

Review Article

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School Bullying and Cyberbullying Update on Theoretical Models and Effective Interventions of Health Promotion

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ABSTRACT

Bullying represents a social problem, widely diffuse in the school age. Almost 10% of young people at school is involved in bullying behavior, and up to 25% report victimization. Although a trend in decreasing prevalence is generally observed in the transition across school levels, the impact of bullying in social relationships and in mental health is dramatic. Several forms of bullying are possible, and different explanatory models have been proposed for accounting to this phenomenon. An accredited model gives importance to social roles beyond bully and victim (i.e., bystanders, victim defender and bully supporter), but also to the dynamics in the whole social circle (vicious circle of bullying). Cyberbullying is an increasing phenomenon, in which aggressive behaviors are catalyzed by anonymity and amplified by digital means. Cyberbullying shares some features with traditional bullying, but it represents a diverse, unique entity. This mini-review aimed to be an updated narrative report of the current theoretical and explanatory models of bullying and cyberbullying, with references to social psychology and health psychology. Lastly, some intervention models of health promotion to reduce bullying and cyberbullying are discussed, with particular emphasis on peer education.

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Introduction

School Bullying: A Current Social and Public Health Emergency

Bullying represents a diffuse social problem, which assumes a group dimension in the educational school context [1-3]. In the Western societies, it reaches consistent rates of prevalence both in terms of perpetration and victimization, likewise in primary and secondary school [4]. Large-scale population studies estimate that approximately 9% of young people are involved in bullying behaviours, and up to 25% of children in school age experience some form of victimization [5]. Among risk factors for school bullying, a high number of students, the school district, and disadvantaged socioeconomic status have been reported [6]. A significant role for gender is documented, with male gender being traditionally found to be more associated with bullying behaviours, as well as for public versus private schools, the latter being at higher risk [7].

Different types of Bullying Behaviours

Bullying represents a manifold phenomenon, that expresses socio-relational distress through different ways: “classical” (offline) bullying, indirect bullying, as perpetrated by means of social manipulation, and relational bullying, as perpetrated through the voluntary intent to disrupt reputation, self-esteem and social status, as well as the interference on social relationships [8]. School bullying can be differentiated in physical and non physical

behaviour, the most common of the latter form is name calling; other forms included relational bullying and cyberbullying [7,9]. Name calling and relational bullying are expression of traditional (offline) bullying, whereas cyberbullying identifies a specific category (see paragraph below). Traditional bullying is carried out with verbal or physical aggression.

To implement preventive actions for contrasting bullying behaviours in school environment is crucial. It's widely documented that the “diversity” in all its features seems to catalyze discriminatory and vexatious actions in bully [10,11]. Physical appearance, ethnicity and sexual orientation, and any form of weakness and peculiarity may represent a potential target for bullying.

This discriminatory attitude is named prejudice-related bullying [5]. People perceived as “diverse” in whatever meaning are at higher risk of victimization, especially in certain settings as school and at a thorny age as adolescence, when the faculty to discern the right and wrong behaviours still not fully developed.

Bullying is a social emergency above all for people suffering for learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders (neurodiversity). A meta-analysis estimated that, among children with a diagnosis of autism spectrum, up to 67% is at risk of victimization and 29% is at higher risk to perpetrate bullying [12]. Children with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are also at higher risk to be involved in bullying behaviours; however, school programs focused on interventions to reduce

risk factors, as intolerance to frustration and agitation/hostility, can give an important contribution for preventing and contrasting this phenomenon [13].

Nowadays, a common view about the most significant determinants of bullying among predisposing factors is still lacking [5]. In the past, it has been investigated the existence of a pattern of personality traits more strongly associated with bullying [14]. A role of low self-esteem has been also hypothesized, with mixed evidence [15,16]. More recently, the focus has been directed to the life skills, in particular emotional intelligence and empathy [17]. A previous study found a strong reverse association between bullying and cognitive features underlying empathy, perceived self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence [18]. Temperamental factors, as suggestibility, emotionality and efforts to control, may play a role as moderators on efficacy of the treatments [19].

