

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PREVENTING AND MITIGATING BULLYING BEHAVIORS

Tudorița GRĂDINARIU

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași

tudorita.gradinariu@uaic.ro

Georgeta DIAC

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași

getad@uaic.ro

Abstract

The increase in the frequency of bullying behaviors in schools is a constant concern for education officials, politicians and the civil society. In this context, the current legislation forces educational institutions to pay attention to this phenomenon and to make efforts to prevent and limit its psychological and academic consequences. Studies show that bullying impacts the balanced socio-emotional functioning of all the actors involved (bullies, victims and bystanders) with an increased risk for the development of emotional disorders such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, alcohol and drugs consumption and suicidal ideation. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role that learning and practicing social-emotional skills can have in preventing and intervening in the bullying. In this respect, we made a presentation of the degree of national and international urgency presented by bullying, then, based upon studies; we highlighted the importance of the emotional intelligence (EI) on a personal and interpersonal level, and in order to finally point out the role that this competence can play in the bullying situation.

Keywords: *legislation, bullying, emotional intelligence, socio-emotional learning*

Legislation in the field of bullying

Bullying takes its toll in schools around the world and it raises concern internationally. According to *the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO, 2019) children and adolescents experience bullying with a frequency between 10% and 65%.

At the European level, there is a 25% rate of aggression among pupils, which indicates that the lowest rate is recorded within communities compared to the other continents.

In *the European Strategy to Prevent and Tackle School Bullying* (2010) it was stated that at that time many European countries did not have a common national protocol for the prevention of bullying. The strategy records the intention of professionals of several states to find solutions to fight the aggression among pupils, an aspect that led to the finding that in the European Union countries there is no state policy aimed at preventing this phenomenon. The informal meeting of education ministers from the Community states in Godollo, Hungary, on March 29, 2011 (European Commission, 2010), resulted in a report that was analyzed within less than a month after its drafting by the Council for European Affairs (CEA).

Thus, the CEA outlined the tasks for the implementation of the measures set out in the report and ordered that, if necessary, the legislative support for the concrete achievement and application of the recommendations issued at the meeting of the ministers of education should also be created.

In Romania, a legislative support was drawn-up and the political leaders in education issued *the Order no. 5115 of December 15, 2014 regarding the approval of the Regulation on the organization and operation of pre-university education units*, which outlines two general intervention procedures at the level of education units in cases of violence of various severity and they proposed a nomenclature (inventory) of acts of violence in school in order for this to be an accessible tool. Two years later, the Save the Children Organization from Romania presented the results of the national sociological study *Bullying among children* (Grădinaru, Stănculeanu & Manole, 2016) in which it exposed the state of affairs in our schools.

Thus, regarding the notoriety of the term *bullying*, it is found that 52% of the children surveyed stated that they did not know the term and have not even heard of it. Interestingly, among the children who stated that they knew what this term meant, 35% stated that they found out from the Internet, 24% from English class, and 13% from leadership class. Likewise, the picture of the bullying phenomena in Romanian schools illustrates that 39% of children declare that they were slightly injured at school, and 16% that they were repeatedly beaten at school.

These data pushed political decision-makers to develop a legislative framework that would update the previous provisions in a more specific way. Thus, in 2019, the national education law was revised and the main amendment concerned the bullying behavior. Consequently, the Romanian Parliament promulgated *the Law 221 of November 18, 2019 for the amendment and completion of the National Education Law no. 1/2011* prohibiting the

bullying, following that within 90 days from the entry into force of this law, the Ministry of Education and Research was to develop the methodological rules for applying the new provisions regarding the bullying.

Therefore, they were made and established by Order no. 4.343/2020 of May 27, 2020 approving *the Methodological Norms for the application of the provisions of Art. No. 7 paragraph (1¹), Art. No. 56¹ and point 6¹ of the Annex to the National Education Law no. 1/2011, regarding the psychological violence – the bullying*. Thus, the need to implement some school programs and projects with the aim of “*increasing the cohesion of the student group and the child-adult community, raising awareness of the consequences of psychological violence-bullying, eliminating the causes/risks/vulnerabilities that could determine the occurrence of such behaviors*” (art. 2, letter a, Annex no. 1 to the methodological norms). A multidisciplinary and inter-institutional analysis and intervention framework was thus created that required the collaboration of specialists from clinical psychology, psychotherapy, educational psychology, forensic psychology, sociology, criminology, medicine in the best interest of the child.

