

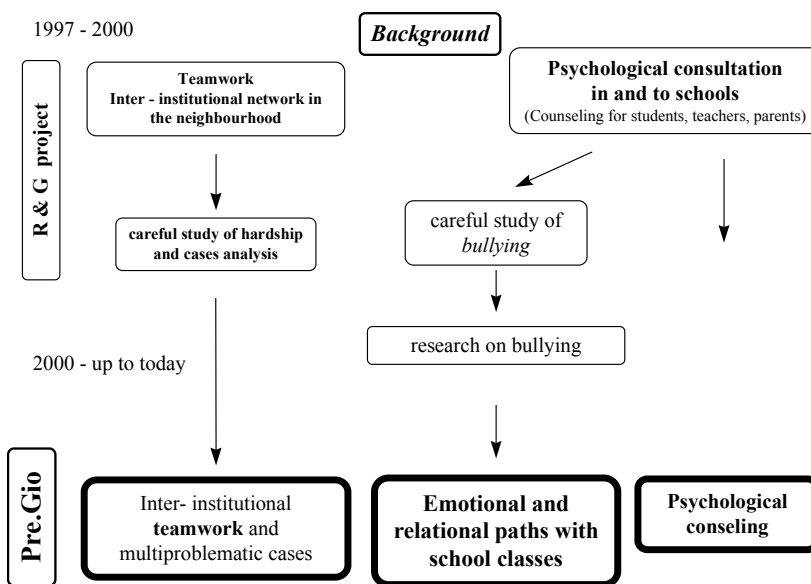
Intervention for the reduction of bullying in some Trento primary and lower secondary schools

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The background

The “Pre.Gio” project represents the operative context where the interventions for the reduction of bullying, that have been implemented in some Trento primary and secondary schools, have their beginning and in which they have developed. The Social Activities Department runs the project, that aims to prevent and reduce juvenile hardship in some areas of the town of Trento.

Generally the interventions address their attention to the widespread psycho-social hardship during the developing age by: refining procedures of signalling and of precocious intervention; empowering the social assistance and preventive measures of the Social department also in cooperation with the schools; defining special interventions to restrain bullying and to educate about legality into the schools; developing psycho-social intervention methodologies in the taking care of children in difficulties, with multidisciplinary teams made up of people that belong to different institutions; etc...



Picture 1- The history

institutional teamwork in a secondary school, located in an area in the North of the city; during the years, as the needs of that places have become clearer and clearer, the range of services organized to encounter and to respond to those necessities has enlarged.

In the year 2000 the first project changed its name and became “Pre.Gio Project” and it began to work in other part of the city (mainly in the southern districts and in some schools in the centre of the town). From its beginning the project has been characterized by interventions addressed to children (with offices into the school for “psychological listening”, interventions in the classrooms, meeting with parents) and to teachers (with psychological consultation for situations of social and educative hardship and teamwork against bullying). The project has always given particular attention to the integration among different institutions and then it has promoted multidisciplinary teams and teamwork that could investigate and face the crux of their different territorial context of action.

The experience gained during these years of work has led to the definition of a series of operative procedures based on a strength cooperation among the institutions involved in the relation with the youngsters. In this way it is possible to optimize the resources at disposal and the professional

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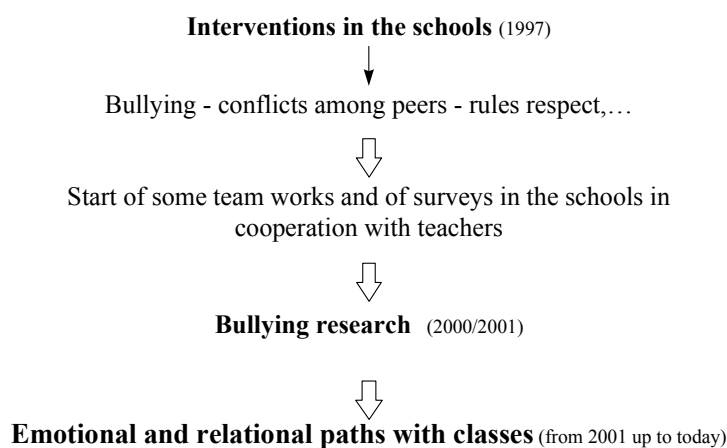
competences of each service department. Even the preventive interventions have become, during the years, more and more effective, thanks to the evaluations methodologies developed to better understand the needs and characteristics of the phenomenon they had to intervene on.

