Bullying and Cyberbullying in Italy: Perspectives from an Action Research Project

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Abstract: This paper shows the results of an action research project titled "Bullout" financed by the Lombardy Region, Italy, on the topics of bullying, cyberbullying, and guidelines for intervention and prevention. The project had a threefold purpose: to investigate instances of bullying experienced by selected groups of students; to understand bullying dynamics and its various forms; to provide tools directly created by students against bullying and for its risk prevention. The project used a theoretical framework to detail the typical aspects of bullying dynamics and what action is needed for which, especially during the prevention phase. The action research methodology is applied through the learning-by-doing approach, thus allowing for active student experimentation and direct participation in the activities produced. Results are viewed under three perspectives: increasing our knowledge of bullying and cyberbullying dynamics; a systematization of methods for discussion of the subject with students; two practical storytelling tools to improve bullying and cyberbullying prevention.

Keywords: Bullying; Cyberbullying; Risk Assessment; Hate Speech

Introduction

Bullying and violent behaviours at schools are not a new social and collective phenomena. They began with the systematization of education systems and they affect, albeit in different ways, all countries and students in the world[1].

In the last few decades, the situation in the daily life of children and adolescents especially has gotten worse, as the advent of social networks and social media has allowed for an increase for increase possibilities of socialisation also in digital environments, thus raising the issue to a new level of perception and awareness. This type of bullying is not predominant compared to physical or actual bullying and yet, as two sides of the same coin, their combined effects and implications become evident.

As far as the definition of cyberbullying is concerned, in the specific context of this research it refers to that outlined by Menesini et al. (2017), who identify four forms of cyberbullying as reported by Bertocchi (2019, p. 39):

- *written-verbal attacks: this refers to written or verbal behaviour aimed at offending the victim, such as sending messages with insults and insults, posting offensive comments on social networks, etc;*
- *visual attacks: these include sending and publicly and/or privately sharing personal, compromising or embarrassing photos and videos;*
- *impersonation: unauthorised access to, and use of, the private credentials, account of a peer;*
- *exclusion: excluding someone from online groups such as WhatsApp groups.*

This issue is one of the most complex in the education sector, because it consists of collective dynamics involving a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, pedagogy, sociology and anthropology.

The Italian bullying and cyberbullying situation is interesting from both academic and practical perspectives.

In particular, the latest national survey conducted in 2019 by ISTAT - Italian National Institute of Statistics[2], was promoted by a parliamentary commission to implement the knowledge about Italian bullying and cyber-

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[1] Richardson, D. and Fen Hiu, C. (2018). Developing a Global Indicator on Bullying of School-aged Children, irc.org/publications/pdf/WP%202018-11.pdf;
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2017), School Violence and BullyingGlobal Status ReportSustainableDevelopmentGoalsUnited NationsEducational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246970/PDF/246970eng.pdf.multi

[2] Commissione parlamentare per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza, Senato della Repubblica (2019), Indagine conoscitiva Bullismo e cyberbullismo, http://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg18/file/repository/relazioni/libreria/novita/XVIII/19P0286_IC_Cyberbullismo_REVFINALE.pdf

bullying situation, with the aim of understanding and countering these phenomena.

What emerged from this survey was a complex and complicated scenario, due to the difficulties to clearly define the main topics such as bullying and cyberbullying.

For example, the first law defining cyberbullying is No. 71 of 2017, in which the article 1, clause 2 defines cyberbullying as follows:

"any form of pressure, aggression, harassment, blackmail, insult, denigration, defamation, identity theft, alteration, unlawful acquisition, manipulation, unlawful processing of personal data to the detriment of minors, carried out electronically, as well as the dissemination of online content having as its object also one or more members of the family of the minor whose intentional and predominant purpose is to isolate a minor or a group of minors by enacting a serious abuse, a damaging attack, or their ridicule."

The last Italian national survey was conducted in 2014 and targeted boys and girls aged 11 to 17. One of the interesting data is that more than 50% of respondents have been victims of some form of bullying in the last 12 months before the interview.

Another interesting data is the one related to the territorial context in which bullying actions are carried out: mainly in Northern Italy where the frequency of these acts decreases as age increases.

As for cyberbullying, it is emphasized that it depends on the spread and access to new technologies (i.e. smartphones) and the Internet: on the total number of respondents who responded to have been bullied, 22.2% report acts of cyberbullying. The latter is a very important information, especially to think about and develop actions to both prevent and combat this specific form of bullying.

In this regard, Tintori et al. (2021, p.2), referring to Brewer and Kerslake (2015) well express the typicality of cyberbullying: "*Thus, cyberbullying offers a new virtual space to express violent behaviours, which are favoured by the anonymity of the Internet.*"

Furthermore, the latest reports and data[3] on the Italian scenario reveal trends in common with the international picture.

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[3] Giornata contro il bullismo: vittima di soprusi un adolescente su due, (2020), https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italia/bullismo_giornata_nazionale_agazzo_su_due_vittima_di_bullismo-5033569.html;

Maciocchi, P. (2020), Il bullismo viaggia in rete e quattro ragazzi su dieci lo incontrano, https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/il-bullismo-viaggia-rete-e-quattro-ragazzi-dieci-incontrano-AC1hHgHB;

Network indifesa (2019), https://networkindifesa.terredeshommes.it/bullismo-e-cyberbullismo-i-dati-osservatorio-indifesa/;

Di Cristofaro, C. (2020), Cyberbullismo, crescono i reati ma anche le denunce. Vittime 4 ragazzi su dieci, https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/cyberbullismo-crescono-reati-ma-anche-denunce-vittime-4-ragazzi-dieci-ACn6kHHB.

