


Chapter 49

Resolving Conflicts and Preventing Violence in Italian Schools

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ABSTRACT

Phenomena of conflicts among students are on the rise everywhere in the world. According to a new report from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), half of the world's teenagers experience peer violence and bullying in and around the school. School violence affects learning and has a negative effect on students, schools, and the broader community. The effects on students are both psychological and physical and often lead to isolation, depression, and in some cases to suicide. This chapter provides an overview of an alternative methodology approach to the teaching of dialogue and non-violent communication in schools. Furthermore, it examines a training model that uses mediation and Aikido to teach communication, conflict management, and conflict resolution to students and teachers. The training, called School of Mediation-Mediation for School (SMS), has been developed in Italy by a group of lawyers, mediators, and researchers. To date, the project has involved more than 600 students and 250 teachers with important results.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7464-8.ch049

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Children Fund (UNCICEF) END Violence Youth Manifesto was presented to ministers at the Education World Forum in January 2019. The manifesto was crafted by more than a hundred students from all around the world and represents the voices of millions of young students who face violence at school every day. In the manifesto, students call for ending violence in schools and affirms that teachers, society, media, government institutions “bear a responsibility to promote, practice, teach and ensure that schools are a safe and inclusive space for everyone.” (ENDViolence, 2019) The Manifesto comes after the UNICEF release of a global report on peer-to-peer violence in schools. The 2018 report is part of a global campaign to end violence in school and reveals that half of the students aged 13 to 15 worldwide – around 150 million – report having experienced peer-to-peer violence in and around the school. According to the report, slightly more than 1 in 3 students aged 13-15 experience bullying, and roughly the same proportion are involved in physical fights. Both boys and girls are equally affected by bullying but while girls are more likely to become victims of psychological forms of bullying, boys are more at risk of physical violence and threats. The report notes that violence involving weapons continues to claim lives in schools and many students are harassed or humiliated through cyberbullying (2018). Italy like other countries in Europe is not immune to such phenomena. Italian schools are witnessing frequent interpersonal conflicts and crises among students of all ages that are often poorly managed. Such interpersonal conflicts could lead to difficult and critical situations, such as social isolation, acts of violence, and premature school dropouts.

According to the Italian Ministry of Education’s 2015 guidelines, the goal of the Ministry is to fight violence in school settings. The Ministry of Education (2015) noted that violent episodes in schools:

Are increasingly configured as an expression of lack of tolerance and non-acceptance of those who share a different ethnicity, religion, mental and physical attitudes, gender identity, sexual orientation, and familiar contexts. Victims of bullying are increasingly often teenagers on which the burden stereotypes stem from discriminatory prejudices. It’s in misinformation and prejudice that lurk phenomena of juvenile deviance may turn into acts of generic violence or more structured actions of bullying. (p. 3)

Although attention has been given to the problem, the overall efforts to deal with school violence are too often inadequate or insufficient. Some of the weaknesses of the implementation of many projects are the diversity between the same projects, the lack of sharing of a common thread, and the lack or absence of communication between institutional and private subjects, all along with inefficient use of the available resources. In recent years, the Italian legislator has taken actions in response to the numerous cases of suicide attempts and suicide of students which occurred in Italy as a result of bullying and cyberbullying.

In May 2017, the Italian parliament passed a long-awaited law intended to tackle online bullying of children. The new law (L.n. 71/2017) containing “Provisions for the protection of minors and the prevention and contrast of the phenomenon of cyberbullying,” provides for the first time in Italy a legal definition of cyberbullying. Section 1(2) of the law defines cyberbullying “as any form of pressure, aggression, harassment, defamation, identity theft, manipulation, illicit data processing of personal data [...] harming the minor.” The law makes it illegal to offend or post defamatory messages against a minor online, to threaten them or steal their identities. Victims or their parents now have the right to demand that websites hosting hurtful content have it removed within 48 hrs. Also, the legislation requires all schools to educate students to use the Internet responsibly and to have a member of staff responsible

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