

BULLYING: METHODOLOGY AND CONTENTS OF AN INTERVENTION TO IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' AWARENESS

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Introduction

This is the synthesis of the contents of an intervention to raise students' awareness carried out in the first half of the school-year 2000/2001, and addressed to about 600 students attending two high schools, mainly met class by class. The intervention was part of an organic project to prevent and contrast bullying, including the raising of awareness and training of the adults present at school (teaching and non teaching staff), with the aim to create groups of listening and intervention on cases. The language used was necessarily not very scientific, on the contrary direct and plunged in the reality it referred to: in fact a lot of the words and concepts used were taken directly from the students' interventions (in the text they are in inverted commas). The data presented to the students are the result of a research carried out on 312 students attending three high schools in Ferrara and province during the school-year 1998-1999: the schools will be called A, B, and C.

Staff resources: 2 operators qualified in group managing

Technical resources: a traditional blackboard to expose the data and note down the students' opinions

Method: work with the class-group, preferably in circle-time¹

Time: 1 hour and a half

¹ the *circle-time* refers to the socio-affective techniques used in Italy, amongst others, by Francescato and Putton, who refer to Rogers' Humanistic Psychology and afterwards to Gordon's; to deepen this subject, see:

- Francescato D., Putton A., Cudini S., *Star bene insieme a scuola, Strategie per una educazione socio-affettiva dalla materna alla media superiore*, NIS, Roma, 1986
- Gordon T., *Insegnanti efficaci*, Ed. Molfetta, Bari, 1994
- Rogers C.R. (1969), *Libertà nell'apprendimento*, Giunti Barbera, Firenze, 1973

Communicative approach: communication as an exchange between operators and students, promoting students' participation and expression of their opinions; the operators try to make the most of the content of each intervention to promote students' involvement as much as possible

Work plan and contents:

First step:

definition of bullying and analysis of the roles related to it

Students are invited to give their definition of bullying and starting from their contributions the most important points are made clear:

- a) bullying is arrogance, abuse, both physical (threats, aggressions) and psychological (mocking, offences, exclusions) towards someone weaker, usually a more sensitive and not very aggressive student, who can't defend himself, due to an unbalance of forces;
- b) the victim finds his condition deeply painful, and many students who suffer arrogant acts report their wish to stop coming to school;
- c) bullying is therefore a negative behaviour, even though the bully or the bullies are not necessarily all bad boys; some probably don't realise how much pain they inflict; the bully can be someone who looks for reassurance and confirmation of his own identity through other people's abuse and domination, seeing them as quicker and easiest ways than a relation implying confrontation, dialogue and respect for other people;
- d) there is an undervaluation of the phenomenon on the part of bullies and students should reflect on the fact that there are other ways to get reassured of one's own identity, ways involving a positive relation with other people

Second step: exposition of data coming from the researches

Acts of arrogance and the places where they happen

It would be very important, as we had the chance to do, to start from the data concerning the specific reality on which the intervention is carried out, promoting the students' interest and their motivation to listen and participate. It should be reminded that bullying doesn't mean only physical and evident violence, but all that is involved in abusing other people: physical violence is only the top of the "bullying iceberg". The researches, ours included, usually make the following kinds of arrogant acts emerge: continual mocking, small thefts, offences, exclusions and "jokes" involving

humiliations, threats and aggressions in places not controlled by adults (washrooms, outdoor places). This is the submerged part of the culture of arrogance, based on the right claimed by the strongest students (or “sharpest and smartest”, as sometimes bullies define themselves) to annoy the weakest ones (or “dullest, most stupid and idiot”, as bullies define their victims). When one speaks of threats, acts of extortion and aggressions, which are likely to stir reactions of incredulity, it is very important to remind the concepts of *unbalance of forces*, *inability to react on the part of the victim*, of *victim’s suffering* and of *undervaluation on the part of the bully* and make some examples easy to understand: if someone, to assert his supremacy in the class, forces another student to keep silent, forbidding him to come to school the following day or ordering him to carry out humiliating actions (jokes similar to those taking place in barracks), the victim perceives such experiences as real threats. Operators should remember to make some exercises of *empathy*, that is to say *putting oneself in the victim’s shoes*. At the same time, being forced everyday to give a sum of money, though little, is perceived as an extortion. If the victim is intimidated and attacked, he will perceive to have suffered an aggression. All this while, on the contrary, the bully thinks it was just a “joke” and for most students, bystanders and witnesses in particular, nothing especially serious has happened. During the interventions, some students said that the victim should react, otherwise he deserves to be annoyed. It is necessary to remind them that one never deserves to suffer hurting acts that cause pain and if the victim doesn’t react, it’s because he can’t: it is the bully who should change and not the victim. School and in particular class climate should make possible for anyone, depending on one’s personal qualities and character, to have a space of fulfilment, but through collaboration and respect, not through abuse.