Specifically, the following key directions and dynamics emerged:

1. an increase of the phenomenon[4] regardless of territory and urban areas
2. nearly half of the students who took part in the various national surveys conducted in the past few years say they have witnessed or experienced both real and virtual bullying. Girls are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying, while boys are more concerned about bullying overall than girls.

Because bullying and cyberbullying are on the rise in Italy, and because many students perceive it as a risk and a real threat, they deserve attention.

In Italy, specifically, the Children's Guarantor plays an essential role in making guidelines operational both nationally and upon reception of supranational recommendations such as those issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of Children and Adolescence.[5]

The project discussed in this paper is called #LIKEFORLIFE 2018/2019 and it is aimed at the prevention and tackling of bullying and cyberbullying.

The #LIKEFORLIFE project also implemented a range of awareness-raising, informative and training activities to tackle and prevent bullying and cyberbullying. This project is included in the Bullout funding line promoted and financed by the Lombardy Region, Italy and is based on the principles of action research methodology and learning-by-doing training principles.

Its goal is threefold:

1. to raise awareness of bullying dynamics in specific schools in the region, promoting risk awareness
2. to support students in building suitable information on the topic
3. to develop, along with the students, two tools to help raise awareness of the topic and ways to tackle such dynamics.

The project had a duration of one school year, nine months, and involved the students of various classes in two high schools in the Lombardy Region. It entailed the following activities:

1. define a theoretical framework to sustain the selection of activities
2. meet with students to define the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, violent behaviour and hate speech
3. implement two workshops with some of the classes in order to achieve the goals of the project such as promoting bullying and cyberbullying

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[4] Istat (2014), Il bullismo in Italia: comportamenti offensivi e violenti tra giovanissimi, https://www.istat.it/it/files/2015/12/Bullismo.pdf; Istat (2019), Indagine conoscitiva su bullismo e cyberbullismo https://www.istat.it/it/files//2019/03/Istat-Audizione-27-marzo-2019.pdf

[5] Garante per l'Infanzia, (2019), Pubblicate le raccomandazioni del Comitato Onu all'Italia sui diritti dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza, https://www.garanteinfanzia.org/news/pubblicate-le-raccomandazioni-del-comitato-onu-allitalia-sui-diritti-dellinfanzia-e

awareness; raise student awareness of the widespread diffusion of hate speech among adolescents

4. assist in learning to prevent and manage bullying dynamics
5. help increase awareness of the way they relate to and understand one another and the need to be respectful and tolerant towards others, both in real living environments and in the increasingly present virtual world

Key findings emerged at the end of this project that enriched the knowledge about this social phenomenon, enabling educators, parents, children and adolescents to better prevent future acts of bullying.

Theoretical Background

From a theoretical perspective, the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying are situated within the prolific discussion of the sociology of education and in particular its expression in the Italian academic context.

The consideration of authors such as Besozzi (2014) and Ribolzi (1979, 2012) allows us to consider these phenomena in the light of the historical debate between the different sociological currents that have alternated over the decades. In particular, the reference is to the theories of consensus that have as their progenitor the sociologist Durkheim and those of conflict represented by the sociologist Weber and the broader Marxist currents.

This dualism and contemporaneity have pervaded much of the sociological thinking on the subject of schooling, schools as social agencies and the relationship between teachers and families.

The history of the sociology of education then came to a crisis around the 1970s, with the deepening of the social crisis in Italy and much of the western world, which was based on a crisis and change of values that would pervade the following decades.

It is precisely in view of this complex social context that the attention devoted to the issues of professional skills and job opportunities that schools can and should offer young people can be explained.

The changes in relational and socialisation models, with the new roles attributed to other socialisation agencies, such as school or the peer group, has led to a crisis in the traditional model of education (Besozzi, 2014) and the advent of new forms of education and socialisation.

Moreover, the new socio-cultural context of the last two decades has brought greater attention to the role of intersubjectivity, the interdependence of the various social actors present in the school context and communication (Besozzi, 2014).

It is in accordance with this perspective and with the evolution of school and educational dynamics, that it is possible to embrace the interactionist - communicative perspective of socialization proposed by Besozzi (2014).

In the last decades, with the development and increasing pervasiveness of new media and social media in particular, the communicative perspective becomes fundamental to the understanding of socialization processes related to the school and educational environments of young people (Martelli, 1996).

In view of the characteristics of the broader socio-cultural context, attention to phenomena such as bullying and its expression in online, digital environments, namely cyberbullying, has intensified in recent years.

Specifically, bullying has increasingly been the subject of attention and awareness in recent years in the media and local case stories, but also in the scientific and education communities as well as in other institutional agencies such as the Parliamentary Commission on Children and Adolescence.