The project has developed into three main frameworks: psychological consultant and the office “listening space” into the schools for students, parents and teachers; the inter-institutional teamwork on territorial base in the northern part of the town, the interventions for bullying reduction.

By a methodological point of view it is important to underline that all these activities have been implemented trying to cooperate, as much as possible, with the different services department and public offices as well as with psychologists, teachers, social assistants, social workers and so on. All these partners had and have the same aim, that is reducing juvenile hardship. In the search for an effective cooperation we have encountered very complex and tough moments, but it is only facing these difficulties that it is possible to create more effective interventions, in which the several institutions involved have worked in the most coherent way.

The interest in bullying

From its first year of implementation, the psychological consultation into the schools has underlined that more than one third of the requests – from students, parents and teachers - for consultation and



Picture 2- Interest in bullying

intervention were about behavioural problems and students’ conflicts management.

At the beginning of the project, team works that involved also teachers from the schools went into the knowledge of the problem, investigated the situation of the schools and looked for some procedures of intervention. In the meantime short paths with school classes have been tried as well as individualized intervention in support of the victims.

The first surveys on bullying and the consequent interventions in the classes have shown that the care against arrogant behaviour improves classrooms’ climate and can also have a preventive effect on those youngsters that run a psycho-social risk and that already have violent behaviours.

A research into the spreading of bullying inside the schools was realized in 2001 in collaboration with professor Manuela Lavelli², from Verona University, Department of Psychology and Anthropology. I have used the same questionnaire adopted in Trento for other surveys in Trentino districts.

² The results of the research have been discussed during the meeting (in Italian) “Bullying, What are we doing? Comparison of experiences”, 12.02.2002, organized by the Social Activities Department of Trento Municipality. Meeting documents available from Trento Municipality web site: www.comune.trento.it, surfing through “Editoria” and then “Numeri unici e pubblicazioni varie”. See also www.bullismo.it.

3 different researches :

Class	Sex of the student			
	Missing	Female	Male	Total
Third grade	10	352	365	727
Fourth grade	8	348	305	661
Fifth grade	4	318	339	661
First grade (secondary school)	2	325	367	694
Second grade (secondary school)	5	338	379	722
Third grade (secondary school)	0	365	357	722
Total	29	2046	2112	4187

The analysis emphasizes that more than one third of the students suffer arrogances continuously. There aren't remarkable differences about the index of persecution, welfare perception inside the school context, in the way of telling about the arrogances suffered. This evidence means that bullying is a transversal phenomenon that affects in the same way different territories.

Bullying (self evaluation) %	Elementary school	Secondary school	Total
	involved: 39 %	involved: 35 %	involved: 37 %
Other	61	65	63
Bullied	17 29	12 20	15 25
Bully and bullied	12	8	10
Bully	9 21	15 23	12 22
Total	100	100	100
	2049	2138	4187

The bullying research realised in Trento has risen the interest in the problem and then the school request for intervention has increased. To answer to these needs, the Social Activities Department of Trento Municipality has applied the project to other parts of the town and it has enlarged the number of psychologists involved.

The Emotional and Relational Paths presented here represent the consolidation and the formalization of all the interventions realised in the passed years and they aim to improve some situation of social and relational hardship through the reduction and the prevention of bullying into the schools.

Emotional and Relational Paths with the classes

Many are the useful approaches to study the bullying phenomenon, each of which is focused on specific aspects of the problem or it refers to a particular psychological or educative model. All these different approaches agree on some elements and aspects of bullying. In our interventions we have considered as essential some aspects and objectives that we have tried and that we are still trying to pursue, together with some important considerations related to the age of the children and adolescents we work with (from 6 to 15 years old).

