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BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING: A SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT

In this article, we define the bullying phenomenon and its evolution - i.e. cyberbullying – beginning from the premise that it constitutes a form of maladaptive socialization and that many studies identify a connection between emotional competence and social skills. The distinctive features that make it possible to identify the phenomenon of traditional bullying or cyberbullying may be intentionality, asymmetry, persistence and reiteration over time. Subsequently, we describe the main actors involved: bullies, victims and spectators, each of whom plays his or her own role with outcomes that heavily affect the personality and identity of those concerned. In the conclusions, we provide some data describing the Italian and international scenario.

KEYWORDS: *Bullying, cyberbullying, maladaptive socialization, empathy, bully, victim, spectator*

1. INTRODUCTION. BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING: A FORM OF MALADAPTIVE SOCIALIZATION

Bullying and cyberbullying are a form of maladaptive socialization that often takes the form of group actions against one or more individuals; for victims, the consequences may last a lifetime. This is, therefore, a social process that calls for the ability to frame bullying behaviours in groups of children and adolescents characterized by relational anomie that is displayed in primary and lower secondary school through more aggressive behaviour and in upper secondary school through apathy and disinterest (Vergati, 2003).

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Whether on-line or off-line, the bullying phenomenon more commonly emerges in school contexts and later spreads to virtual ones. It is therefore necessary to stress that school institutions are highly important in promoting measures to support teachers in comprehending the relational dynamics played out in the classroom and fostering students' sense of belonging.

To this end, Barbara Forresi (2008) cites a preventive measure (Wellbeing Five) designed by the Australian association ReachOut Schools and focused on the class group. This intervention begins from the questions *Where do I feel I belong?* and *What should a school I feel I belong to be like?* Working with students requires continuous engagement through activity proposals that explore the issues of values, self-respect and respecting others and may offer specific tools for combatting bullying in its various forms. How can we define the phenomenon and what are the risk factors?

2. DEFINING THE PHENOMENON

The phenomenon of bullying and cyberbullying constitutes a form of maladaptive socialization and many studies identify a connection between emotional competence and social skills. A risk factor pointing to the appearance of aggressive bullying behaviour may be identified in the individual's characteristics: for example, a student's inability to attribute intentions, emotions and desires to others may be a risk factor, while the propensity to engage in physically violent play and attitudes may be considered risk factors as well. The inability to devise suitable and effective solutions to problems (problem-solving) may also lead the subject to resort to aggression as the only way of resolving a conflict (Daffi, Prandolini, 2012). In research on the bullying/cyberbullying phenomenon, many studies identify a connection between emotional competence and social skills.

Specifically, a lack of emotional skills is connected to socialization problems which can be expressed in behaviours that, in many situations, lead to forms of bullying (Trentacosta and Fine, 2010). Both bullies and victims are therefore united by a “maladaptive” ability to relate to others, and both lack emotional competence. Empathic subjects are aware of and in tune with their own and others' emotions, whereas alexithymic individuals are incapable of perceiving emotions (Maino, 2012). The inability to process their own mental states and to regulate emotions can cause alexithymic subjects to react to painful or stressful situations with impulsive or compulsive behaviour (Caretti, La Barbera, 2005). According to Olweus (1996), bullying is a phenomenon that may occur between two people or through a group of people acting against a person identified as the recipient of prevarication. Prevarication in a group entails advantages in that it allows group members to delegitimize their own responsibility, feeling supported by each other and thus reducing the severity of their own actions. Following the spread of social networks and the use of audiovisual technologies, a new form of prevarication has spread alongside traditional bullying: electronic bullying or cyberbullying. While traditional bullying is carried out through gestures, words, beatings, insults and denigration, electronic bullying may instead become much more cruel and dangerous (Civita, 2006).

Cyberbullying refers to the use of communication devices involving defamatory content to carry out bullying in order to harass a person or group through personal attacks, even going so far as to commit genuine cybercrime. The distinctive features that can be used

to identify the phenomenon of traditional bullying or cyberbullying can be summarized as follows:

- *intentionality*: the bully engages in provocative and aggressive behaviour with the intention of hurting and offending the victim he or she has identified;
- *asymmetry*: there is an imbalance of strength between the victim and the prevaricator; in fact, when two individuals with the same degree of strength (either physical or psychological) quarrel or argue it is not an instance of bullying; there has to be an asymmetry in the relationship, stemming from character, age, physical strength or gender (e.g. males vs. females). The victimised student experiences a feeling of impotence in relation to the individual or group that is persecuting him or her;
- *persistence and reiteration over time*: the instances are repeated over time and occur with high frequency

3. THE SOCIAL ACTORS INVOLVED

Bullies, victims and spectators are the protagonists of a vicious circle of behaviours that may lead to very serious consequences, as often seen in news reports.