Influence of Psychological Factors and Cognitive Mechanisms on Bullying attitudes: Contributions from Social Psychology

Beyond the above mentioned social and temperamental factors, other determinants of bullying behaviours can be identified in implicit psychological mechanisms, as cognitive biases and dysfunctional beliefs. The social information processing theory postulated that aggressive behaviours can be influenced by the hostile attribution bias: this phenomenon occurs when an individual interprets as hostile one's intention in an ambiguous situation [20,21]. This implicit attitude (*bias*) is based on cognitive or motivational processes that precede affective processing, and interferes with the emotional regulation. Previous evidence supported the role of cognitive and affective dimensions of morality as mediators of adolescents' aggressive and prosocial behaviours [22]. Another type of bias that occurs in the bullying circle is the *fundamental attribution error*, the tendency to overemphasize individual characteristics and underestimate situational factors when people judge others' behaviour. This represents a urgent issue in bullying, since victims are blamed as such (*victim blaming*) as a justification for the presence of bullying in the own class, with the consequence of reinforcing the bullying aggression, a mechanism similar to the *self-fulfilling prophecy*. The *Belief in a Just World (Just-World Theory)* postulated by Lerner in 1980 claims that negative events occur to bad people while good events occur to right people. In fact, following this type of mental approach, one is led to blame the victims by holding them responsible for what happened. It represents a way for justifying and rationalizing these assumptions, that make this belief dysfunctional in certain situations. In his seminal experiments of social psychology in 1970s, Zuckerman reported a tendency to altruistic behaviours, even in absence of an objective profit, in people who believe in a just world [23]. According to this model, students who believe in a just world would avoid bullying behaviours. However, this belief itself is subjected to cognitive biases whose an individual is not fully aware. The theory of *belief in a just world* received significant consideration in recent years, with the operationalization of a two-dimensional model in which a distinction was made between believing in a just world *for themselves and for others* [24]. The cognitive biases above mentioned (*fundamental attribution error and belief in a just world*) are further, indirectly related to another cognitive mis-attribution, in turn widely investigate in social psychology, so called "Hypothesis of defensive attribution" (*defensive attribution theory*), firstly introduced by Shaver in 1970. This mechanism states that victim blaming depends from the degree of similarity perceived between the victim involved in the situation and themselves; the rationalization underlying the bias is that the more dissimilar is the victim, the less likely the

same event would occur to the subject. Thus, the attribution of a certain degree of responsibility to the victim (*victim blaming*) holds the defensive aim to attenuate the risk to be involved in a similar situation, with the consequence that victims are made responsible for the accident. Research in this field reported that the degree of perceived similarity, both in situational (i.e., social context) and individual (i.e., personality and attitudes) reduce the tendency to blame the victim [25]. An intervention to change the dysfunctional cognitive schemata toward hostility, in the field of educational programs for health promotion, may modulate the negative effects on the risk to perpetrate bullying behaviours.

Association of Bullying and Risk of Mental Health Problems

Bullying is recognized as a risk factor for development of psychopathology in late adolescence and adult age, but also the reverse is true: a higher vulnerability for psychological grief is in turn a risk factor for victimization [26]. The relationship between bullying and psychopathology is bidirectional. It's known that being victim of bullying is associated with higher incidence of psychosocial concerns and mental health problems in adolescents [11]. Specifically, perpetrators have higher risk to develop externalizing problems – i.e., substance use – while victims are more vulnerable to develop internalizing problems, as anxiety, depressive and psychosomatic disorders [4, 27]. Up to 29% of depressive syndromes as observed in adults can be related to previous experiences of being bullied in early life [28]. However, the relationship between bullying behaviours and the development of negative psychosocial sequelae is not linear: factors that can modulate this association are self-esteem, tendency to loneliness or to depression, and the positive relations with parents, in particular the quality of dialogue and education to good manners [29]. Victims of bullying often experience low self-esteem; conversely, social skills – in particular the ability of conflict resolution – are positively associated with high levels of self-esteem [11]. Interventions focused on enhancement of *life skills* as a target of health promotion, as *peer education* programs in the schools, represent an important opportunity for contrasting bullying and for creating safe contexts or *resilient communities*, in which each school member is involved as main character.