An improved study and understanding of bullying and cyberbullying phenomena is necessary because of the individual and social consequences of these acts, as cited by Bowman (2018), who points out multiple effects and detrimental consequences such as:

- suicide
- decreased academic performance
- decreased mental and physical health

Research results and literature on children and adolescents describe specific narratives for this social process and detailed characteristics in its social, relational and communicative dynamics.

A few factors in particular have contributed towards changing the perception and the systematization of bullying as a violent phenomenon that needs to be curbed:

- a statistical increase in the phenomenon that consequently shifted it from the "perceived or narrated" dimension to an "objective and systematic" dimension;
- a change in the education system and in the relationship between the various secondary and education agents of socialisation (Ribolzi, 1979; Ribolzi, 2012; Besozzi, 2014);
- different parenting systems and patterns;
- changes in relationships in the everyday living environments of children and young people;
- the advent of social media and social networks has contributed to the creation of bullying dynamics also via the web, leading to the definition of that field of action as cyberbullying, which is connected with other violent phenomena such as hate speech.

Over the last few years, the focus of the phenomenon has gradually formed around two central elements, which inform this research in different ways:

- institutional guidelines as policy tools to guide activities that should be implemented for the prevention, monitoring and possible contrast of this violent phenomenon;
- attention to the local context to better understand the peculiar forms of bullying and to best implement the most effective prevention activities and actions to combat this phenomenon.

Moreover, in awareness of the crucial role played by the web and social networks, it becomes essential to understand their specific virtual dynamics and the types of relationships they create between real and virtual contexts. Another important factor is the need to understand how these online and offline dynamics are perceived by users or teens.

Furthermore, bullying and violence at school can manifest within the multiple areas defined by the UNESCO Report (2019) and its conceptual framework of school violence and bullying:

- Physical violence
- Psychological violence
- Sexual violence

Specifically:

- Physical bullying includes repeated aggression such as being hit, hurt, kicked, pushed, shoved around or locked indoors, having things stolen, having personal belongings taken away or destroyed, or being forced to do things. It is different from other forms of physical violence such as physical fights and physical attacks.
- Psychological bullying includes verbal abuse, emotional abuse and social exclusion and refers to being called mean names, being teased in an unpleasant way, being left out of activities on purpose, excluded or completely ignored, and being the subject of lies or nasty rumours.
- Sexual bullying refers to being made fun of with sexual jokes, comments or gestures.
- Cyberbullying includes being bullied by messages, i.e. someone sending mean instant messages, postings, emails and text messages or creating a website that makes fun of a student or by pictures, i.e. someone taking and posting online unflattering or inappropriate pictures of a student without permission; it also refers to being treated in a hurtful or nasty way by mobile phones (texts, calls, video clips) or online (email, instant messaging, social networking, chatrooms) and online hurtful behaviour.

The systematization offered by UNESCO (2019) helps define the key concepts, making the challenging mission of identifying which type of violence constitutes an act of bullying or bullying attitude easier.

Another definition of bullying is that offered by Meyer (2009, p. 6) as cited by Bowman (2018): [definition of bullying as:] "repeatedly and over time

intentionally inflicting injury on another person." (Meyer, 2009, p.6). This can be verbally (through things like threatening, name calling), physically (punching, kicking etc.), or psychologically (excluding others, manipulating others etc.) (Meyer, 2009, p. 6).

The phenomenon of bullying is generally defined as a violent or aggressive act against someone, although it can consist of hate speech and verbal aggression as well.

Within the framework of this project and in accordance with this perspective, the phenomenon of hate speech, which is controversial in its definition also from the multiple international legal perspectives, will be considered as all those forms of expression, written or oral, conveyed through various types of media or through personal communication, which aim at devaluing a person for certain characteristic physical or psychological traits and promoting feelings of inferiority and debasement.

Furthermore, the consideration of forms of hate speech as methods and tools for promoting and spreading bullying and cyberbullying actions, leads to the need to reflect on the concept of violence and the polarisation it can have in discriminatory acts both online and offline. In this regard, Crochick and Crochick (2017) identified two forms of violence: bullying and prejudice, whereby prejudice is seen as both the root of bullying and a specific action against other people.

Furthermore, Crochick (2015, cited in Crochick and Crochick, 2017, p. 13) differentiates both forms of violence: bullying is more indiscriminate than prejudice, which is directed towards specific targets and justified imaginatively; it is perpetrated by individuals who are more regressive—from a psychic perspective—than individuals who develop prejudices. Non-selective projection, or less-established prejudice, may thus be associated with bullying. It also seems to be more compatible with a homogeneous culture, which, through (false) formation, creates insensitive individuals who have difficulty expressing their desires; this may lead them to a more diffuse form of violence compared to prejudice.

Prejudice is a worthwhile social category to distinguish among different acts of bullying, considering also the changing and adaptive nature of the phenomenon.

In directing this analysis, it was important both for this project and for the development of the workshops with students to stress the definition of cyberbullying, taking into account the adaptive attitude of students in using social networks as one of the channels to spread aggressive and violent speech: The very first studies (Smith et al,. 2008; Kowalski et al., 2008) adapted the Olweus definition of bullying (Olweus, 1995) to the online world, simply adding the precision that bullying was performed via electronic means of communication within the cyberspace: an aggressive intentional act carried

out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself. (Smith et al., 2008)

This general definition of cyberbullying needs to be understood with the specific dynamics that take place in the virtual domain and especially though social networks in mind: manipulation, disinformation and fake news significantly combine forces to spread prejudices and stereotypes that are the roots for both offline and online bullying.

