Piloting school self-assessment

The ABC-project partners have been working on pilots in the schools. Here are some of the results!

Over 2019, the ABC-project partners have been working on piloting the certification procedure. Although the procedure is the same, every school is different and so were the pilots.

In this newsletter, we give some impressions of the ways schools did the procedure and the type of results. We have articles on the surveys, the school "visitations" by students, the teacher workshops, the types of recommendations and an article on cyberbullying.

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How schools combat bullying

Newsletter of the Anti-Bullying Certification project

https://www.gale.info/en/projects/abc-project

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The surveys

In 2018, the project developed questionnaires to measure the level of bullying and to get the opinions of students and teachers on the school policy and how it can be improved.

The student and teacher surveys are meant to create a European standard instrument to measure bullying. Until now there were a lot of surveys on bullying, but they had different questions and measured different things.

The questionnaires were prepared by exploring existing questionnaires and question batteries on school safety, and selecting the questions that had a high predictive reliability. The first student's questionnaire consisted of 25 questions But many questions had a lot of sub-questions, making it quite a long questionnaire.

During pretests among students and teachers, we got suggestions to simplify questions and answer options.

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It was more difficult to find examples of reliable questions for teachers; such questionnaires hardly seem to exist. We selected a number of questions from the few questionnaires we could find, and added a number of questions comparing the opinions and behaviors of students with the perception of them by teachers. We did this because research shows there is often a big difference between the opinions on, and assessment of the real situation in school by students and by teachers. Often teachers consider the school to be much safer than students experience. This mismatch in common understanding is one of the reasons for less effective antibullying policy.

> A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself

THE TRADITIONAL DEFINITION OF "BULLYING" BY DAN OLWEUS

The original definition of bullying dates back about 30 years. It is still widely used but there are criticisms to it. The main criticism is that it does not seem to recognize the more subtle exclusion and marginalization mechanisms of sexism, heteronormativity and xenophobia. So some scientists say that discrimination is a different phenomenon as bullying, while teachers often see negative behavior as one undistinguished whole. The understanding of "bullying" is also different across cultures, and is often differently understood even by students and teachers in one school. Because of this, we decided not to use the word "bullying" in the questionnaires, but to consistently ask about the more neutral "pleasant" or "unpleasant behavior" and to ask for 26

specific behaviors (real life and online) taken from the internationally used PISA survey.

The questionnaires were translated and distributed among students and teachers of the pilot schools after the summer vacation of 2018. Reports were made in November and December.

The student visitations

The project puts a high value on making the voices of students heard. Students are ideally not subjects of a school, but participants in a learning process. With that perspective it is logical that they also should have a profound influence on the social policy of the school.

SCHOOL VISITATION IN ALTRA COLLEGE

In the project, we encouraged this by organizing a one day student review of the school safety, called the student "visitation". With the word visitation, we don't mean an ordinary visit, but we refer to a more official review of the school safety, like a school inspector authority would do.

Of course, doing this by students would be a bit less official than by authorities. In the ABC-visitation, students would get presentations of the results of the surveys and of the current school policy. Then they would do short interviews with other students to check if their own impressions and impressions from the survey match with the day-to-day experience of other students. The day would end with a discussion and formulation of recommendations to improve school policy for the school management.

A visitation in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, one of the two schools was Altra College, a school for special needs students. The students of the school find it difficult to function on a regular school because they can have considerable mood swings or because they are autistic to some extent. Nine students of Altra College volunteered to be on a student school committee which helps to improve antibullying and social safety policy.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS ON A RECOMMENDATION TREE

During the initial discussion on the visitation day, students had some difficulty to imagine what an "antibullying policy" is. They asked: "Is this a document, that you have to sign?" Some students vaguely remembered that they had to sign something when they started the school, but they couldn't quite remember what it was. One of the school managers, who was responsible for safety policy, explained that indeed the students had to sign a declaration on how to behave in school. The students concluded that signing the paper and not referring to it anymore afterwards is not a good method. Students also remembered that they got an antibullying lesson in the beginning of the year, but they said: "it is just like a technical presentation, and it is every year the same, so it's boring and it doesn't help us to commit to positive behavior". In the school, the students have a weekly "KIK" lesson which are specifically about social skills. The students advised to integrate antibullying in those kick lessons, and also in sports lessons and even in other lessons as long as it is done in an interactive way, with games and with role-plays in which they can try out real life situations.