The present study therefore is a viewpoint based upon the harmonization of the legislative response in the matter of school violence with the specialized literature in the field of the socio-emotional learning. We believe that a descriptive reading of emotional intelligence from the research angle of bullying with an emphasis on the socio-emotional competence of pupils and teachers will highlight the fact that we are analyzing a group behavior that requires specific intra-relationship and inter-relationship.

The bullying - a psychosocial phenomenon

The way people react in different socio-cultural environments such as family, school, community, convey certain messages about accepted social practices and norms. As for bullying, there is a myth circulating in society that this type of behavior would prepare pupils for the tougher moments in their adult life. In reality, the bullying is a traumatic experience with serious consequences on the child's psycho-somatic development: social isolation, anxiety, depression, delinquent behavior, poor school results and the development of personality disorders in adulthood (Sesar, Barisic, Pandza & Dodaj, 2012).

In the international academic environment, *the bullying* is considered a group phenomenon with complex psychosocial and cultural determinations and effects (Salmivalli,

2010) characterized by three key aspects: *the intent to hurt*, *the repetitiveness* and *the power imbalance* (Newman, Horne & Bartolomucci, 2000). The roles that pupils can take on voluntarily or involuntarily are those of *bully*, *victim*, and *bystander* (Guillory, 2013). *The bullying* creates two profiles: an aggression profile and a victimization profile. The aggression profile is determined by pupils' construction of a violent way of relating dynamically to those they perceive as weak, with victims usually being the target of hostile attacks without any prior provocative behavior coming from the victim (Cerezo, 2001; Polo et al., 2015).

A predictor of bullying behaviors is difficulty initiating and maintaining relationships. Teenagers who have socio-emotional skills also have positive interpersonal relationships (Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, 2015), skills to improve the school climate and prevent negative behaviors such as cyberbullying. These students resolve conflicts constructively, ask for support when they feel it is necessary, and adopt responsible social behaviors. On the other hand, being a victim of bullying at a young age has maladaptive behavioral effects, which become a risk factor for victimization at later stages of development. Longitudinal studies show that victimization suffered in primary education can continue until secondary school and has serious consequences for students, more than half of the adolescents who are victims of bullying are victims of such behavior since primary school (Rodríguez-Álvarez, Yubero, Navarro & Larrañaga, 2021).

Lomas et al. (2012) found that the adolescents who have developed skills in the sphere of emotional intelligence (EI) are less likely to be bullied. Thus, the authors state that EI testing/assessment should be used to identify pupils with less developed EI skills, so that targeted and effective interventions can then be developed. In this respect, knowing the IE coefficient can help to optimize anti-bullying programs. It is recommended that the development of EI skills in pupils is accomplished through prevention programs that focus on the development of EI in perpetrators and victims (Hansen, Gardner, & Stough, 2007 apud Lomas et al, 2012). By virtue of the same goal, Muijs (2017) believes that school policies that address bullying in an inclusive and positive manner and that are “approved” by pupils, parents, researchers and teachers are the best tools for preventing bullying.

To capture the relationship between the emotional intelligence and the social skills in high school pupils, as well as how these two variables influence bullying, Trigueros et al. (2020) conducted a study involving 471 boys and 441 girls aged 14–16 years from several educational centers in a Spanish province. The results show that the emotional intelligence can help develop social skills in general and improve relationships with their peers. Also, it was

found that the emotional intelligence and the social skills predict optimal social functioning pupils.

The bullying and the emotional intelligence

In the view of the authors Salovey & Mayer (1990) the emotional intelligence (EI) is a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to understand one's own emotions and those of others, by distinguish them and by using them to direct thinking and behaviors. Daniel Goleman (2001) proposed a model that involved the separation of the IE into two different components; on the one hand, the components aimed at personal skills (for example, the self-awareness), and on the other hand, the social skills (for example, the empathy). In the table below you can see the elements related to each component and also the fact that each involves two types of dynamics: the recognition and the adjustment. Recognizing personal resources and those of others is the step towards training and developing personal (self-control, for example) and social (collaboration, for example) skills.