In line with these perspectives, looking at the individual and/or collective factors that lead to bullying acts is essential.

Marcus (2017, p.4) highlights some key risk factors, pointing out the multidimensional property of bullying […] covering two contemporary risk factors: personality risk factors and situational risk factors:

1. Developmental risk factors refer to any influences in an individual's past which increase the probability of aggressive or violent behaviour. More generally, "developmental factors" are defined as "the conditions and variables that influence emotional, intellectual, social, and physical development from conception to maturity […] Sources of developmental risk examined in this volume, with case studies, are the following: (1) the broader environment, for instance poverty or a violent neighbourhood; (2) the person, for instance both "fixed" dimensions such as gender, presumed to be operating over many years, and "dynamic" risk factors which change, such as age or early personality traits; (3) the family, for instance a parent convicted of a crime, inter-parental violence, or child abuse or neglect; (4) the school environment, for instance a poor academic program or frequent fighting amongst students; and (5) relationships with peers, for instance rejection by peers, bullying, or associations with antisocial peers.

2. Personality risk factors refer to personality traits and any "relatively stable, consistent, and enduring internal characteristic that is inferred from a pattern of behaviors, attitudes, feelings, and habits in the individual … [that is] useful in summarizing, predicting, and explaining an individual's conduct" (VandenBos, 2007)

The added value of this systematization is the combination of personal factors with the context-sensitive nature of the phenomenon.

Although a more complex reflection is needed to deal with such dynamics, bullying is clearly the result of different influences affecting people with various personality traits.

As this Bullout project deals with adolescence, a detailed focus on this peculiar age group was provided by Marcus (2017, p. 6): […] The following rubric covering potential situational risk factors, as proposed previously (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011), will

be followed specifically as applied to adolescents: (1) provocation such as insults or physical aggression; (2) frustration, as in blocking of one's goal attainment; (3) pain and discomfort, as in any sight, sound, or temperature, which would increase discomfort; (4) drug or (e.g., to reputation) as opposed to cost (e.g., detection, punishment); and (6) aggressive cues (e.g., the presence of firearms or violent video games) alcohol use; (5) incentives, as in anything that increases the relative benefit.

Methodology

The objectives of this action research project are threefold and are articulated according to three orientations: to increase awareness of the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying; to support students in the development of dynamics and effective interpersonal communications; to develop practical tools that can help to tackle conflictual or problematic dynamics.

In relation to the objectives expressed earlier and or the purpose of this Bullout project, the preferred methodological approach was that of action research.

This choice was determined by various criteria:

1. Pathak (2008, p.11) places action research methods in the fieldwork of school activities: "Action research is a concept which was first used by Stephen M. Corey in the field of education. Corey (1953) held the opinion that if teachers are to make an active contribution towards effective learning, better achievement of learners and resolving their problems, it will probably be in the area of action research. Studies can be undertaken for the purpose of improving local school practices and for teacher's professionals growth, teaching strategies/techniques, classroom management, professional improvement, preparation of textbooks and the development of curriculum."

This statement also points out a further dimension of the action research methodological approach, which is to focus on a phenomenon on a micro and local level and spread those findings at a macro/national level.

2. the theoretical principles behind the action research method can be summarized as follows, as cited in Pathak (2008, p. 11): "According to S. M. Corey, "The process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems scientifically in order to guide, correct and evaluate their decisions and actions is, what a number of people have called, action research". In fact, it is the type of research which a person conducts in order to enable them to achieve their purpose effectively, e.g. teachers conduct action research to improve their own teaching."

The Bullout project also had an added value because of the alliance between a pool of experts from academic institutions and law enforcement

agencies, media and communication experts to support the active role played by the teachers in the development of the projects and workshops.

3. All activities and workshops were implemented and carried out according to the principle of inclusive education theorized by Cronick (2017), evidencing the relational patterns and the importance of fieldwork; both of them are typical of educational practices and the active participation required by this methodological perspective

4. An advantage of this approach in the context of educational research is that it allows for student self-evaluation, as Marcus (2017, p.11) stated: "Self-report measures of aggression and violence have become a mainstay in the assessment of nationally representative survey samplings of adolescents at a particular point in time or in assessing the same group of adolescents followed over many years."

5. The methodological structure of the Bullout project has been adapted to the general action research approach proposed by Pathak (2008) and was developed over nine months, between 2019 and 2020:

  I. Identification of the problem: bullying and cyberbullying are a real concern in many Italian schools: it affects many children and students, and it includes different types of bullying such as aggressive acts but also hate speech, especially through online social networks;

  II. Analysis of the problem's dynamics: this action was set in motion based on a report on the matter produced by national authorities and preliminary testing of students attending different classes in two schools in the Lombardy Region. The two schools and the specific classes have been selected through the winning of the regional competition announcement about preventing and tackling bullying of the Lombardy region in 2018;

  III. Analysis of preliminary test findings and consequent planning for actions and workshops. The preliminary test was conducted to assess whether the developed questionnaire was suitable and effective for the characteristics of the respondents, their specific cognitive, cultural, and linguistic aspects. The choice to conduct it was made in order to have a more circumstantial assessment of the validity and relevance of the survey instrument developed;

  IV. Developing and conducting two different workshops aimed at improved awareness of the phenomenon and preventive actions;

  V. Based on the findings emerging from the two workshops, developing policy and training recommendations;

Specifically, students involved in this project belong to the 13-16 age group.

