

## INTERVENTION METHODS AND PROPOSALS TO FACE BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

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This document is based on the practical and applying experiences collected in the last 7 years in different schools and training centres in the Communes of Ferrara, Bologna, Reggio Emilia and Firenze.

The international literature on bullying and in particular on the possible intervention methods to prevent and face it, refers to an overall school policy (Olweus, 1991; Sharp and Smith, 1994; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler and Charach, 1994), involving students, teaching and non teaching staff (school directors and principals included) and parents. Following this line we tried to structure our projects, and this year, for the first time, thanks to Promeco, we could organise training courses on Active Listening addressed both to teachers and caretakers in two high schools in Ferrara.

What we'll try to explore here are more a series of methodological and test proposals, than a report of the results obtained so far.

### AIM OF THE INTERVENTION

In our opinion, there are two possible ways to create and carry out anti-bullying models of interventions. The first is aimed at the research on the phenomenon and the refined and detailed survey of the tools applied and their consequences. This model, being aimed mainly at the “scientific” research, inevitably implies the projecting of tools and techniques to be applied in all kinds of situations, so that it is possible to accumulate in just one “experimental” sample different characteristics like age, composition, teachers, scholastic systems, and so on, in which, however, the same activities were carried out using the same strategies.

The second model, on the other hand, is aimed at reducing the phenomenon of bullying in the specific reality where the intervention is carried out. Therefore, in this second model the maintenance and survey of single differences among classes, schools and participants (teachers, students, caretakers, principals, parents and so on) is fundamental to plan specific techniques and strategies made on purpose for the single user. In this second model, therefore, the measures to be used to test the efficacy of the strategies proposed must be based on different criteria from those of the previous model, as it is very likely that, not only in each school but even in each class, the intervention program planned was based on completely different techniques and modalities, depending on the situation, the participants and their attitudes and interests, as well as physical and economical resources offered by single realities. In this case, therefore, the action to carry out will be an intervention research, applied, in which one observes and studies what was accomplished independently for each subject, instead of measuring the same program applied to different subjects.

Our latest work in schools was based on this second model and is therefore on this that we'll focus in this study.

## METHODS AND STRATEGIES

As already proposed by the literature on this topic, the intervention system which seems to be more successful, besides an overall school policy, is also the integration of different methods and strategies within the same school (Olweus, 1996; Sharp and Smith, 1994). In fact, our proposals usually include different possibilities:

### **For teaching and non teaching staff:**

- 1) Training on group co-operative techniques to carry out in class. The activities proposed are usually about role-play, literature as a stimulus, forms of problem solving, exercises on self-esteem, assertiveness, communication, conflict solution, mediation;**
- 2) Training on Active Listening, allowing to establish within the school a form of support to the students, like a listening counter, addressed to those students who find more difficult to integrate in the daily scholastic reality;**
- 3) Across the formations above-mentioned, techniques of Peer Support are transmitted, so as to create consolidated and united groups of colleagues able to self-support during the intervention program, therefore taking on different functions: supervision, support, solution of difficult situations or obstacles due also to the school internal ostracism.**

### **For students:**

- 1) Applying co-operative strategies in class during lessons, with the teachers' help. At the end of each session of intervention the class is offered a moment of debriefing, in which the whole group discusses the interactive modalities applied during the session, and explores the individual difficulties, the group's successes and failures, and plans the following sessions considering these reflections.**
- 2) Direct interventions in class conducted by researchers, especially in the more critical and troublesome classes. The interventions take place within the class-group, when the teachers are not there, and are based on exercises developing knowledge, confidence and mutual support, the ability to listen and solve conflicts.**
- 3) Listening counter or other forms of Active Listening offered by teaching and non teaching staff during recreation or lesson time, and addressed individually and anonymously to the students who feel the need to be supported and helped by an adult.**

### **For parents:**

- 1) Training as well as information courses on bullying and the techniques applied in their children's class. Promoting discussions, interactions, with special attention to the parents' fears**

**towards the phenomenon of arrogance, and their role and responsibility in the educational context, also in relation to their being complementary with the school educational models.**

**2) Across these activities, a Peer Support group is once again developed through specific games and activities, so as to foster the group's wish of going on even after the course is finished and exchanges of information and support. We try also to achieve the possibility to meet the groups of involved teachers.**

### **Teaching and non teaching staff supervision**

In a pilot study carried out last year (Berdonini and Cowie, 2000) a supervision modality, addressed to the teachers involved in some intervention project in their school was surveyed. What emerged as fundamental is a supervision model which could be focused more on support and forms of counselling addressed to the teachers than on the evaluation of their work. The starting assumption (considering the data collected in previous experiences) was that teachers starting up an intervention in class, often find that they have to face a series of unforeseen obstacles, such as negative reactions on the part of the class or other colleagues, a sense of inadequacy with the techniques chosen and in managing the class in the presence of such dynamics, frustration, a sense of failure. All these difficulties of course contribute to diminish considerably the teacher's motivation, and, as a consequence, the class', with the result that often, despite the regular monthly supervisions, intervention activities are interrupted and slowly left diminish, until complete abandonment of the project. It is enough that one teacher alone interrupts the process in his class, to influence negatively other people's motivation and enthusiasm, not to mention those who still haven't dared starting up the applications, and therefore are even more frightened of the colleagues' apparent "failure". In fact, what the teachers are required in these cases, is a real challenge: to foster and develop the students' social abilities, offering them support and listening, facilitating their living together, collaboration and emotional exchange, but without having the possibility to use the same service. How can we expect that teachers have enough energy to bear all this and guide the class-groups and the students in difficulty through complex emotional and interactive processes without granting them a support, a chance of finding relief underway? Therefore, more than a supervision giving feed-back to the work carried out and finding solutions to the problem, we thought it necessary to offer first of all a space and a certain amount of time only devoted to the emotionality of the teacher involved, to the reflection on oneself more than on the class or the intervention process. Thanks to this kind of work, the solutions of the problems encountered in class or with the single students were found spontaneously by the teachers and their colleagues, also because no one better than them knows "that" class and "those" specific students, besides their own possibilities, limits and intentions.

It was therefore a sort of listening counter for the teachers, run by researchers and addressed to the whole teachers group, so as to go on developing an harmonious and united group, but also to maintain a coherence between their task with the students, and the relation among peers and with the researchers.

### **VERIFYING METHODS OF INTERVENTIONS**

Given the intervention models we are proposing here, for the kind of aim and applying modality explained above, the test and effectiveness methodologies we can figure out are in our opinion of qualitative kind, and particularly, to be carried out through survey of the single cases. In fact, since in our model what is actually more respected are the specific reality and individuality, which represent the intervention project foundation, this kind of research method seems the most appropriate.

Within the single case, it seems to us more informative to use techniques such as naturalistic observation of the students, during the intervention activities, as well as in spontaneous moments (recreation, for example) through video recording, afterwards codified with systematic perspective, individual and group open-ended interviews, journals and reports compiled by teachers, than methods like questionnaires and self-reports.

This kind of need is now perceived and dealt with also in foreign literature, about the intervention measurement and their effectiveness (Torrance, 2000), underlying the fact that interventions often work in some schools while in others they fail, and that through quantitative methods it's impossible to obtain enough information, while the "case studies" would be more clarifying.