COMPREHENSION AND STRATEGIC TACKLING OF BULLYING PHENOMEN IN SCHOOLS (CASE STUDY: I AM NOT SCARED PROJECT)

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Abstract

The I am not scared project 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. The present article will present the transnational discussion carried out among the teachers, supporting experts and key police makers, aimed at enhancing a peer to peer based knowledge exchange experience, on the theme of bullying prevention and tackling.

Key words: school bullying, strategies, prevention, education

The project context is that **the bullying phenomenon** represents a main challenge that all European educational systems have to deal with. Despite many initiatives:

- The main information and experiences related to the understanding of bullying have been developed through a mainly Top-Bottom approach.
- The standard of the researches and initiatives is not homogeneous at the European level.
- National approaches are still prevalent and a European shared perspective is still lacking.

The project intends to identify the best European strategies to prevent and fight against 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 which can cause the emerging and consolidating of the bullying phenomenon and of the most effective strategies and behaviours to tackle it available at an European level.

Violence in schools has ceased to be a taboo, on the contrary it is a much too frequent topic depicted in news programmes. Nicole Vettenburg (1999) believes that there are three forms of violence in schools:

- Deviation tolerated or normal juvenile violence;
- Social violence, the school itself is a victim of violence manifested in the society (this is often invoked to school free of any responsibility);
- Anti-school violence (destruction of equipment, vandalism, insults and aggression towards teachers).

In Romania, the level of violence became alarming. A recent study conducted by Institute of Educational Sciences showed that violence rate is higher in high schools (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 occurring especially in schools. 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 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 project is 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 to tackle it. The project activities are organized into 4 main Work Packages.

A) Collection of Information

The aim of the Work Package is to is to achieve a better understanding of the bullying phenomenon carrying out an empiric based research at transnational level, aiming at identifying the state of art in the comprehension and strategic tackling of bullying and violence and intolerance at school

B) Case Studies

The aim of the work package is to promote a Bottom Up approach to the understanding of the bullying phenomenon through the carrying out of Case studies taking the form of small research projects aiming at analysing bullying episodes from all the possible point of view of the different actors involved.

C) Transnational Discussion

The aim of the work package is to involve the teachers participating into the project (meaning those interviewed for the completion of the Case studies) in a transnational discussion, aimed at enhancing a peer to peer based knowledge exchange experience, on the theme of bullying prevention and tackling.

D) European Strategy to Combat Bullying

The aim of the work package is to use the information and opinions collected during the project to create the European Strategy for Combating Bullying that will be published as the main comprehensive and tangible output of the project.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The present article will present the process of collecting the case studies and the implementation of the transnational discussions.

The actors involved in this process were:
- Students victims of bullying, Bully students and other students of Secondary and Vocational education schools (after the number of schools requested for each partner was reached - 10, EuroEd also invited to take part of the project one Primary School)
- Teachers
- School principals
- Parents of students
- Supporting Experts (Counsellors, Psychologists, Psychopedagogues, etc.)
- Key Policy makers (with competences in education and with impact on the local/regional decisions)
- Organization in the field of education and preventing and combating bullying.

The steps and methodology developed for implementing the collection of the case studies was:
- Face to face meetings with the teachers and school principals to present the project and the aims and purpose of development of case studies on bullying on schools and also on the role on debating the case among different target groups: victims, bully students, other students, teachers, school directors, parents of the pupils involved, supporting experts and policy makers.
- Translation of the case study form into Romanian to be more accessible to the teachers to fill in (as we mentioned before, we did not intend to had only language teachers involved.
- Send emails to all teachers and school principals involved with invitation to develop the case studies and all instructions.
- Preparing and sending to the contact teachers support materials for developing the activities at class where to develop the case studies (list of participants, presentation of the project, project brochure).
- Continuous support offered to the teachers on how to develop the activities in schools, what aspects to be followed and how to fill in the form and understanding of the form headings.
- Invitations sent by the teachers to parents and support experts to participate in the activities with students, other teachers and school principals to debate one case of bullying.
- The direct teachers registered prepared and organized the development of the activity in schools, preparing the details related to one bullying event and moderating the activity and discussions among participants.
- The direct teachers took notes on the aspects discussed and after the activities in schools, the teachers worked on filling in the case study form. The form has been filled with the comments and aspects mentioned by the participants in the activities in schools: victims, bully students, other students, teachers, school directors, parents of the pupils involved, supporting experts and policy makers.
- In the schools where the policy makers weren't present, the case studies were sent to them (to the representatives selected before) and invited to express their point of views and comments.

