

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT AND COMBAT THE BULLYING PHENOMENON – CASE STUDY I AM NOT SCARED PROJECT

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Abstract

As the bullying phenomenon is one of the main challenge, that all European educational systems have to deal with, the I am not scared project¹ intends to identify the best European strategies to prevent and combat the bullying phenomenon and involve Secondary school and Vocational Education teachers, Directors Pupils, Parents and key policy makers in the field of education in a common reflection based on a Bottom-Up approach for a transnational sharing of the dynamics that can cause the emerging and consolidating of the bullying phenomenon and of the most effective strategies and behaviours to tackle it available at European Level.

Key-words: bullying, educational systems, strategies, prevention, rights, security.

Adolescence is a contradictory period, a period when teenagers may feel miserable or unhappy as they need to leave their childhood behind. Furthermore, it is a stressful period for most of the teenagers, especially for those who are prone to deviance and delinquency. The violent behaviours encountered at this age during the school programmes, are signaled since the boys (in lower proportion, the girls) are at the age of physical conflicts: comparing yourself with the others is part of the process of asserting the masculine sexual identity, a way of socialising by fighting, defending your territory. These bets break the common rules of the conflicts among teenagers and may cause individual or collective violent behaviours.

¹ I am not scared project (511645-LLP-1-2010-1-IT-KA1-KA1SCR) funded by the European Commission under the Programme KA1 Policy Cooperation and Innovation Studies and comparative research.

Violence is one of the aspects which has been of great interest for the research field since long ago. At the same time, nowadays it represents one of the most discussed current problems in the field of humanistic social science. In the Western specialized literature, in the late 30 years the published studies have shown intense concerns on this field of interest.

In Romania, the studies on the phenomenon violence, especially when occurring in school life, are relatively recent and insufficient.

- ***Violence can be defined in many ways:***

Eric Debarbieux (1996) specialist in the study of violence in schools provides a definition which complises the paradigm of the phenomenon of violence: “violence is the brutal and continuous disruption of a personal, collectiv and social system, and which translates into a loss of physical, psychic or material integrity. This disruption may function through aggressivity, voluntary or involuntary force use. Additionally, the violence can also be caused by the victim, the aggressor having no intent to do any harm.” (Debarbieux E., 1966, *Violence in Schools*, Vol. I, IESF, Paris, p. 1122). X. A. Michaud, the author of a study on violence (1986), believes that there is no universal definition of violence, because each society tackles with its own pattern of violence, according to its own criteria, and it succeeds more or less in the struggle with this problem. In other words, historically and culturally, violence is a relative concept, dependent on the social, legal and political codes of the society it appears in.

Most of the studies favour the idea that aggressivity is innate, while violence is more dependent on culture, education, context.

Aggression is considered “a destructive and violent behaviour directed towards persons, objects or oneself. It implies active denial and can cause damages or just changes. Aggression always means attacking, jeopardizing or even destroying the object of the violent behaviour.” (Definition translated from Romanian into English – Norbert Sillamy (2000), *Larousse Dictionar de psihologie*, Univers Enciclopedic: Bucuresti)

The majority of the authors concentrate upon the intentionality when they define aggression. Thus, R. A. Barron (1997) define aggressivity as “any act intended to cause damage to the targeted object”.

Brennan and Raine (1997) and Sabol (1992) plead for the innate nature of aggressivity. In other words, people are aggressive when they are born. Supporters of the theory speak of an “aggression drive”. This position has been supported by psychanalists and ethologists.

Supporters of the innate nature of aggression (Patterson and Moffitt) think that aggression is context-dependent and appears as the person's response to the environmental conditions. In this sense, the most famous theory was formulated by J. Dollard, an American researcher at the Yale University, who explained the nature of aggressive behaviours through the "frustration-aggression" hypothesis.

We believe that it is necessary to proceed at the identification of the slight difference aggression and violence. Violence is defined as "brutal or continuous disorganisation of personal, collective or social system. When this disorganisation operates through conscient and intended use of force, we have the definition of aggression". (Salavastru)

This is the conceptual framework according to which we will discuss the violence in school.

- ***The current national situation on the bullying phenomenon in Romania***

Violence in schools has ceased to be a tabu, on the contrary it is a much too frequent topic depicted in news programmes.

In Romania, the level of violence became alarming. A recent study conducted by Institute of Educational Sciences showed that violence rate is higher in highschoools (80%) that in secondary schools (73%), and among teenagers in urban areas (82%) than among those in rural areas (71%).

Considering these alarming figures, people are more and more worried about violence among teenagers occuring especially in schools. Main topic in newspapers.

- ***The national strategies applied to fight against this problem***

The national strategy which describes the approach on this phenomenon is: The Strategy of the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth on the reduction of violence in schools.

The material has been adopted and adjusted on the base of the study „Violence in schools”, conducted by the Institute of Educational Sciences, drafted and published with the financial support of UNICEF representation in Romania.

