

Teachers' Continuing Professional Development to Promote Well-Being and Prevent Bullying: An Exploratory/Comparative Study of Schools Between Germany and Italy

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Abstract: In recent years, schools, both in Italy and in many other European and non-European countries, seem to be hit by particularly urgent educational problems: the spread of bullying, an increase in conduct and aggression disorders even in younger age groups, social inhibition. Bullying and Cyberbullying, in particular, are extremely serious social phenomena so much so that they are now considered an international health problem due to the consequences of the suffering suffered by the victim. To effectively combat this worrying phenomenon, it is essential that teachers are well trained and equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to recognize and address unlawful behavior in the classroom. In this direction, the aim of this work is to deepen and analyze the phenomenon of Bullying and Cyberbullying in the light of the new training of the teacher. The ultimate goal is, in fact, to encourage an increase in the awareness of the entire educational community to the emergency of the phenomenon of youth violence, and to the need to implement concrete interventions that allow it to be contrasted and reduced.

Key words: Pedagogy, lifelong learning; professional development; formation.



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1. Introduction

In recent years, schools, both in Italy and in many other European and non-European countries, seem to be hit by particularly urgent educational problems: the spread of bullying, an increase in conduct and aggression disorders even in younger age groups, social inhibition, etc. (Armitage, 2021). In addition, the growing availability of technologies, virtual content and the widespread diffusion of social media have reduced human and empathic relationships, consequently increasing virtual ones, bringing out a further problem, that of cyber-violence, now global in scope and with significant social consequences (Hikmat et al., 2024). These developmental difficulties have an increasingly significant impact both on the academic performance of the students and on the teacher's ability to effectively

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manage the educational and didactic itinerary of the class. In this sense, conduct disorders: "[...] constitute one of the greatest challenges for Social, School and Health policies of the twenty-first century [...]" (Angold & Costello, 2001). For this reason, for many years the attention of the Institutions has focused on the dynamics of Bullying and Cyberbullying and its impact in the years of growth, especially since Generation Z has become hyper-technological and hyper-connected but very "dependent" on the web and social media. Bullying and Cyberbullying, in fact, are extremely serious social phenomena so much so that they are now considered an international health problem due to the consequences of the suffering suffered by the victim. The fight against these phenomena represents, therefore, a global challenge from which we cannot escape. This is mainly because the harmful effects of such behaviors have very broad social implications, both for victims and perpetrators: among these, there is the personal social development, education and psycho-physical well-being of minors, with negative effects that can last into adulthood (Gaffney et al., 2021).

The most recent statistics from the United Nations report that 1 in 3 students in the world, between the ages of 13 and 15, has experienced bullying. Worldwide, 246 million children and adolescents suffer some form of violence at school or bullying every year. Cyberbullying is also on the rise: most of the available data concerns surveys conducted in industrialized countries with percentages of minors who have experienced it ranging between 5% and 20% of the juvenile population, with psychophysical consequences ranging from headaches to stomach pains and/or manifesting themselves with lack of appetite or sleep disorders. Youth violence is a reality that cannot be ignored, but rather must be prevented and stopped from its first manifestations. Its effects on the entire social system are increasingly worrying (Waseem & Nickerson, 2024). There are more and more scholars who argue that being a victim of bullying in childhood has worse consequences than being abused in adulthood (Rigby, 2024). The intervention strategies are many and involve the entire community: school, family and territorial. Bullying and Cyberbullying, in fact, are complex phenomena that must be addressed and managed through a systemic and global approach (Healy et al., 2024). It is therefore clear that these phenomena, which are widespread in high-income countries, require effective and measured pedagogical intervention, precisely because their diffusion causes harmful effects on the learning and behavior of minors such as to reduce the effectiveness of public investments in the education and well-being of children in each country (van Aalst et al., 2024).

Many experiments conducted in Italy and abroad underline the opportunity to intervene promptly, through specific strategies aimed at countering these phenomena. The goal is to convey to young people a series of social skills, behavioral self-control and interpersonal problem solving. Curricula for the promotion of prosocial behaviors are part of this direction, representing an increasingly decisive factor in the student's ability to adapt successfully to school life, especially in the transition phases (from elementary school to middle school and then to high school), which traditionally represent critical moments with regard to the phenomenon of school dropout and early school leaving (Nengsi, 2024).

Since the 90s, following the research of Dan Olweus, scholars from every country have questioned themselves in researching the causes that push young people to choose the use of force, vulgar language and intimidation as a mode of communication. Among the most accredited hypotheses are: the family climate, individual psychological characteristics, behavioral models offered by the mass media and dynamics within the classroom (Liu et al., 2024). Teachers and the class group, in fact, play an important role in aiding or abetting episodes of violence. The type of

leadership used by the teacher, permissive or authoritarian, and the sense of belonging of the classmates to the class group are able to predominantly influence the behavior of the students (Madsen et al., 2024).

