PREVENTION OF BULLYING BY INDUCING TEENAGERS'ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR

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Abstract:Bullying represents a form of violence that involves more agressive behaviour (intimidation, harassment, humiliation, physical aggression, effected with intention and repeatedly). In the last years, it became a phenomenon in Romanian schools, because it affects thousands of students. In adressing teenagers, the representative adults, especially teachers should use methods to prevent bullying. The paper mainly approaches strategies of inducing pro-social behaviour, by assertive communication techniques.

Keywords/ Cuvinte-cheie: bullying, teenagers, assertive behaviour, prevention, pro-social competences;

Bullying as a phenomenon

School represents an education institution for youth, with an explicit role in developing the necessary competences for active integration in social life. But the school is also a difficult environment for each student, because it demands rapid accomodation to the social rules of the classroom, as a group. In this microclimate it is being re-created, on a small scale, the hierarchies of any group of persons. Having different personalities, different needs and backgrounds, the children must find efficient ways of communication and collaboration, and the group must armonise itself in order to fully function.

Adolescence, metaphorically defined as the age of "storm and stress" (Stanley Hall, 1909), is a stage of important transformations in a child's life, and it makes the transition to his maturation and his assuming adulthood's specific roles. In this strage of life, the adolescent must realize a major task: that of creating for himself a stabile identity and of becoming a mature adult, complete and productive (Perkins, Adolescence: Developmental Tasks, 2001). One of the great questions an adolescent has to answer is: *Who am I?*, in other words to define his identity. In this task, the others represent guiding marks, and also agents for re-configuration of self's image, by the social learning mechanisms. Some teenagers become shy and unsecure, others desire to get attention by rebellion acts against their parents and the society, and others develop hobbies and attend performance levels.

Most teenagers experience the imperious need for independence. This most often means taking distance from the family and orienting towards the peer-group. The group of friends will represent, in this stage, models for the way of dressing, behavior, hobbies, so on. Teenagers have a great wish of being accepted, which often manifests by a growing sensitivity towards other's beliefs and many times they immaturely and completely wrong understanding of other's

attitude ("he's smiling, it means he likes me", "he ignores me, it means he hates me"). Conflicts are often between groups of teenagers with different values or between groups and children that don't belong to the group. Predominant targets are children that are different: the shy and introvert ones, the ones with weight problems, with very good or very bad school results. When these children are repeatedly harassed or aggressed, by kids that are stronger or bigger, we talk of bullying.

The term bullying, was first proposed at the beginning of the 20th century by a Swedish academic, namend Dan Olweus. He developed an older theory of Heinemann that identified **mobbing** - a violent, instinctual behavior of birds consisting in assaulting a weaker member of their own species. Olweus disagreed with the idea that mobbing was a "crowd" behavior, and made the observation that opposite was true: typically, a small group of two or three students would do the majority of the bullying that occurred in a class, and as many as 30 percent of children who were bullied had been victimized by the same person.

The term was introduced in the romanian scientific world, as it is, and is now used to name a great rage of aggressive behavior as group exclusion, social isolation, physical violence, threats or humiliation, violence and destroying the personal belongings, the interdiction to walk/interact with a student, roumours' spreading, so on. In critical formes, it may lead to threatening or harassing, acts presented and punished in the Penal Code.

Bullying is defined as a form of repeated aggression, characterized by an inequality of force between the involved persons: bully and victim, through which the aggressor tries to obtain some benefits (social recognition, assets, so on.) (Nansen et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993). Bullying does not presume the existence of a conflict based on a real problem, but on the desire of some people to earn power, authority, by putting others in a bad light.

In order to differentiate bullying of other violent behavior, we'll make the following observations: it represents a form of emotional and physical abuse, with three main characteristics:

- is intentional – the bully harms others deliberately;
- is repeated – the same student is hurt every time;
- it is based on an imbalance of power – the aggressor chooses his victim among the students he thinks are vulnerable, weak and unable to protect themselves;

According to Agerpres, the purpose of bullying is affecting the victim's mental and emotional state, ruining his image or reputation and also "developing and imposing a perception regarding the aggressor's superiority, on one hand, and of victim's inferiority on the other". It involves verbal, physical or relational violence.

Related terms are used to differentiate specific bullying behavior, as **mobbing**- if theaggressive behavior of humiliation and intimidation is realized by a group o students and **cyber-bullying**- if the aggressions take place in the virtual reality. Here, the most common aggressions among teenagers include: mean text messages or emails, rumors sent by email or posted on social networking sites, and embarrassing pictures, videos, websites, or fake profiles.

