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### The point of view of children of primary school on bullying

*Original*

*Availability:*

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*Publisher:*

*Published*

DOI:

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## **THE POINT OF VIEW OF CHILDREN OF PRIMARY SCHOOL ON BULLYISM**

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**Abstract.** The term “bullying” denotes aggressive, harassing, offensive, physical, verbal or relational behaviours, intentionally and repeatedly implemented by one or more subjects (bullies) towards one or more victims, who are unable to react and / or ask for help. Acts of bullying are already present in Italian primary schools and it is therefore important to launch awareness-raising and prevention initiatives on the subject to accompany children towards broader projects in order to promote citizenship. The aim of the research was to explore the perceptions and opinions, on the above antisocial behaviours and bring out useful suggestions from the children to deal with bullying situations in the classroom. As for the bullie is described as one who feels strong and does not feel guilty about their actions, who takes pleasure in doing harm, thinking that the victim deserves it. The victim is perceived as a subject who lives his situation with strong inner discomfort (he is sad, suffers, feels humiliated), is isolated and does not react and does not seek help for fear of the consequences. Children have an understanding attitude towards victims and invite them not to bear in silence and share what happens to them with the teacher and parents (their own and the bully). The victims should also try to react (but without violence) and take courage, while having an educational attitude towards bullies; however they would not exclude a punishment, that is usually delegated to the teacher.

### **1. Introduction**

The term bullying indicates aggressive theybehaviour (Olweus, 1993, Cowie, 2002, Smith and Monks, 2002, Gini and Pozzoli, 2018) directed toward peers, in a group context (Menesini, 2003), toward subjects who are younger, smaller, weaker or in some other situation of relative disadvantage (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

Three are the protagonists of bullying: the bully, the victim, the spectators. The *bully* engages in violent behaviour, with a strong need to dominate others (Coie et al., 1991), while the *victim* is usually a subject who suffers without asking for help,

is insecure and more anxious than the other members of the group, (Olweus, 1993) and therefore an easy target for the bully. *Spectators* can take on different roles: helper, reinforcer of the bully, assistance of the bully, defender of the victim and outsider (Salmivalli et al., 1996), or they can observe without intervening, intervene in support of the victim or in support of the bully.

Bullying can manifest itself through different modalities, classified by Rivers and Smith (1994) and Genta et al. (1996): physical, verbal and indirect (relational, social). The physical mode consists of attacking the subject or damaging their things; The verbal modality takes place through insults, teasing, threats, humiliation, while the indirect mode uses strategies of social isolation of the subject, for example through defamation, which aim to undermine the self-esteem of the victim and / or their social status (Smith and Monks, 2002).

Bullying manifests itself with aggressive behaviour, but in order to distinguish it from other types of violent manifestations of more episodic feature, three conditions must be met (Thomas et al., 2015): *intentionality* to deliberately create physical or psychological harm to the victim, with a form of proactive aggression<sup>1</sup>; *repetition* of behaviours that are repeated and protracted over time (and with lasting consequences, Smith and Sharp, 1994, Smith and Monks, 2002) and *asymmetry of power*, as the bully places himself in a position of superiority and aims to conquer a position of dominance (Gini and Pozzoli, 2018).

A further classification introduced by Olweus (1993) proposes a distinction between *active bullying* and *passive bullying*: in the first case the bully acts with the intention of harming the victim and achieving his purpose, while the passive bully is one who acts by imitation, because he is guided by the actual bully. Similar to this is the classification proposed by Rigby (1996) which distinguishes between *malicious bullying* (active) and *non-malicious bullying* (passive). But even among the victims a distinction can be made between passive victims and provocative victims, who can provoke, with their irritating way of behaving, reactions from the bully (Menesini, 2003).

Bullying seems to be a mostly male phenomenon regarding the role of the bully, who seems to prefer physical, aggressive bullying, while females use more forms of social bullying (Smith and Monks, 2002). For the role of victim, according to Menesini (2003) there are no marked gender differences, while others argue that even in this role the number of males prevails (Fedeli, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Coie et al. (1991) introduced the distinction between proactive aggression, which occurs on the initiative of those who perform a violent action, and reactive aggression, which is instead a response to a provocation. The bully usually acts proactively.

