

The Anti-Bullying Certification Project: a summary for members of the European feedback committee

The Anti-Bullying Certification (ABC) project aims to develop a system to certify schools on high quality prosocial policies. The ABC-team has been awarded an international project on this by the Dutch Erasmus+ Authority. This project focuses on helping secondary schools to improve their own integral and inclusive antibullying policy.

The ABC-project team is an international partnership consisting of GALE (Global Alliance for LGBT Education, Netherlands), Villa Montesca (Italy), CESIE (Italy), Merseyside Expanding Horizons (UK), ACCESO (Asociación Cívica de Comunicación y Educación "Sophia" , Spain, Smile of the Child (Greece) and EAN (European Anti-Bullying Network)

Why a certification process?

We have three reasons for developing a certification process.

1. Lack of knowledge about effective methods

We have noticed that many schools have antibullying policy, but often do not know very well which methods are most effective in combating bullying and in creating a good atmosphere at school. For example, many schools hardly know anything about the actual effect of, for example, punishment or suspension as measures to correct antisocial behavior, and no-blame techniques are still very unknown. The most effective measure (arranging rules together with pupils) still hardly occurs in high schools.

2. Lack of exchange and cooperation at school

According to the Dutch School Inspectorate, the school management, the teachers and the pupils often have different experiences and views on bullying and social behavior in school. In research, those different groups often come up with various suggestions that may conflict with each other. Schools also find it difficult to exchange about this. Not only is there a limited insight among school managers in how you can involve pupils (and staff) in the policy without giving away "the power", but it also turns out that discussions among students and in the staff team may be difficult, especially when it comes to divergent values and norms.

3. Lack of sensitivity to diversity

It is also common that the school has a "generic" or general antibullying policy, but that there is little sensitivity for vulnerable groups such as girls and boys (and transgender pupils), pupils with a disability, students with a non-native background, Muslims, pupils with a different political opinion, and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex) pupils. If there is only a general policy, this often has only partial effect for such minorities. To contribute to ensuring that school safety is available for everyone at school, we want to pay specific attention to sensitive inclusion.

In this project we do not want to introduce a new antibullying program, but help the school in self-analysis, reflection and making custom-made measures. We call this reflection and recalibration process a certification process. While this process, we also want to give the parties involved instruments for better discussion and cooperation.

Goals and products

The Anti-Bullying Certification (ABC) project aims to support schools through the certification process in the development of effective antibullying policy, the prevention of social exclusion and the integration of 21st century skills in education for both pupils and employees of the school. The certification process is therefore not only a "check" of written antibullying procedures but also includes:

1. A survey of the situation and needs
2. Staff training and school visitation by students
3. A guide with suggestions for effective measures to structurally improve the learning and working climate at school

An underlying focus of the project is to investigate and discuss how pupils and teachers deal with diverse emotions and conflicts. We also look at how the school functions as a role model for democratic and non-violent problem-solving skills and methods. The main aim of the certification process is to give the school more control over the situation and thereby make even better choices for an appropriate school policy. Whether and how we might also want to link a label or hallmark to this, is a discussion that we will conduct during the project. That only makes sense if it means something and if we can convince national authorities that this is a valuable contribution to safety in schools.

An added dimension of the project is that we would like to start and stimulate a discussion about quality standards for schools in the area on antibullying and on broader prosocial and related democratic policies. In some countries, schools are guided directly by the government, in others only partially and in some other schools are almost completely independent from democratic government guidelines and autonomous in their way of teaching and maintaining discipline or promoting prosocial behavior. Each partner will explore to what extent and how they stimulate their own government and education system to improve on their control systems in this area.

On the European level, this is even more complicated. Although the European Union and the Council, of Europe has similar principles they have agreed on concerning democracy, human rights education, and fighting violence and discrimination, the educational domain does not feature as a strategic option to reach those goals. States are aware that the content of education is sensitive and do not easily allow international quality control over their curricula or school management systems. The consequence of this is that international bodies cannot do much more than publish technical guidelines or inspirational good practices and support the development of such products by funding related projects.

The ABC-partnership looks to develop a European certification system. In the first place, this will be sustained after the project by the European antibullying Network (EAN), which is the birth cradle of this project. But in the second place, EAN also wants to encourage European reflection and debate on European quality systems on preventing violence and particularly bullying. Why does the European Union have mandatory energy labels for a range of products, but not a quality label for social safety in schools, while it is clear the bullying and discrimination happening in schools is a threat to learning and day-to-day safety? In the European debate, we do not only look at the content of violence and bullying, but also at the reasons why European policy in this area is how to take the first steps into the direction of a more European strategy and hopefully quality standards or directives.

The European Feedback Committee

A feedback committee is set up in each country and at the European level. The feedback national committees consist of content experts and officers who may be able to influence the quality of the national education system or policy.

For the European Feedback Committee GALE (the leader of the project and responsible for the European level strategy) will invite:

- Politicians
- Public officials in charge of education, justice, citizenship and non-discrimination
- Representatives of European federations of education organizations and of populations affected by school violence, in particular organizations representing Roma children, disabled children, migrants, children living in poverty and LGBT students.

The national feedback committees have two tasks:

1. Give feedback on the products and developments in the project, to help raise the quality.
2. Consider possible consequences of the project on the education system or policy; this could possibly lead to follow-up actions during or after the project.

In addition, the European Feedback Committee will be asked to give feedback on the international use of the products (i.e. outside the partner countries Italy, Greece, The Netherlands, Spain and the UK) and on the potential to -on the long term – come to some kind of European standards. Because we realize that developing European standards is not going to happen during the project lifetime (2018-2019), our goal on the European level to initiate the discussion and maybe to jointly develop a roadmap for further steps.

Timing schedule

Step 1: work products

The project partners start the project in the first semester of 2018 by developing the certification procedure into an executable toolkit. They also carry out an evaluation per country of national antibullying policies and social inclusion policies.

After the summer holiday 2018, the feedback committee will see the concept products and they will be asked to provide feedback on them. This will be done digitally.

The European Feedback Committee will be asked to give feedback on a European level analysis on antibullying policies and opportunities the members see for European standards, or steps in that direction.

Step 2: evaluation

Before the summer holidays we do an investigation into the situation and needs at two schools per country. In the 2018-2019 school year, the schools are experimenting with the products. At the beginning of the year they do group formation and make interactive arrangements about manners with the pupils. During a "visitation" day, students do their own interactive research and make recommendations for improvement, teachers are trained, measures for the safe school policy are devised and several measures are implemented. At the end of the school year, we repeat the research and we can see whether the measures at pupil and teacher level have already been put to the test. In or just after the summer holiday 2019, the feedback committee will see the evaluations, the recommendations to improve the products and recommendations for possible follow-up steps. This does not come out of the blue. During the school year, the feedback committee members will occasionally receive questions or be asked to take part in (online) discussions about dilemmas.

The European Feedback Committee will be kept informed of the progress and an online debate will start about a possible strategy on the European level (both EU and CoE).

Step 3: discussion about follow-up

In the summer vacation of 2019, based on the evaluations and feedback from the committees, the products will be adjusted and presented in November. In November, the EAN conference will take place in Brussels. Part of this conference is an "expert meeting" of the members of the European Feedback Committee on the final products and on a proposal for European sustainability.

The project ends on 31 December 2019.

European organizations who are interested in participation in the (invited) European Feedback Committee can contact Peter Dankmeijer (p.dankmeijer@gale.info), coordinator of the project.