We can define bullying as a phenomenon because:

- It is affecting students, careless of their religion, age, socio-economical level. Statistics show that half of the schoolage children are involved in aggressive acts in school, as aggressors, victims or both. The other half becomes, in most cases, witness to this violent behavior. The Save the Children Foundation points out that, in a bullying situation all the children are victims: the one that bears the direct consequence of aggression; the one that is author of the violent behavior (as he surely learned that kind of behavior, as witness or

victim in another life context); the one that helpless assist and learn that the school or neighborhood are battle fields on which only the strong ones are winning.
- Has major impact on all the people involved: victims may remain marked for life; the aggressors are testing some ways of behaving, which can be repeated all through their lives.

Statistical dates regarding the ampleness of the phenomenon in Romania are worrying: according to UNICEF, Romania is on the first place in Europe in the number of students aged 11 to 15 who bully peers. Almost half of the children in Romania (46%) were victims of bullying (more than half of them were girls and 47% boys. During 2011-2013, the Child Helpline Association registered 2907 cases of bullying in Romania, 45.72% of the cases regarding physical violence, 22.86% verbal abuse, 15.24% emotional abuse and 14.28 % relational abuse. Among the effects of the phenomenon of bullying were recorded: depression and behavioral disorders, exclusion and difficulty in relationships, suicidal ideation, fear and anxiety, identity crisis and loneliness.

A study of the organization "Save the Children" on the phenomenon of bullying in Romanian schools reveals that a quarter of the children is repeatedly humiliated in front of colleagues. Furthermore, 4 of the 10 children were injured as a result of the repeated aggressive behaviors of other peers. Another thing revealed by this study is that 37% of the students were bullied by bearing humiliating and annoying rumors spread about them. According to this research, the most vulnerable are the Roma children, the disabled, the ones with weight problems or shy children.

According to other studies, the most part of the victims of bullying were teenagers aged between 12-17 (28,58% girls and 57,14% boys) or pre-teenagers (8-11 years). The aggressors were other kids (57,14%), adults (25%) and teachers (17,86%).

Causes and effects of bullying

The phenomenon's causes are hard to find. Some explain it by the innate human aggression observing that the phenomenon is widely spread among other primates, in the attempt of the stronger ones to dominate the weak ones and to get benefits as food or social status.

The most mentioned causes are: the immaturity specific to childhood combined with the lack of empathy, egocentrism, the lack of communication skills. Another important cause is early exposure to violence: many times the bully adopts violence as an expression of disability to react against the abuses and violence towards him (from the family environment).

The aggressor's profile is not, as one might think, the one of a powerful person. On the contrary, the bully teenagers are trying to impose themselves by violence, usually in order to be accepted by the group or to be considered "cool", when they actually are masking defects or complexes.

We believe that one of the main causes is the lack of education and adult implication. Studies show that 80% of teachers don't take measures when students are being bullied and most adults consider bullying a normal behavior between children. Many parents don't speak to their children about relationships and don't prepare them to avoid or respond to peer violence.

Bullying has a negative impact on everyone involved: the target, the bully and the bystanders. The bullied children are more stressed, anxious, have problems in concentrating at school, some refuse going to school. It lowers their self-esteem, so they become more quiet and refuse to communicate. This may lead to depression, behavior disorders and even suicidal thoughts.

In the case of the aggressive students, the bullying behavior becomes a risk factor for school abandon and juvenile delinquency. The bully students are up to 5 - 6 times more likely to involve in anti-social behavior when they become adults. (Olweus, 1991)

The bullying bystanders, usually the other children, many times feel secretly relieved that they aren't the target of bullying and tend to avoid the author, not being willing to interfere in protecting the victim.

Bullying is creating an unsafe environment in school, an atmosphere of anxiety and fear, intimidation and negative feelings, that affects the whole class.

Inducing assertive behaviour by practicing assertive communication techniques

One of the pioneers and founder of the intervention programmes on bullying is dr. Dan Olweus. In his book "Bullying at school. What we know and what we can do" (1993), dr. Olweus identifies the students' characteristics that define the profile of the aggressor and the profile of the victim. He proposes an intervention plan on bullying, that is based on four key-principles (Olweus, 1994): 1.) positive interest and adult intervention; 2.) setting of firm limits regarding the unacceptable behavior; 3.) the consequent use of non-punitive and non-physical sanctions, for unwanted behavior and 4.) models of positive behavior offered by significant adults. The programme is working at school, class and individual level.

