

## **TEENAGERS IN SCHOOL: RELATIONS, PERCEPTION OF RULES, CONFLICT MANAGEMENT.**

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The study-project is an answer to the need, felt by some school operators, of getting to know in depth about the nature of relations among boys and girls, that are high school mates. In a more general perspective the study analyses how students interact with the school environment, understood as formal institution.

Beside these goals, that are related to a surveying approach, the study also meant to foster reflection and confrontation among students, teachers and parents, on the themes it deals with. Therefore the study-project has been planned to be an action-study.

The study has been carried out through several steps.

During the first phase, a committee of experts was set up: composed by teachers of the schools taken into consideration, and by external operators. The Committee has worked on focusing study questions and on planning of the whole study project.

After several meetings, the planning phase has come to an end, with the creation of a partially structured questionnaire, aimed at analysing a) the relation of the individual with his/her school mates, (nature, intensity, sites, expectations and fears..); b) the orientation of the teenager towards social rules in general and the breaking of school rules (formal and informal) in particular; c) the perception of school conflicts (meanings, causes, conflict solving styles).

The second phase consisted of the filling in of the questionnaire by a sample of 688 boys and girls (23% of total students the study refers to), attending 5 different grades of three different schools (sciences high school, technical school, professional school). The questionnaire has been filled in during school time, at school, with the only presence of surveyors, specifically trained for the purpose.

Using as resource materials the main results of the questionnaire, during the third phase, some of the classes that had filled in the questionnaire, have been involved in class interviews.

Those interviews were meant at focusing on some topics related to: aggressive behaviour among school mates (why they happen, when, in what circumstances, who they concern, with whom they are done, what they consist of); resources and possible strategies for facing conflict situations among school mates; orientation towards rules in general and school rules in particular.

Finally the results related to the 3 different school environments involved in the study, have been presented separately to groups of teachers and parents in the different schools.

## 2) Relations among school mates. An action.

A previous study- project (Mancini 1999) showed that school mates relations happen to be more difficult in a professional school than in other types of high school. Starting from the results of that study-project, a new project based on a concrete action has been carried out. The project rationale was based on the assumption that specific actions addressed to some classes, could start-up some changing process.

The project was to set up an environment that may facilitate the discussion and the expression and the sharing of the different points of view in the classes. Such an environment has been created thanks to the intervention of external experts, that could facilitate a discussion on the topic: negative relations with school mates. The discussion was meant to foster general awareness firstly and, afterwards, to start-up a modification into those interpersonal dynamics that were not based on positive relations and on the respect of rules of common living.

The action has been divided into different phases:

In the first phase or *pre-test phase*, all the 78 students of the chosen classes (4 first grade classes) were to fill in a short questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on the previous study results (Mancini 1999) and has been filled in during school time, at school, with the presence of external experts. This first phase was aimed at understanding the teenagers self-perception, concerning aggressive behaviour suffered or acted with school mates in the preceding month.

The second phase, or *action*, has been implemented by dividing the four classes in 2 groups, or “experimental conditions”. With the first group (*with external intervention*) a group discussion has been run after 10 days from the filling in of the questionnaire, with the presence of 2 experts. As a hint, some of the results of the previous study were presented. Within the second group (*without external intervention*), no group discussion on the project themes has been carried out.

The third phase (*post-test phase*) was to evaluate the impact of the action on the group with external intervention. The questionnaire used in the first phase has been filled in again after about 40 days.

The action–study has shown significant changes in both groups, in the evaluation of negative behaviour at school in the last time period. The changes, though, have developed in two different ways. Generally the teenagers that had taken part to the group discussion (group with external intervention), during the post-test phase tended to overestimate the frequency of negative behaviours that were acted or suffered at school in the previous month, (as they are probably more aware and/or sincere with their answers); the others tended to underestimate the frequency of those behaviours, (probably, as a result of social desirableness influence).

For a detailed description of the study and its results see: T. Mancini, Adolescenti a scuola: rapporti, percezione delle regole e gestione dei conflitti, Modena, centro stampa Comune di Modena, 1999