In this direction, the aim of this work is to deepen and analyze the phenomenon of Bullying and Cyberbullying in the light of the new training of the teacher. The ultimate goal is, in fact, to encourage an increase in the awareness of the entire educational community to the emergency of the phenomenon of youth violence, and to the need to implement concrete interventions that allow it to be contrasted and reduced.

2. Modes of expression of the phenomenon

As far as the modes of expression are concerned, Bullying can be expressed directly and indirectly (Walters et al., 2024). Direct bullying is carried out through physical or verbal violence. Physical violence consists of punches, kicks, shoves and damage to the victim's personal belongings, while verbal violence, on the other hand, is carried out through the use of offensive phrases and derogatory insults related to ethnic origin, religious beliefs, physical defects or disability. Indirect bullying is mainly psychological, it is more subtle and subtle than direct bullying and aims at the social exclusion of the victim. This mode of bullying is the one preferred by girls (Ahmad & Smith, 2022) who, without the need to resort to physical violence, still have the possibility of emotionally and psychologically destroying the chosen victim. Bullying differs from other forms of juvenile violence, such as delinquency and crime, because of three specific characteristics: intentionality, repetitiveness and imbalance of power (Le Menestrel, 2020). In order for an episode of violence to be identified as an act of bullying, it is necessary, in fact, that it is included within a series of repeated episodes over time, that the bully attacks the victim with the intention of harming him or her and that the victim is in a condition of psychological or physical inferiority compared to the bully.

Cyberbullying or online bullying, on the other hand, consists in the use of violence through the web. It represents a growing phenomenon among minors and, above all, among adolescents (Francis et al., 2022). Its global reach has forced institutions to implement action plans and legislative interventions to prevent and combat its development, including Law 71/2017. This is a phenomenon that should not be underestimated as it can cause considerable damage to victims and, like bullying, can constitute a violation of the rules of Private Law, the Criminal Code, the Privacy Code and the fundamental principles of the Italian Constitution. Electronic bullying is extremely dangerous, difficult to detect and can cause serious damage to the victim's physical and mental health. Through the network, in fact, the victim can be persecuted anywhere and at any time, as violence is expressed through the mobile phone, tablet and computer. Research has shown that cyberbullying occurs mainly among school-age individuals (Dwiningrum & Wahab, 2020). The purpose of the cyberbully is to destroy the social image and reputation of the victim, through the dissemination of fake news, gossip, photos and videos depicting the victim in intimate or embarrassing situations. The victim is unable to defend himself, due to the invisibility that the network allows the bully to have. Harassment comes from anonymous users, offensive content, published on the net, is viewed by millions of people who in turn, through "sharing", often forward it to others, thus creating a chain of violence that is difficult to stop (Hansson et al., 2020). Added to all this is the fact that posts posted online do not have a time limit, i.e. they can remain on the web for an indefinite time. Aggressive actions can be carried out not only through the dissemination of gossip and images but also through the sending of

messages of threats or danger to the safety of people emotionally close to the victim (Lee et al., 2022). The spread of online violence is also determined by the continuous frequency of young people in the virtual world. The continuous use of electronic equipment such as tablets, PCs and smartphones, in fact, subjects children to the continuous risk of being subjected to Cyberbullying actions (Markkanen et al., 2021). Both forms of bullying, electronic and traditional, produce devastating effects on victims: physical discomfort, lowered self-esteem, anxiety, eating and sleep disorders (Källmén & Hallgren, 2021), in serious cases even self-harm and suicide (Ganotz et al., 2023). Victims develop depressive syndromes, addictions and altered behavior (Alvarado et al., 2020). School performance also decreases, while social isolation and a sense of desolation increase. The educational figures of reference, parents and teachers, find it difficult to recognize the signs of discomfort of children, except when these signs turn into serious or particularly evident physical and psychological disorders. To aggravate the difficulty of adults, preventing their timely intervention, is also the silence in which the victim closes himself for fear of further violence by the bully, out of shame or fear of being subjected to judgment (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). In the case of Cyberbullying, on the other hand, in addition to the silent attitude of the victim, another factor that influences the non-recognition of harassment by adults, is their lack of knowledge of the functioning of electronic tools and, in particular, of the dynamics of the network and the dangers that can derive from its improper use (Bjereld et al., 2020).

For the reasons listed above, the first action to combat Bullying and Cyberbullying is the care of the relationship with the Other, extended to every subject of the educating community, accompanied by a constant reflection on all forms of discrimination, through the enhancement of differences and involvement in collective projects and paths of research and dialogue with the territory. To this end, a fruitful educational alliance between school, family and other extracurricular educational agencies is recommended (Ozada Nazim & Duyan, 2021). A decisive role is reserved for the training of teachers, as protagonists of an educational plan for the prevention of bullying and cyberbullying and the promotion of respect and coexistence at school.

3. The contribution of the new teacher training to combat Bullying and Cyberbullying

The training of teachers and school staff is a fundamental element to deal with Bullying and Cyberbullying effectively (Demol et al., 2020).

To effectively combat this worrying phenomenon, it is essential that teachers are well trained and equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to recognize and address unlawful behavior in the classroom (Waasdorp et al., 2021).