- ◆ The main aim to pursue in each school in which we work should be building a global project with the contribution of all the people that are involved in the school (students, teachers, parents, other school workers). An anti-bullying policy should be shared and coherent with all the other school activities. From our experience we can say that it is a real ambitious objective, very difficult to achieve. When we work in a school we usually collaborate with a limited group of teachers, more interested in these problems than their colleagues or that has to run very trouble pupils. Even if the teachers that try to do something against bullying are only a few, it is important that they keep on working on the problem of arrogance and continuously find out coherent interventions, without facing the problem only when it appears or when serious accidents happen.
- ◆ The phenomenon of bullying is very complex and it is strictly bound to the characteristics of each youngster, such as the family and educative context in which he grows up, the social and urban context in which he lives, his class and schoolmates, the teaching methods of his teachers and it also depends on how psychological, health and educative services work and cooperate. When we act against bullying in a specific situation, we can't consider all these different aspects, but we must define priorities, that often mean taking care of trouble students trying to limit their violent behaviours. In our interventions, even if we work with violent youngsters, we have always focused on the assistance and defence of the victims of bullying.

- ◆ Many studies on bullying privilege the intervention inside the peer group, in particular when directed to adolescents. From our experience we can say that with youngsters from 6 to 13 it is important the presence and the intervention of an adult beside the peer group, that can activate mechanism of mutual help. If we want to modify very compromised situation we can't just support mutual help behaviours, but it is necessary to face the strong emotional conflicts and to demolish the consolidated roles of bullying inside the groups. This kind of intervention is usually perceived in a hostile way by the group or by some students, because they feel that their leadership is at risk. This hostility can be worked out only by authoritative adult figures.

The approach we have worked out and experimented in these years comes from the requests of the students and it has developed giving lot of importance to the collaboration among psychologists, teachers and, when possible, parents. Our attention has been addressed to the implementation of a methodology of work that could individualize the intervention making it as much coherent with the characteristics of each specific situation as possible. We consider very important also the collaboration between teachers and experts, together with all the other tools used and chosen considering the features of the classes, the know how of the psychologist that intervene, the teaching methods of the school people that collaborate. Our intervention methodology, then, can assume different forms on the basis of the different situations encountered, the different educative contexts in which they are implemented and the evolving phase of the class.

I have defined this methodology as “*emotional and relational paths*” with classes to emphasize that bullying reduction is realised intervening on emotional dimension and on peer groups’ relations. Those who act bullying, as well as those who suffer arrogances, have difficulties in understanding and working out their emotions. Because of this the aggressors overestimates hostility, while the victims inhibit their aggressiveness. If we really want to reduce bullying, we should try to enlarge the ways of expressing owns emotions, without considering them as guilt, and teaching to the youngsters how expressing them in constructive ways.

Bullying is a social phenomenon that presents itself in a group context, so we should give a careful attention to the relational dimension. The paths with the classes give importance to social integration, because one of its much problematic aspects are those of persecutions and arrogance. The working methodology combine elements from developmental, clinic, social and educative psychology.