### 1.1 Dataset

The focus of this work is represented by children attending primary school. Bullying is still a little-known phenomenon, difficult to quantify, and it is worrying that such young children can intentionally perform violent gestures (Medri, 2018), and is often interpreted as liveliness, unruly acts or rudeness (Mariani, 2009), and this makes difficult to diagnose it. However, most data on the prevalence of bullying refers to older boys, and bullying data are associated with those of cyberbullying. Both phenomena have been growing in recent years, and a report by the NGO Bullying Without Borders<sup>2</sup> shows that in Italy 7 out of 10 children (who attend lower and upper secondary school) suffer some form of bullying or cyberbullying every day.

In the most recent ISTAT survey (2015) carried out in 2014 on children aged 11 to 17<sup>3</sup>, it emerged that 52.3% say they have been subject to some form of bullying in the 12 months prior to the survey. In particular, 32.9% suffered harassment a few times a year, 10.7% once or more a month (but less than a few times a week) and 9.1% once or more a week.

The first reports on the monitoring of bullying in Italian schools carried out through the ELISA platform (E-Learning of Teachers on Anti-bullying Strategies) and referring to the school years 2020-21 and 2021-22 concern the direct testimonies of secondary school students and the opinions of primary school teachers<sup>4</sup> (table 1).

**Table 1** – *Victims and bullies in school (percentage values)*

School years	High school students	
	Victims	Bullies
2020 - 2021	22,3	18,2
2021 - 2022	25,3	18,1
Opinions of primary school teachers		
	Victims	Bullies
2020 - 2021	5,0	5,3
2021 - 2022	4,3	4,4

Sources: <https://www.piattaformaelisa.it/monitoraggio/>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Gioia, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> The survey referred to the last 12 months before the research.

<sup>4</sup> Following the entry into force of Law 71/2017 and the issuance of the Guidelines for the prevention and contrast of cyberbullying (MIUR note prot. N. 5515 of 27-10- 2017) in 2018 the Ministry of Education and Merit started, in collaboration with the University of Florence, the ELISA project which aims to train teachers and monitor this phenomenon in primary and secondary schools of first and second degree.

In one year time span the percentage of victims has increased by 3 points, while "self-certified" bullies are substantially stable (18%). The perception of the phenomenon at primary school level is very different; there, teachers estimate a much lower presence of bullies and victims and report a decrease in bullying episodes.

Finally, according to the most recent research of the "indifesa" Observatory of 2022-23, 47.7% of young people between 14 and 26 years have been victims of bullying or cyberbullying<sup>5</sup>.

As we have seen, the data reported here have been collected with different methodologies and referred to subjects of different ages, so they are not comparable, but equally bring out a worrying picture on the spread of bullying in our country.

## 2. Objectives, tools and methods

The aim of this research was to identify the perception and evaluation of bullying by children attending primary school. To this end, a special questionnaire was structured: at the beginning a short story was written where there is Fede who acts with verbal, physical and social aggressive behavior towards Ale, but the term "bullying" is never written. The two protagonists were given nicknames that can be used for both boys and girls, and then the children were asked to assign a gender to Fede and Ale.

In the final version, the questionnaire counted 12 questions and administration<sup>6</sup> took place in the period between February and April 2023, involving 19 classes of primary schools in the provinces of Belluno, Pordenone, Trieste and Udine. The sample was made up of 323 pupils, of which 25.4% third-graders, 38.4% fourth and 36.2% fifth-graders, with a presence of 49.7% of males and 50.3% of females (one pupil did not respond).

Given the methods of selecting the sample and the aims of the research, there is no probabilistic sample, therefore the results of the research cannot be the object of inference for purposes of generalization. Nevertheless, these results have provided

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<sup>5</sup> Since 2014 *Terres des Hommes*, with *OneDay* and *ScuolaZoo* carry on the Osservatorio "indifesa", to hear of testimonies of young people on gender violence, discrimination, bullying, cyberbullying and sexting.

<sup>6</sup> The administration of the questionnaires was made by trainee university students in Education Sciences of the University of Udine, while class teachers were attending. Before administering the questionnaire, the research project was approved by the Managers of the schools involved and an information form was also signed by the families with the consent for the administration of the questionnaire to their children. The data were collected anonymously and processed in aggregate form in full respect of privacy according to the GDPR (2016/679) and Legislative Decree 101/2018.

useful information to teachers who have taken action to make targeted interventions in response to the different connotation of the problem present in the individual classes.