Through effective training programs, teachers can acquire the skills and understanding necessary to actively intervene when they are faced with acts of Bullying and Cyberbullying, helping to promote a culture of respect and inclusion (Van Verseveld et al., 2021). This type of training should focus on the following aspects:

1. To raise awareness among teachers of the role they can play in prevention and intervention;
2. To provide teachers with the tools and knowledge necessary to recognize the warning signs of Bullying and Cyberbullying and intervene effectively;
3. Develop a shared action plan to address bullying and cyberbullying in schools, in collaboration with students, parents and other community members.

With a coordinated and collaborative approach, it is crucial to help teachers transform our schools into safe and positive environments for all.

It should be noted that teachers are not required to become psychologists, but only to receive adequate training to be able to recognize bullying and cyberbullying and intervene preventively or, if necessary, even after an episode has occurred. Their role must be that of mediators between the children and the professionals who will then be called upon to manage what happened (Burger et al., 2022).

Continuous training, therefore, to be carried out through formal channels, such as refresher courses, seminars, conferences, etc. But, above all, it is required that updating should be understood as a mindset, an openness to the new, an interest in change that increases with the growth of knowledge, an anxiety aimed at improvement that must characterize the entire professional life. It is unthinkable that a teacher who is such does not live in a reality that is not impregnated with culture, is not informed about what is happening in the world, does not try to get closer and know what the tastes of the students are in order to understand their world and try to get as close as possible to them (Kollerová et al., 2021). Certainly, this must be accompanied by continuous study that allows you to be constantly updated on the evolution of science, technology, pedagogical, psychological theories, methodology and teaching.

If training is important for a variety of reasons, the question now arises as to what training to offer. A training capable of responding to the training needs of our historical era. In-service training, fundamental for every teacher who finds himself working in a school that requires professional skills, but also solid value bases. Strong and guiding values that are able to provide models of behavior and life for young people (Salgado et al., 2020).

This, of course, is valid for all teachers in the light of a didactic action that cannot be separated from a constant reflection on the values that give meaning to the actions of the individual and to the life of the community. The episodes of Bullying and Cyberbullying that plague our schools ask us to strengthen this value dimension in the daily life of the School to allow young people to rediscover the ideals that must inform a life that is worth living. A training, therefore, that highlights the educational and existential value of teaching: the student searches among the school desks for the traces for the construction of his own identity, his own life project, the meaning of existence (Catherine Scheeler et al., 2022).

The teacher must find opportunities for meeting and effective cooperation, seek opportunities for professional exchanges to actively participate in the achievement of the objectives of the school's educational offer plan, increasing his authority and therefore that of the discipline within the school itself. He must be the bearer and diffuser of collegiality: he cannot close himself in his own disciplinary case. Interdisciplinarity, as well as collegiality, is not taught and learned but lived (Colpin et al., 2021). In-service training, therefore, takes on a strategic role when implemented according to the following principles:

Lifelong learning cycles

The ability to learn, the propensity to be engaged in lifelong learning cycles are the conditions for giving meaning to a training system throughout the career. The idea of professionalism is what teachers who are knowledge professionals in continuous learning want. It makes no sense to conceive of in-service training as a "drizzle" that occasionally cools the ground. Continuity and organicity are the factors that make the proposed training effective (Bergmark, 2023).

Reflection on practice

Reflection on practice is one of the essential dimensions of any training action in the field of learning professions. Reflecting on practice means enhancing the sense of actions, giving value to everyday behaviors, attributing precise meanings to each one. The teacher is a "reflective professional" (Dadds, 2020) who reasons on experience to derive models of action, more aware and effective. Reflexivity, understood as the ability to continuously reflect on one's professional practice, is considered as the "distinctive characteristic" of the quality teacher. Training then represents an opportunity to urge teachers to reflect on what they do: it is more motivating, it is more useful and, if nothing else, teachers do not fall asleep as often happens in traditional refresher courses.

Action research

Action research is considered a very valuable tool for the professional development of teachers. Teachers are not only consumers, passive or active, of refresher courses, they are themselves resources for understanding and renewing teaching. Educational laboratories and networks of schools and teachers are very useful. The laboratory is one of the most effective methods of educational research. It represents the best condition to transform the classroom experience into a privileged tool for professional learning (Potyrała & Tomczyk, 2021). This involves interaction and communication between peers. The exchange and sharing of experiences are more effective than the transmission from top to bottom. The dissemination of good practices is the best way for the professional development of teachers. School policies in general and those of in-service training must tend to favor and solicit the protagonism of teachers.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Study Hypothesis

Continuing Professional Development holds paramount importance in order to cultivate exemplary practices (Singh, 2024). Accordingly, teacher participants were involved in a Continuing Professional Development program in order to ensure their professional advancement in knowledge and skill competencies through the exchange of practical experiences and the embrace of lifelong learning. The hypothesis is that at the end of the program, teachers will feel more confident in carrying out their educational and teaching practice by perceiving greater levels of self-efficacy, thereby providing high-quality instruction and educational experiences for students. Furthermore, assuming that the greater or lesser ability of the teacher to effectively manage a class group can be related to the percentage of bullying recorded in the same class, it has been hypothesized that in a class whose teacher has good *self-efficacy*, low percentages of bullying will be recorded. while, in a class in which the teacher has low levels of *self-efficacy*, students will be left more easily without a guide and therefore more exposed to the risk of having to suffer aggressive behavior or having to bully their classmates even from a defensive perspective.