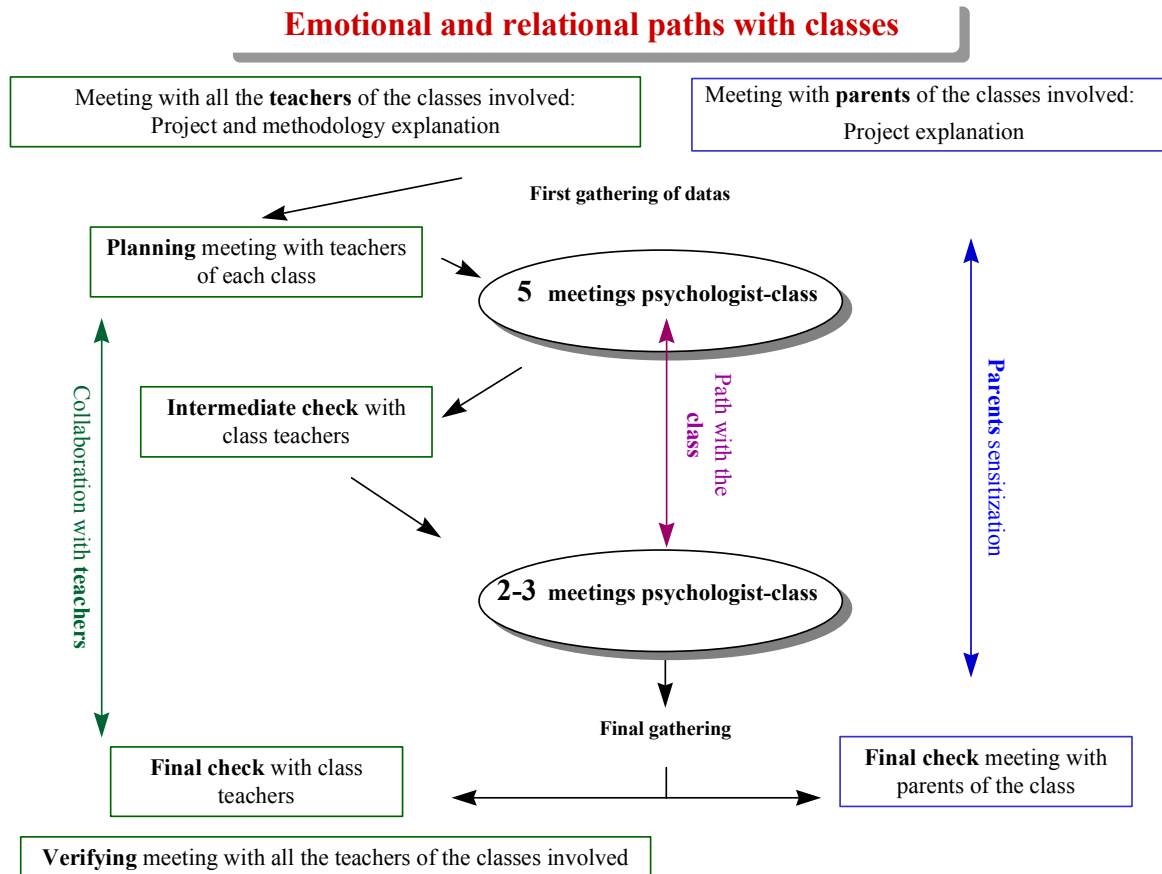
The paths tend to reduce arrogant behaviours and to promote a better climate in the classroom, thorough the analysis of the main relational difficulties among schoolmates. Each intervention is defined on the characteristics of the class and the activities proposed are strictly bound to the evaluation of the class made out by the teachers and the psychologist. These paths do not substitute but integrate the typical teaching activities, that aim to improve students’ social and relational competencies.

The main guide lines of the collaboration between teacher and psychologist are:

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| The teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the “holder” of the path • Chooses the objectives for his/her class • Remains a central figure and empowers his/her roll as authoritative figure • Manages with continuity the evolving path of the class |
| The psychologist | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborates in order to have a more careful interpretation of group’s dynamics • Proposes social and relational strategies to manage the group • Intervenes to mobilize critical emotions and fossilized behaviours and roles in the group • Proposes strategies to understand and analyze the experience, in collaboration with teachers. |

Path structure

The path structure now in use represent a valid compromise between the objective of improving class relational climate and the need of restraining the time of activities. The structure is shown in Picture 3.



Picture 3 - Class path scheme

The “Emotional and relational paths with the classes” are divided in three interdependent levels of intervention: collaboration with teachers; meeting with the class; parents’ sensitization on the problem. At the beginning of the path, there is a meeting with the teachers and the parents of the classes involved and planning meeting only with teachers follow. Then there are 5 first meetings between the class and the psychologist, followed by other two or three, in order to give more continuity to the project. After the first cycle, usually it is organized a meeting with parents during which they have a feed back about how the path is working and information about the problem of the class group. The parents are involved in the path also through things they should do at home with their children in order to make the project more effective. This can do only if there is a trust relationship and a sort of educative alliance between parents on one hand - and teachers and psychologists, on the other.

About the collaboration with teachers, the path must be known by all the teachers of the class, at least two of them have to participate in all the planning and check meetings and at least one of these two has to be inside the class when the students meet the psychologist. In this way the continuity of the project is assured.

During the planning meetings teachers have the possibilities to know how the path works, to define their expectations on the intervention, to agree on the objectives for each class and on the activities

to be implemented, even if often they are modified in progress. This is due to class behaviour and it also depends on the requests made by the students.

At the beginning and at the end of the school year students are requested to compile a questionnaire, that is not anonymous, made up by a self evaluation section and by a section in which they are invited to nominate the schoolmates that usually act or suffer some behaviours that are typical of bullying. Survey's data are used to define the roles (arrogance, persecution, popularity, exclusion) in each class. In this way we gather information about the pupils to control more carefully during the interventions into the classes. The self evaluation section aims to point out the frequency in acted and suffered bullying, to understand how students feel the school and how they talk about their being victim of bullying.