SPORT EXERCISE: THE "SISSY" SQUAT

Then the results of the survey were discussed. There were two conclusions that jumped out. One is that a lot of students experience teasing and rough verbal behavior as unpleasant. This is not strictly bullying, but the school culture is rather rough and uncaring in this, and many students and even teachers find this "normal". Some students say: "we take the way we talk on the street into the school". Teachers do not really know how to deal with this street culture talk, because their middle-class culture rejects rough or offensive talk. For students this is difficult because if you are too polite on the street, you will be considered a sissy. "Sissy" means both "weak" and "homosexual". Peter Dankmeijer, the school visitation facilitator, asked if being called a sissy or homosexual is bad, and students admit that both sexism and homophobia are common. "But we don't do it to be mean, but to protect our status". Girls are also called "bitch" but the boys of the visitation group think this is another thing that is actually disrespectful and should change. However, it is difficult for them to think of ways to change this group culture.

Another conclusion from the survey was that a rather large percentage of student says that they hate to be put down by teachers. "They often make jokes in class which put you down in front of your classmates". This is particularly something that students hate. "Maybe teachers think they are just making a joke, but it hurts, especially if you do it in front of others". The facilitator notes that the survey also showed that a large percentage of the students report to feel insecure, and that putdowns may increase this sense of insecurity. In the end of the visitation, the students formulated a recommendation that teachers should be aware that their jokes and teasing can be perceived as putdowns and that they should stop doing it. It is also recommended that the school sets up a systematic program to improve the self-esteem of students.

PUTDOWN JOKES ARE OFTEN NOT APPRECIATED BY STUDENTS

The nine "visitation" group students each interviewed 2 other students, in total 20. The first thing they note is that the results from the interviews closely correspond to the results of the survey. They also note that the range of opinions is quite wide: some students experience the school culture is very safe while others as unsafe. Apparently students can experience the same culture in

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very different ways. They conclude that the way you deal with teasing and bullying is partly dependent on how students deal with each other, how the school deals with it, but also how the students him- or herself is able to deal with teasing or bullying. Here again the issue of self-esteem and the role of the school to help foster self-esteem became clear.