Theoretical and Explicative Approaches for Bullying Investigation

There are two main fundamental approaches for the study of bullying. The one based on traditional roles (*participant role approach*) identifies three types of attitudes by peers who attend to the situation: pro-bully, pro-victim, e passive or neutral bystander [30]. Accordingly, beyond the bully and the victim, the more relevant participants are the bully supporter, the victim defensor and the bystander, respectively [2,31,32]. Several factors have been associated to the lack of intervention by the bystanders. The most investigated is the *diffusion of responsibility* bias, the tendency to not intervene in situations where other bystanders are present, with the implicit assumption that somebody else will take initiative [4]. Regarding bullying, this type of behaviour has been called "*bystander effect*" [2]. Interestingly, in contrast with the social context influence, intrinsic motivations have been associated with a propension to victim defense and less passive behaviours [33]. The role of *bystander* is very crucial in the sociorelational context in which bullying behaviours occur, and the personal characteristics of the passive bystander are complex; however, this social actor represents a fundamental target for health interventions [25].

An alternative view in the approach toward bullying is that named *bullying circle*. This theoretical framework postulates the involvement of a higher number of participants, who have a direct or indirect role, giving more attention to the dynamics within the social context in which bullying behaviours occur. In this perspective, the potential roles are not fixed but dynamic, hybrid, thus the contextual dimension appears more complex and should be investigated at a more deep level. To this purpose, a new term has been coined that appears as a paradox, “*frenemy*” (fusion of *friend* and *enemy*), used to describe an attitude apparently friendly toward someone who at the same time is object of hostility [30].

In sum, the abovementioned approaches highlighted two fundamental aspects for understating the bullying phenomena: the need to a deep investigation of cognitive biases and implicit attitudes (*intraindividual* level); and the connotation of bullying as a multidimensional entity, in which interpersonal, sociocultural and peer group dynamics are a crucial target of intervention (*interpersonal* level).

Cyberbullying: Associations with Traditional Bullying

Internet and sociale media a sort of virtual place, a favored space for young people to build relationships and make experiences that involve social, emotional and moral dimension [34]. These experiences can be negative or positive in valence, with important consequences on the wellbeing and mental health; moreover, adolescent make access to digital media in a phase of their life in which the cognitive and emotional abilities to manage and control potential dangers and pitfalls are not fully developed. Adolescent have not yet available “antibodies” to cope with aggression and other dangerous behaviours usually present in the web universe [35]. During pandemic, young people continued to use internet for attending to school lessons, extracurricular activities, and for socialization. However, a potential negative consequence of prolonged internet use is the exposure to cyberbullying [36]. This represents an expansion of traditional bullying (*offline bullying*), where aggressions are made through technology as mobile phones or internet, and are not limited to school context [37]. Cyberbullying is less related to physical places, thus more pervasive [35]. Perpetration of aggressive behaviours is made by means of two modalities, one directly addressed to victim and the other indirect, through the involvement of bystanders. The latter category represents a modulator for the entire process [38]. Accoding to the *vicious circle* abovementioned, several roles are involved, each deserving attention and potential educational intervention [30]. Among them, those who are more aside represent the so-called “*silent majority*”, that from one side is more indirectly related to the manifest behaviours, but from the other side may act changing the dysfunctional dynamics intrinsic to the vicious circle, also stopping negative behaviours, as suggested by evidences in literature [5,27]. To this purpose, cyberbullying can be efficiently contrasted with interventions focused on the community rather than at an individual level, since it should be viewed – even more than traditional bullying – as a social, cultural and interpersonal phenomenon [2,3,31,32].