Most of the anti-bullying programmes propose two principles in dealing with this problem: the victims should immediately announce an adult and the aggressors should be punished. Although these two principles are based on good motivation, they can lead to opposite effects. If any bullying case is reported to the teachers, this will induce among students the idea that they can't deal alone with difficulties. Thus, the self esteem and trust will be destroyed. The students that inform teachers may be seen as traitorous. Punishing the behavior does not always solve the problem: studies show that punishments don't determine good behavior on the long term, because they don't offer solutions and don't address the causes. In many situations, the bully may decide to revenge on those who announced the teachers and conflict may continue.

One of the more effective and more interesting way of intervention is being expressed in the worlds "all aboard!" This means that, in order to stop the violence, everyone must be involved: the school, teachers, students and families have to collaborate for making school a safe environment.

It is not enough to speak about bullying and set rules to incentivize good behavior. According to thepsychologist Izzy Kaleman, the most effective way of preventing bullying is to give students the "wisdom" of knowing how to deal with bullying without an adult's help.

A very useful way of teaching children to adequately react, so they solve by themselves their problems, in a positive manner, is the **assertive behavior**. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines assertiveness as: "Forthright, positive, insistence on the recognition of one's rights" in other worlds is a key communication skill that allows a person pursue your his objectives and stand up for his rights and values, while respecting the rights, values and beliefs of others.

Assertivity can be practiced with teachers or parents even from the early childhood, so it would become a useful skill in relating to others and in blocking other's aggressive behavior.

An efficient way to develop children's assertive behavior is by teaching them techniques of assertive communication. In *School Counsseiling*, A, Băban (2000, p.93) notes: "Assertive communication has been developed as a way of efficiently adapting to the conflictual interpersonal relations" (Rees, Shan, 1991). "The lack of assertivity is one of the most important sources of social inadequacy. The assertivity is the result of a **set of attitudes and learning**

behaviors that have as long term consequences the improvement of social relationships, development of self-trust, respect for personal rights, building a healthy lifestyle, development of the decision making abilities, development of conflict management abilities (Rakos, 1991)."

For better understanding the assertive behavior, is best that we compare it with passive and aggressive ones. Shortly, they are presented in table no.1.

Table 1. Assertive / Passive/ Aggressive behavior

	Passive	**Assertive**	**Aggressive**
Motivation	Want to avoid conflicts, feels that his opinion is not that important, is afraid of expressing his feelings.	Wants to solve the situation in a manner acceptable by both sides.	Feels that only he is right and doesn't care about others' opinions.
Attitude	Doesn't express his feelings.	Express he's feelings in a way that wouldn't upset the others.	Express he's feelings without carrying for the other's reactions, in a violent, aggressive way.
Consequences	- the problem isn't solved; - negative feelings as anger, frustration.	- the problem is solved in a both sides accepted manner.	- the problem is solved in a manner advantaging the aggressive person or leads to conflicts, fights.

According to A. Băban,*Assertivity is the abilityof expressing our emotions and beliefs, without attaching others' rights.* Learning the assertive behavior is facilitated by putting it in contrast with the two opposed behavior models: Passivity and Aggressivity.

Passivity – is a behavior that can be described as one person's answer that is trying to avoid confrontation, conflicts, wishes everybody to be satisfied, regardless of their personal rights or wishes (idem). This persons feel hurt, frustrated, irritated, without trying to express their complaints about others. Reasons for some teenagers to adopt passive attitude regarding peers:
- low self-esteem or a deformed self-image: they are certain that if others will find about their wishes and feelings, they won't be appreciated or accepted.
- they think that is better to avoid conflicts and to maintain peace with all means;
- interpretate their passivity as kindness orcourtesy;
- think that not being passive mean being aggressive or arrogant;
- do not trust in their values and opinions.

Aggressivity – is a behavior based on accusing and blaming the other, not respecting the rules set by the authorities (parents, teachers, Police), and reacting in a violent manner in order to harm the others. The aggressive adolescent is uncaring to other's emotions, solve their problems by using force and violence, are hostile and furious. Studies have shown that is more likely that a teenager is aggressive if he has aggressive models in his family, if he has ben abused by others or if he considers that violence is the only way for getting respect and recognition from peers.

Unfortunately both passive and aggressive behavior aren't effective in solving problems. If someone is passive during repeated conflicts with others, he will lose these conflicts, his rights will be denied and he would feel unhappy and powerless. The aggressive behavior may solve some problems, but ruins interpersonal relations.

In order to develop students' competences of assertivity, teachers could train them, by using some efficient techniques:

- **The Responsibility Language;**

It's a communication form through which one can express his own emotions and feelings without attacking the interlocutor, it's a way of communicating that avoids criticism, labeling, that is focused on behavior not on person.

