

***“Implementing and experimenting the method of shared concern:
The Hauts de Seine resource teams for the handling of school bullying
situations”***

Introduction

France’s belated awakening

Unlike many other countries, in France, the issue of school bullying has not become one until very recent years. The first occurrence of the French translation for school bullying “harcèlement scolaire” dates back to 2011.

The first step towards awareness was taken on May 2011 by the then secretary of Education Luc Chatelet who launched “les assises nationales du harcèlement scolaire”¹, a series of measures aiming at tackling the phenomenon. This first series of measures on a national scale, were based on the publishing of a research paper by Eric Debarbieux “refuser l’oppression quotidienne, la prévention du harcèlement à l’école”² on April 12th 2011.

The results of Debarbieux’s “victimization survey”³ on the types of victimization that children undergo during their school experience/years, was that **one out of ten** children suffered from school bullying (regardless of their social background) and the urgency to deal head-on with such a massive form of school violence.

The second step of the awareness happened after some striking cases of “bullycides” (suicides due to bullying) caused a tremor in the public opinion. For instance, that of Sebastien a 9th grader who had a stutter. This whipping boy hanged himself after so many insults, nick names, punching, texting and internet stalking. This “bullycide” and others allowed to shed light on the tragic and deeply real consequences of long term bullying (social phobia, relational skills impairments, school phobia, violence, anxio-depressive syndromes and suicidal tendencies). The school and through it, the state, was henceforth condemned to some compensation payments for failing to grasp the dimension of harassment and the suffering of a pupil. This new step led to taking the school bullying national policies and their implementations to the next level.

¹ Chatel, L. (2 et 3 mai 2011). Les assises nationales du harcèlement lycée Louis Legrand, Paris. “The National conference on school bullying” translated by the author.

² Debarbieux, E. (12 avril 2011). Refuser l’oppression quotidienne : la prévention du harcèlement à l’école.

³ « Enquête de victimation » translated by the author.

Implementing a new policy

The French public policy evolved. Through the framework legislation of July 2013⁴, the fight against school bullying was declared a top priority. Because it is clearly established that fighting against bullying is a key factor in the school achievement of children: if children feel safe then they learn better.

The national policy includes four main aspects:

- Raising awareness,
- Training educators,
- Preventing the risks,
- Handling the situations.

The department of "Hauts de Seine" decided to implement this governmental strategy through the body of "CESC départemental" (comity for the education to health and citizenship).



A three-year action program was implemented from 2014 to 2017 whose departmental strategy was to:

- Train the staff to have a better understanding of the phenomena.

⁴ La loi d'orientation et de programmation pour la refondation de l'École de la République (mardi 9 juillet 2013). Journal officiel.

- Create a network to implement common good practice in the handling of school bullying situations using the Method of Shared Concern⁵.

In three years, **84 resources teams** have been created and **300 staff** trained. The Method of Shared Concern was chosen as a means of sorting out bullying situations.

So, what is this method?⁶ What does it consist in? Is this method successful in putting an end to bullying situations? Does it have any limitations? Does it contribute to a shifting of perspective? And of what sorts?

Method

The method is a qualitative approach based on the exchanges and discussions with 300 resource team members and 400 non-resource team staff trained all across the "hauts de Seine" department during a three-year span. The survey polls which are currently being submitted to resource team members will allow to corroborate and particularize the results.

Defining the phenomenon

First of all, the characteristics of school bullying being repetitiveness, isolation of the targeted person, the disproportion of forces and the fact that it is often hidden from the eyes of the adults, the first pitfall was the identification of the situation. In other words, what can or cannot be considered as being school bullying? What elements or clues can you analyze to know that you are dealing with a case of school bullying?⁷ Therefore, it appeared necessary to provide the educators with a common definition and also to equip them with elements enabling them to decipher the weak or missed signals.

However, the underlying questioning was the following: once the schools became aware of ongoing situations, how could they handle the cases? What tools could they be given to address these situations in an effective way?

To allow a better deployment in the department, resource teams were created. They comprise first and second degree staff (kindergarten, elementary, middle school and high school staff: teachers, headmasters and school psychologists...) Each resource team is composed of two to six members for a middle school and high school or for a school district (in the first degree).

The principle of the snowball effect was applied: the resource teams received a training with the idea that they would themselves take action, help and train in their school districts and schools.

⁵ Pikas, A. (2002). New Development of the Shared Concern Method, department of Education, Uppsala University *School Psychology International*, Vol. 23(3).