After the first meetings with the class there is an intermediate check, that is necessary to verify if the planning need to be changed.

During the final verification the results of the path are investigated and the participants can indicate how to modify the intervention in order to give it more effectiveness in the future.

Methodology

The main elements that characterized emotional and relational paths methodology are the following:

- ◆ the importance given, in the planning of the project, to children's point of view and to their way of living the relationships with schoolmates, investigated by questionnaires and during the meetings;
- ◆ the sharing of the project and the collaboration between teachers and psychologists, necessary to build a successful intervention;
- ◆ the individualization of the paths, defined considering each class characteristics, the maturity level of the children, the social and emotional climate of the class in a particular period. This attention implies continual revisions and redefinition of the project, but it gives the possibility to better define the objectives to obtain;
- ◆ the collaboration with teachers, their presence at the meetings, the integration with some teaching activities, in order to intervene focusing from the beginning on the main problems of the class and, often on students' request, taking care of those youngsters more involved in bullying. The final target of the intervention is the class group.

Phases of the path

Each class group has its own social and relational structure, that comes from a complex mix of factors and that influences the way in which the class participates, collaborates and accepts the proposal presented during the meetings. In order to catch some common elements on the base of which trying to find a way out of this complexity, it has been defined a methodology of the intervention that aims to consider how the group reacts to changing proposals that involve the emotional and relational sphere. The identification of some phases of the changing process (Picture 4) tends also to better identify the objectives of each meeting and to help when choosing operative instruments.

Stages of class path

Stages of change

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|---|--|
| <p>1. Class diagnosis</p> <p>2. Emerging of critical points and resiliences</p> <p>3. Mobilization</p> <p>4. Working out of evidences and experience</p> <p>5. Building of communication modalities coherent and useful for change</p> | <p>1. Visibility: let students, group and adults see the real behaviours</p> <p>2. Stressing of behaviour: frequent increasing of violent behaviours, due to resistances, reactions to have been discovered, challenge to the adult. All this thing lead to an empowerment of the intervention and to coherent, constant, determined answers.</p> <p>3. Roles mobilization: gradual mobilization of the roles and of the relational dynamics</p> <p>4. Change in a certain period: a constant monitoring and a coherent intervention of the adults lead to a change that can present an improvement of the communication modalities and an acquisition of new social and relational competencies by the individual and by the group</p> |
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Picture 4 - Phases of class path

1. Before defining a path of change, it is necessary to define the problem to address. This is the *diagnostic* moment, in the sense that we realise a map of the relational situation of the class. The principal instruments that can be used in this moment are meetings with class teachers and students' questionnaires. As occasion may request, other instruments can be used, such as sociograms, paintings, students' compositions, discussion in class on particular themes, observations of groups' dynamics. The diagnostic evaluation of the class helps in the definition of the path and to give a feed back to the class itself (in terms and ways adequate to the level of students' comprehension and consciousness), as a visibility moment that can create a positive climate, in which it is possible to draw up a pact that clarifies the objectives of the intervention.
2. During the thematic discussion it is possible to identify the critical points, such as harsh conflicts among peers, negative climate, evident bullying situations,.... When the problems that emerge during the discussion are particularly serious, students react to change proposal emphasising bad behaviours and this situation can be read as a *resistance* to change. When class roles have a structure and are defined they balance the group and each change is perceived as a threat to the status quo. This is one of the most difficult phases and it requires to keep on the street chosen and to be determined in working out the conflict with the class. The experience shows that in many of these situations a continuative and determined answer to the challenge of the group represents a topic moment to reach a real change inside the class. In facing the resistances to change it is possible to understand why the youngsters find it difficult to tell the adult, and in particular to teachers, what happens to them, but they look for answer from the teachers themselves. It seems that children and adolescents perceive a difficulty in modifying situation, social roles and group pressure by their own.
3. In the next phase, that we have called *mobilization*, the group is guided through intervention that want to smooth out the roles of some students and to give everybody the possibilities of experimenting different roles. In this way the children can also widen the emotions they know. Roles mobilization and the experimentation of different ways of working out harsh conflicts are supported and enforced by a continuous cognitive analysis of what happens that tends to restore

sensations and emotions felt, giving a meaning to the different ways that each student has to live his/her anger, fear, pain, happiness and sadness.

