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## Conflict management among secondary school students

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### Abstract

The present research investigates the role of the perception of the environment as a determining factor in choosing a conflict management technique. The study was conducted on a sample of 485 secondary school students involved in conflict management training. The proposed educational intervention intended to promote an increased awareness on the cognitive, emotional and social dynamics that characterize the conflict and allow a better understanding of the environment. The intervention facilitated a positive reading of the episodes of conflict, providing advanced instruments for their resolution and stronger motivation to apply them. In fact, the results of the research show that the students with the most positive perception of their schoolmates are also those more willing to adopt constructive conflict management strategies.

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*Keywords:* Students; conflict representation; conflict resolution; bullying; bystanders; mediation.

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### 1. Introduction

Intense conflicts, bullying and cyberbullying today, are widespread phenomena among children and teenagers, for which schools and other institutions are constantly taking and updating counteractions. This article is based on part of the data collected during a pilot project aimed at testing the potential of mediation in the management and reduction of conflicts within groups of adolescents in schools. The work stems from the reconstruction of a theoretical framework, including elements from research both on mediation and on bullying, with specific attention on the role of bystanders in the evolution of conflicts. The central part of the work is the result of an empirical research conducted during an educational intervention on this topic, that has given interesting results about the group dynamics connected to conflict and bullying.

Researches on bullying have been adopting different perspectives, from the investigation of the behaviour and the motivations of the single individuals involved (victims and aggressors) to the creation of models trying to extensively represent these phenomena and to support their interpretation. According to this latter point of view, “bullying [but we might say ‘conflict’] is an event that can be understood through the dynamics of groups with three or more components. This perspective suggests focusing not only on the bully or on the victim but on the inadequate mechanisms of the relationship, and it underlines the importance of an interactive culture” (Cuvelier, 2001). For instance, several studies in social psychology (Schuster 1996, Mummendy and Otten 1998) have shown that

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inadequate conflict resolution' skills (Perry, Perry and Kennedy 1992), or a poor level of management of in-group conflicts (Novara and Regulus, 2007) may lead to their degeneration in violence and bullying.

Considering bullying as a group phenomenon (Smith et al., 1993), it has been observed that bullies act in order to gain higher status among peers (Salmivalli et al., 1996b, Pellegrini, Bartini and Brooks 1999) and their behaviour can be reinforced by other group-members. Bystanders may try to support the victims, adopt positive attitudes towards the deviant behaviour (Rigby, 1996), or simply do nothing (Salmivalli et al 1996). Since the spectators usually outnumber the participants involved in a conflict, their attitude can prove essential in determining the evolution of any conflict. It is important to stress that remaining passive does not mean remaining neutral: on the contrary, this attitude actually reinforces aggression, since it shows the bully that nothing will thwart his activity, and he is let free to pursue it. In fact, it has been observed that bullying is more likely to continue if peer bystanders are present (O'Connell et al., 1999). In the analysis proposed by Iannacone, incidents of bullying are described along two main dimensions: one is defined by a continuum between democracy and despotism, and the other is based on the continuum between being empowered (power) and "not knowing how to act" (impotence). When a group accepts the degeneration of conflicts into acts of verbal or physical violence and bullying, the aspects of despotism and impotence become dominant. In fact, according to some studies, aggression and victimization are characteristics which are common in groups with low quality of friendship or poor quality of dyadic relationship among its members (Garandau and Cillessen 2005, Owen et al 2001). Active participation by members of the group seeking to restore a climate of "participatory democracy" brings benefit for all the members, bullies included (Iannacone 2005).

As already introduced, the relevance of peer attitude in determining the spread of aggressive and bullying behaviour has recently become the focus of different researches. It's been observed that social aggression, more than physical aggression "seems to be mostly shaped by a child's environment. Children who have a socially aggressive peer group are likely to be socially aggressive themselves" (Brendgen 2008). At the same time, "witnessing a fellow student being harassed in the absence of personal experiences of victimization can increase student's feelings of anxiety and school dislike" (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). This is another example of how "bullying and victimization have system-wide negative consequences." Moreover, as "the natural tendency of a social group is to perpetuate itself", interventions can be successful only when the change involves the whole group, modifying the dynamics at the roots of the aggressive climate. (Cillessen 2008).

Projects aiming to motivate bystanders to take action when witnessing aggressive behaviour among their peers need to take into consideration that "something prevents children from defending their bullied peers even if they think that it would be the right thing to do and have intentions of doing so" (Salmivalli 2009). The reasons for this lack of action go from the fear of becoming the next target to the idea that someone else will do it (bystander effect) or that such behaviour is considered acceptable by fellow students (pluralistic ignorance).

On the other hand, it has been observed that believing that friends and parents would expect one to do something when witnessing aggressive behaviour among peers is a predictor of the expressed intention to intervene (Rigby, Johnson 2006).

This results underline the importance of letting students talk about such issues, becoming aware of what others really think about bullying, and focusing on both peer relationships and emotional characteristics (Caravita, Di Blasio, Salmivalli 2009) when planning interventions which aim to promote positive conflict management among students.

Programs dealing with conflict and bullying among children, which focus not only on those who are directly involved but on the whole school context, can achieve better and longer lasting results (Baldry and Farrington 2007) because they create an environment that is capable of absorbing the conflict and supporting its constructive management by the pupils.

There are several strategies that are intended to enable effective cooperation among youth, which promote the ability to handle conflict in an autonomous and positive way, such as the circle of time (i.e. group discussions of different issues between teachers and pupils, enhancing mutual trust and active listening), the friend-operator (i.e. the activation within the class of a small group of comrades with functions of emotional or practical support of their peers) and peer education (ie. the sharing of information, attitudes or behaviours among peers) (Menesini, 2003).

Among these methods, school mediation (Ardon and Baldry, 2003; Benson and Benson, 1993, Johnson and Johnson, 1994; Cohen, 1995, Cowie and Sharp, 1996) is based on the idea of peer counselling: students learn techniques of active listening and facilitation of communication in order to help their peers to talk about conflicts and to find their own solutions for the management of conflicts: "Peer mediation is used as a preventive method to solve smaller conflicts before they turn to larger ones. The idea is to create a solution-oriented atmosphere where

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