The document is divided into two main parts. In the first part, two aspects of violence in schools are discussed: types and causes of violence in schools and arguments for the necessity of elaborating a national strategy meant to reduce the violence in schools. The second part has four sections: Principles, actions and general recommendation for school violence prevention and control; Educational institutions' role and functions in the process of

violence reduction; The model of minimal operational plan on stopping violence from occurring in schools and the Annexes.

Society has a very important role in school violence prevention. The educational system, despite being autonomous, is a social reality in close interaction with the society in general. Therefore, the strategy for prevention of violence in schools cannot be seen as a separate part of the prevention of violence in general. However, in order to add more specificity to the process of school violence prevention, it is necessary to opt for a model of prevention which can adapt to the social reality which is the school.

The ecological model provides a comprehensive framework for the analysis of the violence prevention, by using an integrate paradigm of the factors which determine it. The violent behaviors occurring in schools cannot be explained by considering only one category of factors (i.e. individual, interactional, societal, cultural or environmental). Consequently, only an integrate approach of all these factors can provide a comprehensive explanation of violence and, at the same time, we can substantiate a strategy for violence prevention and control. The ecological model is based on the idea that the individual and contextual factors are interrelated. Violence is the result of the multiple levels of influence of these factors on behaviors. The ecological model comprises four levels of understanding and analysis of the factors that can produce violence: individual level, community level and societal level.

Some of the violence prevention measures are listed below:

1. At the individual level:

- Identifying students with high potential of violence and factors which can generate violent behaviours with the help of the teachers and specialized staff (school counselors, psychologists, mediators)
- Developing individualized counseling programmes for the students involved in cases of violence (as authors or victims).
- Encouraging the National Board of Students to participate in planning and developing activities for violence prevention and control.
- To make the violent students more responsible by implementing certain educational measures; avoiding to concentrate on punishment and removing sanctions which are against pedagogical principles (for instance, punishing the violent behaviour by bad grades, repeating a class etc.)

2. At the interactional level:

- Collaborating with the National Federation of Parents and informing the parents on the services which school can provide in view to prevent school violence and ameliorate de

parents-children relationships (counseling, psychological assistance, mediation); encouraging the specialized staff to participate in these kind of activities (school counselors, psychologists).

- Partnership between school and the families of the students incline to display violent behaviours, in all the stages of the process of students' assistance (informing, establishing a common programme for intervention, monitoring the signaled cases); organizing school meetings, home visits, extra-curricular activities with students, teachers, parents and specialists joint participation.
- Approaching topics related to school violence in the official school meetings (Board of Administration, Teachers' General Meetings, Pupils' General Meetings, National Federation of Parents) in order to raise awareness of the importance of the phenomenon and to analyses the forms, participants and causes of cases of violence in school.
- Developing coherent strategies of prevention and action, based on the analysis of the present situation, to be included in the plan of the institutional development; launching programmes which answer to some situations particular to the school (identifying the risks in the school actual context, students inclined to display violent behaviours or to become victims), encouraging students to get involved as key participants and partners:

3. At the community level:

- Initiating some programmes for making people aware in respect of school violence (Institutions involved: School Inspectorates, schools, Authority for the Protection of Child Rights, police, local governments, NGO-s).
- Developing programmes for violence school prevention (with the financial/ logistics support of the local governments, School Inspectorates, NGO-s and local police departments).
- Developing partnerships with other local institutions – law enforcement agencies, local authorities, NGO's – in order to ensure students' safety in the neighbourhood of schools.

4. At a societal level:

- Organizing social campaigns by using different channels of public communication in view to make people aware of school violence (institutions involved: Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and Administration, National Authority for the Protection of Child's Rights, NGOs).
- Increasing the number of measures for reducing the violence depicted in the mass-media – verbal violence, pornography and images with a violent content (institutions involved:

Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs, Audiovisual National Council, NGO-s).

- Developing and implementing the legal context regarding violence in general and that related to children, especially, by elaborating actual methodologies of implementation (institutions involved: Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, Ministry of Justice, legal committees in the Romanian Parliament, Ministry of Interior and Administration).

- ***About the project***

The bullying phenomenon is a challenge that all European educational systems have to deal with. The official research promoted by the European Council in 2008 tells that the average of pupils declaring being victim of bullying is around 32%. The project partners believe that still important needs can be answered to in order to enhance the capacity of the European Educational system to deal and prevent effectively the bullying phenomenon:

1. Large majority of information and experiences related to the understanding and the tackling of bullying have been developed and are available according to Experts point of view and following a scientific approach that risks to promote mainly Top-Bottom approach. Despite the high standard of information and strategies developed, teachers, pupils and their parents tend to be only "objects of study" rather than subjects of the solutions adopted to prevent and tackle the bullying phenomenon

2. The standard of the researches and initiatives is not homogeneous at European level, countries as:

- UK, Germany and Spain seem ahead both in the comprehension and in the development of structures and initiatives to prevent and tackle the issue.
- Italy, Greece and Belgium have a consistent number of studies and a high standard of knowledge, but lack of organic strategies to tackle the problem.
- Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania lack of both the knowledge and the capacity to plan and organise effective initiatives.

A sharing of information and methods is therefore needed

3. Despite the number of EU-funded transnational projects addressing the bullying phenomenon, national approaches are still prevalent, and this is even more true if we consider that transnational cooperation mainly takes place on research level and not so much on practical level.

