STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING

Prof. Frînculeasă Claudia Emilia

Liceul Teoretic „Radu Vlădescu" Pătârlagele, judeţul Buzău

School bullying, like any other type of violence, together with its online version, cyberbullying, are great dividers in our society and growing menaces which need to be urgently addressed by both educational institutions and brutality-threatened communities. Needles to say, education has the potential not only to correct the aggressive behaviour of a bully, but also to inform and train the potential victims of bullying acts as well as the mere spectators of such dramatic circumstances, preparing anyone to act and react more responsibly in the future, in a more confident and empathetic manner, based on assertiveness and benevolence. Educators have both the opportunity and the responsibility to explore and provide the best solutions to the most problematic aspects of our contemporary world. This article illustrates, on the one hand, why we should rely on revisiting successful experiments from the past to shed new light on contemporary challenges and, on the other hand, how we should inspire the younger generations to take initiative and be more proactive and more resilient.

Key-words: bullying, cyberbullying, prevention, education

Romania is disgracefully ranking third in Europe on bullying in schools, according to a recent report of the World Health Organisation which led to the phenomenon of bullying to be finally regulated by Law no. 221/2019, published in the Official Journal no. 929 of November 19, 2019, amending and supplementing the National Education Law no. 1/ 2011. Moreover, the Ministerial Order no. 4343/2020 containing the Methodological Norms related to psychological violence – bullying, for the application of the National Education Law, was also published equipping the schools with the necessary guidelines to successfully cope with this threat.

Bullying, including its latest version- cyberbullying- is a subcategory of aggressive behaviour which involves physical, verbal and/or emotional abuse and follows, according to experts, three minimum criteria: hostile intent from the part of the perpetrator, imbalance of power (bullies might be older, more athletic, more popular or even wealthier than their targets) and repetition over a period of time - an act of bullying is never an isolated conflict.

The main types of bullying are physical (pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking, biting, hair pulling, inappropriate touch, breaking objects, taking or damaging another's belongings etc.), verbal (teasing, name calling, threats, intimidation, demeaning jokes, rumors, gossip, slander etc.), sexual (insulting, offensive words about one's gender or sexuality, inappropriate touching of body parts, unwelcome physical contact, posting inappropriate photos online etc.) and emotional (marginalization, exclusion, lying to hurt/destroy one's reputation, public humiliation etc.) while cyberbullying includes sending mean text messages, posting videos/comments/photos that ridicule someone, spreading rumors through social networking sites etc.

Childhood bullying, whether it occurs online or offline, has serious short-term and long-term effects for both the victims of bullying (some of them suffering from social isolation, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, poor mental and physical health, increased risk of suicidal thoughts, culminating, in some cases, even in suicide) and the bullies running the risks of antisocial behaviour, drug addiction, domestic violence and that of joining the category of the less likely to complete their education or get and/or maintain a job in the future.

Concerned parents, teachers and community members are beginning to understand that violence and its consequences represent a real threat which affects everyone, the lives of the aggressors, those of their targets and even the bystanders who wrongly assume they will be safe in a violence-striken environment, not to mention the deep-rooted implications which place virtually any member of society at risk. Throughout the world, school officials and teaching staff have seen for themselves that the scourge of "violence begets violence" and now, more than ever, everybody realises that, by informing the young generations about the causes and effects of negative attitudes and behaviour, by helping the youngest students to understand the complexities of these prevalent phenomena and by training them to successfully cope with them, we actually prepare them for life, for a better future.

As an educator, I have noticed my own limitations when it comes to discouraging and sanctioning my students' anger outbursts and bullying impulses, because I know that some of them might be too strong to control and subdue in reality. Therefore, instead of passively "waiting" for an act of bullying to take place so that I can take procedural measures against it, I focus more on preparing the potential victims to become self-confident, assertive, independent individuals who would not accept to be coerced, abused, dominated, insulted or intimidated.

As well as these, I also try to raise awareness of this issue and promote proactive attitudes among all students, the potential bullies, victims and witnesses of violence. What they need is to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and values to translate their awareness into action, whether they have already been affected by this form of psychological violence or they have only witnessed an act of aggression in the real or the virtual world. A relevant and reliable "lesson" of this kind is the "Broken Windows Theory".

Applied in many fields of activity, this theory, which was introduced by social scientist George L. Kelling in the article "Broken Windows: The Police and neighborhood safety" published in 1982, was based on the results of an experiment conducted by Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo in 1969. The experiment involved two cars parked in two socially and economically different areas - Bronx (New York) and Palo Alto (California) - and revealed the fact that not only ill-reputed, high-crime areas, but also upper-class, safe communities will face violence and improper civil behaviour if there is an incentive, a contingent motivator, to suggest a lack of accountability, responsibility or punishment. In other words, if no-one cares, if one could get away with anything, why not try to follow one's violent urges and distructive impulses?

