

Bullying: the keys to tackling violence in schools, according to an Argentinian expert

Monica Toscano created a method to fight against bullying, which focuses on understanding the psychology of groups, engage in dialogue with young people and their families, and above all, on creating empathy

By Delfina Celichini

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Bullying - one of the most common forms of violence in schools

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A boy likes sewing and doesn't play football. A group isolates him, and he in turn resists any attempts to approach him, and adopts a hostile attitude towards his classmates. This is a case of violence among children at a school in Paris, France. However, it could have happened at any educational institution anywhere in the world.

The tools used to integrate the boy, acknowledge his differences, and stamp out the hostile attitudes to him were also universal: investigation; conscious listening; building bridges with families, students, teachers and

principals; and identifying a gateway for the acceptance and integration of the other person - someone who is different.

"I suggested to a school director who'd taken the course in the Method that she should read the group and its signs: how the violence was expressed, and why both the boy and his classmates did not want to come together. We realised that the student who'd been isolated was very original, creative and sensitive, and that he could be very good for the others," said the principal of the French school during the Third International Conference of the Monica Toscano Prevention In Act Method - a training system for schools and teachers that provides tools for preventing expressions of violence, such as bullying, which returned to the forefront of public opinion in recent weeks after reports that two Argentinian twin girls had jumped out of a third-floor flat as a result being bullied in the Catalan town of Sallent. One of them died, and her twelve-year-old sister is still in hospital.

As a result of the work done by the school, the boy in Paris who loved to sew became just another member of his class. How did they do it? By means of shared tasks, which enabled the young people to let their guard down, acknowledge that they needed each other, and begin to relate to each other. They were brought together as peers helping each other to overcome a challenge they shared.

"The dimension of the power of the group is a key parameter of the Method, which as principals and teachers have told us, 'we are not used to reading'. This power of the group can be expressed in very dangerous situations with serious consequences, such as increasing expressions of violence towards others, and the painful and irreversible expressions of the rise in suicides among adolescents," says Monica Toscano, a psychoanalyst who created an international prevention network in response to the situations of risk that young people experience on a daily basis related to bullying at school, and the author of the book *El pronunciamiento de los jóvenes. Un camino de la imposibilidad a la posibilidad* (The pronouncement of young people. A path from impossibility to possibility).

According to Toscano's team, between April 2000 and March 2022, workshops on the Method took place involving approximately 32,000 students, 7,700 principals, teachers, educators and 10,000 families at schools in the Argentinian cities of Buenos Aires, Rosario, San Martín de los Andes, Lanús and Martínez; in Barcelona and Madrid in Spain; in

Paris and Lyon in France; and in Düsseldorf, Germany; and Vienna, in Austria.



Representatives of schools from various parts of the world pooled their views on the problems of violence at the Third International Conference of the Monica Toscano Prevention In Act Method

Social media and teenagers

The family of a 14-year-old student asks for a meeting with the principal of her school in Barcelona. The terrified parents complain that a boy who their daughter had dated for a while had abused and mistreated her. The principal is not overwhelmed by the serious nature of the accusations, and takes charge of the issue, adopts a professional attitude, and begins to investigate.

"That day, the parents returned home with the assurance that I would talk to the student first thing in the morning and sort the problem out," said the head of the Spanish school, which works with the Method. She said that when she talked to the teenager, she realised that some things did not

add up: sexual photos of the young woman had emerged, but with a boy who was not the same as the one she was accusing of the abuse.

"I asked her if the photos that were circulating on social media had anything to do her not wanting to go to school any more, and she replied that yes, she didn't want her brother to find out about those images," the school principal recalled. The student was subjected to sarcastic comments and insults from other students at the school.

After talking to the girl, the boy she had accused and the parents of both students, the situation became even more puzzling: the accusation was very serious, but there was insufficient evidence to suggest that the boy was responsible. The city's social services were called in, and played a crucial role in identifying the problem: a psychiatrist specialising in adolescents diagnosed that the girl was suffering from an addiction. She had become addicted to the Internet, and her posting of photos and videos of herself had got out of hand. Her frightened classmates approached the directors of the school, seeking help for her.

"When violence in schools is extrapolated to social media, it can lead to extreme situations. The anonymity of the Internet means that this type of bullying increasingly serious. As many teenagers say: 'when I read what they're saying about me on social media, I want to disappear.' These situations do not happen at school and the educational institution may not be responsible for them, but they must not remain indifferent to them," emphasised Toscano during the workshop.



Monica Toscano, a psychoanalyst specialising in adolescence, has been working on developing an international prevention network for two decades, in response to the risk situations that young people who suffer from bullying experience on a daily basis

At a religious school in Rosario, a similar problem put the directors to the test: a student with a disability was filmed at break, and mocked on TikTok, one of the most widely used social media by teenagers, where they post short videos.

"The bullying material was posted on a Friday morning, and it had gone viral by the afternoon. However, first thing on Monday morning, the classmates of the student who had been filmed asked the schools for the principals to intervene so that as adults, we could deal with what had happened," says the head of the school in Rosario, who points out that

the students took action after being trained with the Method, and after building a space for listening and conscious dialogue with the students.

"Young people are disillusioned with adults, and they don't want to talk because they feel powerless," adds Toscano, who says that this problem intersects with a complex stage of development, a period marked by a great deal of anxiety related to school, involving issues such as belonging to the group of friends, as well as a backdrop of an increase in violence.

After two decades of work, the specialist reiterates that the way to construct the future is by asking the question: do I have the right to hurt other people?

"If a nine- or ten-year-old child can ask themselves this question, instead of saying 'I won't do it to them so they won't do it to me,' for narcissistic and utilitarian reasons, and be able to understand their own limitations and their own responsibility as a result, then the experience of the Method will have sunk in," the psychoanalyst concludes.

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