Definining Cyberbullying: Differences and Similarities with Traditional Bullying

Nowadays, a standardized definition of cyberbullying in terms of its specific characteristics is still lacking [36]. Although a shared pattern of features with traditional bullying, in the past this type of digital bullying had heterogenous definitions [29]. A fundamental dimension with respect to offline bullying is that cyberbullying is more radicated in the digital context: social networks and internet in general allow a higher degree of interpersonal distance and the

anonymity. A survey carried out through a *focus group*, with the aim of investigating the social representation of the phenomenon in young people till 18 years, highlighted that adolescents tend to consider cyberbullying as a “internet bullying”. Authors found intentionality, reiteration of the behaviours, imbalance of power and anonymity as important criteria to define the phenomenon [39]. More recently, the criterion of reiteration of aggressive behaviours has been questioned, due to the amplification effect that a single action may obtain online [3,40]. According to other perspectives, the intentionality does not represent a core feature, since perpetrators could not be fully aware of the consequences of theri behaviours [29]. Conversely, other authors encompass intentionality among the criteria [41,42]. A shared feature with offline bullying is the imbalance and abuse of power [. A recent study, carried out on children with socioeconomic disadvantages, used a comics-style approach to assess the emotional experiences of victims. The results supported the high complexity of the phenomenon, and the highest prevalence of verbal aggression as the most common type of bullying behaviour; then, in more than half of cases cyberbullying was represented in a similar manner of traditional bullying, supporting the existence of a continuum [44].

Epidemiology

According to a systematic review and meta-analysis, one child out six is involved in cyberbullying [45]. COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences on the use of social networks may have increased the diffusion of cyberbullying, so an update on previous estimates is needed [46]. Recent data report a prevalence of cyberbullying in Europe ranging between 6% and 46%, and between 14% and 57,5% for victimization, with a prevalence of 20-40% among adolescents who suffered from online aggression [43,44]. Individuals involved in the vicious circle – as perpetrators or victims are more at risk to develop internalizing and externalizing symptoms [47]. Cyberbullying is more diffused among those with higher education, and prevalence remains stable in the transition from school to university (ibidem). This finding is in counterrend with respect to traditional bullying, where a decrease of behaviours is usually observed approximately of 15% for each level of transition [7]. Several studies documented a correlation between low satisfaction for own body image and cybervictimization. The more time spent online, the more risk to be exposed to idealized body images and models and more attention to appearance. Thus, self-image projected on the virtual space displays a crucial role as mediator of cyberbullying, and high self-esteem for his/her own body, affective support by family and by peers are important protective factors [48].

Association between Cyberbullying and Internet Addiction

Several studies reported an association of cyberbullying with internet addiction [49-51]. During pandemic, rates of prevalence for internet addiction increased, together with those relative to interpersonal aggression, with significant consequences in terms of psychosocial distress and mental health problems due to online bullying. According to a recent review, social support and quality of family relationships are negatively associated with co-occurrence of bullying and internet addiction [50]. There was not reported any significant difference about gender, even if aggressive behaviours seem more frequent in males; time spent online was not directly associated with higher prevalence of aggressions, but it increases the anonymity; prolonged use of internet seems a higher risk factor for victimization than for perpetration [43]. Interestingly, a recent study supports the hypothesis that attitudes toward aggression are perpetrating factors for online addiction by means of cyberbullying [51].

