

## FROM THE VICTIMIZATION TO THE MEDIATION OF PEER CONFLICTS: AN EXPERIENCE IN AN ITALIAN SCHOOL



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### Abstract

Victimization is the process of taking the role of a victim that is generated in relation to a crime, or is simply perceived as one (autovictimisation). Whether it is an external or an internal induction, this process involves a set of clinically related significant factors. When the offense is committed by minors, we are faced with peer victimization, a phenomenon much more common than one might think, because part of it is still submerged. It is important to point out that socially and medically intervention with regard to a "victimized" person is far more complex than intervening before the role of the victim has become well established. It is for this reason that, in addition to clarifying the various forms through which it manifests the role of the victim, it is important to research the strategies needed to manage the conflict in a competent way before this should result in crime and clinical relapses for one of the two roles. The scientific interest of this paper is to highlight how a territorial project can help a minor to deal with differences and conflicts between people through mediation skills.

*Keywords:* Victimization, peer mediation, conflict management, school, skills

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doi: 10.15405/ejsbs.76



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## **1. Introduction**

Victimization is the process of taking the role of a victim that is generated in relation to a crime, or is simply perceived as one (autovictimisation) (Braiker & Harriet, 2006; Doerner, 2012). Whether it is an external or an internal induction, this process involves a set of clinically related significant factors (Brown & Bzostek, 2003). When the offense is committed by minors, we are faced with peer victimization, a phenomenon much more common than one might think, because part of it is still submerged (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Especially at the youth level and often also at the level of adulthood, the presence of a victim implies the existence of a conflict. If studies of the victim have extended the field in various directions, such as school (Faccio et al., 2013; Ladd, 2003; Iudici & Faccio, 2013a), community, labor, sexuality (Grauerholz, 2000), the community (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000), the family (Duncan, 1999; Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998), in the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Iudici, Faccio, Belloni, & Costa, 2013), in the health promotion (Faccio et al., 2013, Faccio, 2013; Faccio, Centomo, & Mininni, 2011; Faccio, Fusa, & Iudici, 2013; Iudici et al., 2013) and so on, it is equally important to point out that socially and medically intervention with regard to a "victimized" person is far more complex than intervening before the role of the victim has become well established.

It is for this reason that, in addition to clarifying the various forms through which it manifests the role of the victim, it is important to research the strategies needed to manage the conflict in a competent way before this should result in crime and clinical relapses for one of the two roles. For these reasons, it seems important to focus investment and effort on how you can promote management skills dealing with differences and conflict (Iudici, 2013; Iudici, Rumi & Faccio, 2013).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Although victimology has clarified the various manifestations through which one can express various ailments, it is necessary to note that the ultimate effect of specifying the profile of the victim is, in certain cases, to radicalize the conflict with the offender. If this makes sense for legal reasons, in the community field there is the risk of creating a social situation in which the differences are reinforced. Therefore, it seems necessary to strengthen studies and useful interventions to ensure that the conflict does not degenerate into suffering, and that one learns how to handle it, especially in the case of children (Iudici, & Faccio, 2013b).

### **3. Research Questions**

The scientific interest is to highlight how a territorial project can help a minor to deal with differences and conflicts between people through mediation skills.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study aims to show the application of the methodology of peer mediation in some districts of the province of Como and Milan, in northern Italy. The project in question involves school and extracurricular activities, and involves about 600 students.

### **5. Peer Mediation**

Although mediation has only gained a certain amount of international importance in recent decades, its history is dotted with different joint interventions that spans the history of man. Different civilizations have created similar roles, formally and informally (Boulle, 2005; Brown, 1982; Folberg, 1983). The practice of mediation refers to the action of the provision of aid by a neutral, one who is equipped with competencies in order to resolve a dispute or conflict (Schrumpf et al., 1997). The purpose of the mediator is mainly to facilitate the identification of a solution, and secondly to promote the competence to do so independently (Williams & Winslade, 2010). Skills that the peer mediator must typically possess are skills of communication, problem solving skills, competence to identify and analyze differences, and competence to manage interpersonal relationships (Turnuklu et al., 2009). Although mediation is used in various areas such as family, legal, commercial and legal, not all states possess normative references to make full use of its functionality. In legal and juridical field, it is also a strategy of the restorative justice (Iudici, Villorani, & Antonello, 2013).

In fact, the benefits of this practice are fully shared in the international literature, especially the avoidance of lengthy legal processes that tend to be economically wasteful and psychologically stressful (Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson, 2002).

Recently this practice has also been used in the context of education and schooling (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Schultz, 2002). In this context it is referred to as peer mediation, and addresses the needs of young people of the same age. Many times peer mediation has been used as a strategy in more complex projects, and refers to health promotion (Harden, Oakley, Oliver, 2001) or social inclusion (Cremin, 2007) the fight against violence and antisocial behavior (Cantrell et al., 2007; Noaks & Noaks, 2009) or in the school (Kosier, 1997; Bell et al., 2003). Researchers who have been involved in validating the effectiveness of peer mediation in schools argue that it must meet at least three criteria: the accuracy of planning, the methodology extending beyond the duration of the project, and the mediation

must be implemented with regard to all the roles that make up the school organization, not only the students (Bodine & Crawford, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). In operational terms, peer mediation can be considered a strategy to solve a single conflict, while in general terms it can be identified as a practices designed to configure the problems in a non-confrontational way, based on different levels of sharing. Once again, more than "curing" the symptoms associated with medical conditions, one should invest in the ability of children to "heal" conflicts before they explode into a worse situation. It's necessary to introduce a new epistemological and teorical concept (Faccio, 2011; Faccio et al., 2012; Faccio, Bordin, & Cipolletta, 2013; Cipolletta & Faccio, 2013; Faccio, Castiglioni, & Bell, 2012; Faccio, Romaioli, Dagani, & Cipolletta, 2012; Castiglioni et al., 2012; Romaioli, & Faccio, 2012).