4.2 Study design

At the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, several schools were contacted in Italy (Naples and its province) and Germany, in order to obtain authorization to administer two questionnaires aimed at investigating the spread of bullying and cyberbullying phenomena and teachers' perception of how their effectiveness in teaching can affect students' behavior in the classroom.

The individual schools drawn to constitute the sample were contacted by institutional *e-mail* and subsequently, in case of no response, telephone contacts were made. Due to the poor response of schools to requests to participate in the research, the sample size was restricted to 4 schools (2 Italian and 2 German), i.e. the only ones that made themselves available to participate in the survey. A non-probability sampling plan was adopted in which, in a first phase, the schools were identified, then students (for the investigation on bullying) and teachers (for the investigation on *self-efficacy*) were involved, all this in order to obtain a statistically significant sample in terms of number. In total, the sample corresponds to 180 students and with respect to the gender and age variables, the participants interviewed are predominantly male (51.6%), while the age distribution shows a range of variation between 11 and 13 years. The sample is entirely composed of lower secondary school students. The sample of teachers, belonging to the selected schools, is 40 (20 for the experimental group and 20 for the control group) for the most part to the female gender (88.9%). The age distribution, on the other hand, varied between 29 and 62 years. All participants voluntarily joined the survey.

4.3 Measures

Florence Bullying /Victimization Scale (FBVS) and Florence Cyberbullying/ Cybervictimization Scale (FCBVS)

Following a specific classification of the ways in which bullying can manifest itself (physical behaviors; verbal behaviors; indirect-relational behaviors), the authors came to structure the scale into a total of 28 items that investigate, not only the modes of manifestation of the phenomenon, but also the frequency with which it occurs during a given period of time, i.e. 2-3 months prior to administration.

The Florence Bullying / Victimization Scale (Palladino et al., 2016) consists of two sections, one for the perpetrators of bullying and one for the victims. Each section is developed in 14 items, to which respondents must respond using a five-step scale where 1 indicates never; 2 once or twice; 3 once or twice a month; 4 once a week and 5 several times a week.

The possible answers are elaborated according to two indices: presence, absence and gravity (which coincides with a close repetition in time of bullying). The questions are preceded by the request to fill in some personal data (gender and age) and a brief definition of the phenomenon of bullying among boys. This instrument is particularly suitable for the detection of the phenomenon within large samples, in fact, its schematic and repetitive structure simplifies its administration within the class-groups.

Thanks to the description of specific behavioral dynamics, ranging from the generic to the particular, the researcher is able to translate the various information into data without any reductionism to the simple presence/absence of the phenomenon, but transforming all this into precise behaviors, ways or forms and frequencies of bullying manifestation.

Each section of the tool, in fact, is introduced by a general question on the frequency with which the subject has suffered or acted bullying, which is followed by a series of 14 possible ways of implementing such bullying and a fifteenth alternative with an open answer that can be entered by the person filling in.

The Florence Cyberbullying/Cybervictimization Scale (Palladino et al., 2015) is a structured scale in order to evaluate the phenomenon of bullying carried out through the use of new communication tools offered by the development of the *Internet*.

The *Scale* consists of a first part listing the tools that can be used to implement cyberbullying behaviors and a second part, divided into two sections, which

respectively describe the ways in which electronic bullying can be implemented and/or suffered.

The scale consists of a total of 36 *items*, divided into two subscales of eighteen *items* each. The behaviors investigated refer to a specific period of time, corresponding to the two months prior to administration and are evaluated through an index of presence and one of severity. Each *item* was rated on a 5-point Likert scale: where 1 indicates never; 2 once or twice; 3 once or twice a month; 4 once a week, and 5 multiple times a week.

The Florence Bullying/Victimization Scale and the Florence CyberBullying/CyberVictimization Scale aim to detect not only the frequency with which the phenomenon of bullying is present in schools, but also how it manifests itself and, among the different forms of manifestation, which is the most used.

The Teacher's Self-Efficacy Scale (SAED)

The construct of *self-efficacy* developed by Albert Bandura (De Paul, 2012), refers to a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. As Bandura and other researchers have shown, self-efficacy can have an *impact on behavior*. To assess teachers' self-efficacy, a particularly sensitive scale has been found, at an international level, to be the *Teacher Self-Efficacy* by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001). Biasi, Domenici, Capobianco and Patrizi (2014) translated the *items* and adapted them into Italian by interviewing 200 primary and secondary school teachers of both genders. In the original version, this scale is composed of three factors: *Efficacy for Student Engagement*; 8 *items*, *Efficacy for Instructional Strategies*; 8 *items*, and *Efficacy for Classroom Management*; 8 *items*. The *teacher's perception of self-efficacy* corresponds, in short, to the judgment on the personal ability to succeed in achieving the desired results in terms of commitment and learning on the part of the students. This construct has been shown to be strongly linked to many significant educational outcomes including: the persistence, enthusiasm, commitment and teaching behavior of the teacher; and, as a decidedly important secondary effect, it showed predictive value on students' learning outcomes, their motivation and their behavior in the classroom.

