

# Methodological Issues for the Analysis of Bullying in Educational Environments

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**Abstract** The report provides the setting for a research on bullying in educational establishments, on a population of students aged between 6 and 18 years into three levels of education: primary (6–10), middle (11–13) and secondary schools (14–18). The analysis pays attention more than reparative therapeutic aspect of the phenomenon, to the dynamical aspects inherent the structure of the organization in which this phenomenon arise, to school climate and to the dynamics of the youth groups within and outside of school.

**Keywords** Bullying · Educational organization · School climate · Group dynamics · Class group

## 1 Foreword

To conduct research on bullying involves primarily the need to ask yourself some basic questions to help clarify some of the problems concerned with the matter. Firstly, attention should be paid to the term bullying and more particularly on what is meant by bullying in the Italian socio-cultural context, as well as on an inter-personal and group dynamic context, and on processes of socialization of traditional and/or anticipatory-progressive types that are observed. Additional questions are focused on types of values and on the regulatory processes of social life.

The scope and complexity of the issues arising from such questions is really wide, including aspects which are purely anthropological and cultural (traditional culture), evaluation of relational and socio-organizational processes, analysis of environmental and spatial contexts, references and identity of persistence behaviors and attitudes customarily encoded. Finally, what influences social identity, culture

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and organizational choices in bullying as an inevitable phenomenon in the dynamics of the social group.

In terms of definition, while keeping in mind the significance of some of its Italian popular culture etymology (such as those of *guappo*, *guapparia*, and also that of the godfather or sacramental godfather figure), to specify the contents of the phenomena of “bullying”, reference is made to the main acts and behaviors that are characterized as bullying, harassment, often repeatedly perpetrated by a boy, or more frequently by a group of boys, against another classmate, school or neighborhood, more or less the same age. “Bullying” (from the English bullying “bully”, domineer, intimidate) can generally be defined as an action that aims deliberately to do harm, to damage another individual. The bully, as a single or a group, wants to overwhelm a person to feel stronger, more important, and to better be relied upon (Belotti and Castellan 2006; Olweus 2007).

## 2 The Research Design

The focus of research has been placed on analyzing bullying in group dynamics within schools, as a social organization in which much of the processes of socialization of young people should be accomplished.

The school, is noted, on the other hand, that it is the privileged place in which bullying occurs and can play a significant position in consolidating oppressive behavior and the role of the bully and victim within the class-group, but at the same time, it may be a facilitating environment in counteracting the spread. Several studies show that the structure of the school, the organizational, teaching methods and how relationships may be factors favoring the emergence and consolidation of prevarication (see Caravita 2004; Fonzi 1997).

This focus primarily or preferably scholastic does not exclude the areas of life outside school, family and friendship, nor the contexts in which interactions take place: in the classroom and on public transportation, spaces for social relations.

Particular attention is paid to identifying the dynamics of the actor/victim of bullying, specifying both the corresponding types of action, and the sociological variables that lead to the identification of the relative profiles of bullies and victims in their specification of subjects, active or passive, individual or collective. The preferred aspect to handle the problem is however sociological because more attention is attributed to it than a therapeutic approach of the phenomenon, with emphasis placed on the study of the victims of bullying and to its pathological characteristics in order to undo the damage, to the dynamic and generative aspects inherent in organizations where such phenomena occur (Fonzi 1997).

The lives of young people within social groups, the place of their social life is in fact in many ways comparable to the effervescence of what Alberoni called “*statu nascent*” (Alberoni 1971), in which a group of actors synchronously decide to create another entity identified as a collective or social group. The binding element of this spontaneous build is precisely the group dimension, the discovery of the

possibility of being able to bear a collective identity, especially in pursuing objectives felt as common. This drive, this effervescence, is such that it causes the aggregational process to be developed around a progression of foundational and regulatory states that sees the participation of each according to his instances of social claim and self-assertion against others, following a double autonomous and adaptational tract, in which their subjectivity intersects flexibly.

Adaptation, as newcomers, (new members or newcomers) to the positions of others, whose components are already present within the social groups, in proposing autonomy, sometimes even in terms of imposition, worldviews, own choices, own values and organization is the interaction that builds new hierarchies in the group (Di Sauro and Manca 2006).

Research was thus prepared with the dual purpose of making the first survey on bullying through the analysis of socio-organizational and developmental procedures for monitoring over time, in order to prevent bullying and its effects on the dynamics of the youth groups within the school. With this logic in mind it a quantitative survey was designed to detect bullying through the experiences of school leaders (see also Gagliardini and Bortone 2007; Menesini 2003).