	Self (personal competence)	Other (social competence)
Recognition	Self-awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emotional self-awareness ▪ Accurate self-assessment ▪ Self-confidence 	Social awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Empathy ▪ Service orientation ▪ Organizational awareness
Regulation	Self-management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-control ▪ Trustworthiness ▪ Conscientiousness 	Relationship management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication ▪ Conflict management ▪ Teamwork and collaboration

Table no. 1. Goleman’s (2001) 2 by 2 model of emotional competencies, with examples of each of four types of competency (Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts, (2012, p.11)

Some authors believe that the emotional intelligence, the self-efficacy and the empathy, as intra-individual variables related to socio-emotional skills, have an important role in the bullying phenomenon. In the process of the social development of the individual, these elements are paramount and determine a better psychosocial functioning. Such skills have the role of maintaining social relationships and pro-social behavior (Petrides et al, 2007). By

“equipping” pupils with skills such as the self-awareness and the self-management, we offer them the necessary levers to recognize and regulate their own emotions. By learning to recognize the emotions of others, the child will process the emotion and react appropriately (Ragozzino & Utne-O'Brien, 2009 apud Johnson, 2014). Having these psychological means, the child can face the conflict calmly and rationally.

The pupils with a developed social conscience empathize with their peers and understand their differences. Some authors believe that if the by standing pupils empathize with the victim, there is an increased likelihood that they will intervene. The relationship skills help pupils make friends, resist pressure to engage in bullying, and seek support from adults. Friendships often help reduce victimization, and when pupils refuse to engage or encourage the bullying, the behavior stops because the bully does not receive the recognition for his or her actions (Ragozzino & Utne -O'Brien apud Johnson, 2014).

The emotion regulation is designated as one of the most important factors impacting the mental health that has not been considered in the case of bullying (Ebrahimi et al., 2017). People who have not developed emotion regulation skills are likely to exhibit bullying behaviors (Frick et al., 2003).

The social-emotional learning in the prevention of bullying

The social-emotional learning (SEL) involves “the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children to better cope with life's challenges and perform in both school and social settings” (Ragozzino & Utne O'Brien, 2009, p. 3). This is a way to optimize several socio-emotional aspects of pupils (Smith & Low, 2013), but also a promising approach for reducing disruptive behaviors in schools, improving the engagement and school climate, the interpersonal relationships, the academic results and the well-being (Divecha & Brackett, 2019).

These assumptions are also imputable to teachers in the sense that the socio-emotional competence is essential in perceiving the severity of the bullying. If teachers display a passive attitude towards the pupils involved in bullying then there is a low probability that they will intervene (Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

In the daily effort to fight the aggression among pupils, schools can take over education programs specific to bullying or implement some social-emotional learning programs that train pupils in the skills necessary to manage their relationships with others, but also to revise/adjust their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Not limited to empathy, these skills encompass the

assertive communication, the management of emotions, the perspective-taking, the problem solving and the goal setting. With this “endowment” pupils will do much better in school and also in their adult lives (Jones, Doces, Swearer & Collier, 2012).

The most effective anti-bullying interventions involve the whole-school training, the school-wide policies, the teacher training, and classroom SEL programs (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). These programs will also focus on the specific needs of pupils and teachers regarding the identification, reporting and effective management of the cases of bullying. It is argued that an effective approach would be to implement the both types of programs, with SEL programs as a foundation upon which bullying-specific content should be delivered (Jones et al., 2012). The SEL programs propose an approach based on building socio-emotional skills and promoting positive individual and peer attitudes. The scientific literature highlights the fact that a SEL program trains pupils in the following skills:

The self-regulation (impulse control; focusing, maintaining and changing attention; listening and memorizing information; developing empathy);

- Perspective-taking (assessing similarities and differences; recognizing and identifying the feelings of others; understanding that feelings are complex and that they can change);
- The emotion management (recognizing and identifying one's own feelings; learning strategies to calm anger; managing stress/anxiety);
- Problem solving (learning a way to solve problems; setting goals);
- Communication skills (being assertive, respectful; negotiating and making compromises);
- Friendship skills (cooperation, inclusion of others, joining others).