- There were 12 case studies collected, sent by email by the teachers to the local project coordinator.
- All of the case studies were developed in Romanian and translated into English.
- The 24 forms with the case studies were uploaded on the project platform.

Difficulties encountered:

- Some of the schools didn't agree to discuss and present bullying cases which really happened in their school. In this situation the teachers were invited to present and bring in discussion another case, they heard and have knowledge about it.
- It was difficult to involve parents, from two reasons: lack of time and reluctant to the subject. The teachers participated in the parents councils and presented the project and the aim of the case studies debates on schools.

12 Case studies have been collected, translated into English and uploaded on the project website. The common elements are highlighted through different points of view:

Target groups:
- Boys and girls
- Students from the same school, but also from different schools
- Between 2 students or groups of students
- Ages between 9 to 17

Places of bullying:
- Class
- School bathroom
- Schoolyard
- Through email

ACTS:
- a violent exchange of words
- addressing rude words
- physical aggression / violent fights
- use of drugs
- teasing, hitting
- stealing
- exchange of sharp remarks and insults, based on the place of origin: urban versus rural regions
- emotional bullying / intimidation
- constantly annoying
- disrespectful behaviour to teachers and colleagues

Actors involved:
- Students
- Teachers/ form teacher
- Directors
- Counsellor / psychologist
- Police
- School doctor/ Hospital
- School inspectorate

Causes:
- adolescents are exposed to a series of violent events
- financial misunderstanding which later degenerated into violent conflict

- social differences - financial problems within the family
- come from homes that use physical punishment to discipline
- social background - urban versus rural
- repulsive behaviour of some students
- group influence
- inner conflicts and frustrations / intimidations between students
- poor education and social environment
- precocious physical growth helping to dominate other students
- teachers tolerates signs of violence/ minor incidents which later can lead to unfortunate situations
- lack of school secure and safe environment for students
- lack of strict rules
- lack of involvement of the students in social activities

Consequences:
- serious consequences on the personal integrity
- lower grades for school indiscipline
- several days of hospitalization, which fortunately did not result with serious problems
- school became an unsafe place
- lack of interest of students in school matters, absences
- expelling from school
- difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships

Impact:
- these conflicts had an impact on everyone involved, either directly or indirectly
- a negative impact on the school because it became under the attention of the school inspectorate
- the movie with the violent scene between students posted on YouTube and then broadcasted on television produced a very bad image of the school
- often experience low self-esteem and depression

These conflicts led to the development of various activities aimed at solving and preventing similar conflicts:

- **Students** who have started the incident was **called in the office of school director, together with their parents**, where they were invited to speak freely about the reasons which led them to commit these grave actions, to submit their views and, finally, to find a path of reconciliation and amicable settlement.
- The school board called **emergency council teachers** where he discussed the incident and where students have analysed the facts and the measures to be taken to suppress any similar situations.
- **Counselling sessions** (group and individual, with or without the parents) trying to understand students' behaviour and why they become

involved in such violent situations, improving the self-image of the actors involved, preventing negative effects, autonomy development and self-control.

• **School safety procedures** (the school entrance door to be closed all the time, the access to school to be allowed by the teacher's security guards, identification cards for school students, video system, etc.).

• **Develop a school-wide bullying policy to:**

   • Raise awareness of teachers and students
   • Create a framework for responding to bullying
   • Develop classroom rules against bullying
   • Develop cooperative learning projects that encourage teamwork and reduce social isolation
   • Create activities or assignments that teach problem-solving or conflict-resolution skills
   • Participate in role-playing or other activities to help students understand the effects and consequences of the violent behaviour

Comparing points of view of the victims, bully students and other students

Assaulted student "this is not the first time I found myself in this situation, but I admit that I was also guilty. If I hadn't bothered him, he wouldn't have gotten angry. But he could have just told me to leave me alone. Not to hit me. "

The verbally abused teacher: "given the particular children we work with, it is not the first time I am in this situation. Our students cannot always control their temper, but they also don't realize the risks of such behaviours. This is not the case of a conscious aggression, a deliberate act of violence of a minor towards an adult. "

The student aggressor: "I do not like to get beaten or to be cursed. I also tease my colleagues and I don't think they like it".