4.4 Procedures

The tools described were administered in the 4 schools sampled for this survey, in the period between January and February 2024. The surveys, for each school, were carried out in a single day. The researcher is present in class for the entire duration of the compilation (about 40 minutes), so as to be able to help students who may experience difficulties in answering the questions. Before the start of the administrations, teachers and students with their parents were summoned to explain the characteristics of the study, its contents and the safety issues based on the Declaration of Helsinki. The researchers ensured the anonymity of the participants, and all faculty and parents of the participating students provided their written informed consent prior to the study.

Continuing Professional Development Intervention

Intervention Group: A comprehensive 20-hour of Continuing Professional Development Intervention_program was devised over an 8-week duration. This educational framework included four essential domains relevant to the facets of teachers: 1) Teaching and Learning Domain (10 hours) – instructional workshop, Teaching Games for Understanding; and the integration of Information Technology. 2) Student Development Domain (4 hours) – a seminar elucidating the

understanding of students' varied necessities. 3) School Development Domain (2 hours) – exemplary dissemination of Home–School collaboration regarding parent-associated educational activities. 4) Professional Relationships and Services Domain (4 hours) – experiential learning through empirical investigation; and institutional enlightenment aimed at facilitating the understanding of research findings and optimal methodologies.

Control Group (CG): Participants did not engage in the intervention treatment. To guarantee a fair opportunity for Continuing Professional Development, participants were solicited to partake in the formulated program subsequent to the culmination of this study.

5. Results and Discussions

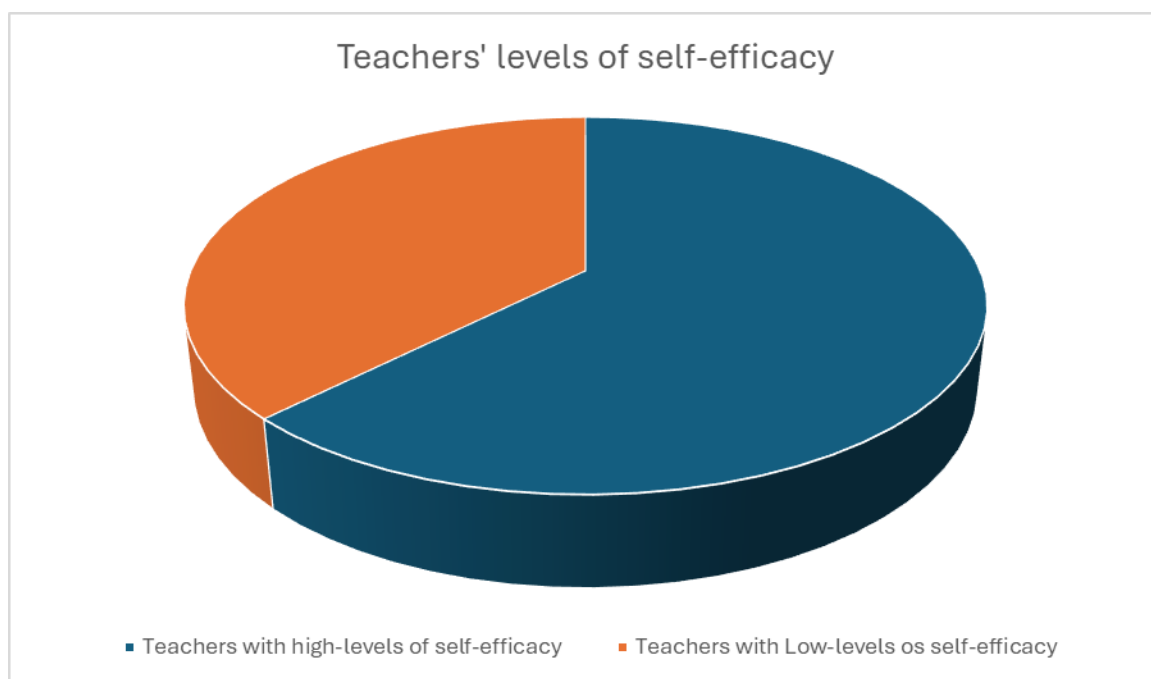
From the analysis of the results it is possible to tend towards an acceptance of the initial hypothesis which will have to be further verified with subsequent analyses and which can therefore become the starting point for future research. In other words, the role of the teacher's attitude was identified, expressed through the so-called perception of self-efficacy of the teacher and, from the comparison of the results obtained from the different analyses conducted on the two different samples (teacher sample and student sample) and an important correspondence was highlighted: a high self-efficacy of the teacher corresponds to a lower frequency of bullying behavior in the classroom and vice versa. The answers to the questionnaires allowed us to have an idea of the judgment that the individual has created with reference to his or her ability to succeed in achieving the desired results. A first fact that is immediately evident concerns the fact that out of 40 teachers, 15 showed results relating to poor self-efficacy while the remaining 25 obtained good scores at the SAED in the pre-test, an indication of a good level of perceived self-efficacy (Table 1; Fig. 1). Surprisingly, the teachers who showed a good level of self-efficacy were those whose classes showed lower levels of conflict among peers. Conversely, teachers with low levels of self-efficacy were those whose classes reported high levels of conflict. This plausibly happens because teachers with good self-efficacy, presented a greater awareness of their professional skills, were able to implement appropriate behaviors and strategies to effectively manage the class group, moreover, by experiencing the success of the strategies implemented, they further and positively strengthened their self-efficacy (Fischer et al., 2021). In the opposite case, a teacher with low self-efficacy, not feeling able to effectively manage his class group, was unable to act with a positive outcome, thus experiencing failure that would most likely increase his sense of ineffectiveness. This corroborates the indications put forward at international level according to which the teacher's way of acting in the classroom is also relevant to prevent or reduce the phenomenon of bullying and cyberbullying (Özkiliç, 2014). In summary, an attitude that emotionally involves the student in a positive way and transmits confidence, which motivates him to learn, solicits a positive and not frustrating climate, on the contrary, in the case of poor *self-efficacy* of the teacher, a demotivating and highly conflictual climate can easily spread, which ends up generating aggression and can favor contextual situations that will not then be able to stem or even prevent the spread of any prevarication behaviors, victimization and scapegoating phenomena (van Aalst et al., 2021). Ultimately, we can talk about the role of the teacher's attitude not in a causal sense with respect to the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying, but in the sense of recognizing the role of co-factor that intervenes in the modulation of social dynamics at school: this in order, of course, to stem and/or prevent the spread of the problem. It would therefore be a variable that can have a secondary impact on