The visitation group found it worrying that 26% of the students say that effeminate behavior of boys is bad and that 50% of the students doubts if you can come out at school as being gay, bisexual or lesbian. They recommended this topic needs additional attention in the sex education lessons and non-discrimination lessons, and also during the "KIK" lessons and in the recommended actions on self-esteem.
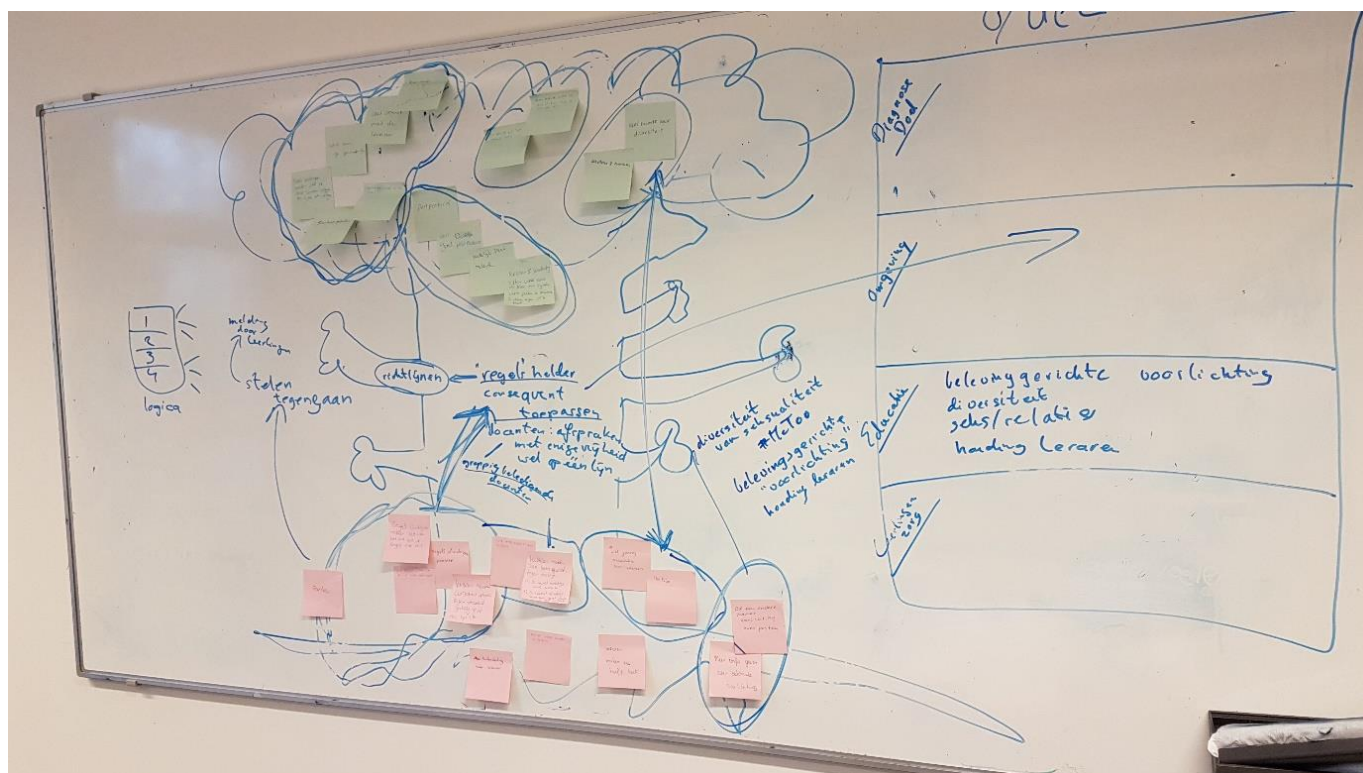
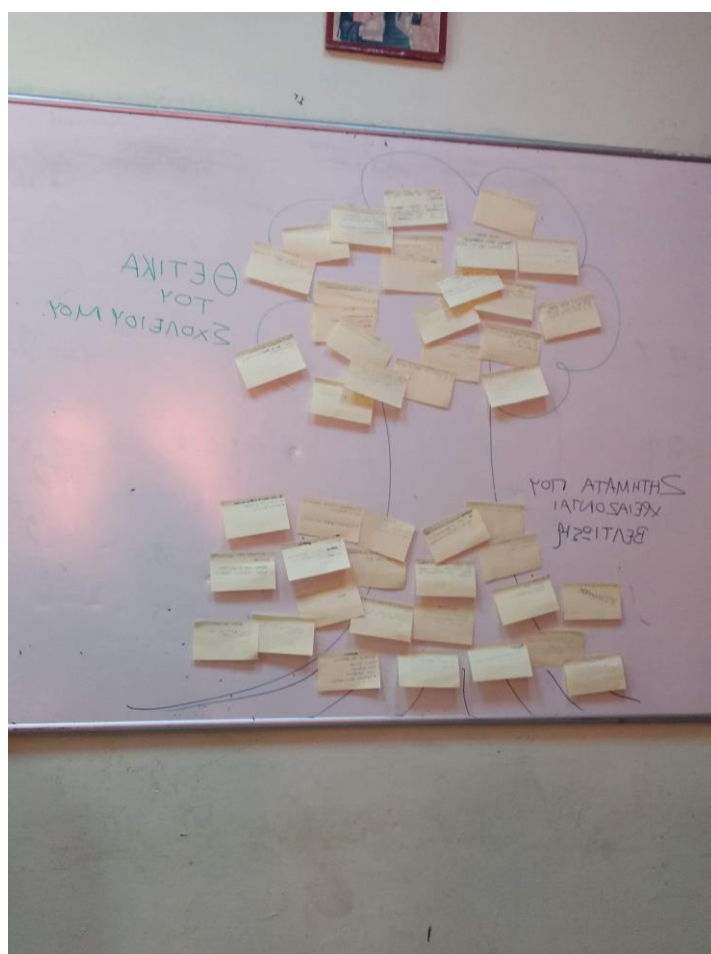THE "RECOMMENDATION TREE" OF STUDENTS OF ALTRA COLLEGE