The classes selected for preliminary testing and for the final test, to be done after completing the two workshops, showed a slight tendency towards bullying and cyberbullying, while no evidence of these phenomena was found in the control group to be tested.

In order to maintain methodological and conceptual consistency, all three questionnaires shared thematic areas to explore, such as:

1. Tendency to experienced aggression and/or agitation
2. Experience of hate speech
3. Experience of aggression

Moreover, these three areas were set out in specific questions for the three types of survey: a preliminary test for all; a survey for those joining the Laboratory and a survey for the control group.

The common themes of the three instruments were those related to the better understanding of possible bullying behaviours (both verbal and physical) received or acted; to the better knowledge of having been witness or victim of possible acts of bullying, and finally to the exploration of the relationship between young people and social media, their online interactions and the online dynamics of in-group and out-group.

The questionnaires were distributed respecting the participants' cognitive and emotional system, in consideration of their age and developmental phase; they were collected in classrooms with the support and assistance of regular teachers in order to provide participants with a setting appropriate to their personal and personal characteristics.

All questionnaires were collected and processed anonymously.

Findings from the preliminary test

The preliminary test was conducted in the two schools previously selected, because of the participation and winning of the Bullout funding promoted by the Lombardy Region, aimed at the implementation of educational initiatives against bullism and cyberbullism. In this context, 136 surveys were collected from students ranging from 13 to 16 years of age.

The following graph shows the distribution by age and the relevance of the 16-year-old category.

Regarding the gender, the preliminary survey was presented to 82 females and 54 males, and this first overview confirms that bullying odes not only concern boys, perhaps dismantling a cultural bias.

The first question explored the tangible experience of acts of bullying such as pushing, kicking and other violent acts. Three categories of answers were available:

1. I have witnessed violent acts (pushing, kicking, etc.) towards other kids:

- Often: 5,15%
- Sometimes: 58,82%
- Never: 35,29%
- No reply: 0,74%

Graph 1. Preliminary test population distribution by age
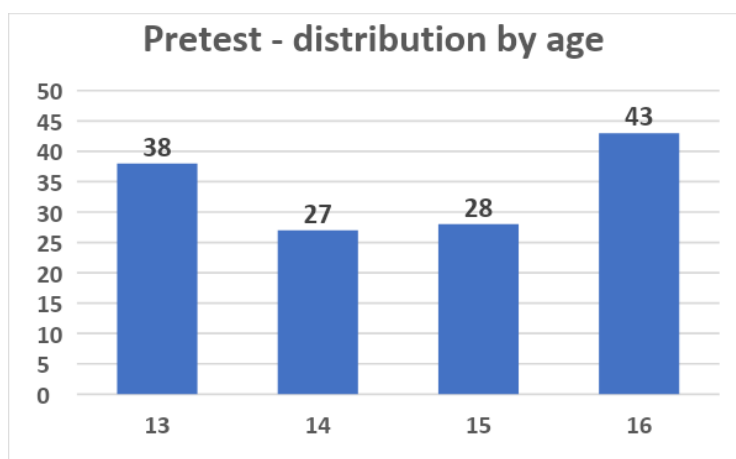
The interesting information lies in the "Sometimes" category value of 58,82%, meaning that at least half the interviewed students in the survey witnessed acts of bullying, albeit sporadically.

The second question focuses on the potential experience of being offended by other students with aggressive language for different reasons:

2. Have you ever been offended by aggressive language from other kids?
- Yes, for my physical appearance: 19,85%
- Yes, for an aspect of my character: 14,71%
- Yes, for my family history or my origins: 6,62%
- No: 38,23%
- No reply 20,59%

The responses highlight the deep complexity of the phenomenon as well as the significance of the physical domain in verbal abuse; the value of 20,60% for "no reply" is also an interesting bit of data.

The third question focused on being the principal actor in using offensive and aggressive language against other students both online and offline:

3. I have addressed other kids using offensive and aggressive language:
- Often: 2,20%
- Sometimes: 44,12%
- Never: 53,68%

The "Sometimes" category showed a tendency towards the use of aggressive language against other youth, although 53,68% of students replied "Never".

The category of bullying as a form of psychological violence through the use of violent and aggressive language was taken into account in the planning of workshop activities.