the evolution of the pathological behaviors under study. Again in order to prevent or reduce the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying, which are fully part of the pathological forms of aggressive behavior, it is also necessary to intervene at a systematic level in the various aspects of school life: from the involvement of families to the adoption of clear and shared disciplinary rules, to the development of pro-sociality and empathic sensitivity, a development that can be favored through innovative and functional educational choices (Fischer & Bilz, 2019).

Tab. 1 – Mean scores obtained on the three SAED subscales

	Engagement	Strategies	Management
Average	38.37	35.02	35.77
Median	19.17	22.31	21.51
Standard Deviation	31.50	31	27.00
Minimum score	11	8	8
Maximum score	72	72	72

Fig. 1 – Teachers' levels of self-efficacy before the intervention.



As regards the comparison between the results obtained before the start of the intervention and at the end of the period of the continuing education programme, it is clear that this programme was effective in improving the levels of self-efficacy. Statistical analysis conducted through IBM SPSS software (version 25.0 developed by IBM in Armonk, NY, USA) for all dependent variables demonstrates a high significance between pre- and post-test.

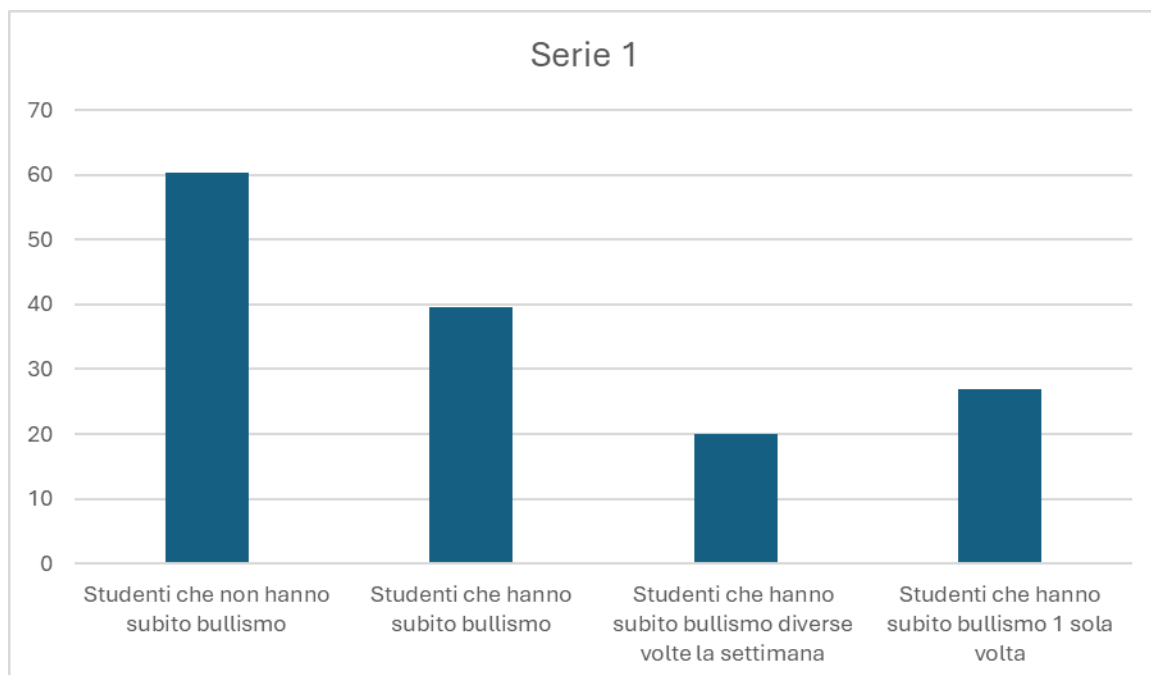
The influence of the program on dependent variables was assessed through a two-way ANOVA (group (experimental/control) $\times$ time (pre/post-intervention)) involving repeated measures on the temporal axis. When significant 'Group $\times$ Time'