⁶ Rigby, K. (July 2005). The Method of Shared Concern as an intervention technique to address bullying in schools: an overview and appraisal in *Australian journal of guidance and counseling*, Vol 15 number 1 pp 27-34.

⁷ Olweus, D. (October 1993) *Bullying at School: what we know and what we can do.*(Wiley Blackwell).

The Method of shared concern developed in France by Jean Pierre Bellon and Bertrand Gardette and their association APHEE (Association pour la Prévention de Phénomènes de Harcèlement entre Elèves, Association for the prevention of the phenomena of school bullying)⁸ is based on the work of Anatol Pikas, Phd in Educational psychology. This method was chosen to try out to answer these needs.

What are the principles of the method?

When a situation is identified by the adults a series of meetings are conducted (by the members of the resource teams) in a non-accusatory manner, a non-blaming approach using the principle of “shuttle diplomacy”. The interviews must not be conducted as a judge, policeman, investigator, or moralizing educator but with the politeness, goodwill, firmness and stubbornness of a diplomat.

One might argue: why be a diplomat with pupils who have caused suffering to others? Because in most situations reproaches and moralization will only cause the bullying to become more severe or more invisible to the eyes of adults and most of all because what’s most important to the targeted pupils is that the bullying comes to an end. Furthermore, since you are dealing with peer group violence can you be sure if you catch a pupil red handed, that you are blaming and punishing the correct person? Can you be sure that the punishment will be appropriate and fair?

Even if it is not conscious for wrongdoers, the premises of the method imply that there is a strong desire to break out of the process of victimizing because the violence of the peer group is not that of individuals. Fear is the real cement that holds the group together and keeps the bullying going, hence the idea of using individual interviews to get out of the mechanics of violence. The aim of those short interviews is for the wrongdoers to *feel for* the targeted person but without actually forcing them to do so. In other words *empathy* is an end but not a means.

The process: how are the interviews conducted?

The method consists in conducting a series of five to ten minutes one on one meetings starting with the wrongdoers and then the active witnesses- the targeted person is often seen simultaneously -but not by the same practitioner.

- There are seven steps in the method:
- Meeting with the wrongdoers and followers
- Meeting with the targeted person
- Follow up with wrongdoers and followers
- Follow up with the targeted person
- Preparation for the summit meeting
- Summit meeting
- Follow up

⁸ Bellon, JP. & Gardette B. (2002). Fondateurs de l’APHEE (Association pour la Prévention des Phénomènes de Harcèlement entre Elèves).

During the interviews there are two steps. The goal of the first one is to get the wrongdoer to acknowledge the concern for the targeted person and to admit that this person is going through a pretty rough time, without pointing fingers or clearly accusing the interviewed pupil to be responsible for the situation. The interviewer, with politeness and firmness expresses his strong concern for the targeted person: " I am deeply concerned by X, I don't think he/she is feeling very well at the moment, I Think he/ she is going through a very rough time, what can you tell me about it?".

The second step occurs when the wrongdoer acknowledges the difficulties of the person, the search for solutions and suggestions can begin: "Ok, so you agree to say that X is not in a good position right now, so what would you suggest to put an end to the situation?" The suggestions can be very different: ranging from "I can try to talk to the group" to "I can try to help the person do their homework". All suggestions should be considered in a positive light. The staff performs a follow-up to make sure that the suggestions proposed are respected.

Results

So, is the method successful in putting an end to the school bullying situations? Are there any limitations? Of what sorts?

A very high success rate

After a three-year implementation period all across the department, the feedback from resource team members who have used the method shows it works in 70 to 80 percent of the situations. The sooner the situations are dealt with the better the impact. The method is also effective to manage conflict situations between children and not only school bullying situations.

The resource team members have all stressed the fact that there is almost a *magical touch* to the method and that you can observe a *twist*. Wrongdoers often take strongly to solve the situations and take active defense for the targeted person and this despite the fact that they originated in the problem. Since they are not blamed, they can get out of the process with their head up high, feeling that they have helped. They are restored in their self-esteem. Cases where the method is not effective is when the resistance of the wrongdoers is too strong, when they refuse to acknowledge the situation or when they have a defense mechanism that is already too ingrained. It is neither effective in situations in which there are a criminal or perverse dimension.

As for first degree teachers, the feedback is that it is also very effective but only when children are able to express their feelings and come up with ideas or solutions. Therefore, it appears that it is extremely difficult to conduct interviews with children aged 6 or under.

A time-consuming method

Both second and first-degree educators comment on the time-consuming aspect of the method, because it is often necessary to conduct several interviews for just one case and because the follow-up is also crucial. Since resource members are school

community members, conducting the interviews is one of many other tasks that they have to perform during the day so it is very often complicated to make time for those.