Further questions explored being on the receiving end of physical acts of violence:

4. Have you ever received physical acts of violence from other kids?

Graph 2. Preliminary Survey – Receiving physical acts of violence
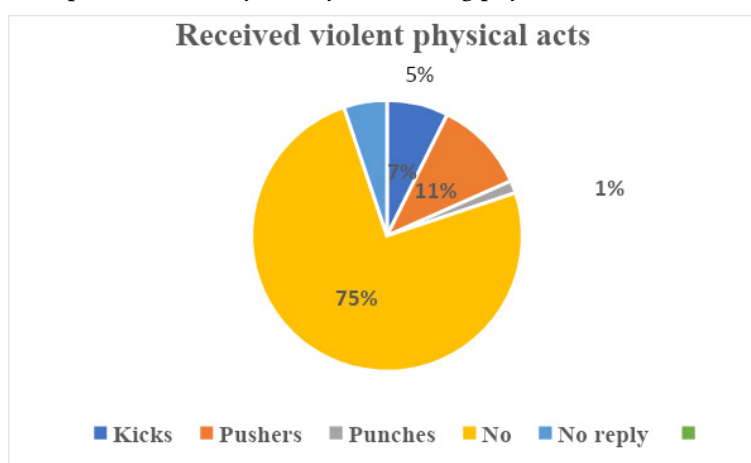
The replies provided for an interesting reflection on the distribution of answers regarding the various acts of violence, even though the majority fell in the "Never" category with 75%.

The last question concerned the potential experience of exclusion from social network environments such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok etc.: Have you ever been excluded from a social network (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok)?

• Often: 5,90%
• Sometimes: 15,44%
• Never: 78,66%

The answers showed the importance of social networks for today's adolescents and the relevance of remaining connected through social networks: the "Never" category value of 78,66% shows the importance of these tools and the students' reluctance in excluding someone from a virtual domain that is now a normal part of daily life for adolescents.

Once data and information were collected to make the questionnaire valid, it was administered to two different groups of students: one consisting

of 55 students both male and female who participated in workshops focused on bullying and online bullying; another group of 91 students who did not participate in any workshop.

The results that emerge and that will be presented in the following paragraph illustrate some of the trends and dynamics of these social phenomena that should be considered in the planning of resilient, inclusive and effective educational policies.

In particular, the information that has emerged on the phenomenon of cyberbullying is useful in creating widespread awareness of respectful use of social media, especially in the light of the increasingly important role they play in the daily lives of all of us.

Comparing two questionnaires: after the workshop and the control group test

After reviewing the preliminary survey findings, two separate workshops were planned for two groups of students who would take part in both workshops.

The workshops would address the following issues:

- prejudice and bias against other students based on physical features, personality, family history and belonging to ethnic minorities;
- hate speech and misinformation within social networks.

These two core issues were addressed by experts in the fields, through three meetings for each issue. After that, two single workshops were organized, led by experts and promoting active participation of both students and teachers.

The workshops produced two outputs[6]:

1. a comic, empathetically depicting feelings experienced during a bullying situation through a story and the genre's typical visual tools;
2. a short radio programme, using the tool of communication, enabling students and teachers to understand the dynamics of hate speech and how important it is to promote and support inclusive communication.

These two outputs were shared in a general meeting among all students, teachers and parents to cultivate awareness about the educational path taken.

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[6] Podcast Bullout Project
https://www.facebook.com/groups/618130478379543/search/?query=bullout&epa=-SEARCH_BOX; Podcast Bullout Project
https://www.neverwasradio.it/attualita/bullout-likeforlife-podcast-bullismo-e Cyberbullismo/?fbclid=IwAR2aQMXCx1cjX1ptRrA2MO2Q4X1o-bVZx39Jx_YXt13Gm3zTbMUEtC-sTbFs

At the end of these active and participatory training activities, the same survey was conducted on two different groups of students: those who attended the two workshops and those who did not attend the workshops, i.e. the control group test.

The main aim of this activity was to understand the effectiveness of the workshop and its influence in shaping or reshaping violent and aggressive trends in the students who joined the workshops.

It also confirmed the relevance of the action research approach and learning-by-doing principles within the educational fieldwork.

The comparison between the survey collected from the students who joined the two workshops and the students who only joined the control group shows interesting findings for future policy and guidelines in preventing and tackling bullying and cyberbullying.
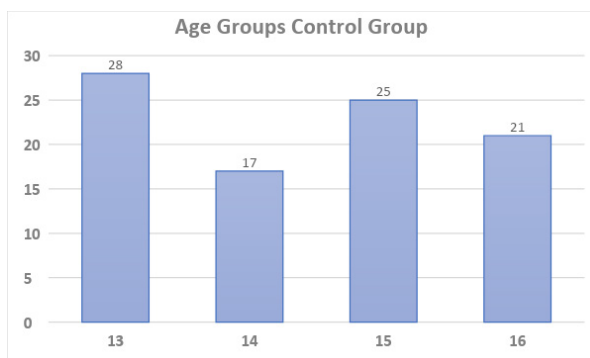
The answers collected in the survey from students who joined the workshops were 55 (30 female and 25 male), while the control group were 91 (54 female and 37 male).

Age distribution from 13 to 16 years old was the following for each group:

Graph 3. Age groups – Workshops
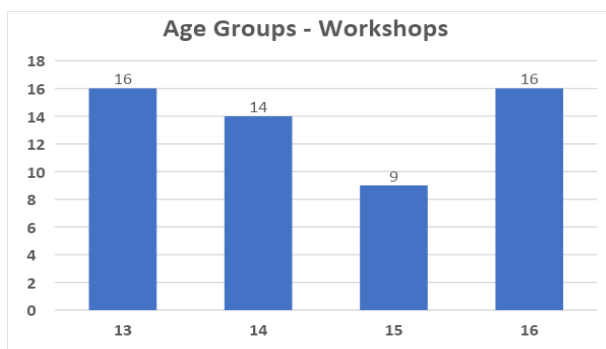
Graph 4. Age groups – Control Group

Age groups and gender categories are similar, evidencing the homogeneity among these personal data.