Where arrogant acts take place

In nearly an even way, among the three high school surveyed, the percentages of answers related to the places where arrogant acts take place, point out the classroom, followed by hallways and washrooms (respectively 54,8%, 42,3% and 30,7%). Data referring to the *classroom* are quite alarming: they point out a situation which is clearly of serious undervaluation and unawareness of the phenomenon on the part of teachers. Nearly unremarkable is in proportion the percentage of arrogant acts in outdoor places or adjacent to the school. *Washrooms, hallways and classroom are the places where the bully or the bullies prefer pestering their victims, for whom the school, from a place where they should study and establish significant relations with young people of their age, turns into a place of great suffering.*

How students divide themselves with respect to bullying, how they react: the witness role

Some inflict acts of bullying (13,4%), others suffer them (21,4%), some are both bullies and victims (18,9%), and finally there are some students who are witnesses (36,5%). Observing students' acts of arrogance towards their classmates, 42,6% have fun and become the bully's fans, and this goes to confirm the fact that the witness doesn't perceive the phenomenon in all its seriousness; 34,9%, on the other hand, pretend nothing is happening, probably to avoid getting involved. Only 3,5% are frightened, a further sign that the phenomenon doesn't show evident characteristics of violence and aggressiveness. These data can help somehow to understand why so many episodes happen precisely in the classroom, without the teachers realising them or, as it will be made clear afterwards, even with the amused participation of some of them. 19,5% of the students intervene directly to contrast *bullying*, either helping the victim or isolating the bully. These data make clear what can be done to contrast bullying, even without suffering any consequence: underlying the importance of the refuse to approve the bully or bullies' behaviour and the students who have fun or even become their accomplices; it is also important to avoid pretending nothing is happening, as if the episode didn't concern the people who are not involved, as everyone is responsible for the quality of the school climate: if there is something wrong, students should say it, without renouncing to express their own opinion; a very important thing is to show solidarity with the victim, try to console him without making him feel alone and show disapproval towards the acts of bullying; all this can be very useful to change the climate internal to the class, as bullies look for the general approval and get stronger when they can obtain it.

the adult role

39,1% of the students interviewed state that adults (teaching and non teaching staff) are not there when arrogant acts take place: this means that many bullies know that they are committing negative acts and therefore they conceal themselves. But when adults are there, how do they (teachers and non teachers) behave? In one of the schools surveyed, the school B, 22% don't realise anything, a further confirmation of the phenomenon being submerged. 30% tend to undervalue the acts of bullying, pretending nothing has happened or interpreting their dynamics as "jokes" it is not necessary to intervene on. Some teachers (13%) even laugh of them, actually encouraging bullying attitudes like mocking and humiliating students considered worthy such treatments, being less "sharp" than the others. Only 18% intervene. It is clearly necessary an overall teachers and non teachers' raising of awareness, aimed at fostering responsibility towards their educational tasks: as the school is not only the place where to acquire a technical knowledge, but also of personal growth

and social integration, adults must absolutely intervene in situations causing students' trouble and suffering. If students are asked to do what pertains to them, adults cannot but be involved in the same way, also because students see them as reference points and expect an intervention on their part. For this reason we have organised courses to raise teachers' awareness and give them the ability to observe the group of students and its dynamics with different eyes, as well as give the necessary attention to the phenomenon. Training courses to develop the ability to Observe, Listen and Intervene have followed. A careful Observation allows to identify the dynamics of bullying; Listening allow students in trouble to have a way of communicating their own difficulties and sufferings. Some adults (teachers and non teachers) will be willing to collect cases of bullying. Students should be reminded of the importance of speaking about what happens with a reliable adult, as it is not due to "cowardice" if the victim, being in a situation of unbalanced forces and suffering, asks for some help: if in such episodes there is someone who behaves as a coward, that is the bully or bullies' case. The school also activates itself to intervene: its intervention allows to face and contrast bullying, making the students understand that the school doesn't intend to undervalue the phenomenon anymore. In this sense the intervention has also a preventive value. Adults' (teachers and non teachers) interventions can be divided into two great categories: a) *widespread and immediate intervention* in the daily school reality, intended as the adult's ability to observe and act precisely when the dynamic emerges (for example: not allowing that someone hiss another student, not allowing that someone is offended or mocked, and so on). In such cases, most of all it is important that teachers are reinforced by that part of the class who disapprove bullying (teachers too need to be supported); b) *planned and structured intervention* on particular cases, meant as an application of intervention strategies set up on purpose to face dynamics of bullying particularly structured and difficult (for example: a group or a whole class pestering a victim, a bully who has established a situation of strong domination on a victim, and so on). A planned strategy of intervention can include interviews to the bullies and their parents, support to the victims and interviews to their parents, educational interventions on the class, aimed at creating a different social climate, and so on. It is very important to communicate these things to the students, so as on one hand the victims and those who disapprove bullying can perceive that there is a way out from painful and negative dynamics, and on the other bullies are invited to stop and informed that their behaviours will have serious consequences.