The importance of trust

One of the major objections to the method is the parents' reaction. The success or failure of the method depends highly on the parents' level of trust or distrust. If parents try to sort out the situation by themselves it often contributes to deteriorate them -even if the pupils themselves would rather they did not meddle. Parents sometimes refuse that their children be seen by the members of the resource teams or simply tell them not to say anything about the situations. The issue of permission for the interview is also at stake here: should parents be informed straight away that interviews are being conducted? Should they be informed afterwards? What elements should be given to them considering that there is a certain level of confidentiality?

The feedback on the summit meeting is that it is not conducted in most of the cases because the targeted persons refuse them. It was also noted by resource members that when summit meetings did take place they were *high-risk* meetings. Situations which had been solved and stopped were almost re activated by the meetings themselves.

The prominence of subscription

On a larger perspective, a very important element lies in the continuity of circulation of the method, in other words if the method only stays in the hands of the resource members and is not adopted by the whole community, then it will be more complicated to ensure consistency. It thus appears necessary not only to inform but to include all other community members in the process. The promoting and explaining of the method is crucial because it will guarantee the consistency and avoid having disruptions.

The stability of the resource teams is also a factor of success or failure. If resource team members are transferred to other academies or regions then it becomes very complicated to continue the dynamics started the previous year. This resource staff turnover has to be anticipated.

It is important for headmasters not to be directly involved in the method *i.e.* that they do not conduct the interviews themselves. This allows them to keep their symbolic figure of authority. For example in cases where the method cannot be applied and sanctions have to be given.

Discussion

Benefits, improvements and adaptations

What are the benefits of the method based on the results? Are there necessary improvements or is it just a question of adapting the method to the particular context?

Are there any real limitations? Can they be dealt with by adaptations or re-adjustments?

To begin with, there are many benefits to the method for pupils but also for educators. Since it is a non-blaming approach with the premise that education is possible, it causes educators to see the pupils in a very different light. As for pupils, being given a lead on what is happening, they end up taking a much more active and engaged part in the resolution of situations than if they were just being punished. The positive trust in their judgement is a bet on their ability to change for the better.

A shifting in perspectives

The deployment of the resource teams caused a shifting in perspective in three domains:

- The understanding of the phenomenon,
- The relationships between pupils, educators and parents,
- The issue of punishment.

To begin with, the first observable shift is the increased awareness of the phenomenon both in the detection and the understanding of the consequences for the targeted persons. Educators that we have come across during the numerous training courses given in the department suddenly start to see things in a different light, they re-discover that nothing is set in stone and it is absolutely necessary not to jump to conclusions especially when you are dealing with education material. The idea that targeted pupils and wrongdoers share a common weakness "**Chez sa victime le harceleur reconnaît une faille qu'il ne veut pas voir chez lui [...] Victime comme harceleur ont le plus souvent un point commun: ils se ressentent comme différents. Cette réalité, l'un la nie, l'autre l'évite**"⁹ often strikes them very much. The wrongdoers often lack self-esteem which they try to re-create by imposing a relation of power onto another person. With the compensation that the method implies both wrongdoers and targeted persons are restored: the wrongdoer because he has to come up with solutions for the suffering that he has caused and the targeted person because his suffering is finally acknowledged.

Encouraging a spirit of benevolence

In almost each training course, educators would start re reading the weak signals that they had sometimes perceived but didn't know what to do with, sometimes even re-reading their own teenage hood or childhood school experience. How they sometimes were victims or tormentors therefore realizing the importance of the phenomena and that it had been in their school life all along.

In the French school mentality, and until very recent years, situations of bullying were often considered as a rite of passage or as being in the order of things. Thanks to

⁹ Catheline, N. (4 novembre 2015) *Le Harcèlement à l'école, que sais-je ?* Puf (ed) (pp 27-28). "In its victim, the wrongdoer recognizes a flaw that he/ she does not want to see in himself/herself [...] victims and wrongdoers often share a common feature: they feel they are different. This reality, one denies it, the other avoids it". Translated by the author.

this new policy, the argument by which boys will be boys, whipping boys and scapegoats always existed is being demolished. Now situations are often seen for what they really are: a form of violence that cannot go away without the intervention of adults. Educators realize that it is indeed adults who can provide pupils with help and understanding and that teenagers and children are not capable of dealing with the situations on their own. Why would pupils have to go through hardships at school that no adult in their right mind would agree to go through in their work experience? The answer of course is that they don't have to and that adults have a crucial role to play. The speech which consists in saying "I am here to teach, it not by business to meddle with the stories of the pupils" is unfortunately one that can still be heard especially for second degree teachers. For some of them the dichotomy between teaching and raising is still very strong. The implementing of the method slowly causes to reconcile both aspects.