In operational and verification terms the following dimensional areas were taken into account: (1) Structural conditions and socio-environmental impact of the schools; (2) Characterization of the socio-cultural area of interest; (3) School disposition and internal organizational characteristics of the various structures; (4) Incidents of bullying in the past three school years within the school; (5) Strategies and interventions for the prevention of bullying; (6) Evaluation of the phenomenon and its related, as well as attitudes towards bullying. Finally, with regard to the universe of reference all the schools in the area of the Abruzzo region and in particular of individual locations were included in experimental study. The survey covered a sample of 393 schools in the Abruzzo region of Italy. Of which 211 were primary or elementary schools (54.45 %), 15 were comprehensive schools, 98 secondary junior high schools (overall 27.74 %), and 69 high schools (17.81 %).

### 3 Bullying: Frequency and Types

The first data regards relative consistency of bullying, which, according to school principals, is present in 62.59 % of schools of all levels (Table 1).

Bullying episodes inside and outside the school seem to be correlated with the opportunity to attend areas of socialization also outside the school during the free time from school commitments. In elementary schools this possibility is certainly less extensive and therefore the episodes focus within the school (33.81 %) and on school buses (30.22 %). In high school spaces are wider and therefore the difference between the inside and the outside of the school is minimum: in both cases the frequencies were 30.33 %.

**Table 1** Frequency of bullying incidences in the last three years in various occurrences—vol%

Incidences of bullying	Frequency of bullying episodes		Total
	Often/At times	Rarely/Never	
Inside of schools	30.72	25.38	29.18
Outside of schools	26.02	36.92	29.18
On the way home from school	15.05	7.69	12.92
On transportation (train, bus)	5.33	10.00	6.68
On school busses	19.12	13.08	17.37
During a school trip	3.76	0.77	2.90
In other cases	0.00	1.54	0.45
NA/Don't know	0.00	4.62	1.34
Total	100	100	100

**Table 2** Frequency of bullying in schools distinguished by type of schools in various contexts in the last three years—vol%

Context of bullying	Elementary	Junior	High	Total
Inside of schools	35.88	35.88	28.24	100
Outside of schools	19.85	51.91	28.24	100
On the way home from school	24.14	36.2	39.66	100
On transportation (train, bus)	10.00	33.33	56.67	100
On school busses	53.85	44.87	1.28	100
During a school trip	53.85	38.46	7.69	100
In other cases	0.00	100	0.00	100
NA/Don't know	0.00	0.00	100	100

Multiple choice answers

With regards to the types of bullying we refer primarily to “verbal abuse”, which often occur in 23.24 % of the cases and “sometimes” for 27.70 %, and then to “threats” and to the “rejection by peers”, i.e. the *conventio ad escludendum* which youth groups often implement against other young group individuals or isolated groups. Follow the “theft” (often 10.27 %—but sometimes 5.54 %), the “derision or mockery” (often 8.65 %—but at times 17.73 %), the “damage to property of others” (often 8.11 %—to at times 4.99 %). You can also see how the types differ with the transition from elementary school to high school (Tables 2 and 3).

The actions taken are largely conducted by male isolated subjects (41.30 %), males in the group (24.16 %) followed by isolated females (13.77 %) and females from groups (11.95 %). The incidence of mixed groups, made up of boys and girls, is very low accounting for bullying only for 7.01 % (Table 4).

The actions are directed especially towards isolated males (MI) and towards isolated females (FI). The data shows that in fact the victims are the 47.61 % males and 32.64 % for females. The group consisting of only males or only females is apparently safer, more protected from the actions of bullying, while it seems more vulnerable in mixed groups (Gmixt). The negative action in any case involves isolated subjects, mostly males, preferably acting alone and sometimes in groups.

