CYBERBULLYING.
HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS PHENOMENON USING THE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PARADIGM

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Abstract: *Due to the negative impact cyberbullying has on adolescents' health, there is a great attention on preventing such situations in schools. The action research approach carried out in one school will be illustrated, focusing on the methodology adopted. The meetings organized in school aimed at creating a restorative attitude among students, by using dialogue and negotiation of conflicts, recognizing the different roles of all actors involved and their different motivations, with the possibility to find common solutions and better tools to face possible episodes of cyberbullying,*

Key words: *cyberbullying, restorative justice, school, school education, action research.*

1. Introduction

The widespread use of the internet and social networks by children and adolescents has increased the risk of cyberbullying everywhere in the world including in Italy (Istat, 2019). Cyberbullying is a serious risk factor for adolescents' physical and mental health (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Raskauskas et al., 2015), even becoming more threatening than bullying (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Fredstrom et al., 2011).

Many cyberbullying-related projects are carried out throughout schools in Italy, to raise the awareness of creating tools to prevent the risk. The action research project we propose has the specific goal to create a space in which the boys and girls involved can discuss and reflect together on the needs and motivations that are at the origin of this type of behaviour while keeping in mind the different roles they may play in the cyberbullying episode.

We found out that the restorative justice paradigm offers a solid framework for this project and allows not only to take into consideration all the roles that are played in cyberbullying, but moreover to think about how to repair and restore relationships

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among those involved.

"A day at school" is the title of this shared experience that can be replicated in other contexts. As part of the action research project, we collected and examined the data that will be presented in this article. We will also comment on the limitations and the strengths of the proposed approach.

2. Cyberbullying and Youth

Cyberbullying is defined as an aggressive behaviour implemented via electronic devices in an intentional and continuous manner, with the awareness of the harm caused to the victim (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). The prevalence of cyberbullying and its impact on health make educational and prevention actions necessary. In this area, schools play a fundamental role, so much so that the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit itself recommends following the guidelines prepared for this objective (Sorrentino et al., 2018).

Cyberbullying can be perpetrated by boys and girls being hidden in their own real identity, sometimes without any possibility for the person who suffered the traumatic incident, to know not only the motives, but even the offender.

3. The restorative Justice

Restorative justice brings those harmed by crime or conflict and those responsible for the harm into communication, enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward. Restorative justice aims at the active participation of all the parties involved: the subject who commits it, the one who suffers it, and the communities to which these subjects belong. The aim of restorative justice is to promote the reparation of the damage, the reconciliation between the parties and the restarting of the collective sense of security that the crime has compromised (Caraceni, 2024; Mannozzi & Mancini, 2022; Nicolini 2024; Patrizi 2019).

Fig. 1. *How restorative justice works* (What is Restorative Justice? – RJ Pilot)

Restorative practice can be used anywhere to prevent conflict, build relationships and repair harm by enabling people to communicate effectively and positively. Restorative practice (Figure 1) is increasingly being used in schools, children's services, workplaces, hospitals, communities and the criminal justice system (https://restorativejustice.org.uk).

Restorative justice requires a complex and comprehensive vision, which by its very nature precludes the possibility of simple solutions, of finding quick connections between causes and effects. Understanding an offence such as cyberbullying requires attention to the various factors that may have contributed to the situation. Thinking in the framework of restorative justice requires the commitment to look for the pulse of the butterfly's wings from which the storm on the other side of the world originates (von Bertalanffy, 1950).

4. The Action Research: "A day at school"

The Istituto Tecnico Economico "Einstein Nebbia" was involved in the action research project. The secondary school comprises two courses: "Administration, Finance and Marketing" and "Tourism". Ten classes in the second semester of the first year of study were part of the project in the academic year 2023-2024. Students between 14 and 16 years-old were divided into 3 groups of about 50 participants meeting on 3 different days. Their teachers were also involved.