## **6. The Project "Strengthening the Skills of Conflict Management"**

This project stems from the need to enable young students to develop the social skills associated with active and responsible citizenship. The idea of the project is to initiate a process of growth and encourage the involvement of students in order to manage diversity and differences.

### *6.1. The overall objective of the project*

- Promotion of conflict management skills
- Promotion of citizenship skills, which help students to engage in an active role as a citizen.

### *6.2. Recipients*

- Students
- Teachers
- Families
- Social workers and educators of the municipal social services

### *6.3. Strategies*

In order to achieve the overall objectives, the strategies put in place are:

#### *6.3.1. Peer mediation*

This is aimed at student volunteers who are interested in learning how to mediate in situations in which differences may arise between students, between students and teachers, and between teachers and parents. This strategy is aimed at creating a system of involving the

management of potential conflicts presented in school by students. In general the aim is to create a culture of managing differences and conflict, particularly through the skills of mediation. At the operational level, social skills are introduced in the classroom in order to facilitate learning, especially learning that relates to other students in a non- confrontational way. The organization of the project includes the following activities:

- Training and voluntary activation of a group of students, selected from different classes in 6 comprehensive schools (12 complexes) with the aim of learning the skills associated with the role of "peer mediator". The course lasts 50 hours and 25 students attended. On a practical level, the recruitment of interested students is preceded by a presentation of the project to all the classes involved. The individual schools, in partnership with families, allow interested students to suspend their normal program for the scheduled hours.
- Training of peer groups. The topics covered in the training course with students include: communication, understanding the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, stigmatization, generation of conflict, knowledge relationships. The course of the training involves the process of recognition of others, their differences, and the identification and sharing of needs.

The tools used are: role-playing, simulations, group activities and group work, interactive teaching, cooperative learning. The meetings also aim to create the conditions that allow students to present the work they have done in different locations: with students, with teachers, with parents' representatives, with municipal services.

- Tutoring of peer mediators, supervision of mediation situations in which they were involved
- Meetings between student peer mediators and the local services involved. These meetings allow the services to know and be updated about the problems that occur in schools.
- Activating processes of awareness in the class, managed by the peer mediator, worked alongside an expert in mediation, involving 600 students. The task is to present the work that has taken place in the course of training and to explain role of the peer mediator in the school.
- Management, in collaboration with teachers and other school staff (including external consultants), of the activities involving the use of a peer mediator. For example, in the case of a new student attending school or a foreign student coming from another field of study, or in the case of a long- lasting conflict between students or between

students and teachers. On the times when the mediating process is activated, the peer mediator works with a properly trained referred teacher.

### *6.3.2. Training and Supervision of Teachers, Families and The Services of Local Actors*

This strategy is designed to teach the teachers, families and operators of local services the general principles of mediation in civil society and in school. At the same time, the activities carried out with the students, both the students' group peer mediator and students who have already participated passively in the project, are presented. A part of the training sessions and supervision is dedicated to creating the conditions for organizational and management some project activities in subsequent years.

- Activation of two routes (training and supervision) intended to increase the awareness of teachers, especially those who have a role of institutional responsibility. There is also the activation of an awareness campaign aimed at the parents concerned. Finally, there is the activation of a route with some social workers who work in municipal services, such as community centers, services for adolescents, oratories, youth centers, recreation centers, minor protection services and home care services for minors.
- Activation of the training course for teachers at primary and secondary levels (3 courses, 16 hours, for a total of 80 teachers)
- Starting the path of supervision on specific situations facing teachers trained in conflict management in the school or family (experiment involving 20 situations)
- Starting the awareness course with the families concerned, involving parents with a minor, and others.
- Starting the training course for social workers in the municipalities where there are schools that take part in the project.

## **7. Conclusions**

After two years operation, the project has become a landmark in the area. Peer mediation has become a tool used in the school context of the district, and this has met three requirements: in particular, it has sensitized schools to engage students increasingly in the management of activities involving collective responsibility. Secondly, it has produced the idea that differences and conflicts can be managed cooperatively between the parties involved, leading to the development of a course in citizenship skills for young people. It consists of a pool of students known in the area who have helped schools and services with regard to organizing practices and receptivity with regard to children from other countries or from other

schools. It has activated a study involving the reception center for unaccompanied minors resident in Como with the aim of organizing ways of peer mediation on the theme of active citizenship for the young guests of the centre. Conventions for integrated activities between schools, social services and associations that deal with social inclusion have also been created. Last, but not least, it has resulted in an awareness that conflict is a collective responsibility. Associated with this is the reduction in the number of uncomfortable situations, including clinical and psychological ones. In fact, the number of reports related to psychological problems have been reduced considerably.

### Acknowledgements

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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