(Jones et al., 2012, p.3; Brown, Low, Smith & Haggerty, 2011)

Conclusions

The current paper intended to highlight the need for training, development of socio-emotional skills socio-emotional skills in the prevention of bullying from the perspective of normative (legislative) and psycho-social prerogatives. We believe that such an approach will contribute to rising awareness and sensitization of the trustees (the responsible people) in education regarding the importance of truly effective prevention programs. The socio-emotional competence is not only the prerogative of pupils, but also of teachers and of the

society as a whole. We have referred to a defining psychological dimension for the human being and which has implications in all the aspects of life.

From this viewpoint, SEL should be an indispensable competence for teachers and it should be systematically developed in the process of the professional development. Starting from the documentation of the socio-emotional area, we propose to optimize the motivation of the providers of initial and continuing professional training for the introduction of distinct themes and chapters related to SEL. Only a teacher who is aware and competent in the psycho-relational sphere will be able to impress on pupils important skills for the optimal social functioning at school and, subsequently, in their adult life from the perspective of the multiple roles they will fulfill: as an employee, an active member of the community, as a parent and so on.

On a large scale, the building of valuable and productive communities in the sphere of humanity is based on enlightenment, more precisely, on the “taming” of one’s innate drives through socio-emotional learning.

References

- Brown, E. C., Low, S., Smith, B. H., & Haggerty, K. P. (2011). Outcomes From a School-Randomized Controlled Trial of Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program. *School Psychology Review*, 40(3), 423–443. doi:10.1080/02796015.2011.1208770.
- Cerezo, F. (2001). Variables de personalidad asociadas en la dinámica bullying (agresores versus víctimas en niños y niñas de 10 a 15 años). *Anales de Psicología/Annals of Psychology*, 17(1), 37-43.
- Divecha, D. & Brackett, M. (2019). Rethinking School-Based Bullying Prevention Through the Lens of Social and Emotional Learning: a Bioecological Perspective. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 2(2), 93-113. doi:10.1007/s42380-019-00019-5.
- Goleman, D. (2001). Emotional intelligence: Issues in paradigm building. *The emotionally intelligent workplace*, 13, 26.
- Grădinaru, C., Stănculeanu, D., & Manole, M., (2016). Bullying-ul în Rândul Copiilor, Studiu sociologic la nivel național. *Organizația Salvați Copiii*. <https://www.salvaticopiii.ro/sci-ro/files/10/10551dfa-f0b2-4cb0-a103-08d811dc31a9.pdf>.

- Guvernul României. (2014). OMEC nr. 5.115 din 15 decembrie 2014 *privind aprobarea Regulamentului de organizare și funcționare a unităților de învățământ preuniversitar*. https://educatieinclusiva.ro/images/documente/Ordin_5115_2014_privind_aprobarea_ROFUIP.pdf.
- Ebrahimi, L., Masoumi, M., Hojjati, A.H., Firozjaie, R.A., & Abdi, M. (2017). Comparing the Quality of Life and Emotional Intelligence among Patients with Psychosomatic Disease (Type 2 Diabetes) and Health Individuals. *NeuroQuantology*, 15(3):12-19.
doi: 10.14704/nq.2017.15.3.1097.
- European Commission, (2010). *European Strategy to Prevent and Tackle School Bullying 2010*. online.org/files/strategy_european/EuropeanStrategy_ENdoc.pdf.
- Frick, P.J., Cornell, A., H., Bodin, S.D., Dane, H.E., Barry, C.T., Loney, B.R. (2003). Callous-unemotional traits and developmental pathways to severe conduct problems. *Developmental Psychology*, 39(2):246-60.
- Guillory, L. A. (2013). An exploratory study of students and teachers attitudes toward three types of bullying: Physical, verbal and social exclusion. Open Access Dissertations. 742. <https://doi.org/10.7275/kqvc-4b59>
- Hansen, K., Gardner, L., & Stough, C. (2007). Improving occupational stress through emotional intelligence development. *Organizations and People*, 14(2), 70– 75.
- Jones, L., Doces, M., Swearer, S., & Collier, A. (2012). Implementing bullying prevention programs in schools: A how-to guide. *Berkman Center Research Publication*, (2013-1).
- Johnson, S. E. (2014). Bullying Prevention: How to Foster Positive Interactions Among Elementary Aged Youth. *Social Work Master's Clinical Research Papers*, 340. https://ir.stthomas.edu/ssw_mstrp/340.
- Lomas, J., Stough, C., Hansen, K., & Downey, L. A. (2012). Brief report: Emotional intelligence, victimisation and bullying in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35(1), 207– 211. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.03.002.
- Rodríguez-Álvarez, J. M., Yubero, S., Navarro, R., & Larrañaga, E. (2021). Relationship between Socio-Emotional Competencies and the Overlap of Bullying and Cyberbullying Behaviors in Primary School Students. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 11(3), 686–696. MDPI AG. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe11030049>.