The first question was: "What would you do if you were to witness violent acts (pushing, kicking, etc.) towards other kids?"

Table 1 - Reply comparison 1

Response mode	After the workshops	Gender (group after the workshop)		Control Group	Gender Control Group	
		Female	**Male**		**Female**	**Male**
1. I would intervene immediately to stop the aggression	70.91%	12,10%	9,35%	43.96%	30,94%	20,93%
2. I would report the fact to a teacher and/or head-teacher	21.82%	3,30%	2,75%	18.68%	16,38%	9,10%
3. I would report the fact to my parents	7.27%	1,10%	1,65%	36.26%	1,82%	2,73%

The responses show an interesting situation, whereby the first response mode is high for both groups involved, as well as the second mode.

The last response mode shows a shift from the centrality of the parental figure for the control group, to a greater importance attributed to teachers and headteachers, when reporting an event or act of bullying.

As can be seen from the table, there is a general tendency to report these facts less to their parents, with females having a higher incidence of this behaviour than males.

This response can be deemed a direct effect of the action research method and the principles disseminated throughout these educational activities.

Another interesting aspect that emerges from these results is that for females a tendency towards direct intervention seems to prevail in both the group that participated in the workshop and the control group. This information is also useful to address some gender prejudices related to different behavioural patterns in stressful or aggressive situations.

The second question leads to the issue of hate speech and aggressive language: "What would you do if you were to receive aggressive language from other kids?"

Table 2 - Reply comparison 2

Response mode	After the workshops	Control Group
I would react immediately to stop the aggression	56,36%	39,56%
I would report the fact to a teacher and/or headteacher	32,73%	18,68%
I would report the fact to my parents	10,91%	39,56%

The same trend shown for the first question is confirmed in the second question, evidencing the rise of a different awareness for the students and their relationships with adults: not only parents are able to understand them, but also teachers, headteachers and educators.

The third question highlights the need for increased knowledge on the use of social media by students: "According to you, the information you read on social media and social networks is:"

Table 3 - Reply comparison 3

Response mode	After the workshops	Control Group
Often true	5,45%	2,20%
Often false	10,91%	4,39%
Sometimes true, sometimes false	81,82%	91,21%
No reply	1,82%	2,20%

The most interesting data deriving from this question is the shift between second and third mode in the groups that joined the workshops: the total for the "Sometimes" mode has decreased in favour of the "Often false" mode. This means that both the meeting on hate speech and fake news and a more aware use of social media and social networks affected the students' critical capability when looking at these important issues.

The fourth question explores the potential use of exclusion or discrimination in social networks by students as well as the reasons behind this behaviour: "Would you exclude a schoolmate of yours from a social network (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok) because they interact with it in a way you don't agree with (posts, likes, shares)?"

Table 4 - Reply comparison 4

Response mode	After the workshops	Gender (group after the workshop)		Control Group	Gender Control Group	
		Female	Male		Female	Male
Often	1,82%		0,55%	3,30%	0,91%	1,82%
Sometimes	18,18%	2,75%	2,75%	54,94%	26,39%	19,11%
Never	78,18%	13,75%	9,90%	40,66%	20,93%	12,74%
No reply	1,82%		0,55%	1,10%	0,91%	

The same trend that emerged in the previous question was confirmed in the current response mode, exploring whether students wanted to exclude someone from a social network because of their behaviour: the main response mode was 78,18% for "Never" for the students who joined the workshops, compared to 40,66% for the control group.

In addition, the response mode "Never" received a high percentage of responses from females in both groups, whereas males in both groups did not show such a marked value.

As far as the gender perspective is concerned, it should be noted that in the group that followed the workshop activities, the percentage of "Sometimes" answers is equal between males and females. This indicates that contextual variables are important in choosing what behaviour to adopt in terms of including or excluding people from one's personal circuit.

This trend sustains the effectiveness of the meetings and workshops held with students and teachers in order to be more aware about the social, environmental and contextual variables that may influence the behaviour of young people.

The fifth question was linked to the previous one, changing the reasons for potential exclusion or discrimination: "Would you exclude a schoolmate of yours from a social network (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok) because they have different clothing, personal taste, family origin etc.?"

Once more, the trend for the positive effects on students who joined the workshops is confirmed by these data, which mirror the increased awareness that discrimination for whatever reason is not the right way to act, especially in an educational setting.

Table 5 - Reply comparison 5

Response mode	After the workshops	Control Group
Often	5,45%	1,10%
Sometimes	0	13,19%
Never	94,55%	84,61%
No reply	0	1,10%

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall project leads to both future research guidelines and policy orientation aimed at preventing and managing bullying and cyberbullying phenomena.

Before moving forward with these two issues, it is worthwhile to focus on the findings emerging from the project:

1. comparing the data emerging from this #LIKEFORLIFE regional project with the national data provided by different institutional agencies, there is evidence to claim that there is greater likelihood of being a victim of bullying at a national rather than regional level

2. the data show that there is a greater likelihood of being a perpetrator at a national level than at a regional level. This could be due to the protective factors resulting from the more cohesive ties that are typical of local communities.