An alternative: the class as a community in agreement

It is very important to underline that the class can be seen and perceived like a small community, a group where to express and help one another by giving the best and not the worst of oneself, to look for and offer friendship. The bully runs the risk of having no friends who like and respect him, but only followers who fear him and establish an instrumental relation with him, and therefore risks to be deeply alone. The scholastic experience can on the contrary allow anybody to make strong friendships that can last all life long and help them to grow, but this can only go through a relation respecting other people and not through arrogance. Of course the relation is hard to establish, as it implies the effort to understand other people, to look for a mediation of one's immediate interests, to put a bit of one's own selfishness aside, to admit also weaknesses and defects, but it is thanks to this kind of social relations that one can come to a real, lasting and significant acceptance, and be looked for and remembered as a "clever" student.

bullying and studying

One of the causes of bullying can be the aversion concentrating on the good students who have good marks. This phenomenon is more likely to happen in the technical schools, where studying theoretic subjects is considered less important, with respect to practice and the use of work equipment; a lot of students attending these schools have a preceding experience of failure in other high schools and anyway have never had a satisfying relation with studying. In their opinion one who studies is seen as a "boot-licker" (teachers' servant), a "swot" (priggish and boring individual, even a bit "bastard" as he shows off at his classmates' disadvantage). This aversion seems to derive from a misunderstanding, seeing study as a "surrender in front of the enemy (the teacher)" or as an act of betrayal towards the majority who have no intention of losing too much time with studying and in any case want to keep an attitude of rivalry towards the school. It is very important to contrast such misunderstanding, reminding that study means testing one's own abilities and cleverness and therefore acquiring competence, self-confidence and self-esteem, and there is absolutely no harm in doing it. Is it better to go home and tell your parents you got the usual bad mark, or that finally you got a pass mark? Studying is the second way to assert oneself at school: the first is a significant relation with friends. How to change? Let's try to imagine if the bully who pesters the student with good marks - as he envies him, while he returns a negative image of himself - asked instead his help to do some homework or study. A completely different, positive relation, of mutual esteem could start, even a new friendship. One should remind students that it's not impossible, they can do things like that.

Bullying and unselfishness

Another misunderstanding supporting the culture of arrogance is that one needs to show himself strong and not weak to be successful. Therefore all those characteristics of one's own personality that can be considered as signs of weakness (especially in males), like unselfishness, generosity, solidarity and goodness of heart, are often kept concealed. On the contrary, when they are expressed by more sensitive students, they are often misunderstood (those who are kind are "fool", "weak", "gay") and can become pretexts for mocking and collective stigmatisation. But what is wrong with kindness? Is there someone who wouldn't like, in a moment of trouble, to find someone helpful? How can one think of friendship without generosity? They are positive feelings which cannot be restricted only to family members. Positive feelings implying an opening towards other people are not a sign of weakness, but on the contrary it is the closing towards others that reveals signs of insecurity and therefore fear. A right opening towards other people doesn't deprive us of something, but allows us to grow rich in terms of friendship. The attitude of aggressiveness and contempt for kindness can derive from the fear of being "cheated" by other people and therefore from the necessity of advancing everybody, showing oneself "strong" first. On the contrary, those who behave automatically like this, without even exploring other possibilities of peaceful and productive living together with their classmates, become themselves the incarnation of that common place that sees the strong ones as prevailing and contributes to perpetuate this culture within society. The only way of dismantling this common place is to try feeling part of a small community in agreement, drawing the best out of oneself, and one needs courage to do this, not to pester other people.