Based on the assumption that cyberbullying is a complex process consisting of actions, reactions and interactions between all the actors involved, we built an activity to encourage students in *"a day at school"* project reflect on cyberbullying. The students were tasked with working in small groups, keeping the case story in mind, and engaging in a discussion that focused on those involved: the perpetrator of the cyberbullying, the victim of the cyberbullying actions, and the communities in which they reside, such as their families and schools. The activity was designed to involve the exploration of at least two roles, one at the commencement and one in the subsequent phase of the exercise. It was hypothesised that the experience of shifting perspectives on the facts, engaging in discussion with peers (Nicolini, 2011), and receiving expert guidance in articulating personal opinions, could positively influence their evaluative attitudes.

4.1. Method

The action research project was developed along with 3 school days, involving all the first classes of the Istituto Tecnico Economico "Einstein Nebbia".

4.1.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 157 students (*boys* = 69; *girls* = 88) participated in the activity, with 3 or 4 classes per day. In each session, there were about 50 students in the same room with their teachers.

Starting with a presentation of the team and the aim of the activity, the programme for the morning was proposed as follows:

- The cyberbullying case story to be discussed was distributed to participants. *A girl in the first year of secondary school, in love with a slightly older boy, shared a picture of herself showing her breasts. The boy started asking her for more pictures and threatened to publish the one he had. The girl was not too impressed by the threat until the police knocked on her door and told her that her picture was circulating online. The other students began to avoid her because of her behaviour, and the girl fell into depression and had to be hospitalised to cure her mental illness.*
- Then, students were asked to participate to the first data collection (T1), to provide their current evaluations on the facts.
- Following, participants were divided in 3 or 4 groups, and asked to focus on the person who acted as a cyberbully, the person who was affected by the cyberbullying actions, or the communities in which they live, such as the families and the schools.
- After that, all students answered again the same questionnaire used in the initial data collection (T2).
- Once completed the questionnaire, participants returned to their groups and discussed the case adopting a different role and thus possibly changing the point of view through which they may have reflected on the episode.
- Then, they filled out the same questionnaire for the third time (T3).

In the first data collection (T1), 158 students completed the task, 66 boys and 84 girls, average age of 15.50 years. In the second data collection (T2), 105 students, completed the task, 61 boys and 42 girls, average age of 15.31 years. This means that the entire male sample completed the first and second tasks, whereas only half of the girls did so. At the end (T3), 62 questionnaires were collected, 30 boys and 32 girls, average age of 15.26 years. In this case, half of the male sample responded, while 10 of the girls skipped the task. The average age slightly decreases from T1 to T3, showing that the younger students were probably more involved in the activity.

4.1.2. Measures

To assess the participants' evaluative attitudes on the cyberbullying episode, an ad-hoc questionnaire was created, based on the tripartite model of restorative justice

(Chapman, 2012). The questionnaire was composed by 4 sections. In the first section demographic data were collected; in the subsequent sections students were asked to express their opinion about the boy who acted as a cyberbully, the girl who was affected by the cyberbullying, their families, their schools, also in terms of needs and motivations. A six-point Likert scale wad proposed to measure the level of agreement or disagreement to statements provided. The statements were built to correspond half to a punitive and half to restorative evaluation.

4.2. Results

The purpose of this paper being to highlight the methodology adopted, to this end descriptive analysis results will be presented.

As a reminder, in the first data collection (T1), 157 students completed the task, 65 boys and 84 girls, with an average age of 15.50 years. In the second data collection (T2), 105 students completed the task, 61 boys and 42 girls, with an average age of 15.31 years. This means that the entire male sample completed the first and second tasks, whereas only half of the girls did so. At the end (T3) 62 questionnaires were collected, 30 boys and 32 girls, with an average age of 15.26. In this case, half of the male sample responded, while 10 of the girls skipped the task. The average age decreases from T1 to T3, showing that the younger ones were probably more involved in the activity.