At the end of the visitation the students wrote their positive comments on the school on green post-its and negative comments on pink post-its. They pasted the positive comments in the leaves and the negative comments in the roots of a tree on the whiteboard, and grouped them in clusters of post-its that were similar. The final phase of the discussion was to formulate recommendations, which were the negative comments reformulated as issues to improve. Six priority recommendations were chosen. In a scheme on the right of the tree, they noted concrete suggestions for implementing the recommendations.

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The recommendations were:

1. Provide clear guidelines for behavior

2. Consistently execute the guidelines by teachers: avoid that each teacher has own (different) rules in his/her own class

3. Implement the rules according to the intention, not to the letter, there should be some freedom in it (everyone makes mistakes)

4. Teachers and students should stop making "funny" insults

5. Do not repeat antibullying information in standard lessons, these lessons should not only be about knowledge but especially focus on experiences and own role in conflicts and on group roles

6. Create more and systematic attention to sexuality, relationships, diversity, #MeToo (gender-based teasing and abuse), and to a positive attitude of teachers during this lessons

SCENES FROM A VISITATION IN GREECE: INTERVIEWS AND THE RECOMMENDATION TREE

A visitation in Italy

In Palermo, 4 students carried out the school visitation in Benedetto Croce College. With the help of their teacher, Mr. Pierpaolo Tripiano, the students interviewed 58 other students, analysed the results and brainstormed about the situation in the school and recommendations.

Here are the results from the interviews.

I never experience uncomfortable behavior at school	Positive: 55%; negative 36%
I like going to school	Positive: 55%; negative 18%
There is a lot of teasing in this school	Positive 38%; negative 34%
I consider that teasing does not hurt people's feelings	Positive 2%; negative 88%
I feel comfortable with all other students	Positive 91%; negative 4%
I feel comfortable with all teachers	Positive 93%; negative 2%
It is difficult to see why teasing turns into bullying	Positive 13%; negative 43%
I see some people are treated in a different way because they are migrants, Roma, gay, lesbian, poor, etc	Positive 25%; negative 39%
Age	14-16

The results show a rather positive school culture, but some aspects could still be improved. For example, ¼ of the students thought that unequal treatment (discrimination) occurs at the school. With a 34% score, teasing seems to be a regular occurrence and some students don't really see how teasing can turn into bullying. The interview showed that most of the interviewed students are able to report and discuss episodes of bullying with their families or with the school staff. Still, several students admitted to be very shy and felt they need to trust more on themselves and on the other classmates. Teasing comments may not be meant in a hurtful way, but shy students may not make clear that some teasing doesn't feel right. A conclusion was that classmates can be more altruist and that they should try to balance their judgements about others. The recommendation was that the school could support ways to make students more open and self-assured, and to give

VISITATION IN GREECE

more attention to diversity and non-discrimination.

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Teacher workshops

The project organized teacher workshops to discuss school policy with the school staff. We give a few examples.

TEACHER WORKSHOP AT VITTORIO EMANUELE II

In the school Benedetto Croce (Palermo) the workshop with the teaching staff focussed on prevention of aggressive communication in school. The teachers studied on non-violent communication and shared their insights with students during lessons. In circle discussions they engaged in comparing experiences through dialogue. This type of discussion requires that both students and teacher take an equal position and take each other seriously.

These circle discussions are also called the maieutic approach or Socratic dialogue. During these dialogues, topics were discussed like "Virtual life is real", "You are what you communicate", "Words shape the way I think", "Listen before speaking", "Words are bridges", "Words have consequences", "Share with care", "Ideas can be discussed…people must be respected!", "An insult is not an argument" and "Silence says something too".