Although used mainly as a criminological theory meant to illustrate how visible signs of disorder, vandalism and other types of seemingly insignificant anti-social behaviour encourage the occurence of further, more and more serious types of crime, this theory should be popularized and applied in schools in connection with preparation and prevention strategies regarding (cyber)bullying.

To my mind, both cars involved in the original experiment can teach the students some valuable insight. The first car, abandoned in a dangerous neighbourhood in Bronx, warns them about the hazards associated with this kind of high-risk environments, advising them in favor of complete avoidance as far as the company of potentially menacing people is concerned. From the second car, parked in a safe neibouhood, whose first window was broken on purpose, students can learn that apparent and lingering vulnerability has a snowball effect which will attract additional aggression and vandalism and that negative peer-pressure is more prevalent than the positive one.

Having used this theory several times so far with my students, I strongly recommend it to any teacher who is willing to address the imperative necessity of dealing with one's own weaknesses, insecurities and vulnerabilities in an attempt to guide and inspire them not only to "fix" all broken windows, but also to come to terms with their imperfections, build stronger personalities, more integrous characters and self-standing value systems (based on respect, empathy, dignity), repair the emotional wounds of the past and maintain a positive public image. Despite some beliefs, victims are never to blame but, at the same time, we must all take full responsibility for our own development, safety and well-being, for tackling some problems or difficulties that might be encountered along the way, making the best decisions in life and

surmounting all obstacles. Above all, bullying or cyberbullying, just like everything else that is harmful, is always better to prevent than to cure.

Another strategy of dealing with the threats of bullying and cyberbullying nowadays is student empowerment and advocacy through project-based learning. In October 2020, Liceul Teoretic "Radu Vlădescu" located in Pătârlagele town, Buzău county, Romania received a National Quality Label for the international eTwinning project "Say NO to Violence!". The partnership aimed at identifying and popularizing the best ways to cope with school and extra-school violence, with an emphasis on prevention, in educational communities located in 10 countries: Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Turkey and Ukraine.

The main activities of the project were strategically planned to take place between the International Day of Non-Violence (October 2, 2019) and The International School Day of Non-Violence and Peace (January 30, 2020). For the students directly involved in the project implementation as well as the indirect participants and beneficiaries the following objectives were considered: promoting and cultivating non-violent attitudes and behaviours in the respective local and school communities, developing or improving the social skills, positive relationships and conflict management skills of the participants, identifying and popularizing the best ways of coping with different types of violence (such as bullying and cyberbullying) and, last but not least, honoring the participating schools as spaces of non-violence, tolerance, empathy, solidarity, respect and harmony.

Although the coordinating teachers were officially responsible for providing the material, socio-educational and affective support necessary for the development of the educational activities, monitoring the pupils (or students) during the activities and disseminating the project tangible and intangible outcomes, the students were actually in charge with the building of the international project team and the implementation of the positive changes in each school community, designing the most appropriate measures and solutions to meet their own needs, priorities and aspirations.

The educational objectives of the eTwinning project "Say NO to Violence!" were mainly learner-centered. Most of the pedagogical approaches encompassed methods focusing on improving the pupils' knowledge, comprehension and evaluation of the topic and on developing positive attitudes, proactive behaviours, better interpersonal relations and practices which enabled learner autonomy, independent problem-solving and lifelong learning. Non-formal and informal learning activities were designed together with students (involving music, dancing, visual arts and their own expressed needs, preferences, talents and skills). Peer-to-peer interaction, personalized instruction and collaborative learning helped the pupils and students to become active participants in their own learning, improve transferable skills such as critical and reflective thinking and create their own learning process as well as original learning materials ready to be used by others.

In the Romanian coordinating school, the main contributions were: an acapella song collection of 5 original songs, a scientific paper published in an international conference, a methodological presentation and a drawing workshop and exhibition.

The project was integrated into the formal curriculum through the following school subjects: English, Romanian, Counselling and Orientation and Art. During the English and Counselling and Orientation classes, we followed the principles of interdisciplinary instruction by examining the topic of violence in general and bullying and cyberbullying in particular from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, anthropology, law, literature, history and the arts. We also used "The Broken Windows" theory, an academic theory proposed by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in 1982, but re-interpreted it as a metaphor for vulnerability in an educational environment.

Both curricula, for English and Counselling and Orientation are based on the European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competences, communication, learning to learn, digital skills, cultural awareness etc. The project facilitated and promoted

the development of the following competencies: communication and collaboration, managing information, critical thinking, positive thinking, problem solving, creativity, personal growth and well-being. The pupils were equipped with new knowledge, skills and attitudes they really need to navigate their personal, social and academic journeys and, above all, the project prepared them to identify and successfully cope with different types of violence, including (cyber)bullying, manage conflict, develop both assertiveness and empathy and nurture positive relationships.