### 3. Data analysis and hypothesis testing

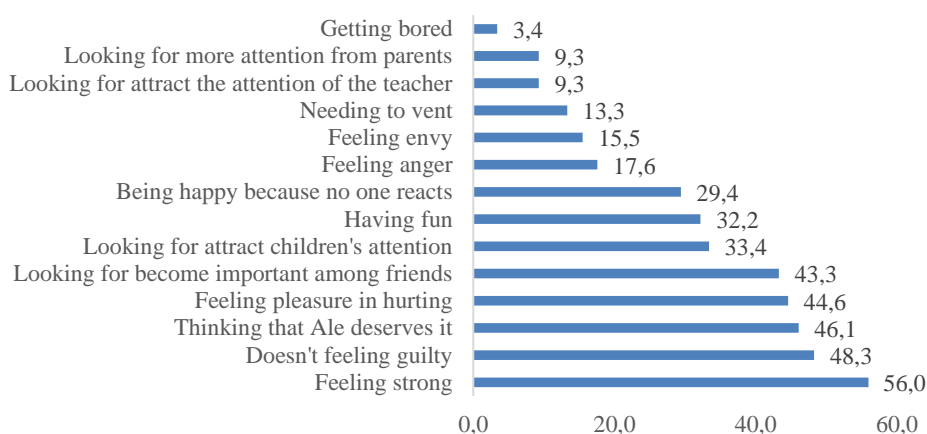
The first interesting data concerns the gender of the bullies: 86.2% of respondents believe that the bully (Fede) is a male and 70.7% think that the victim is also a male (in agreement with Olweus, 1993, Genta et al., 1996, for which males are more likely to be involved in bullying episodes). The second useful data to frame the spread of the phenomenon in the school, indicates that, according to interviewed children, in their classes 55.3% behave like Fede and 40.2% are victims like Ale.

The structure of the story allowed the students to try getting inside the mind of the bully and the victim so to describe what their feelings and emotions are, and to think about what the behaviour of classmates who act as spectators should be.

#### 3.1. Feelings of the bully

The children traced an emotional profile of the bully that winds through different definitions (figure 1).

**Figure 1** – How children think the bully feels (percentage values).



Finally, 13.3% respond to the open question, including some that try to understand the deepest moods of the bully: "she feels excluded", "she does not want to show who she really is", "she feels a little sad and a little happy", "she has a sad and tragic past" (probably the person who wrote it had a very specific child in mind).

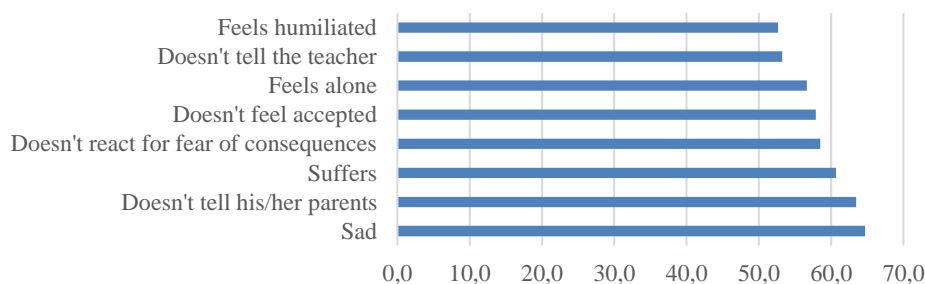
There is no difference in opinion according to the gender of the respondents, except for the statement that Fede "enjoys it" ( $\chi^2 = 7.284$ ), "feel pleasure in hurting" ( $\chi^2 = 6.610$ ) and "does not feel guilty" ( $\chi^2 = 4.474$ ) supported more by males than by females<sup>7</sup>.

### 3.2. Feelings of the victim

The victim is described as a child experiencing a whirlwind of feelings.

Considering the items with more than 50% answers, it emerges that the victim is perceived as a person who lives the situation inwardly with great *discomfort*, is *isolated* and does not find the courage to ask for help from adults nor to react, for *fear* of consequences (figure 2).

**Figure 2** – How children think the victim feels (percentage values).



This is in accordance with the research of the Osservatorio "indifesa" and with the literature that describes the victim as a weak subject (Olweus, 1993), who is not able to defend himself, and on which the bully can act undisturbed and make a considerable asymmetry of power prevalence (Gini and Pozzoli, 2018). A chi squared test was applied on the same answers and did not reveal any difference in perception between children by age, while with reference to gender, males, rather than females, believe that the victim feels sad ( $\chi^2 = 6.779$ ), alone ( $\chi^2 = 4.164$ ) and suffers ( $\chi^2 = 5.870$ ).

