ABSTRACT

This essay was born from a reflection on the issue of bullying and how it contextualizes from school.

We believe that an approach that focuses the problem of bullying in school rather than the subject, is relevant, since the perspective of the subject/problem has not to date achieved to provide a real solution to the phenomenon. We intend, therefore, to pose a different view of bullying, focusing problems in the school, so it is accountable in its whole issue of abuse among their students and find integral solutions that go beyond the individuals or groups. In this way we propose the benefits of cooperative learning, which denotes a largely unflattering overall structure of the bullying behaviors.

Key words: Bullying, Cooperative Learning, Bullies, School

Latin America and their educational systems have not been aside from the scourge of child battering, also known as bullying. That which some justify saying that: «it’s always been there», forgetting the essential premise that a bad school coexistence not only decreases performance, but it hurts the development of the children and young people in formation.

For some people the school abuse would be only one symptom of the times in which we live: individualism, confusion, loneliness, selfishness, fear; where children, who spend too much time in schools, assault others due to an unconscious or conscious dissatisfaction with a system that takes them away from the real world of adults to immerse them in institutions whose mission is to prepare them for a future not glimpsed with too much hope. According to Grimaldo (2001), «currently there is a culture of the same violence that is reinforced by the characteristics of different social agents». Thus, the plight of bullying seems to be aggravated by a context in which the relationships are defined as liquid, fluid, where the strength of the human bonds are interpreted as threat (Bauman, 2005).

Thus, awareness of the phenomenon of bullying emerges at the beginning of the 1970s in Sweden, due to the high rate of suicides among young people; this gave rise to a series of inquiries that ended up revealing what was happening. Numerous investigations followed these
events, among them; one of the most significant is the begun then and continuing until today by the Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus. This author refers that the term harassment among equals is often used to refer to «a person who torments, harasses or bothers another» (Olweus, 2004). In addition, Olweus holds that harassment in the school designates a type of aggression that could be directly or indirectly leading to exclusion, humiliation and even intimidation not only by part of the stalker, but also of other boys and girls who are pressured to do so.

Thus seen, the «problem» tends to be placed usually on individual actors, in this case the specific problem would be the victim and his attacker, from a slightly wider perspective this could also reach the group. However, we could also consider that the problem is society as a whole, however when looking for solutions, this is done most of the time from the subjects, in some cases from the groups, exceptionally from the schools and almost never from society in general.

The questions that come to mind are: is bullying only a «problem» of the victim, the offender and group that encourages abuse? or is it rather a problem of school and society? Our hypothesis is that those same children and young people, promptly called victims and perpetrators, as well as the group that welcomes them, in a different school environment, in a school that will lead and apply values internalized by all its agents to work with a curriculum of cooperative learning, would not have those «problems» and would not weigh upon them the stigma of being the good guys or the bad guys.

In this line, the way of defining the «problem» seems especially relevant, because while it may seem simplistic, this depends on the way of addressing solutions.

The programs of intervention and methodologies that address the phenomenon as a micro structure are therefore jeopardized, showing the subject as the sole possessor of the problem. On the other hand, if we assume according to our proposal, the perspective from a macro system, we should face the fact that the «problem» is the school as an institution and/or society, not only of the individual and from there to consider possible solutions.

The aggressors and cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is defined as «the didactic use of small groups in which students work together to maximize their own learning and that of others» (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1999). The main characteristic of this type of learning implies the requirement the student work with others.

In Table 1, we will present some guidelines developed from the model guidelines of cooperative learning of Johnson et al. (1999); Johnson, Johnson and Stanne (2000), from which we will point out the positive effects of these premises in the conduct of aggressive agents.

We then stop at some features mentioned by various authors and marked (in general terms) as typical of the aggressors. We have decided to focus on them, with the understanding that without the presence of offenders, there would not be victims.

Johnson et al. (1999) suggest that there would be five essential elements in cooperative learning.

We will try to show how these elements might positively affect some aspects of the personality of boys and girls offenders or potential offenders.