The Dutch teacher workshop started with a presentation of the survey results and the recommendation of the students. For a number of teachers, it was difficult to hear that students criticized teachers for making putdown jokes and offering boring lessons about bullying. Their first impulse was to ask which students responded to the survey and to look for arguments to disqualify the results. This was difficult to counter, because the students survey was filled in by a limited number of classes and was not completely representative. However, the school principal intervened and she said that the results of this in-depth questionnaire were completely in line with an earlier survey about student satisfaction with the school, which was shorter and more superficial, but much more representative. She said she did not doubt that the conclusions of the survey were relevant and needed to be discussed seriously. This discussion shows how

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important it is to make sure that the survey is filled in by a representative number of students, and how important it is that the principal squarely supports the certification procedure, whatever the outcomes.

Later on, the 60 teachers taking part in this workshop went into eight subgroups, each of which dealt with recommendations that were coming from the survey or were made by students. The teachers spent an intensive hour discussing the context of the recommendations and if they agreed with them or not, and how they could help implement them. At the end of the workshop, they formulated their own recommendations:

WAYS TO DEAL WITH ANGER

For students:

1. Students have the task to learn how to deal with their anger, fear and insecurity.
2. Safety and self-confidence can be promoted through group building and rule-setting in the first 6 weeks of the school year (the intervention "key weeks" in the toolkit): getting to know each other, learning to trust each other as a group and agreeing basic rules.

For teachers / staff:

3. Be aware that students are vulnerable and don't joke in a way that can be taken as offensive. Gradually teach students to be "approachable" and "accountable", but do this is small, careful steps in order not to overwhelm them.

4. Teachers would like to get training in youth group processes and how to deal with diversity, strong emotions and polarized opinions.

5. The school needs more/better lessons on social skills, self-confidence, assertiveness, on bullying and on sexual education; these should be more attuned to the everyday needs and questions of the students. Certainly "repetition" of cognitive messages should be avoided.

6. The purpose and function of the time-out (a classroom where students are sent when they disturb the class process and where a counselor can talk with the student) should be reviewed. Is it intended for the student to "cool down" and reflect on his/her behavior, but it is doubted if this

really works. It may be seen by students as a discipline room, and by teachers as an easy way to not deal with obstructive students in class, and to be able to continue with the academic part of the lesson. It may be preferable to develop a way in which social skills are fully integrated in academic lessons, and training is needed when teachers don't know how to handle unsettling emotions of students and obstructive behavior which is really a (dysfunctional) cry for help.

Cyberbullying

In a lot of schools, cyberbullying is considered an important subject, that is why attention was given to this topic in almost all pilots.

Even though the results of the student surveys did not show a particularly high level of cyberbullying, most students and teachers found it important to give attention to it. For students, online life is just as important as real life and cyberbullying may be even more difficult to deal with. For teachers, the online life of students is usually relatively invisible and they feel kind of helpless to support students to be safe individual environment.
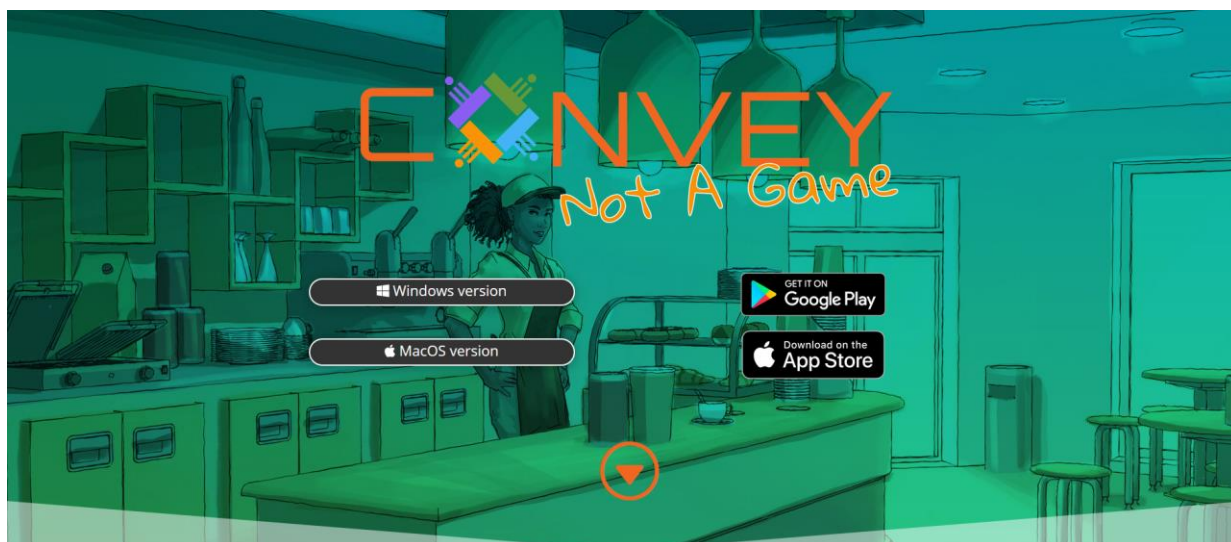
THE CONVEY ONLINE GAME