<sup>7</sup> Tables 2x2 (gender for each item with dichotomous response) have been applied the  $\chi^2$  test with  $\alpha=0.05$  (Diamond and Jefferies, 2006).

### 3.3. Role of classmates

Children place great confidence in the possibility that classmates will resolve conflict situations by talking directly to the bully to make him desist (86.3%) but, at the same time, they believe that an intervention by adults can be decisive, first of all that of parents (73.9%) or in any case of an adult (71.4%). Classmates should side with the victim (66.2%), talk to him or her (61.2%) and remove them from isolation by involving them in different activities (49.7%). But not everyone thinks alike: a 5.0% would choose to be on the side of Fede, the 0.9% would choose to be on the side of both Fede and Ale, and just over a quarter (26.4%) would not side with anyone. 38.8% of children assume that classmates "would like to intervene but do not know how to do it" and few (but there are some) suggest to do nothing for fear of the bully (10.6%) or to move away (9.6%) or pretend nothing has happened (7.1%). 5.9% say classmates should laugh if Ale is teased or laugh if Ale plays pranks (5.3%). These latter behaviours could represent a strong point for the bully who, not finding direct opposition in children, could feel authorized to act, thanks to the silence and fear of part of the class (Mariani, 2009). Among the 15.8% of the "other proposals" what is already foreseen in the structured question is reiterated: a pacifying attitude and desire to understand the bully's motivations and only one child proposes to beat him.

### 3.4. Advice to victims

Finally, the children were asked to suggest how the victim, the bully and even the class teachers should behave. In fact, children mostly provide synthetic answers, in which one or two suggestions are present in the vast majority of cases, with a high dispersion of indications. The responses were subjected to content analysis (Losito, 1996).

The advice for the victim is to *share* their experience and *react* to the situation. The first advice is not to bear the situation in silence but to share it with an adult (overcoming the fear of a reaction of the bully, Cowie, 2002), first with the teacher (36.7%) and own parents (26.8%), but also with those of the bully (5.8%) or own schoolmates (who probably have already noticed). Although the most common advice is to turn to an adult, there are children who suggest further *reaction strategies*: a) *deal with the situation*: 10.9% suggest to "defend / react / respond" or "pay bullies back in their own coin", while 16.6% proves to be conciliatory and mostly proposes to the victim to talk to the bully, understand why he/she behaves in that way and ask them not to do it again, play with him/her, make peace with him/her, become his/her friend; b) *avoid the situation*: 14.1% suggest "letting go / ignoring /



not caring / not thinking about it / not being with Fede, not listening to him and not talking to him"; finally, there are 5 children who propose to the victim to leave or even change school; c) *take courage*, make a path of self-reinforcement, "work" on self-esteem and not isolate yourself: 12.6% say that the victims should "take courage / not be intimidated / not be afraid / not give up / be strong / be respected". The last tips are to sign up for a martial arts class or go to the gym, not to "play the victim" and be more confident.

### 3.5. Advice to the bully

From the content analysis of the question on the advice to be given to Fede, three categories of answers can be identified, from which it emerges that children are educational towards the bully and are also worried about his future:

a) recommendations on *things not to do*: 34.2% of children simply say that Fede "must stop", while other children go into more detail: he must stop doing harm, tease, annoy, insult, bully, steal, beat, play pranks and must not exclude Ale and other companions from activities;

b) suggestions on *things to do*: at first behave properly ("like a gentleman"), both towards the victim and the rest of the class, become good and kind and become friends with the victim, get along with him, talk and apologize and make peace, but there are also those who suggest talking to the teacher to check if Ale doesn't tell lies;

c) food for thought for their present and their future (which denotes a great maturity in the children interviewed): 1) an invitation to evaluate the impact that their actions can have on the victim, to reflect that if the same harassment were done to them, he would not be happy and to the fact that he could pay the consequences if someone decided to take revenge ("what goes around comes around"); 2) an invitation to project himself/herself into the future when, if they continue to bully, they will remain friendless and perhaps will not improve in life; 3) a suggestion to Fede to respect everyone and accept them as they are and not to feel superior or more important; 4) eventually, a number of interviewees realize that, perhaps, Fede has problems and should reflect on the reasons why he/she behaves like a bully and talk about it with someone and that he/she should learn to control himself/herself and "think before speaking" and that it is not necessary to act as a bully to attract attention. One child suggests that he should "tell parents that they feel alone".