The necessity of a psychological follow up for long term victims

What the method manages very well is to make the suffering stop but educators must keep in mind that the consequences of school bullying can be severe (the longer the more severe) and need to be dealt with. In other words, the effectiveness of the method should not conceal the psychological aftermath for many victims and wrongdoers. Therefore it is essential to develop partnerships with associations which can extend the process of care through networking.

Building the trust of the parents

The mistrust on the part of the parents (of targeted pupils) comes from the fact that they are not yet used to the schools being able to deal with bullying situations. The media coverage of tragic cases of "bullycide" have all pointed to the blindness and incompetence of educators. The popular misconception is that schools are inexperienced and ineffectual so it results that parents should do justice themselves by pressing charges for instance. It is also a change of perspective for them, to learn how to trust the educators with the handling of situations.

The first key to this change of perspective lies in *anticipation and explanation*. To avoid misunderstandings, it is very important to have a protocol and to inform the parents about it. If parents are aware of the existence of protocols and prevention programs before they are confronted to actual situations, then they will be more incline to trust in the school staff to help them in the matter. When parents realize that their child has been the target of school bullying, there is a notion of emergency which arises. When the crisis situation is here, emotions will interfere therefore often blocking any constructive dialogue, the temporality of the parents being that of emergency. The protocol can also help in terms of temporality to reassure them, to guarantee them that the situations will be dealt with. Presenting and informing on the protocol will allow to shed light on another pivotal restoring aspect of the method which is that it does not stigmatize wrongdoers and this can also contribute to reassure the parents.

Prevention plan: a systemic approach

Another very decisive element is the **implementation of the prevention program** which has become mandatory in all schools since 2016. It is central to have a systemic view of things, keeping in mind the seven factors which influence the school climate: team work, educational methods, school justice, partnership, co-parenting, quality of life in the school and the prevention of violence and school bullying. These factors being interdependent and interconnected, they allow to consider prevention in a more general perspective. The prevention program has to originate from the needs which will become targets and will determine the actions which stem from them.



The prevention program works in the long run where the Method of Shared concern works in the short run. The perfect combination in terms of prevention is if the two aspects are paired up. In parallel the handling of the situations, **developing social skills and emotional abilities, cooperation, empathy** in the schools are compelling to have a complete encapsulation of the issue. Just talking and professing good behavior is not sufficient, children and teenagers have to fully experiment sharing, kindness through common practice through a transforming of the rules and expectations.

A shifting in perspective regarding school punishments

The core of the method directly brings to question the notion of punishment: what do we punish for? To humiliate? To stigmatize? To hurt? To banish? To make an example?¹⁰

The method of Shared Concern provokes a change of paradigm. It is not about the punishment but about the restoration. There is a shift of focus: the **outcome** of the punishment is more relevant than the punishment itself. Therefore the **process of realization** which goes with the interviews achieves what more "classic" punishment (detentions, exclusions from school...) will not do i.e. the **desire to fix**. These **Educational measures** as opposed to punishing measures also allow parents and educators to get out of the desire for revenge. The goal for all educators is that rules should be understood but ultimately that they should be integrated. The distinction between the wrongdoers and their acts preserves them from a shameful guilt and achieves something much more important: facing their responsibilities and failures.

The restorative dimension of the method causes educators to have a reflection on the justice of rules as a whole, namely: are the rules meaningful, clear, and coherent? Have the children contributed to the elaboration of these rules? This reflection is often the starting point of a process of questioning the class rules and associating the pupils to the process.

Conclusion

As we have shown, working on the prevention of violence in a systemic approach in turn causes to change perspective on team strategy and school justice. This method is successful in 70 to 80 percent of the cases and constitutes an extreme positive progress in the handling of school bullying situations. Massive survey polls which are currently being held in the department will allow to have a more precise feedback. On top of that, workshops are being created so as to adapt the method to younger children. It is a "tool-in-progress" but a very decisive one. Still, the founding principles of the method allow to entail and set in motion many aspects which were previously extremely difficult to tackle such as benevolence of educators, the necessity to associate the parents and to turn to a **new type of education** heading towards **empathy, cooperation and education to emotions** as a whole.

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¹⁰ Prairat, E. (13 mars 2013) repéré à <http://www.occe.coop/~ad52/spip.php?article107>