In one of the schools from Palermo, Vittorio Emanuele II, cyberbullying was of particular importance in the ABC-project, but also in another project specifically on gender-based cyberbullying the school participated in ([CONVEY: Counteracting Sexual Violence and harassment Engaging Youth in school in digital education on gender stereotyping](#)). The CONVEY project developed an online [game](#) to aim to foster the respect of women's rights and to change the behavior of young people that reinforces gender stereotypes and leads to gender violence.

MARIA ADELAIDE, PALERMO

In another school in Palermo, Maria Adelaide, focus groups and world cafes were done with teachers, parents and students to investigate the social and psychological impact of cyber bullying in the community. To prevent, compare and decide about strategies and actions to cope with cyberviolence, three groups discussed different topics:

In the first focus group two parents from each class, the teacher in charge of coordinating antibullying projects and a psychologist from the University of Palermo exchanged information, feelings, worries, and possible strategies in order to deal with the problem of cyber violence. In the second focus group two officers from USSM (an organisation which takes care of minors) informed parents about the current legislation on cyberbullying and what underage students risk when breaking the law. In the third meeting two students from each class involved in the project, together with the psychologist, the well-being officer, the parents and the teachers, shared experiences and knowledge about bullying and cyberbullying. In a sort of flipped classroom, using a cooperative learning methodology, the students worked in small groups in order to prepare a lesson to teach their parents and teachers about their social networks, cyberviolence they encounter and a possible cooperation among different educational agencies (families, school, mass media, experts) to deal with cyberbullying.

The last step of this project was an open discussion in a range of classes about the themes of the three focus groups. The students involved in the focus groups talked about cyberbullying and the results of the focus groups and stimulated debate. This way they collected the impressions and feelings of a larger number of students.

School policy recommendations

The final result of the certification procedure would be a series of recommendations based on the results of the surveys, the student workshop in the teacher workshop. Here we give an impression of the type of recommendations that schools came up with.

For example, the results in the Netherlands showed that schools can come up with quite different policy recommendations even though the situation may be similar. The surveys showed that in both Dutch schools, "street culture" with quite rough verbal behavior was coming into the school. Teachers sometimes did not know how to deal with this. Students did not find this "street culture" particularly

pleasant but also did not know how to change it. The surveys and interviews also showed in both schools that students hated putdowns by teachers and recommended to replace those kind of "jokes" by ways to empower students instead of putting them down.

SCENE FROM DISCUSSIONS OF A DUTCH GROUP IN LIVERPOOL

Divergent results and policies

The school managers responded to these results and recommendations in almost opposite ways. In one school, the management put a lot of emphasis on working together with students and strengthening the school's system to strengthen student's self-esteem. They resolved to coach teachers to get more in line with a common prosocial strategy and taking into account that a considerable number of students feel vulnerable and take playful teasing as an insult, rather than as an tension breaker or motivator. The concrete tools included training teachers to be sensitive in this, and adding lessons on self-esteem, antibullying, sexuality and non-discrimination. In the other school, a strategy was chosen to strengthen discipline and to increase monitoring and

control. The concrete tools included that students had to hand in their cell phones in the beginning of lessons, and that teachers were trained in "relaxed ways to maintain discipline and attention".

