Module 10: Supporting victims of bullying and building resilience

Objective:
- Provide teachers with tools to support victims of bullying emotionally, socially, and academically.
- Learn strategies for restoring confidence and safety for affected students.

Summary of content:

- Identifying the emotional and psychological needs of bullying victims.
- Counselling approaches for supporting students and referral pathways to mental health services/school counselling.
- Academic accommodations for students affected by bullying (e.g., increased absenteeism).
- Helping victims re-integrate socially and rebuild confidence.

Lesson 1: Identifying the emotional and psychological needs of bullying victims

Regarding belongingness as a general emotional and psychological need of children, especially for one undergoing bullying behaviours, Wilson (2004) explores the importance of **feeling connected to peers** in school. His work reflects the fact that children that experience aggressive behaviours are less likely to feel connected in school. As a result, they tend to avoid engaging in social activities, or even tend to entirely avoid social interaction in school.

> • Facilitate peer support programs where students can form positive connections, such as buddy systems or group projects designed to foster teamwork.
> • Encourage participation in extracurricular activities to help victims rebuild their social networks.

Another important particular need that is often tremendously impacted in bullying victims is the **perception of safety**, since they no longer find school as a learning and growing place, but rather associate it with an anxiety and fear inducing place (Brockenbrough et al., 2002; O'Brennan et al., 2009). In addition, behaviours such as avoiding social interaction, aggressiveness, engaging in physical fights, consuming alcohol (usually for teenagers), and bringing weapons to school are a result of feeling unsafe and unconnected with their peers (Brockenbrough et al., 2002; Wilson, 2004).

> • Conduct regular classroom checks to ensure no student feels isolated or unsafe.
> • Establish clear anti-bullying policies and procedures, ensuring all students know how to report bullying incidents anonymously (Espelage et al., 2014).

Bullying victims need opportunities to **express their feelings and have those feelings acknowledged**. Many victims experience internalized shame, frustration, or sadness, which, if left unaddressed, can lead to mental health issues like depression or anxiety (Wang et al., 2013).

- Create safe spaces in the school, such as a counseling room or quiet zones, where students can share their experiences without fear of judgment.
- Incorporate classroom discussions or journaling activities that encourage emotional expression.

Bullying often erodes a student's confidence and self-image. Victims may develop a negative perception of themselves due to repeated humiliation (Rigby, 2003), so the need of being **valued and appreciated** becomes unmet.

- Highlight and celebrate students' strengths and achievements, no matter how small.
- Use positive reinforcement to build confidence in their abilities, both academically and socially.

In other words, as a general guideline, the school needs to provide, through respect and discipline, the right environment where students have: basic physical care, protection, security, guidance, support, control, affection, respect, academic stimulation, autonomy and responsibility (Phye, 2004). While being provided all of the above, the children will start taking full and conscious responsibility for their actions.

Lesson 2. Counselling approaches for supporting students and referral pathways to mental health services/school counselling

Historically, a well-established intervention protocol may incorporate some form of **cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** that fulfils the requirement of being both flexible (as a short-term, long term intervention), well-studied and easy to understand and apply (Muslim et al., 2019). CBT may help victims understand and modify harmful thought patterns and develop coping mechanisms relating to their likely negative self-image as a result of bullying. Differentiating between behaviour (whether verbal or relational) that is intended to harm and an accurate representation of one's character or characteristics should be a key staple of a therapy program and any victim of bullying should be trained and equipped with this ability. Lowered self-esteem and negative views of oneself are prevalent among bullying victims, thus CBT enables them to reframe their negative experiences which might lessen the adverse emotional response.

Several techniques are used in this approach, such as:

Cognitive restructuring*:* Helps students identify unhealthy/unhelpful thoughts (e.g., "I'm worthless because I'm bullied") and make them more flexible or realistic, in the life context of that student. Along with the counselor, the student identifies such unhelpful thoughts that activate intense, dysfunctional emotions, places them into a category of distorted cognitions and then seeks to make them more flexible, realistic or helpful.

Problem solving skills*:* Helps students identify, understand, and address specific challenges in a structured and solution-focused way. Along with the counselor, the student discusses a specific problem and the counselor guides the student through the problem-solving steps:
- *Identify the problem:* for example "I feel overwhelmed because I have to go back to school tomorrow and face my bully. It makes me wanna stay home."