Moral Disengagement is a Catalyzator for Bullying Behaviours

Some studies support the existence of a mechanism of moral detachment behind perpetration of cyberbullying [38,52]. The *moral disengagement* is the tendency to perceive as less important the hostile and aggressive behaviours toward others, to minimize the consequences and responsibility of own actions, and to be less empathic with the victim. Gender differences seem to exist about the threshold for bullying and about the notion of “*moral engagement*”. A recent study reported that gender and moral disengagement were factors more associated with development of cyberbullying than conflicts with parents [52]. However, results about the role of gender and age are not uniform. Instead, more evidences support the role of the degree of moral detachment as risk factor for bullying behaviours [38]. Accordingly, a research recently found a correlation between *cybergossip* and cyberbullying, and supported the role of cognitive mechanisms as moral disengagement in the transition across them [34]. These findings are very important since they underline once again the need to take into account potential cognitive biases, as normalization, objectification, dehumanization and justification for the own actions that, if mediated by moral disengagement, may exacerbate the vicious circle of bullying in all its variants. On the other hand, it's worth of note that other studies consider state that certain factors – as the search for high sensations (*sensation seeking*) and the impulsive behaviours – play a role in determining cyberbullying, in a more robust manner with respect to moral values and norms, both in adolescents and in adults; such a relationship seems to be stronger for cyberbullying than traditional bullying [51]. These evidences suggest to take carefully in consideration the role of impulsive behaviours behind aggression as target for intervention to contrast cyberbullying.

Association between Cyberbullying and Mental Health Problems

Reserach data document a strict relation among at risk behaviours, mental health problems and self-harm behaviours with bullying and cyberbullying, further supporting the need for intervention programs focused on prevention and contrast in the young population. A study with over 6500 students from 23 German schools found a link between cyberbullying and mental health problems, more specific than for traditional bullying [53]. Previous studies reported distinct associations among cyberbullying, cybervictimization, coping strategies and depressive symptoms. Siah and colleagues recently documented that the link of cyberbullying and depressive symptoms seems to be not linear, but mediated by the efficiency of coping strategies [54]. All the coping strategies were associated with contrast to cybervictimization, but only the avoidant strategy was significantly associated with the impact of cybervictimization on depression.

Cyberbullying effects are catalyzed by other factors as the accessibility and diffusion of internet contents, the permanence of online materials on digital files, the facility to contact victims and the anonymity, with the consequent impression of immunity [37]. As highlighted in the seminal experiment of Milgram about obedience to authority, social distancing is a catalyzing factor for the exacerbation of aggression and cynism. In these situations an individual has an attitude to speak or act in ways that would not carry out in other conditions, a phenomenon exponentially increased online, called *online disinhibition effect* [55].

The abovementioned review of Vessey and colleagues did not examined any study including transgender people, nor ethnic minorities [50]. However, both dimensions are associated with

higher risk of bullying. Overall, each type of peculiarity or discrepancy from the normative standards can be subjected to a sly tendency to discrimination (*minority stress*), and represents a nucleus of fragility at higher risk for bullying and cyberbullying perpetration [10,11]. Transphobia represents a form of bullying where gender identity is the core feature, that is carried out even by means of technology, becoming cyberbullying. The steady threat to the sense of safety and the pervasivity of this mood in online situations exacerbate the psychosocial distress of transgender people victims of cyberbullying, with anonymity being a determinant factor. Feelings of shame and avoidance usually occur and victims can isolate themselves and go out from the web. The profound sens of belonging to the community and the perceived social support they seek are powerful means to cope with victimization. Studies report that the capacity to live authentically thier identity and the social acceptance by *cis* and *transgender* people attenuate the grief caused by victimization [56]. Such factors intervene for the mitigation of *outcomes* about psychopathological diseases that transgender people are susceptible to develop.

Current Psychoeducational Interventions for Contrasting Bullying: Indications from Research

Although some studies reported a slight reduction of peer victimization due to worldwide campaigns against bullying, a recent international research estimated that approximately one third of students experiences some form of bullying at school [57]. Previous studies underlined the importance of intervention programs based on disciplinary rules, but also the management of interpersonal relationships in the classroom and activities focused to improve the self-awareness, as well as interventions of *parent training* [27]. In prevention programs for cyberbullying, the majority of interventions is aimed to promote novel knowledge and skills, self-awareness and efficient strategies to cope with the phenomenon, in the perspective of *psychoeducation*.