Scientific guidelines and autonomy of the school

For the project partners, these divergent choices were a surprise and partly in contradiction to what project partners would like to advise based on scientific research on bullying. The partnership adopted 6 general guidelines for an effective antibullying policy in a school, based on research:

1. Group formation and norming ground rules: start the school year with setting prosocial rules and create safe groups by doing group cohesion activities.

2. Understanding how bullying works and how to act against it: explain to students and discuss what bullying is and how group processes work and can be handled; embed this in a longer-term spiral curriculum.

3. Broad commitment: involve gradually but systematically more staff,

SCENE FROM ITALIAN DISCUSSIONS IN LIVERPOOL

students and parents in the development and maintenance of safe school policy.

4. Support positive behavior, avoid putdowns and punishment: complimenting, rewarding and no-blame methods are more effective than negative methods, like blaming bullies, a lot of attention for bullies and punishment.

5. Focus on school culture and prevention: a good school policy focuses on prevention creating a positive school climate and not only on preventing negative behavior or on handling incidents.

6. Clear and consistent school rules: school rules and procedures are necessary, and should be concise, clear, widely shared with all concerned and equally and consistently applied by all teachers and staff.

The adopted policy by the second Dutch school did not conform with these guidelines, as it ignored group processes, self-esteem and the full commitment of students with the policy. The project partnership had a discussion on how to deal with such choices.

Some partners thought it was important to stress lessons learned from research or even to include these criteria in the diagnostic rating of the school policy. But others said that the impact of the school policy is dependent on the commitment of the school itself to it. External consultants should follow and support the choices of the school, whatever they are. This was a consultancy dilemma we could not resolve in the partnership.

In, Vittorio Emanuele II, a school in Palermo, the results from the survey showed that some specific areas in the school were experienced as less safe than others. In this case, the school gym was such a place, among other common school spaces. The students and teachers agreed that the school should develop a specific strategy to make these spaces more safe for all. They realized that collaboration is essential and recommended to establish a special committee for antibullying. The committee would support the coordinator, who is formally responsible for the antibullying policy, but would make sure that the school policy is a strategy that is based on the input and commitment of the whole school population. The strategy itself is also based on sharing responsibilities and all school participants undertaking initiatives to make the school environment cleaner and safer. Even people in the wider community should cooperate to make spaces safer. In the ABC-project, parents were not included in the plans, but in Vittorio Emanuele II the school took the initiative to add recommendations for parents. Here is the overview of recommendations that were formulated by Vittorio Emanuele II.

Topics → topics to tackle: ↓ Actions by:	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4
Managers	Improve the quality of the school common spaces and in particular the school gym	Deal with bullying topics and provide psychological help through the establishment of "Sportelli di ascolto" for students	Need to establish a special Committee for antibullying, including school staff and teachers so that responsibility will be shared among many people (not just one coordinator/responsible)	Need to work on the logistics and the organization of the communal spaces.
Teachers	Encourage educational activities, promote solidarity and cooperation between classmates, and between students of different classes	Monitor (more teachers control) on the oldest students, 17-18 years because younger students feel excluded and isolated by them.	Teachers have to share their didactical methods and best practices.	
Students	Foster cooperation and solidarity	Respect common spaces	Denounce to teachers any episode of bullying	
Parents/others	Care about their children, helping them to study and adopt positive behaviors when in school			

In another school in Palermo, Maria Adelaide, a mix of measures was proposed to create awareness about bullying, to train skills and awareness about cyberbullying and to have a more clear guideline on discipline. Interestingly, one of the recommendations of Maria Adelaide College is that the survey on school safety should be done regularly, and that the results should be published publicly to be transparent about the safety of the educational situation.

Follow us!

It would be good if you take part in this by "liking" the (public) Facebook page "How schools combat bullying": https://www.facebook.com/How-schools-combat-bullying-247976002546108.
Newsletters are also published there and can also be found on
https://www.gale.info/en/projects/abc-project.

There is a closed Facebook group for participating teachers and partners:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/250853035553368/.

Students can follow the Instagram page we made for the project:
https://www.instagram.com/studentsjoinagainstbullying/.