Authors nominate the first component of the cooperative learning: positive interdependence, here students must have clear that there is no individual success; the proposed goals can only be achieve insofar as they work together. From this premise of cooperative learning, those offenders or potential offenders who present low empathy, are sociable and of dominant character would be favored, since the positive interdependence would help them to put themselves in the place of another which may or not perform a task efficiently, since he would be next to him showing his process, perhaps his frustration; they would also be obliged to exercise the sociability given the context in which the activities are presented and learn to control their dominant character to confront other people with the same characteristics and have to negotiate with them. According to Johnson et al. (1999), the «positive interdependence creates a commitment to the success of others, as well as their own». 
Table 1
Model of cooperative learning of Johnson et al. versus features that this model would support eventual aggressors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential elements of cooperative learning (model of Johnson, Johnson, &amp; Holubec)</th>
<th>Characteristics of offenders that would be favored by cooperative learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive interdependence</td>
<td>- Low empathy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Low sociability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Dominance</td>
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<td>Individual responsibility</td>
<td>- Impulsivity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Popularity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulating interaction</td>
<td>- Low school performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Low level of anxiety and insecurity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal and team techniques</td>
<td>- Perception of little support by teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Hostile behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group assessment</td>
<td>- Little cooperation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Aggressive behaviors</td>
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A second element is individual responsibility, which would eventually transcend to the group. From here offenders or potential offenders who had traits of impulsiveness and were popular might be favored, since this element seeks to empower every Member of the group through the support of others. The offender or potential aggressor could use his popularity positively channeling it through the support and aid to any boy or girl less skilled and less popular than he. Also he could learn to control his/her impulsiveness as some single goals can be achieved through certain sequences, so some stages must be met first before moving on to the next.

A third aspect would correspond to the stimulating interaction; we refer here to the contact from person to person, which requires one to engage with others. These aspects of the cooperative learning may be beneficial for those offenders or potential offenders that present low school performance, as one of the tasks of this stage is to assist and encourage the progressive achievements of the members of the team, therefore, if the offender or any aggressor feels helped, supported and stimulated, he will create personal ties which in the long run could avoid or minimize aggressive actions. We also appreciate that some researchers suggest that a low level of anxiety and insecurity has been found among the features of the aggressors, we believe these features, coupled with a good level of popularity will offer them the possibility of quickly become leaders, this leadership channeled in a positive sense could also move them from the path of aggression, since they would be in the position of having to promote peer learning and teach them what they know.

The fourth aspect pointed out by the authors mainly points to the teacher, who should teach his students individual and group techniques to help them in working together, within these techniques conflict management, inherent in any human group is highlighted. We believe that this stage raises a greater implication between teacher and students, therefore, if the first efficiently performs its function, it could positively influence on at least two aspects that characterize aggressors, firstly, to break their perception of lack of support from teachers and secondly, the presence of hostile behaviors. So, «teachers will have to teach the practices of teamwork with the same seriousness and precision as it teaches them the school subjects» (Johnson et al., 1999). From this element of cooperative learning the master would have the opportunity and the duty to make their students feel his support and help them to positively channel the negative behaviors.
The fifth and final element of the cooperative learning corresponds to the evaluation group. From here we want to highlight two common characteristics in offenders: the aggressive behaviors and little cooperation. Faced with this, the model of Johnson et al. (1999) points out that «groups must determine which actions of its members are positive or negative, and make decisions about which behaviors keep or modify». It doesn’t seem simple, however, we know that it is possible to modify negative behavior, especially at this stage, which corresponds to the last model, that which occurs when participants already have sufficient trust between them and they have strengthened as a group, therefore, if the members of the team are capable of reflecting, in a sensitive and empathic way, the aforementioned aspects, of little cooperation and aggressive behaviors of some of its members, this could positively become an awareness check and ultimately a change.

We highlight the benefits of the model of cooperative learning presented by Johnson et al. (1999, 2000) on the grounds that this represents a highly positive mode for the prevention of bullying in schools. All this is endorsed by the results obtained in different investigations.