Erica Valsecchi points out two main types of bully: the dominant or prevaricating bully and the passive or gregarious bully. Bullies of the first type act alone or with the support of the group; they achieve great popularity among their peers, establish friendly relationships based on the effects of bullying and aggression against victims, and possess superior physical strength and/or an incisive ability to manipulate people and relationships to their own advantage. They do not show insecurity, or anxiety during their attacks on the victims and appear calm when facing authority figures. They also have little empathy for their victims. Passive or gregarious bullies occupy a subordinate position in relation to dominant bullies, although they do actively support and encourage the prevaricator during the attacks (Valsecchi, 2007). Bullies thus have a positive attitude towards violence and aggression enacted against their peers, but also against adults and teachers. It is a general form of violence against the environment which is used as a means to secure social benefits and prestige (Trincherio, 2009).

The victims are the children or young people who are bullied by a bully or a group of bullies; they are usually anxious and insecure people with behaviours that almost never extend beyond the range of ordinary (Fonzi, 1999). Victims have recurrent characteristics: low self-esteem, poor problem-solving skills, emotional difficulties, loneliness, poor school performance and a high number of absences from school, possible behavioural disorders, psychological and/or psychosomatic problems, stress, phobias, an inability to be alone and the tendency to avoid eye contact (Zanetti, Renzi, Berrone, 2009). As Maria Luisa Genta has stated (2002), these individuals have trouble managing relationships and extricating themselves from complex situations. The victims can be passive; they endure the bullying and tend to isolate themselves and avoid talking to anyone for fear of suffering more serious harm. They may display severe anxiety and a sense of insecurity which leads them to react by turning inward. They are shy, sensitive and calm with a negative opinion of themselves. Another type of victim is the provocative one, often seen in anxious, agitated subjects who have concentration problems and feel out of place in the context in which they find themselves; they annoy the people around them and need to be the focus of attention at all

times. This type of victims suffer prevarication not so much because of their weakness, but rather because of the antipathy they arouse in others (Lawson 2001). In addition, these victims can be ambiguous, with serious antisocial or reactive behaviour; they may defend themselves from attacks and report the bullying to adults. Valerie Besag identifies two other categories of victims: collusive victims, who let themselves be harassed for fear of being marginalized by their own peer group, and false victims, that is, subjects with relational difficulties who feign having suffered violence or report false violence to attract adults' attention (Besag, 1989). There is also a type of victims who deny occupying this role even though their companions recognize them as being victims. The harassment these victims suffer causes them to stop wanting to go to school. They lose confidence and self-esteem, thus influencing their learning and social relations in general. The combination of anger, fear, shame and guilt may drive the boy or girl to avoid telling anyone what he or she is experiencing and consequently avoid asking for help. This kind of generalized isolation requires adequate support to ensure the situation does not lead to relational consequences not only in the immediate future, but also in the long term (Zanetti, Renzi, Berrone, 2009). There is also a third actor with a leading role in such dynamics. The actions of prevarication and violence always take place in front of spectators (schoolmates, friends, but also adults and teachers) who, in the face of the bullying, choose to take either an active role as supporters of the bully or defenders of the victim, or a passive role in which they avoid taking a stand one way or the other and do not report the incident. These are the gregarious spectators, “i.e. subjects who take on the role of supporting the bully (e.g. they take part in violent actions, they act as lookouts) and, even though they are not the first-hand authors of the actions of prevarication, can be considered co-responsible” (Trincherro, 2009, p. 27). There are two spectators roles that can be identified: the consoler who, although not stepping in to stop the bullying, does try to reduce its effects by consoling the victim, and the mediator, the subject who actively seeks to pacify the bully and victim by placing him or herself at the same distance from both without openly taking sides in favour of one or the other.

4. SOME DATA ON BULLYNG AND CYBERBULLING

In Italy, several research organizations have released findings highlighting the extent of this phenomenon. In 2011, Eurispes and Telefono azzurro published a survey on childhood and adolescence conditions in Italy entitled *Indagine conoscitiva sulla condizione dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza in Italia*. It is interesting to note that the data in this report show that the prevalent form is verbal bullying, that is, the dissemination of false or harmful information about the victims: 22.8% of them reported having suffered repeated provocations and teasing, being the subject of unjustified offenses in 21.6% of cases, and of real threats in 5.2% of cases. Then there are episodes of damage done to objects (10.4%), the theft of objects (7.6%) or money (3.1%). Of respondents, 3% say they were beaten up. No major gender distinctions can be seen: “while there is a certain prevalence of male victims in relation to cases of damage (13.7% of males vs. 8.7% of females), threats (7% vs. 4.2%) and beatings (4.1% against 2.5%), minimal or non-existent differences appear in relation to offenses, provocations, thefts and episodes of isolation or social exclusion. An important difference is found only with regard to episodes of dissemination of false or negative information, which target girls in particular (28%, as compared to 20.8% of males)” (Eurispes, Telefono Azzurro, 2011, p. 10). The most recent ISTAT survey on this phenomenon, *Il bullismo in Italia:*