**Table 3** Frequency of bullying that have occurred in the last three years in various levels of schools—vol%

Tipologie di bullismo	Elementary	Junior	High school	Total
Physical aggression	10.25	15.63	10.16	9.33
Verbal abuse	30.33	54.7	27.81	28.93
Threats	7.79	32.9	8.56	10.93
Damage to property of others	7.79	6.51	3.74	6.00
Theft of others'	4.92	6.51	8.02	6.13
Rejection by peers	10.66	22.07	6.95	9.87
Induction to self-isolation	3.69	5.07	2.67	2.53
Gossip and slander	2.05	3.42	8.02	4.00
Derision or mockery	13.52	38.94	17.11	14.67
Refusal of speaking	8.61	11.52	2.14	5.20
Cyber-bullying	0.00	2.4	2.67	1.60
Other types	0.41	0.34	2.14	0.80
Total	100	100	100	100

Multiple choice responses

**Table 4** Types of bullies and types of victims—total schools in the last three years—vol%

Types of victims								
Types of bullies	MI	MG	FI	FG	Gmixt	Others	NA	Total
Male (isolated)	43.87	18.18	35.88	0.00	37.93	0.00	20.00	38.69
Males in group	25.16	54.55	22.52	25.00	18.97	0.00	0.00	23.82
Females isolated	14.84	0.00	20.23	0.00	5.17	0.00	0.00	15.48
Females in groups	11.61	9.09	15.27	50.00	10.34	0.00	0.00	13.51
Mixed groups	4.52	18.18	6.11	25.00	25.86	0.00	0.00	7.59
Others	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.72	100	20.00	0.46
NA/Don't know	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	60.00	0.46
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Multiple choice responses

## 4 Bullying and the Composition of the Class Group

With respect to group dynamics, we wanted to see if bullying were to vary depending on the presence of those considered somehow “different” in the class group, evaluating four different types of students: non-EU foreigners; Community foreigners; students with different religious faiths; students with disabilities.

Based on the four types listed the interviewed were asked to indicate the percentage of “importance” each component carried within the individual classes of their institute. It was thus possible to consider six classes of values that include the absence of subjects belonging to the four categories identified in class to the presence of more than 20 % of these subjects in class (Table 5).

**Table 5** Frequency of bullying in response to the presence of various types of students to their “importance” carried in percentages in schools—vol%

Students bearing different weights	Extra EU foreign students	EU foreign students	Students from different faiths	Differently abled students
Absence of “different” students	49.45	63.75	57.60	49.46
From 0.1 to 5 %	67.92	66.09	69.14	67.26
From 5.1 to 10 %	63.89	51.61	58.73	57.45
From 10.1 to 15 %	72.97	30.00	61.90	87.50
From 15.1 to 20 %	55.56	50.00	16.67	80.00
More than 20 %	42.86	16.67	50.00	33.33

These relationships have allowed us to observe that in the interactions of the school groups, there is an increasing trend of bullying with increasing weight percentage of “different” subjects. This is the case of the presence of non-EU foreign students whose inclusion in the class up to a certain rate does increase the percentage of bullying, but then collapses to tip over. In fact, the rate amounts to 67.92 % when the presence of foreign students is contained up to 5 % of the total students, it increases to 72.97 % if the rate increases to a value between 10 and 15 %, then decrease to 55.56 % when the weight of foreign increases again and finally collapses to 42.86 %, reversing the trend, when recording more than 20 % of foreign presence in the classroom.

The trend of the data would seem to be associated with the rules that govern the dynamics of the group and the formation of mergers and alliances within the class group. To substantiate this hypothesis is the repetition of the trend observed for all four given situations. It is observed that even the presence of European community foreigner students between 5 and 10 % correlates with growth phenomena up to a critical point or breaking point when the positions are reversed. This cut-off in this last case appears to occur when 15 % of foreign European community students is overrun in the class. Beyond this limit bullying decreases up to a point where it is greatly limited. With more than 20 % of foreign students in class the rate of bullying is just 16.67 %.

A similar trend and perhaps even more marked is highlighted with reference to the presence of students professing different faiths. Here, too, the rate is maintained at a high level when a composition that sees the boys of different religions reaches 15 % of the total students in the class. Beyond this threshold, an increase of the same students the frequency of bullying decreases similarly up to 16.67 % and then it attenuates to a balanced share of 50 %. Similarly growth is observed of the bullying phenomena—this time much more important—in the presence of students with disabilities up to and exceeding the threshold of 20 %. As long as the ratio of the “disabled” subjects and able-bodied subjects remains below 20 % the phenomena is present and it increases (from 49.46 to 80.00 %). Exceeding this threshold percentage the phenomena goes down (this time to 33.33 %).

The explanation is not easy, but could be correlated with the dynamics of the social group, both for the emergence of groups or dominant subjects within the class beyond a certain threshold of presence, or for both the occurrence of topological differentiation or transactions and for the allocation of space for most significant subjective relationships in the interactions between the various components, for both the dynamics intergroup which would lead to build alliances—even tacit and factual—achieving a balance between the various forces in the field.

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