«We know that cooperation, compared with competitive and individualistic methods leads to the following results:

1. Greater efforts to achieve a good performance: This includes high performance and greater productivity by all students (high, medium or low performance), more possibility of long-term retention, intrinsic motivation, motivation to achieve high performance, more time spent on tasks, a higher level of reasoning and critical thinking.

2. More positive relationships among students: This includes an increase in team spirit, solidarity and committed relationships, personal and school support, valuing diversity and cohesion.

3. Higher mental health: This includes a general psychological adjustment, strengthening of self, social development, integration, self-esteem, sense of identity and ability to face adversity and tensions» (Johnson et al., 1999).

By way of discussion

To contextualize better the problem of bullying, we’ll proceed to analyze it from the gaze of three entities closely linked to the school system: students, teachers and the school.

From the students:

Cerezo (2006), States that: «evaluation of bullying behavior should cover both protagonists, aggressors or bully actor and the receiver of the same or victim». This approach clearly exemplifies the position from which common works are the subject of bullying, however, from the group that we can see how in these situations many times is the viewers neutrality diluted, since, «although they do not participate actively they support authors, who will be led by the ambition or the audience» (Sullivan, Cleary & Sullivan, 2005).

On the other hand, we know that multiple investigations raise the importance of interaction inside the classroom; however, various figures indicate that a high percentage of the bullying takes place inside them. We cannot forget that after crossing the threshold of the door students remain «captive» in school, which come with a multitude of experiences; nor can we deny various external influences which in a way or another sneak into the classrooms, however, we believe, that inevitably the school has to take care of this.

For Benitez and Justicia (2006), there is no doubt that «bullying is a problem in the educational centers whose consequences affect all stakeholders, and indirectly to the rest of the educational community that has to live with the effects of the same». This postulate confirms the problem that summons us, affects each and every one of the children and young people attending schools in which some kind of bullying occurs, be they victims, perpetrators or witnesses.

From the teachers

We believe that teachers are key players in the plot of the bullying, since they are the responsible adults of the children and young people who are abused in schools on a daily basis, however this establishment seems to be overwhelmed with the topic. Apparently, teachers get complicated when it comes to having to speak with offenders and their parents, as well as the responsibility that they feel that it falls on them to stop these children from mistreating.
A study that gathers the perceptions of active teachers about bullying says that «the majority of teachers reports over his lack of preparation to confront aggressive students» (Fernandez, Garcia & Benitez, 2006). According to the appreciated in this research the teachers are overwhelmed by this phenomenon, expressing themselves unable to cope with it. We so see that «active faculty members highlight the need to receive specific training to prevent and intervene in situations of violence among equals and they indicate a lack of preparation in the initial training received at the University» (Fernandez et al., 2006).

These authors suggest the need to improve the self-efficacy and empathy of teachers, inasmuch as there is research indicating that the greater these capabilities, greater is the likelihood that teachers intervene on the issue. «Therefore it is important to take into account the demands of training that teachers themselves make and start from here, to give them a better knowledge of the phenomenon so they can eradicate it and above all prevent it» (Fernandez et al., 2006).

We believe that teachers should be trained in methodologies of cooperative learning, not only in a theoretical way, but by presenting them with the benefits of the model in real situations, as well as give them the tools so they can take it to practice, since the effective interaction is educable and undoubtedly one of the variables that without being explicitly described in the curriculum corresponds to the teachers and the school to take.

From school

We will begin this section with the premise that school is an inevitable place, constituting the space where thousands of mothers and fathers confidently leave every day their children in the hope that they acquire knowledge that will help them become increasingly better. We believe that this knowledge cannot be limited only to General aspects of the curriculum; the school has to teach also the art of living.

One of the main aspects of the social function of school, referred to in article 29 of the Convention on the rights of the child, establishes that education must be designed to «prepare the child for a responsible life in a free society, in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship among peoples» (United Nations 1989).