- Ministerul Educației și Cercetării. (2020). *Ordinul nr. 4.343/2020 din 27 mai 2020 privind aprobarea Normelor metodologice de aplicare a prevederilor art. 7 alin. (1¹), art. 56¹ și ale pct. 6¹ din anexa la Legea educației naționale nr. 1/2011, privind violența psihologică – bullying*. In Monitorul Oficial al României, 2020, nr. 492.
- Muijs, D. (2017). Can schools reduce bullying? The relationship between school characteristics and the prevalence of bullying behaviours. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 87(2), 255-272. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12148>.
- Newman Carlson, D., Horne, A.M., & Bartolomucci, C.L. (2000). *Bully Busters- A Teacher's Manual for Helping Bullies, Victims, and Bystander*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press.
- Parlamentul României. *Legea nr. 221 din 18 noiembrie 2019 pentru modificarea și completarea Legii educației naționale nr. 1 din 5 ianuarie, 2011*. Monitorul Oficial nr. 929 din 19 noiembrie 2019. <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/219895>.
- Parlamentul României. *Legea educației naționale nr. 1 din 5 ianuarie 2011*. Monitorul Oficial nr. 18 din 10 ianuarie 2011. <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/125150>.
- Petrides, K. V., Frederickson, N., & Furnham, A. (2004). The role of trait emotional intelligence in academic performance and deviant behavior at school. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 36 (2), 277–293.
- Polo, M. I., León, B., Felipe, E., Fajardo, F., Gómez, T., & Mendo, S. (2015). Análisis de la Socialización sobre Perfiles de la dinámica bullying. *Universitas Psychologica*, 14(3), 1117-1128. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.upsy14-3.aspd>.
- Salmivalli, C. (2010). Bullying and the peer group:A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. 15(2), 112–120. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.007.
- Salovey, P., & Mayer, J.D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, 9(3), 185-211.
- Sesar, K., Barišić, M., Pandža, M., & Dodaj, A. (2012). The relationship between difficulties in psychological adjustment in young adulthood and exposure to bullying behaviour in childhood and adolescence. *Acta medica academica*, 41(2).
- Smith, B. H., & Low, S. (2013). The Role of Social-Emotional Learning In Bullying Prevention Efforts. *Theory Into Practice*, 52(4), 280–287. doi:10.1080/00405841.2013.82973.
- Trigueros, R., Sanchez-Sanchez, E., Mercader, I., Aguilar-Parra, J. M., López-Liria, R., Morales-Gázquez, M. J., ... & Rocamora, P. (2020). Relationship between emotional

intelligence, social skills and peer harassment. A study with high school students. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(12), 4208.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2019). *Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying*. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/behind-numbers-ending-school-violence-and-bullying>.

Vreeman, R. C. & Carroll, A. E. (2007). A systematic review of school-based interventions to prevent bullying. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. 161(1), 78–88. doi:10.1001/archpedi.161.1.78.

Zych, I., Ortega-Ruiz, R., & Del Rey, R. (2015). Systematic review of theoretical studies on bullying and cyberbullying: Facts, knowledge, prevention, and intervention. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 23, 1–21. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2015.10.001.

Zeidner, M., Matthews, G., & Roberts, R. D. (2012). What we know about emotional intelligence: How it affects learning, work, relationships, and our mental health. *Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology*.

Yoon, J.S. & Kerber, K. (2003). Bullying elementary teachers' attitudes and intervention strategies. *Research in Education*, 69(1), 27-35.