A huge amount of research reported less robustness of educational interventions for reducing school bullying [45,58,59], as well as high heterogenity of methodologies used [60]. Conversely, a meta-analysis documented as prevention programs targeted to cyberbullying reach an efficiency for reducing of 10-15% online bullying and 14% cybervictimization [61]. Another recent meta-analysis on 17 studies that investigated the efficacy of psychoeducational programs to reduce bullying found a global very small effect, both on bullying and cyberbullying. Authors recommend to take into account some aspects that play a modulation role on efficacy, as an intervention carried out by an expert of digital technology than by a teacher, and suggest to improve the use of specific methods to maximize the efficacy of the intervention [62]. Studies also document that the genitorial model is determinant, both as educational model and deterrence to act bullying, although other studies report a more significant role of the peers compared to parents, supporting the hypothetical model of bullying as a social and relational phenomenon related to network dynamics and social status [63,64]. In some cases, the social pressure exerted by the group of peers are more influent than the personal attitudes to intervene.

Research on *coping* strategies highlights that social support, both from adults and from *peers*, represents the most efficient contrasting factor against cyberbullying [44]. Specific interventions targeted on *social skills* can be protective from bullying behaviours and exert a significant impact for the mitigation of the negative sequelae of victimization. This *educational* approach seems to be

more efficient than traditional *proscriptive* and prescriptive ones, as supported by a recent research in which authors suggest that educators should intervene on peer relationships more than on the prevention of violence [65]. To this purpose, intervention programs for promotion of knowledge and sensibilization of the potential risks related to internet use, promotion of safety and improvement of coping strategies, seem to be more promising compared to those oriented to avoidance [47]. However, to be victim of online vexation has an impact as moderator on the relationship between *social skills* and self-esteem, often requiring additional specific interventions beyond those for training social skills, to face with consequences of victimization. Conversely, independently from being victimized, the *social capital* – the number and quality of significant affective and social relationships – is found to be strongly related to self-esteem [11]. Among the most effective programs, the *Prev@cib* is a type of intervention based on three different theoretical models: an ecologic model, an *empowerment* model and one focused on personal responsibility. This kind of intervention has been carried out to reduce and prevent aggressive behaviours by means the inclusion of adolescents in activities of *cooperative learning* and education toward a shared responsibility in the school context [59]. Data seem to support an usefulness in reducing bullying despite less efficacy for cyberbullying; the importance of a global intervention on the school context, to improve the school *atmosphere*; and the importance to include teachers as fundamental agents, as a crucial resource for the success of the project.

Data from literature support the efficacy of interventions of *peer education* to contrast bullying, with teachers having a key role as agents of change [66]. This method represents a fundamental approach in the field of prevention and health promotion, focused on the education and empowerment of cognitive and non cognitive skills – specifically, socio- relational and emotional skills or *soft skills* – among peers in a group, in order to make them in turn educators for others in different social contexts. The type of educational training is “horizontal”, since people sharing the same social status acquire specific skills to be spent for the community, in a sort of virtuous circle for health generation (*salutogenesis*). These particular *Life Skills*, or *Skills for Life* according to the original term used by the World Health Organization in 1994, are also named *Soft Skills* or “transversal skills”, being complementary to the cognitive ones (“*hard skills*”) and transferable in whatever professional field. To this purpose, in January 2022 the House of the Representatives of the Italian Parliament approved an act for a pilot application for three years of didactic activities focused on the development and improvement of the Life Skills. At present, the final approval of the proposal presented on January 20221 has not been achieved (“*Introduzione dello sviluppo di competenze non cognitive nei percorsi delle istituzioni scolastiche e dei centri provinciali per l’istruzione degli adulti, nonché nei percorsi di istruzione e formazione professionale*”, Atto Senato n. 2493 XVIII Legislatura). After the new legislature started on October 2022, the measure is pending. The last update by the current government, at the moment of the drafting of this manuscript, is a document of 03 August 2023.