Responsibility Language involves three different components:

1) Describing the behavior (for eg. *When you speak unnapropiately, When you say untruth things about me, When you hit me...*);
2) Expressing our own feelings (*...I'm feeling hurt, I get furious...);*
3) Expressing the behavior's consequences (*...I'm not going to tolerate this any further, I'm going to tell you to my parents/ teacher*).

For example, an affirmation can be blocked by a first person message that helps the bully to better understand his victim's feelings: *I'm sad/I don't like when you make fun of my weight problems, I would like you to stop!* Practicing this technique involves making eye contact and using a firm tone.

Addressing others using the second person (*You* always hit your colleagues, *You* are bad, ...) usually involves judging the other and breaks communication because of the defensive reactions it causes. The first person messages (the responsibility language) are focused on the speaker's feelings and the receiver's behavior, preventing the defensive reactions in communication and blocking aggression.

- **Emotion expressing**

In several papers and programmes on emotional intelligence (EQ), Daniel Goleman promoted the introduction in the school curricula of some disciplines aiming to develop the EQ. This could contribute, believes Goleman, to the drastic declining of the aggressive behavior and violence in the society and lead to a harmonious personal development. By many researches, the author proved that the main cause of the students misbehavior is the bad interpretation they gave others' expressions and mimics. If the teacher is not familiar with the internal resorts determining misbehavior, this could represent a serious barrier in his communication with the students.

Some ways of improving emotional expressing:

- Discussing, provoking and countering the myths about emotions by: acknowledging our own myths about emotions, analyzing the situations in which behavior is prejudice and myths influenced;

- Identifying different emotions types by: emotions verbal expression exercises, associating the subjective state with the verbal label of the emotion;

- Expressing emotions through adequate language.

- **The paradoxical answer**

This technique involves blocking the aggressor's behavior through unexpected reactions. Usually the bully choose their victims from the shy, weak children and the expected behavior is crying or withdrawal. This technique teaches the children to give answers that will make the bully think about and change his behavior.

The bullied can use: answering with a complement?? (*You don't have my problem. It's interesting you've noticed*), partial acceptance (*It's as you say, but you don't know the whole story*), humor or self-irony (*If I admit something about myself, we can all laugh together about it*). These methods are blocking the aggressive lines and disarm the bully.

- **Learn to say NO**

One of the most suggested techniques for bullied children is to take distance from the bully. This behavior may stop for moment the conflict, but does not solve the problem. The aggressed child will have to permanently hide from the aggressor. He can even refuse to go to school, to avoid being bullied. Furthermore, this way of reacting will reinforce the bully's belief that the child is weak, can't defend himself….so, in fact, the bullying will go on. The avoiding behavior is useful only in a few number of situations, for example if the bullied feels that he can't demand help of an adult or peer. Avoiding the bully can be done only a few times.

Usually, a more efficient way is confrontation. Kids have to learn to say NO in a firm and without hesitations way. The bullied may say "NO! I won't accept you behaving like this to me. Stop!"

The witnesses can also stop the bullying behavior by addressing the aggressor and reminding him that "It's NOT ok to behave like that! The school/class does NOT tolerate such behavior! "

- The change of perspective

If the one aggressed verbally of psychologically wouldn't feel hurt by the things aggressively stated about her/him, the abuse would be much diminished. Children can learn to get a new perspective about harmful affirmation: they should learn to ask themselves "Is it true why the bully sais?" (most times it proves he's wrong!); "What's his reason for saying that?" Or they should learn to find qualities that beat the flaws exposed in an aggressive or offensive way.

Conclusions

Bullying is a form of aggression, widely spread among students. We can only speak about it if the aggression is repeated, intentional and involves an inbalance of power. All the adults (teachers and families) should involve in getting students to recognize bullying and learn efficient techniques that can stop this phenomenon.

As Mircea Malița stated in *Idei în mers (Ideas in motion)*, regarding the experiences lived in childhoold and adolescence, they might define our personality: "Offences are not only elements of anti-civilization, they are harming the belief in our own force and meaning, that is the main engine that involves, in youth, the act of searching, learning, knowledge and skills acquiring. The encouragement or discouragement of whom victim or beneficial you were during the school years, may imprint in your being, in a benefic or disastrous way, for your entire existence."

It is, therefore, absolutely crucial that students learn during school-years how to interact with one another in an assertive manner. If students will train for being assertive, they will train for living a life with no agrressivity or violence. This would be a proof for Nelson Mandela's belief that "Education is the most powerful weapon for changing the world."

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