interactions were observed, paired t-tests were performed to reveal significant differences. The effect size of the notable "Time $\times$ Group" interaction was evaluated using the partial eta squared (η^2_p) statistic, with classifications indicating small ($\eta^2_p < 0.06$), medium ($0.06 \leq \eta^2_p < 0.14$), and large ($\eta^2_p \geq 0.14$). Additionally, Cohen's d was utilized for the determination of effect sizes in pairwise comparisons, with categorizations of small ($0.20 \leq d < 0.50$), moderate ($0.50 \leq d < 0.79$), and large ($d \geq 0.80$). Statistical significance was determined at $p < 0.05$.

The results of a two-factor repeated measure ANOVA showed meaningful "Time $\times$ Group" interaction for all the three variables. Specifically, engagement ($F_{1,38} = 53.78$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.88$, large effect size); strategies ($F_{1,38} = 31.91$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.85$, large effect size); management ($F_{1,38} = 72.05$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.95$, large effect size). When the post hoc analysis was performed it showed that experimental group reached important increase in Self-efficacy test: engagement ($t = 7.33$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.64$, large effect size); strategies ($t = 5.65$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.26$, large effect size); management ($t = 8.48$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.89$, large effect size).

From the analysis of the results of the questionnaires administered to the students, a first fundamental fact that emerges from this study concerns the implementation of bullying and cyberbullying behaviors that are phenomena in strong growth globally, as from the analysis of the results it is possible to see how the percentages of presence of the phenomenon assume consistent levels. From the analysis of the initial data of the study, it emerges, in fact, that 39.6% of the total sample declares to have suffered acts of bullying in the last 2-3 months, with a percentage of 19.9% declaring to have been bullied several times a week, denouncing the seriousness of the phenomenon and emphasizing the repetitiveness of the vexatious behavior that saw them as protagonists Passive. Only 27% of subjects say they have been bullied or cyberbullied only once in the entire period of time considered (Table 2).

Tab. 2 – Bullying and frequency of the phenomenon in the sample interviewed.



As regards the distribution of cases in the countries covered by the study (Italy and Germany), it was possible to verify how the phenomenon is strongly rooted, probably a reflection of a society whose cases of youth psychological distress are increasing exponentially. In European countries, an increasing number of young people are victims of bullying and cyberbullying, due, plausibly, to the growing availability of new technologies (Olweus, 1997). This availability of technology has led to high but fairly stable percentages compared to previous national statistics in Germany (16%). The phenomenon, on the other hand, appears to be growing strongly in Italy (12%). This confirms the fact that this phenomenon is significantly influenced by cultural contexts (Rigby, 2020).

Another significant fact concerns bullying as a group phenomenon. The scale of detection of bullying and cyberbullying shows, in fact, that a high percentage of students declare to have taken part in episodes of bullying towards classmates or schoolmates, not identifying a direct role in the manifestation of bullying acts but outlining the participation of different actors ranging from the bully, to spectators, wingmen, etc. This discovery is of importance that cannot be underestimated at the level of psychosocial dynamics as not indicating a direct responsibility in the vexatious action, allows the subject to mask himself behind the collective nature of the gesture made, in a sort of dilution of responsibilities among the participants and moral disengagement exemplified in conformism to the rules of the group (Rigby, 2020). The group acts as an element of personal de-responsibility, allowing the subject to declare his or her actions 'negative' without moral or value brakes, defining the group as a self-regulated system in which individuals think and act as if they were a unit (Arhuis-Inca et al., 2021) making use of group conformism as a justifying defense for their behavior. In this perspective, the social identity of the class group in which there is an *in-group* and an *out-group* causes the dynamics of

belonging/extraneousness to the group to be structured, which lead the victim to assume the role of a sacrificial element, that is, the person towards whom all the fears of disintegration of the group itself are poured out, in a defensive way (Trufanov, 2021). These factors determine the overall emotional and relational atmosphere that is breathed within the group itself. A positive atmosphere allows each member to carry out his or her activity with a good degree of basic well-being and the group to work calmly on common goals. Conversely, the presence of a detached, hostile, devaluing climate among classmates determines a general impoverishment of the whole group and a strong individual malaise that often leads to intolerance behavior towards peers (Pabón-Carrasco et al., 2020).