As the figure 2 shows, the data collection at T2 revealed a slight increase of restorative attitude in comparison with the starting point. Even though not statistically significant, the result should be considered from an educational point of view. This result shows that, after a discussion in small groups, the approach to simply punish the different actors involved in a cyberbullying incident, both the person who offends as well as the person who is offended, had a slight change of perspective.
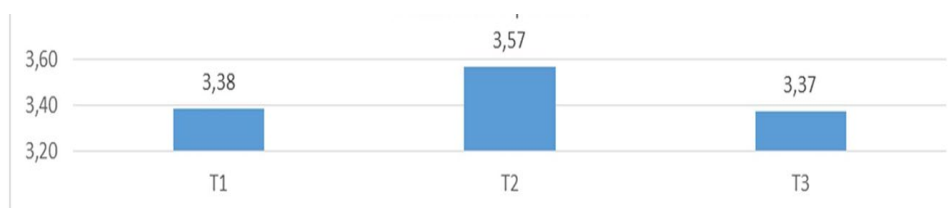

Fig. 2. *Restorative attitude at T1, T2 and T3*

The figure 3 displays that the punitive attitude (blue colour) compared to the restorative attitude (orange colour) towards the cyberbully was higher from the beginning and remained stable even at T2 and T3. However, this is a quite predictable result, as adopting a restorative attitude towards the offender is the most difficult change to make, given that it is culturally accepted that mistakes should be punished and the offender should be rejected.
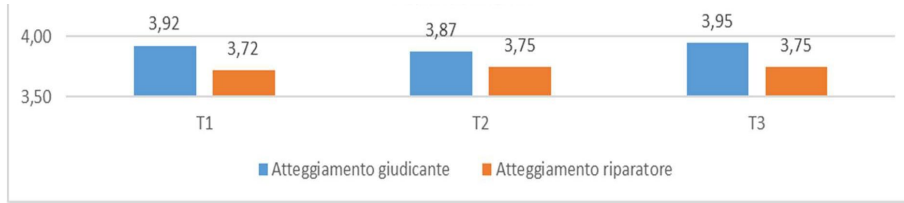
Fig. 3. *Punitive vs restorative attitude towards the person who acts as a cyberbully*

The figure 4 indicates that a restorative attitude (orange colour) was present from T1 towards the person who suffered the damage and it was stable in the three data collection. The punitive attitude (blue colour) slightly decreases at T3.
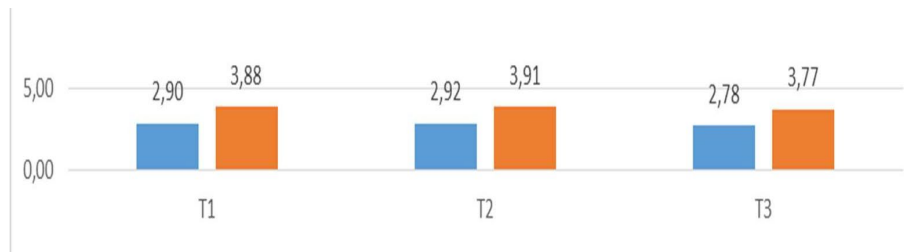

Fig. 4. *Punitive vs restorative attitude towards the person who suffered the damage*

The figure 5 suggests that the punitive attitude (blue colour) had a slight decrease from T1 to T3, in favour of the restorative approach (orange colour).
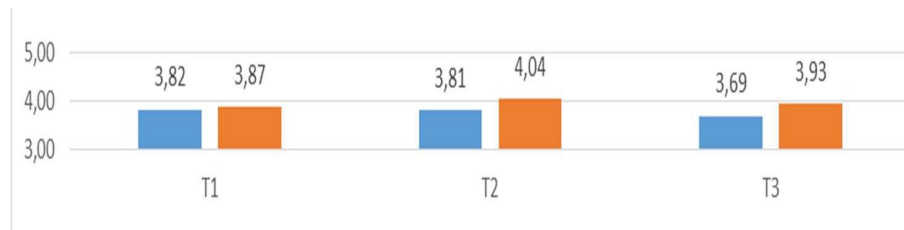