### 3.6. Advice to the teacher

Two categories of interventions suggested to the teacher can be identified:

a) *to say*: as soon as they becomes aware of an act of bullying, first of all they should ask the bully to stop, scolding him and inviting the bully and victim to make each other peace and become friends. What is important is the invitation made by the children to let the teacher talk to the parents of the bully and the victim;

b) *to do*: the actions to be taken are mostly to give the bully a demerit note and put him in punishment. Teachers are also invited to monitor the childrens' behaviour always observing them and to talk about the topic in class. A child proposes to draw up rules against bullying and someone proposes to increase group activities, because evidently they have understood that group work can help them improve relationships within the class.

What is striking in all these suggestions, is the educational approach towards the bully, which must be implemented by every classmate. The children interviewed suggest that a punishment should be given which, however, she be delegated to the teacher, avoiding children to-do-it themselves.

### 3. Conclusions

It is very important to be able to bring out the phenomenon of bullying because it is widespread but protected from a form of fear and silence that children themselves recognize. In the present bullying can create strong discomfort and suffering in the victims and hinders their emotional well-being as well as psychological and social disorders (Hodges et al. 1997; Tani, 1999); in the future the children who are bullied may develop forms of rejection for school activities (Olweus, 1993) or may lead to extreme self-destructive behaviours (Callaghan and Joseph, 1995). This is also in accordance with what also emerges from the recent report of the Osservatorio "indifesa" 2023: 38% of victims report loss of self-esteem and trust in others, 21% isolation from peers, worsening of school performance or refusal of school, in addition to the presence of panic attacks (19%), cases of depression (11%) and self-harm (8%). But there are also consequences for bullies who, if they do not change their attitude towards classmates, will have much more probability to continue as adults to engage in antisocial behavior (Sharp and Smith, 1995).

The great concern for the spread of bullying regards not only the school and is projected into cyber-space and, even if this is not the focus of this work, it cannot be ignore the alarm that concerns it: "There are legions of paid trolls and trolls who attack only for pure evil and who do not discriminate between minors and who spend

their time insulting, threatening and inciting suicide to young people, bringing offenses to unbearable levels, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. These real faceless killers are responsible for more than 200,000 deaths per year, among children and adolescents worldwide' said Miglino<sup>8</sup> (Gioia, 2022).

Bullying harms everyone's right to be respected and grow free, and is configured as a "public health problem" (Gini and Pozzoli, 2018). Prevention is presented as the best strategy to address the problem; in 2002 the WHO in the World Report on Violence and Health (Krug et al., 2002) presented Recommendation to prevent and combat violence and, implicitly, also bullying, including research on violence (causes, consequences and prevention) and primary prevention of violence.

The Kandersteg Declaration<sup>9</sup> against bullying in children and adolescents dates back to 2007, which identifies five actions to be taken: 1) counter bullying in all places where children and adolescents live, study and play; 2) activate prevention actions at an early age and continue them in childhood and adolescence, promoting positive relationships between peers, with the aim of reducing risk factors and strengthening protection factors; 3) train all adults who are in contact with children and young people to enable them to promote healthy relationships and prevent bullying; 4) activate social policies and prevention programs based on scientific research; 5) carry out ongoing monitoring and evaluation actions of the intervention paths.

In Italy, on 29 May 2017, Law no. 71 "Provisions for the protection of minors for the prevention and contrast of the phenomenon of cyberbullying" was issued, and subsequently the ELISA project mentioned in note 4 was launched.

The first places where to carry out prevention are those of socialization, family and school, where it is necessary to activate an educational process that makes children internalize from an early age the concept of respect, which is the basis of civil coexistence, as well as one of the requirements for achieving citizenship skills<sup>10</sup>. It is necessary to insist on the consequences of bullying, because "baby bullies are not always fully aware of how devastating what they do can be for a child" (Medri, 2018), and to start projects of education to teach children about emotions, as the possibility of developing empathic capacity can increase and favour the manifestation of prosocial behaviours by the classmates towards weaker children, and favour their integration and psychological well-being (Pignatti et al., 2003).

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<sup>8</sup> Javier Miglino. Global Director of Bullying without frontiers.

<sup>9</sup> The participants in the Conference "Joint Efforts Against Victimization" held in Kandersteg on 8-10 June 2007, signed the Declaration, committing themselves to promote actions to prevent bullying and victimization of children and adolescents (EADP, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> European Key Competences 2018, Citizenship competence: "Citizenship competence refers to the ability to act as responsible citizens and to participate fully in civic and social life..." (Consiglio dell'Unione Europea, 2018).

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