Moreover, in this project the topic of gender was critical, as there is a discrepancy between the data gathered at a regional level and those provided by national agencies; at a national level most of the reports indicate cyberbullying as more likely for girls than boys. This aspect can be explained by three specific items.

The first is the cultural bias leading to prejudice and bias committed through social networks against girls and women: bad language, aggressive tones and threats are more likely to be present in the virtual domain than in the real-life one. This is also an interesting topic in relation with domestic violence and the difference between hate speech and domestic acts of violence for which Italy holds a dismal record. The second important point is the peculiar psychological stage of adolescence, in which boys generally tend to develop a relational approach, be it conflictual or proactive, based on physical contact. Body transformation is experienced very differently by boys and girls, and the role played by cultural background must also be kept in mind.

Finally, another interesting finding of this project is the uniformity in the perception of bullying and cyberbullying dynamics in the different age groups. This is especially significant in terms of cognitive and psychological aspects.

Looking at a more general policy orientation for future development, it is important to stress the need to promote and disseminate a culture of inclusion at school for all students, especially the more vulnerable (Bowman, 2018). This is important in the current educational settings, where many students come from different cultural, family and ethnic backgrounds.

This topic is being addressed in the last few decades[7], but it needs more attention and full-time resources. This aspect also concerns the methodology selected for the implementation of educational projects dealing with bullying and cyberbullying: on-demand projects and actions are not a productive approach to such issues. Indeed, the matter is so important, that it needs continuity and long-term planning.

In terms of policy orientation it is also worthwhile to focus on the following aspects such as:

- the international scenario and the way other countries are addressing the same phenomenon both at normative and institutional levels;
- the methodologies and tools applied to assess both the risk related to bullying and the effectiveness of the educational interventions developed;
- skills required by students in order to have fruitful and proactive relationships within educational settings;
- providing teachers, educators and parents with definitions and interpretations under a common cognitive framework of potential prejudice and stereotypes that could lead to violent and aggressive behaviour against other students;
- supporting the need to spread knowledge about the specific dynamics of cyberbullying, because of the specific characteristics of the virtual domain and its effects on the dissemination of hate speech.

Moving from the policy dimension to future operative guidelines aimed at the development of activities to support inclusive, tolerant and pro-social relational models, a few possibilities and perspectives to consider are various.

Specifically, a in-depth analysis of the influence of socio-cultural aspects for relational and in-group and out-group dynamics, referring to the multicultural education setting and their specific needs could support inclusive and pro-active attitudes in students living in multicultural contexts.

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[7] Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, Linee di orientamento per azioni di prevenzione e di contrasto al bullismo e al cyberbullismo, (2015): https://www.garanteinfanzia.org/sites/default/files/Linee%20di%20orientamento%20per%20azioni%20di%20 prevenzione%20e%20contrasto%20al%20bullismo%20e%20al%20cyberbullismo.pdf

Moreover, considering the importance gives to the communication dimension in the theoretical perspective of sociology of education, an analysis of communication and relational dynamics in the virtual domain to prevent cyberbullying as well as a focus on peculiar relational and social dynamics in a virtual domain and face to face relationships can support the understanding of socialization process and social dynamics among younger in both online and offline domains. This action can also allow to deep the relationship between genders and how we relate to others aimed at a better understanding of gender (self) perceptions.

Furthermore, the action research approach has proved to be the most effective social method to conduct educational fieldwork projects against bullying and cyberbullying for two reasons. The first is that it allows the participation of all people involved: students, teachers, educators and even parents and the second highlight the promotion of improved relational ties and enables receiving immediate feedback according to the principles of learning-by-doing.

In the end, it is deemed essential to holistically explore the following sociological principles that act as guidance and theoretical approaches for future workshop activities:

- understanding emotional and moral development in relation to the awareness of the social environment in which one lives and its rules and values;
- level of compliance to norms, as per Piaget's work on the concepts of justice and sanction, for example;
- comparing the sphere and range of selfish or pro-social behaviours and attitudes to online and offline relational group dynamics;
- perception of self as mediated and influenced by the socio-cultural relationship with others;
- how the individual self and the social self are constructed;
- sense of identity and narrative thinking (Bruner, 1991
- focusing on the socio-cultural construction of prejudices and stereotypes (Mantovani, 2017), with particular interest in all students who joined the #LIKEFORLIFE project, as well as the beliefs they possess that create the useful and necessary substrate for the creation of stereotypes (Festinger, 1957)
- awareness of the role of conformism (Asch, 1951) – mainly linked to group dynamics and the use of social networks (Ranieri and Manca, 2013) – in close connection with the socio-cultural dynamics of the creation of stereotypes and prejudices is essential
- awareness of the place, environment and social context of life as well as its transposition in virtual space is also necessary (Zimbardo, 2008)

3. interpretive lines provided by Bandura (1991) and the perspective of cognitive-social interaction and the development of personal abilities

These sociological perspectives, which came to light after the implementation of #LIKEFORLIFE projects, are essential for both understanding and exploring the bullying and cyberbullying phenomena and for preparing suitable and effective activities to enable prevention, active monitoring and if required, to tackle physical and above all relational forms of violence and bullying, including the more recent ones such as cyberbullying, hate speech and violent communication.

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