The collaboration between the active partners was permanent and involved communication, division of tasks, consistent feedback, support, sharing of tangible results and evidence - videos, files, presentations, photographs, (blog) articles, reminders about the tasks and dissemination of good practices via the Teacher Bulletin and other Twinspace sections, private messages etc. As planned, national teams provided learning opportunities according to their needs and created materials which were shared with the international partners. The Romanian school used the input and best experiences to create new content (the final brochure), confirming the results and quality of international collaboration.

The idea of project-based learning encouraged the pupils to take initiative, give suggestions and actively involve in all the stages of the project. They shared a common goal: learn why and how to say "No" to violence and show/teach others to do the same. They did this by planning and implementing formal and non-formal activities, informative and persuasive enough to inspire and motivate others. In Romania, the students became teachers and educational content creators who took up the role of educating their peers and raising awareness of the causes and effects of violence.

The learners, guided and encouraged to create the visible outcomes (an original 5-song- collection, drawing workshops and exhibitions, a flash-mob etc.), shared their gained knowledge, greater understanding and improved competencies with the other school communities on the eTwinning platform. Flipped learning was mainly used to complete the collaborative tasks. After the pupils were informed about the expected outcomes, a lot of preparation, rehearsal and research was done off the classroom, through student collaboration and constant communication with the teachers. The project participants decided to work cooperatively and collaboratively to achieve the final products. They were very motivated to lend their "voices" to this noble cause and became more aware and emotionally involved, willing to invest their time and energy.

Here are the lyrics of the original song collection performed and shared by the Romanian students, which became one of the most relevant and useful project outcomes and a great educational resource:

What is bullying?

Bullying is constant harassment and ridicule/ It's not a singular conflict,/ Negative actions repeated intentionally/ Toward an innocent target./ So, learn to say "No, No, No" to violence/Do not be afraid at all/ The sooner we all do it, the better/ And remember those who say "No" are more./ Bullying is violence and violence's against the law/ It's something that must be stopped/ Be it in real life or in the virtual world/ We need to stand up and act./ Let's learn to say "No, No, No" to violence/ Let us have a peaceful world/ It is high time we all solved this problem/ After all those who do say "No" are more.

How do you recognize a bully?

If they are frustrated, impulsive, controlling and angry/ If they think nobody else has the right to be happy/ If they could use some empathy and maturity/ Then what they lack is a bit of humanity./ If they like to frighten, to tease or to persecute,/ If intimidating others makes them feel so good,/ If they threaten people and find victims on their way/ Then tell them it's time to stop their bullying today!

How can we react to bullying?

Ignore them/ Just show them no reaction/ Don't let the bullies hurt you/ Don't give them satisfaction./ Walk away/ Don't let them see you're nervous/ Act like you just don't care/ And they will lose their focus./ Avoid them/ Be with someone protective/ Be nowhere to be found/ For someone who's aggressive.

What can we do to prevent it?

Be assertive/ Learn to be confident/ Find strong models/ And try to follow them./ Trust your parents/ Let them know everything/ Tell your teachers/ If someone's being mean./ Zero tolerance/ That's what bullies deserve/ Give them no chance/ To make you lose your nerve.

Why bullying isn't an option

Nobody really likes a bully/ A bully really has no friends/ Why would you choose to be a bully?/ No bullying has a happy end./ Whether or not they need attention/ Violence's a weakness not a strength/ Why would you want to have beside you/ Someone who's mean and lacks respect?

The project definitely helped the participants to achieve all the objectives initially planned by improving their knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours in an area which impacts and will continue to affect every aspect of their lives. Working together on the project tasks meant investing time, efforts, feelings, artistic talent and skills, but it also prepared both the pupils and the teachers to have correct reactions to violence, take action against it and do their best to prevent violent behaviour and secure a healthier, safer and more positive environment for everyone.

Constructive feedback was provided throughout the project. The project activities were assessed by both the participating pupils and teachers and target groups- pupils and teachers from other schools/countries. Self-assessment was also used to identify lessons learned, personal benefits of participation as well as some recommendations to improve the quality of future eTwinning projects. A lot of parents, school officials and teachers were very supportive and congratulatory of the project. They welcomed the participation of our school and acknowledged our contribution on many occasions. The project outcomes created by the Romanian students were disseminated during classes of English, Counselling and Orientation, a pedagogical meeting of English teachers and on different media channels devoted to education and educators: blogs, websites and other educational platforms.

To conclude with, it depends on us, the teachers, to provide accessible, informative and easy-to-use learning content and personal development opportunities so that we can improve our students' capacity to apply appropriate educational strategies to prevent and combat bullying and cyberbullying.

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