comportamenti offensivi e violenti tra i giovanissimi, dates back to 2014. This report finds that pre-adolescents are more frequently and systematically involved in this phenomenon than adolescents, and girls are more involved than boys. The survey also highlights different types of distressing actions perpetrated among adolescents: offenses and mockery, threats, actual assaults, damage and the theft of objects, defamation, and exclusion from the peer group. Let us briefly examine the main data. Is it common to see such phenomena? According to the data, it would seem so: 63.3% of respondents witnessed such situations. Half of 11-17 year olds have suffered harmful acts, 19% are bullied several times a month and 9% every week. This phenomenon occurs more often in the preadolescent age group, from 11 to 13 years of age (22.5%), as compared to 14-17 year olds (17.9%). Data show that 11.3% of the younger children were bullied “a few times a week” and 11.2% “once or more times a month”, as compared to 7.6% and 10.3% of the older children. Among high school students, high school (lyceum) students lead (19.4%), followed by students from vocational schools (18.1%) and those from technical schools (16%). In the dossier *Bersagli senza difese? Non lasciamoli soli* published in 2016, the Telefono Azzurro Onlus outlined the data regarding the requests for help on these issues that the helpline received and processed in the 2015-2016 school year. Cases of bullying account for 13% of the total number of cases the national helpline association handles (270 out of 2,055 reports; in 2017 Telefono Azzurro declared that it was handling 323 cases). The reports are mainly from northern Italy (45%) and involve Italian nationals in almost all cases (85%). Males were in the majority in committing bullying behaviours (60%), while the percentage of females came to 25%. Most of the episodes reported by those who turned to Telefono Azzurro occurred at school (82%). Requests for help begin during secondary school and continue into adolescence (half of the requests involve pre-adolescents). An alarming datum shows that this phenomenon is also appearing in grade 1 primary schools and even at pre-school age: “2 times out of 3 the victim is a preadolescent (59%). In 1 out of 4 cases, the victims are grade 2 secondary school students (19%), while there is a growing trend towards increasingly smaller children attending primary schools (22% of cases) as victims, with requests for help from children as young as 5 years old” (Telefono Azzurro, 2016, p. 14). Moreover, “cross-referencing the data about gender with data about the age of minors, it is evident that requests for help involving children up to the age of 10 concern equally both male and female victims (46.6% vs. 51.8%). In preadolescence, the number of male victims seems to be higher (60.7% vs 38.7%)” (Ibid, p. 16). Requests for help thus decrease as the victims’ age increases, as evidenced by previous research and in various studies focusing on the phenomenon, beginning with Dan Olweus’s key text in the study of bullying.

Turning to international data, we can refer to one of the most recent documents on this subject, the 2019 UNESCO report “Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying”, which shows that bullying events are more frequent in the countries of north Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, with the percentage of young people claiming to have been bullied in the last year reaching approximately 40%, falling to 30-35% in Asian countries and the two Americas and reaching 25% in Europe with further differences among European countries. According to the UNESCO report, bullying exists and occurs in different proportions in various countries of the world, and is a decreasing phenomenon in 35 of the 71 countries under analysis. In 24 countries it remains substantially constant and it is increasing in only 13 countries (Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Scotland, Wales,

England, Morocco, Burma, Russia, Slovakia, Philippines, and Thailand), albeit with very different starting levels and variations from country to country.

5. CONCLUSION. THE IMPORTANCE OF A PARTICIPATORY DISCUSSION

These data provide a snapshot of the current situation and reveal the extent of the phenomenon. The networks, press, and media report on cases of bullying or cyberbullying on an almost daily basis, often grouping actions into this category that are actually deviant behaviours or even criminal acts. It is difficult to say with certainty that the phenomenon is more widespread today as compared to previous years, but we can undoubtedly affirm that it is receiving increased attention. While on one hand this attention produces a sense of widespread deviance, on the other hand it can represent a positive opportunity to truly focus on this phenomenon with a view to fostering active and participatory discussion among the adults involved in daily processes of socialization with children.

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