Aggressive pupils usually choose their victims; the targeted children are the shy ones or, on the contrary, the ones who try to stand out by adopting a particular behaviour or by dressing a certain way – this type of behaviour irritates the aggressors who want to be acknowledged as leaders and trend setters.

The bullies do not feel guilty for their actions when they are facing a considerable number of persons (pupils or professors), but adopt a completely different attitude when discussing with a psychologist.

The aggressor is not aware of the consequences of his actions.

Most of the aggressive students realized that was a wrong gesture and apologized and cooperated very well in the process of reintegration.

Parent: "I two understand that we have children who are in a special situation and who don't always realize how serious the consequences of their behaviour are. I struggle with my boys at home and they sometimes yell at me but I never managed to solve the problem if I just yelled back.

Neither should we, the parents or the teachers consider ourselves victims in such situations because, as mentioned, most aggressive behaviour of these children stem from an emotional and psychological background".

Student not involved in the conflict: "I don't think I'd feel good if I was the one beaten. There are many older children who scream at us or beat us and often we have not done anything wrong. I hate getting hit and that's why I don't hit other children ".

All the students who participated in the meeting said they had witnessed such conflicts and never felt better after such situations. However, they recognized that there were situations in which they were tempted to join one of the parties although they knew it was the wrong thing to do.

The students not involved, most of the time, acted in a very mature way:

   – informed the teacher about what had happened
   – organized a watchful follow up
   – helped their colleagues realize their mistakes

In conclusion, both students and adults agreed that there are many instances of violence between students or between students and teachers, the main reason being the lack of non-conflicting behavioural models for children and psycho-emotional disorders characteristic to the mental deficiency that prevents them to constructively manage such situations.

Comparing points of view of the teachers

Teachers think that most times, on a school level, a large number of students per class can cause damage to the educational climate by decreasing the teacher's possibility of personal contact with all the students.

Also they unanimously expressed the need to maintain a secure environment for students, especially by providing pro-social behavioural patterns. (Calm, understanding, tolerance, etc.)

The teachers get involved every time when a violent conflict occurs; such conflicts take place pretty often, during breaks or when classes end.

Teachers are very important in terms of school quality education. Having teachers honoured for what they teach, dedicated to student interest would contribute positively to increase students participation and decrease violence in school.

The teachers intervened according to the following principles:

   – students can change if they are listened to, shown trust and given alternatives
   – bullying can be unlearned once its causes are known
   – ignorance, indifference, lack of communication and lack of empathy among students can be sources of bullying
   – a remedial educative approach is advisable to use

- all students can act positively
- engaging everybody in finding a solution (making them responsible for their choice).

In each school involved, in case of a bullying event, teachers establish the teacher's council and try to work together to solve the case and to identify the best ways to deal with the case.

Comparing points of view of the directors

From the director's point of view, the violent conducts of the students in our school declined in recent years, this being a positive aspect of the teachers' work and the creation of educational and therapeutic opportunities (educational circles, art therapy, sports competitions, etc.) which provide students with special needs an environment for acquiring and practicing pro-social behavioural patterns. There are still such conflicts between students, sometimes involving verbal violence between students and adults and these situations should be handled with great responsibility and in compliance with internal regulations by all personnel of the institution.

The schools security has become for the directors the first priority.

Analysing interpretations of the experts

The causes are related to specific traits of the student's age: they respond to challenges to seem strong, puberty being the period when young people tend to demonstrate superiority over others (power, authority, timeliness of responses, the courage to fight back), but also a period of extreme fragility and of being easily influenced by others (friends group).

Also, aside from the influence of their peers, family also plays a tremendous part in personal development by promoting a certain type of behaviour that shapes the child during his process of growth.