From our point of view and because of the high percentage of students who appear to have suffered some kind of abuse in school, we believe that it would not be in compliance with this fundamental premise. This could be explained among other things by the fact that «many of the changes occurring in society don’t go through the walls of the school. They top at its doors» (Ramirez & Justicia, 2006).

There is no doubt that we live in a world that is changing rapidly, to not assume the dizziness of these changes and the fact that the school must adapt to changing also, would mean to become an accomplice to the dynamics of abuse to the students. This is confirmed by Benitez and Justicia (2006), who proposed the existence of: «internal factors of the school institution favoring the development of violence, since the own school establishment presupposes a format and a few principles of basic socialization. In addition, we must consider that the school is based on a hierarchy and internal organization which itself is home to strife and conflict».

We understand that, like any place that a wide variety of human beings interact with multiple complexities, the school has become a place where good coexistence is increasingly difficult, among other things, because it seems to be «an atmosphere of insecurity and under development of cooperative learning» (Contreras & Ramirez, 2009).

As we can see, there are multiple arguments that point that the school would be failing that which has been designated as one of its most important social functions, directly related to the degree of violence that is manifested in its dependencies.

On the other hand, Olweus poses as causes of maltreatment in schools «certain forms of education that does not provide sufficient affection to children, they do not receive enough attention and don’t internalize clear guidelines of behavior» (Gutierrez, 2005).

Faced with this, we propose the methodology of cooperative learning as a real possibility to improve the organizational climate of schools and thereby reduce or eliminate bullying.
Thus, school should aim to have in their classrooms children able to develop their full potential, without fear of being attacked verbally, physically or psychologically by their peers. Cooperative learning, however, is not a magic recipe and is not enough to put children to work together or «promote interaction between them to get, immediately, a few favorable effects on development, socialization and learning. What matters is not the amount of interaction but the quality of the same» (León, 2006).

Conclusions

We are confident in having presented a different view of the phenomenon of bullying, in which the «problem» would not only be of an individual or group in particular, but that this would be and should be assumed by the school as a whole.

We understand, as we have already mentioned in the discussion, that the school as an institution may feel that it is being overloaded with work and obligations that are not her own, and constitute historically assigned functions to the family as a first socializing entity. However, from here we are confronted once again with the old dilemma: what is first, the chicken or the egg?, regardless of who corresponds to educate children in the art of good living, the school should assume their share of responsibility, because many of these boys and girls don’t have in their families (for various reasons) the conditions to acquire this skill.

We appreciate too, based on several studies, that it is known that the teachers do not feel comfortable and/or trained to deal with situations of abuse, citing lack of preparation from the universities. In this regard, it seems of great importance to include in the curriculum of the teaching career courses or theoretical/practical courses that aim to give future teachers the tools than their peers in Active considered indispensable for the sake of better handling of situations of abuse among school children.

Considering the above, we believe that school can’t continue to «cover the Sun with a finger» in the subject of bullying, assigning responsibilities to subjects or their families, without taking care of the problem as a whole. From this perspective the school could be guilty of imbuing the prevailing individualistic spirit, trying to be responsible only for what it considers itself, without understanding that the education of children is the result of one much larger process, which implies certain responsibilities which at times can seem ungrateful. In this regard, we believe that the school mistreats, when it assumes as an institution that bullying can also be the result (among other things) of bad practices or at least not adequate practices for the elimination of the problem. If this were so, the school mistreats by default.

We believe that the adoption of models such as cooperative learning, or other non-traditional (based on individualism and competition), where students are able to «see» and «meet» their peers, would greatly help the solution of the problem.

We believe that, without a doubt, cooperative learning is a model to follow, we are confident in the course of this reflection to have presented some of its multiple benefits, especially those aspects that can be useful in the prevention of bullying. We know that it is not the only model, maybe not the best, however, undoubtedly is a method that works with and for each other and in which you learn to know, respect and appreciate others. In this context, even if despite everything a bully appears, the conditions are given so that, in the event of abuse, other children protect the victim and discourage the aggressor.

References


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