4. Working out activities (generally in the form of group discussion) always have the purpose to rise the social and relational competencies of some students and of the group. This kind of activities represent an important part of the meeting between psychologist and class and after each proposal – role game, physical activities,...- some time is dedicated to the analysis of what has happened. Teachers keep on with this analysis during the period between a meeting and the other one, sometimes even going into some particular themes, that have emerged (what we do when we feel that our anger is getting bigger and bigger, when we are frightened, how we face these situations, why we ask for teacher's help or for friend's help, what we do when parents and teachers give us different behavioural indications).
5. As we have identified the problem and its emotional and relational characteristics and we have tried to change the behaviours that causes difficulties, we go on enforcing those communications modalities coherent with a positive change. On a longer period the change need to be continuously monitored by an adult, that in the same time has to be coherent in the respect of the class and of those children involved in bullying.

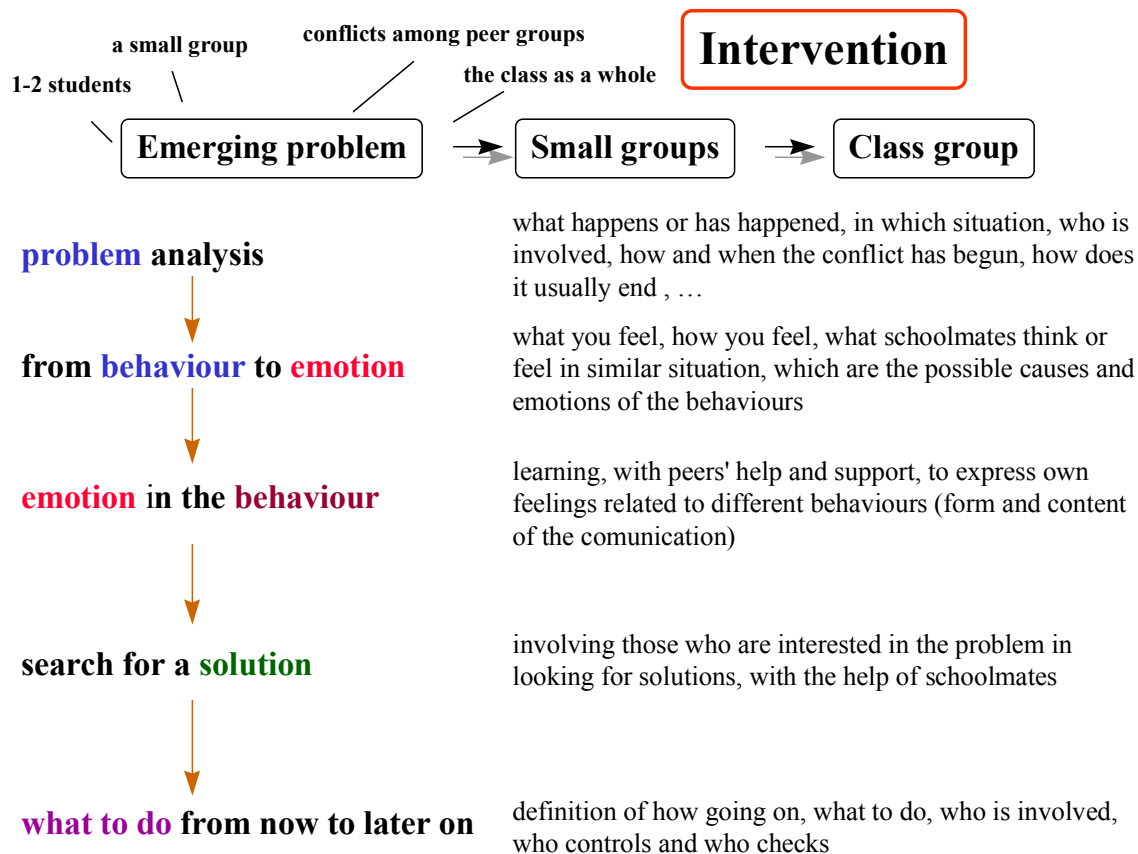
In our experience, during the meetings with the psychologist a series of dynamics and processes are activated and they found their completion in the continuity of teacher's action. That's way psychologists and teachers have to work together, to collaborate and can share knowledge and activities.