Finally, school-family collaboration can act so that such conflicts can be prevented.

The psychologist is asked to discuss with the pupils every time such incidents occur. The specific methods used by psychologists and their openness make possible the settling of all conflicts and the reconciliation of all parties involved.

It is very important that students to attend counselling sessions accompanied by a parent. School counsellor tries to identify the reasons that led the students to such facts, if there is a family violence situations (physical, verbal, psychological, etc..), if the parents support, guide and correct their child's school activities not only in terms of results in education, but also in terms of behaviour within the school and everyday life. It is also investigate if parents supervise their children and if this deviant behaviour was more influenced by a negative environment.

Analysing feedbacks from the Policy Makers

The schools have a partnership with the police, planning periodical informational actions regarding cases of violence occurring in other schools from the city or from our country. Also, during these actions, the police present plans of prevention, of finding solutions or of fighting against school violence. There are no real partnerships and cooperation at school level (between students, teachers, parents, school management) and no at inter-institutional level, to define situations of violence, to develop strategies for prevention and control and to monitor and evaluate their impact.

The schools involved in partnerships with policy makers institutions or organization with expertise in education field, mentioned that their students were also trained in terms of anti-crime and anti-victim, being constantly involved in all programs and activities conducted in school. Attempts thus creating a real and effective communication between school authorities and families by identifying, monitoring and prevention of bullying situations, involving all educational factors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results in figures, regarding the recruiting process, collection of case studies and participation in transnational discussions, are:

- 11 schools;
- 22 teachers;
- over 100 students;
- 55 parents;
- 11 school principals;
- 15 experts;
- 8 Policy Makers with 14 representatives;
- 3 counties from Romania;
- 12 case studies (24 available in Romanian and English);
- 12 activities held in schools;
- 3 transnational online meetings with participation of 4 teachers, 3 MA students who want to become teachers and 3 staff members from Romania;
- 66 comments done to the case studies from the other countries;
- 55 comments received to the Romanian case studies.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion the aspects highlighted with the view of the situation of the bullying in Romanian schools and needs and future ways of intervention were:

- The school is involved in preventing violent situations and in implementation of concrete measures aimed at reducing the number of cases of violence, also to educate students to a civilized and appropriate behaviour. For this reason, the best way to achieve goals is to work together with all those involved in shaping character and personality of the people of

tomorrow: students, teachers, school counsellors, parents, local police and representatives of civil society.

- We should increase concerns regarding school violence prevention, identification of individual causes, interpersonal communication development, and increase collaboration with all stakeholders (school psychologist, NGOs, police, etc.) Group discussions were a good opportunity to express the different views of the protagonists.
- The results are not always the expected ones, but our efforts are continuing.
- All the participants agreed on the following tips that any child should be told:
− speak up against the bullying
− walk away and avoid the bully
− do not stay isolated; stick to a group
− tell an adult
− do not bully back
- It can be said that violence between students in different forms, is a general phenomenon in schools. Most times, the violence of the students (especially forms of "light" aggression) is perceived as frequent attitudes and behaviours in any school.
- The presence of a counsellor is also beneficial. The counsellor is in the position and in the authority to help parents, teachers, students, not only the victims, but also the bullies. In many cases also the bullies have the need of a special treatment. The counsellors have to listen the all sides and they have to create a very complex network, in which parents, teachers and students participated.
- Having in the school life extracurricular activities help the students and the general atmosphere in the schools. These activities help the students to know each other, to see what they are good at, highlight the positive aspects, and everybody, sooner or later, will find the place where to be the star and to be appreciated. Because, in fact, this is what bullies are looking for, appreciation and they want attention.

- Each case is a special case and need time, patience and reflection in order to find solutions. And as teacher we also need guidance and help from a special training.
- The school plays an important role in the socialization of students, teachers are educational agents, directly responsible for student behaviour; and together with the school management and responsible public authorities should be more involved in ensuring safety and protection in schools and also to influence the development of nonviolent behaviour among students.
- We do not have a general policy addressing to this phenomenon and there is no education about this in school. The actual situation, system needs a bottom up approach.

ACKNOWLEGMENTS

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