A further element of analysis concerned the frequency with which the participants in the study declared that they implemented or had suffered abusive behavior. By dividing the sample according to the class attended and analyzing victimization and bullying behaviors across the board, it was possible to see how the phenomenon is more present in boys attending the first and second year of lower secondary school with an almost homogeneous gender difference, slightly predominant towards the male gender but growing strongly in the female gender (Obregon-Cuesta et al., 2022). What has just been described outlines a worrying general picture because, according to several authors, the less time elapses between one arrogance and another, the more the phenomenon takes on worrying proportions. This happens because the perpetuation over time allows the phenomenon to become chronic, favoring in a more precise and meaningful way the distinction between the roles of bully and victim (Feijóo & Rodríguez-Fernández, 2021). On the basis of these elements, the literature tells us that bullying is a phenomenon that, in terms of frequency, decreases with age (Hellström & Beckman, 2020), but on the contrary, the manifestations with which it occurs become more and more serious with the passage of time, in particular it is during the adolescent period that bullying episodes are exacerbated. As already pointed out several times, bullying can manifest itself in the form of direct (physical, verbal) or indirect (relational) behaviors and take on peculiar values according to the gender to which they belong: while girls are more inclined to use behaviors of an indirect nature (gossip, rumors and defamation) to hit their victims, boys are more inclined to use physical force (Yang et al., 2021).

The comparison between bullying suffered or acted, based on the gender variable to which they belong, shows us an almost homogeneous picture between males and females. In fact, the values that distinguish the male gender from the female gender on being actors of bullying are almost entirely in conformity with each other, only slightly preponderant towards the male gender but growing strongly in the female gender. Some slight differences can be detected in the frequency with which males and females are victims of aggressive behavior: girls are more identifiable as possible victims with a percentage of 27.2%, but episodes affecting the male gender occur with higher levels of severity. These results seem to confirm what Oliver James (Nixon et al., 2020) said, according to which by 2016, the so-called 'weaker sex' will fill another gap: the level of female violence, albeit in different ways, could reach that usually expressed by males. The data analyzed according to the gender variable clearly show that females, much more than males, use new technologies to carry out acts of bullying (20.4%), but at the same time, they are also the main victims (25.5%).

As for the methods of victimization, which can be divided according to the direct or indirect nature of the vexatious behaviors suffered (physical, verbal, relational), pushes and tugging represent the most widespread forms of harassment

in relation to the physical nature of the bullying suffered or acted out. A possible explanation for the numerical superiority of subjects who declare themselves responsible for physical bullying against their peers compared to those who declare to suffer it, could be traced back to the defensive reasons related to social desirability, in fact, it is easier to show oneself and self-report to others as an aggressor than as a victim (Cosma et al., 2022). Among the verbal modalities, on the other hand, being called with ugly names or with appellations that reveal homophobic intolerance are the most common forms of vexatiousness. Finally, among the indirect relational behaviors, we find being ignored by classmates and having been denigrated by circulating untrue rumors about oneself. In the case of cybervictimization, the mode that manifests itself through exclusionary behaviors from the online group is perhaps the most frequent, followed by the reception of embarrassing videos and images. Both modalities particularly affect the female gender (Gbordzoe et al., 2024). In addition, the average scores referable to the three behavioral modalities show that indirect persecutory acts are the ones that are most experienced in our sample, followed by verbal-direct behaviors and physical modalities. In other words, the data relating to the bullying suffered reveal a very frequent use of direct verbal modalities. These attitudes would seem to be the expression of the implementation of gender-based violence or, rather, of that new form of homophobic bullying that we currently and tragically hear more and more often about (Cuesta et al., 2021).

An interesting discovery, however, concerns the small percentage of verbal offenses attributable to cultural and religious factors. This result could be the direct consequence of greater tolerance determined by a world that, even in small cities, is increasingly multiethnic and multicultural. In addition, the significant presence of foreign students makes the aggregative structure of the group extremely heterogeneous and transversal, which brings together different socio-cultural backgrounds (Fárez et al., 2021). A reality also found significantly in our sample, with a percentage of students coming from new migration flows equal to 32%.

The results achieved as a result of the present research may provide significant indications for future studies. These first results, in fact, show a worrying spread of the phenomenon of bullying in schools at the European level.

Conclusions

Hardships in childhood and adolescence are a problem that public opinion becomes aware of when the forms in which it manifests itself take on the contours of tragedy, highlighted by the media. Or which is acknowledged through the increasingly widespread personal experience of parents and relatives whose children or grandchildren suffer discomforts that affect personal and family life.

Comparing the data relating to Italy with those of other countries, it is evident that the phenomenon has reached an alarming level. A contextual view of the results of the present study confirms the need to adopt prevention interventions to the phenomenon, to avoid negative repercussions on both the victim and the bully. The literature and the numerous research conducted allow us to understand the importance of the role of the teacher in preventing the manifestation of disrespectful and harmful behaviors and conducts, through the creation of educational and learning environments aimed at promoting positive behaviors.

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