Fig. 5. *Punitive vs restorative attitude towards the community*

Finally, figure 6 illustrates three results that evaluate participants' satisfaction with *a day at school* experience. Using a 10 points scale, participants declared to be more than sufficiently satisfied (6.25/10) about the experience and considered the activity useful (7.00/10). Using a 6 points scale, participants declared that they would suggest their peers take part in a similar activity (4.38/6). The latter should be considered a good result, because it means that the activity was so useful to students that they may want to involve other peers.
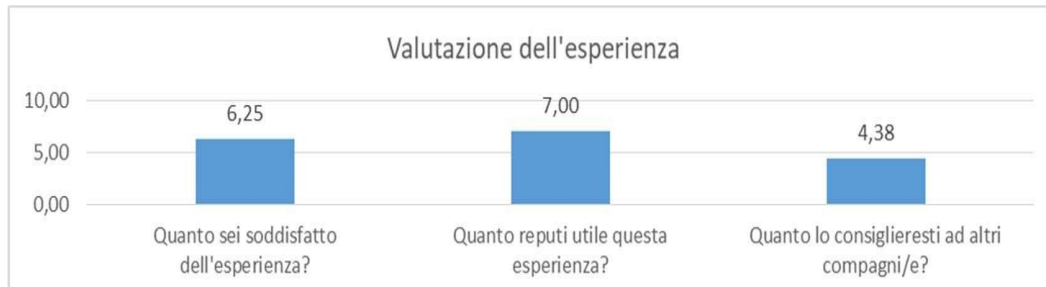
Fig. 6. *Participants' satisfaction*

4.3. Limitations and strengths of the action research

"A day at school" action research study has some limitations. The first was the context in which the activity was conducted. The room in which all the students were grouped was inadequate due to the large number of students together in the same room. For short periods of time, the atmosphere became noisy, as the students were asked to discuss the episode. The more they were involved and wanted to make their positions clear, the most they started to shout. In addition, even if some of the teachers attending the activity participated in its design and collaborated along with the activity, not all of them were involved, due to various factors, like teachers' continuous turn over, changes of schools or timetables.

The gradual loss of respondents to the questionnaires represents probably the main limitation, even though in some cases it was caused by external factors. While all students responded to the first questionnaire, for the second and third data collection there was a decrease in participation due to various external factors such as students having to take part in other activities in the school or some students leaving the school before the end of the activity due to family commitments. However, the decrease between the data collection at T2 and T3 may also be due to tiredness, boredom or lack of interest in the activity.

The study showed also some strengths. In fact, the students who participated until the end of the activity seemed to be engaged and motivated. The progressive development of a restorative perspective towards the girl who suffered the damage has to be considered a great result, because at the beginning also the girl who suffered the offence was considered responsible and negative comments on her were expressed, like being a superficial and careless person. Also, the restorative attention to the involved community increased, both in the groups that adopted the point of view of the school and those that discussed the role of the family. In this case, the family was always the girl's one, probably because it was easier to empathize.

The participants' satisfaction was high, and some of the students freely expressed

positive comments to the open question that invited them to underline what they liked more. This is a positive sign, because to answer this part of the questionnaire was not mandatory: some students emphasized the collaboration among peers and with the experts, and the opportunity to freely speak and explain their ideas and make comments; others pointed out the themes as interesting and useful in their daily lives; some underlined the opportunity to express freely the opinion; some wrote that they liked the modality adopted to conduct the activity. Twenty-six students out of 62 left a comment to the final questionnaire, showing they were deeply involved in the activity.

5. Conclusions

Adopting a restorative perspective requires complex cognitive, social and emotional skills that should be developed in students. The experience presented shows that change is possible, even in a short period of time. The students changed from a total punitive attitude towards all the actors involved in cyberbullying to a more thoughtful view. An important result from the activity is that the change, while maintaining a punitive perspective towards the person who acted as a cyberbully, moves toward the identification with the victim and a form of empathy with her, her family and school.

We were aware that *"A day at school"* project could have been challenging because of the young age of the students and the difficulty of controlling some context factors, such as the turnover of teachers, the rigid timetable of any school, the short time to dedicate to the activity. Building on the results, a new version of *"A day at school"* has been developed, taking into account also the suggestions and comments of the participants from the Istituto Tecnico Einstei Nebbia, as well as the results of the questionnaires.

In subsequent editions, the data collection will only take place at the beginning and at the end of the activity to make the task easier for the students. In order to maintain students' motivation and adopt a hands-on approach, they are also asked to produce a final outcome of the discussion in small groups, such as a video message or a letter addressed to one or more actors of the cyberbullying incident. Data analysis is ongoing and some improvements in the results are visible.

The action research presented can be seen as a pilot experience and the results as a first step to be considered towards a fully restorative mentality, in collaboration with the school.

Acknowledgements

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