Class intervention

Each class represents a kind of social system with its own story and a complex mix of factors that gives it specific and unique characteristics. The intervention planning has to consider, in our opinion, some principal elements: the diffusion of conflicts into the peer group; the distribution of bullying (focused on few students or small groups or on the whole class); the most relevant attitude in class history and the meaning of actual attitudes; the total number of students involved in bullying and that have problematic familiar situations.

During the meetings with the class (Picture 5) it is necessary to pay particular attention to some aspects and problems.

The main problem can be related with the whole class (for instance a class very much restless, or too much demotivated, ...), with a limited number of students (from 1 to 3 or 4), with a small group that have well defined roles in its inside and that disturb or act bullying behaviours against its schoolmates, or with conflicts between small groups in the same classroom. Anyway the intervention starts from the emerging problem and it develops enlarging its space of action, involving always the class as a whole.

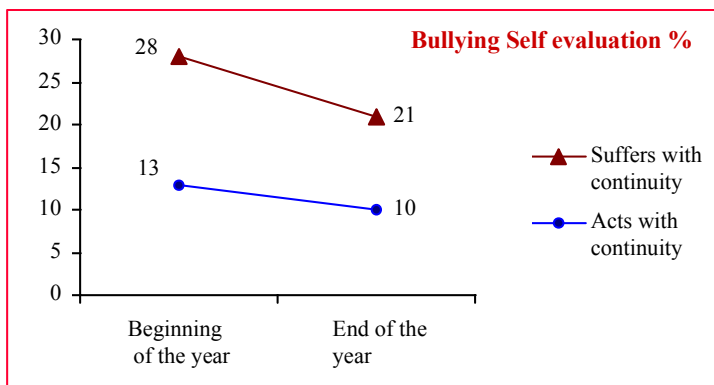


Picture 5 - Class intervention

The intervention kind and the examination also depend on the attitude shown by the class during the meetings. The classes can be effectively collaborative (students use the time at their disposal to clarify some problems inside the peer group or ask for teacher's help in conflicts' resolution) or it can only seem to be collaborative, when in reality is hostile and boycotts the intervention (student pretend to be interested, and then complains because the meeting is not useful). Other classes react to every proposal thinking and talking a lot about it (students can be frightened by change and by their sincerity) or with open hostility and strong resistance, but that in the end shows its emotional needs and the desire of being seen and recognised by the adult.

Some results

The experience of these years has shown a positive relapse on the classes as bullying reduction, as improvement of class climate and as reduction of the difficulties of the victims of bullying. For example, students' perception at the beginning and at the end of the school year evidences a reduction of the sense of feeling as victims and this data is confirmed over the years (from 28% to 21%, Chi-Square = 4,798 $p < 0,029$ - Picture 6). With regard to students' role in the class, as perceived by schoolmates, the investigations show a substantial role stability during the same year, while changes the negative correlation between victim and popularity, that is reduced (from $r = - 0,3517$ $p < 0,001$ to $r = - 0,1816$ $p < 0,001$): students still don't like the victims, but at the end of the year the victims seem to be less isolated than how they were before the interventions.



Bullying Self evaluation %	Beginning of the year	End of the year
I act	5	4
I act/ suffer	33	25
I suffer	20	15
Other	67	75

Bullying % peer nomination	Beginning of the year	End of the year
Act	10	10
Act/suffer	22	24
Suffer	9	12
Other	73	70
Control	5	6

Picture 6

In the last four years we have adopted this methodology of intervention in 65 classrooms of Trento Municipality with the Pre.Gio Project.

Summery

With this contribution we have tried to present the context in which the emotional and relational paths for bullying reduction have developed, their history, their meaning and their methodology. From our experience we can say that it doesn't exist "the right solution" suitable in every situation, or the best method, but instead it is important to have a wide vision of the phenomenon and to intervene with competence, without using strict educative schemes.

The elements that in our history have given a big contribution to the positive effects have been: a clear definition of relational problems, the involvement of the whole class in the solution, the integration between psychological aspects and teaching methods, a continuous monitoring of the situations over the times, parental trust and collaboration. In our opinion, and from our knowledge of bullying, there is much to do to rise children welfare and to create a safer school, that can be interesting and stimulating for the students, and in which they can grow up respecting themselves and the community in witch they are integrated.

Trento, January 2005. Oliviero Facchinetti - oliviero.facchinetti@gmail.com - www.bullismo.it

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