The project intends to identify the best strategies to prevent and combat the bullying

phenomenon and provide Secondary school and Vocational Education teachers, Directors Pupils, Parents and key policy makers in the field of education with a better understanding of the dynamics that can lead to the emerging and consolidating of the bullying phenomenon and of the most effective strategies and behaviours to tackle it.

Specific objectives of the project are:

- Promote and adopt a Bottom-Up approach to the understanding of the bullying phenomenon. The project will place pupils, both Victims and Bullies, their parents and Teachers at the center of the research so that they themselves will be the protagonists of acquiring and understanding the information, through their commitment to a common research-action activity in order to analyse exemplary case studies from their different point of view.

- Promote a knowledge sharing and transfer of knowledge and experiences among institutions and schools representing 9 European countries with different level of awareness and effectiveness on the theme of bullying prevention and tackling, in order to transfer the best solutions and experiences from the most advanced countries (i.e. UK, Germany and Spain) to countries that still lack organic strategies to tackle the problem (i.e. Italy, Belgium and Greece) and that are still developing a complete understanding of the issue (i.e. Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania).

- Promote a transnational based, highly practical oriented approach to the understanding and tackling of the Bullying phenomenon in order to define a shared European strategy to be implemented in order to combat the bullying phenomenon, based on the best practices available in the field, and therefore prevent early drop outs from lifelong learning initiatives.

The project has a direct impact on the following short terms ***target groups***, that will all be directly involved in the analysis of bullying episodes from their different point of views.

- 450 Students of Secondary and Vocational education schools

Students Victims of bullying, Bully students and other students will benefit from a more aware approach to the causes, the negative effects and what behaviours they can adopt to prevent the bullying episodes

- 180 Teachers of Secondary and Vocational education schools

Teachers will benefit from the reflection on how they could improve their capacity to understand the dynamics that backup and cause bullying episodes and what they can do effectively address the situation

Teachers will also benefit from the knowledge sharing experience, with which they will from

their colleagues according to a peer to peer approach

- 450 Parents of students who played a role in bullying episodes

The Parents will benefit from the opportunity to reflect on the behaviours that can signal problems related to bullying episodes, to gain information on who to refer to to be informed and to get advices and to learn what to do to prevent and address the problem.

- 90 Supporting Experts (e.g. Psychologists), 90 School Directors and 90 Key Policy Makers

They will benefit from a more in depth and practical oriented approach to the understanding of the group and personal dynamics that are behind the bullying episodes, of what role they can play to address the issue.

Activities within the project:

- Review of publications addressing the bullying phenomenon available in the 9 countries involved
- Review of initiatives addressing the theme of Bullying phenomenon prevention
- Case studies aiming at analysing bullying episodes from all the possible point of view of the different actors (Students, Teachers, schools' directors, parents of the students, and key policy makers
- Participation of the teachers involved (those objects of the case studies) in a peer to peer based knowledge sharing experience, with which they will comment the case studies of the other countries
- National Reports presenting the results of the activities described above and defining each country state of art and of a Transnational Report presenting in a comparative logic, similarities and main differences.
- Development a European strategy to be implemented in order to combat the bullying phenomenon based on the best practices in the field emerging in the field emerging in the different countries

• Conclusion

In a global perspective, we notice that although the school environment is a public space it has an exceptional status in relation to any other public place, because it represents an institution with rules and regulations more accurate than other public places. However, safety and security of space reserved for public education were not given enough attention. This issue does not become subject to systematic research or of special tests, required to

understand the phenomenon of school violence and to acknowledge the peculiarities of its psychosocial dimension.

Bullying is most likely to occur in schools where there is a lack of adult supervision during breaks, where teachers and students are indifferent to or accept bullying behavior, and where rules against bullying are not consistently enforced.

An effective approach focuses on improving school and classroom climate by raising awareness of bullying, increasing teacher and parent involvement and supervision, forming clear rules and strong social norms against bullying, and providing support and protection for all students. This approach involves teachers, principals, students, and everyone associated with the school, including janitors, cafeteria workers, and crossing guards. Adults become aware of the extent of bullying at school, and they involve themselves in changing the situation, rather than looking the other way. Students pledge not to bully other students, to help students who are bullied, and to make a point to include students who are left out.

The project contributes to Acquisition of key competences in preschools and in obligatory education as it develops a strategy to address bullying at school providing all actors palying a role in the School and Vocational Education system: students, their parents, teachers, school directors, professional experts and policy makers with key competences to identify, prevent and tackle this phenomenon that deeply affect the right of students to achieve an adequate level of education.

Also the project contributes to the success and effectiveness of lifelong learning policies as it tackles he bullying phenomenon that highly affects the rights of pupils to receive education. Being victim of bullyism can be a cause of school abandoning, can lead to social exclusion and passivity of individuals. The project provides with a solution to tackle this by the development of a high quality strategy, to be used by all actors of the school systems to better understand and tackle bullying and remove those related obstacles that threat students chances to be active and ware citizens.

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