To pry up emotional intelligence and the associated *life skills*, by means of specific programs for promoting and for the empowerment of these abilities, is crucial in the framework of educational programs for contrasting bullying and cyberbullying [67]. International data show that the intervention on the schools may lead to reduction of bullying behaviours up to 90%, despite a complete interruption show lower rates [68].

Due to high heterogeneity of interventions, some authors suggested to further deepen the specific targets of observed efficacy of the educational programs, to maximize the use of these methods for contrasting the aggression behaviours [61]. Among them, digital education, interventions for an empowerment of empathy, empowerment of the accountability in the use of internet, a training on coping strategies, and the involvement of parents in the educational programs showed a significant relevance [40]. A recent review and meta-analysis underlined that programs targeted on cyberbullying that follow standardized operational criteria show efficacy both toward traditional bullying and cyberbullying [47]. Then, according to the principle of *andragogy* formulated by Knowles in the 90s, the human being needs to feel the sense of his own action and to understand the utility of that. So, an active participation within intervention programs leads to a more pervasive and powerful effect with respect to carry out the traditional psychoeducative interventions on *life skills*. These findings have been previously highlighted by an Italian research group ten years ago, that found better results for the peer education compared to traditional training for empowerment of self-awareness, in terms of reduction of bullying, cyberbullying and victimization [4]. That approach may act on two sides: directly on *peer educators* involved in the project and indirectly on the whole class, by changing the previous dysfunctional dynamics. With the *peer education*, in sum, people can realize a sort of “immersive community experiences”, to offer both to students and educators, where people can share their authentic selves, learn a mediation between the own needs and the others ones, in a peculiar context – the *class* and, at a top- down level, the *school* as an entity –that represents a unique ambience [3].

Limits

This mini-review is an attempt to propose a brief narrative report of the updated evidences on school bullying and cyberbullying and of some promising interventions. It’s not a systematic review, so literature search is not exhaustive. Then, the organization of contents and reported findings would be educational, with the aim to give an overall insight on bullying and the current approaches to define, understand and contrast the phenomenon.

Conclusion

Bullying is a school emergency, often an hidden phenomenon that impairs personal growth and social identity, in lifetime period in which an individual is building his/her own personality, desires and vocations. Cyberbullying is a specific kind of online bullying, catalyzed by anonymity, social distance and technological means. A debate still exists about the degree of overlap between the two phenomena. Different theoretical models from social psychology have been proposed for explaining the underlying mechanisms of bullying and cyberbullying, especially cognitive biases and dysfunctional beliefs operating in social contexts. An influential explanatory model of bullying gives importance to distinct social actors, also involving the passive bystanders and other roles (i.e., victim defender, bully supporter) in the vicious circle. Thus, a significant role of the peers is widely documented as significant target for programs of prevention and health promotion. Among the more efficient intervention programs, those focused on the empowerment of life skills through participative projects of *peer education* seems more promising than traditional psychoeducational programs. *Peer education* is a specific method for health promotion that operates at an holistic group level, by means of educational activities in which each actor holds a participative role as member of a community. Teachers and peers are both main characters involved in participative and immersive

community experiences. Improvement of the social skills, the knowledge and the self-awareness of potential risks of internet use, the promotion of a personal and shared sense of responsibility, the acceptance of others' reasons, and the investment on creating health communities, can all represent actions for contrasting bullying and cyberbullying, with a significant role of social support and authentic social relationships.

Authors' Contribution

NS and MC conceived the research. NS made the first draft of the manuscript. EM and GF contributed to literature review and revised the manuscript. MC coordinated and supervised the work. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

None.

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Data Availability Statement

All data reported are available in public databases (PubMed; APA PsycInfo) and websites (<https://journals.openedition.org/>; <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/>), or in specialistic textbooks, as reported in the section below (References).

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