- *Brainstorm potential solutions:* The counselor invites the student to think creatively without judging the ideas. For the problem stated above, some examples could be:
  - ✓ Tell a trusted teacher or counselor about the bullying.
  - ✓ Practice strategies to stay calm if confronted by the bully.
  - ✓ Arrange to spend time with supportive friends during the day.
  - ✓ Avoid areas where the bully usually hangs out.
  - ✓ Role-play how to respond assertively to the bully.
  - ✓ Ask a parent or guardian to communicate with the school for additional support.
- *Evaluate the options*: analyze the pros and cons of each solution, discuss feasibility, potential outcomes, and effort required for each option. For example, "If I tell a teacher, she might intervene promptly, but I would fear that the bully will find out and retaliate. If I practice staying calm, it helps manage my anxiety a little bit, but it does not address the bullying at all."
- *Choose a solution:* guided by the counselor, the student selects one or two solutions that can be implemented and that have the highest rate of anticipated success. The plan for implementation is also discussed. For example, "In the next week, I will tell a trusted teacher and also hang out with my supportive friends during the day. The school should start acting and then I will revise what other options I have."
- *Implement the solution*: put the chosen solution into action and monitor how it goes.
- *Review the results:* Assess whether the solution worked or if adjustments are needed. The following questions can help, in the context of the example offered:
  - ✓ Did talking to the teacher or counselor help? If they took action to address the bullying, did the student feel safer?
  - ✓ Did spending time with friends make the school day more manageable?
  - ✓ Were the calming techniques effective in reducing anxiety?
  - ✓ What worked well?
  - ✓ What still needs improvement?
  - ✓ What are the next steps?

Behavioral activation: With the help of this technique, the student is encouraged to engage in positive, safe activities to improve mood and confidence.

Another individual psychological intervention that has been implemented in bullying prevention programs is **solution-focused brief therapy** (SFBT), which encourages victims to focus on:
- Past successes and exceptions to the problem
- Existing skills and positive personal qualities
- The preferred future (Young & Holdorf, 2003)

Employing techniques such as non-problem talks, scaling, exceptions, miracle questions, and compliments helps student victims focus on building self-confidence and resilience (Gingerich & Peterson, 2013). Concentrating on achievable academic goals may also curb school dropout and absenteeism.

Here are some examples of techniques and questions used to lead the process (De Shazer, & Berg, 1997):

The miracle question: "If the problem disappeared overnight, what would be different?" This question encourages students to focus on solutions and anticipate success.

Scaling: Students rate their confidence or progress on a scale from 1 to 10, helping them visualize improvement.

Non-problem talks: The counselor asks questions to help the student recall moments when the issue was managed well or when things went better than expected.

Coping questions: The counselor explores how the individual has managed to cope despite difficulties, drawing attention to their strengths.
- "How have you managed to keep going despite these challenges?"
- "What has helped you get through difficult times before?"

Strengths and resources exploration:
- "What qualities do you have that will help you overcome this challenge?"
- "Who in your life could support you as you work on this?"

One important aspect of prevention and management programs is the inclusion of **group counselling** and the fostering of a positive peer environment by teachers. Such approaches may use social skills training groups or peer support programs which help build conflict resolution skills and interpersonal abilities (Ohrt et al., 2016). Feelings of isolation and helplessness associated with bullying may be reduced. Group counseling provides a safe space for participants to learn and practice strategies such as cognitive reframing, and emotional expression (Tiger, 2016).

Example: The Matadors Counseling Group (Tiger, 20216)

The Matadors Counseling Group at CCH is an anti-bullying program grounded in the Leisure Ability Model (LAM), that operated in a residential setting where youth, aged 8 to 20, have often experienced significant trauma, such as abuse and neglect.

The group met weekly for 30–45 minutes, with 2–4 participants per session to allow focused interactions. Sessions are facilitated by qualified mental health professionals (MHPs) or certified therapeutic recreation specialists (CTRSs).

Each session included:
- Introductory activity: Icebreakers or brief discussions to gauge emotional readiness.
- Main activity: Focused on a specific topic, such as the types of bullying, emotional regulation, or empathy-building.
- Concluding activity: Reflection and debriefing to reinforce learning outcomes.

Program goals:
• Learn to identify/label feelings and connect them to behaviors.
• Increase willingness to take responsibility for actions.
• Develop age-appropriate boundaries and relationships and will learn to use them in a variety of situations with adults and peers.
• Practice conflict resolution skills.
• Continue to develop and increase ability to interact with peers and adults in positive ways.

Participants completed assessments at the beginning and end of the program to evaluate changes in knowledge and skills related to bullying and relationship-building. Data showed that 61% of participants demonstrated progress, 32% maintained consistent levels, and 7% regressed slightly (Tiger, 2016).

Lesson 3. Academic accommodations for students affected by bullying

One of the consequences of bullying is increased absenteeism. According to Eurostat Report (2022), In Europe the highest school dropout rates are in Romania and Turkey.
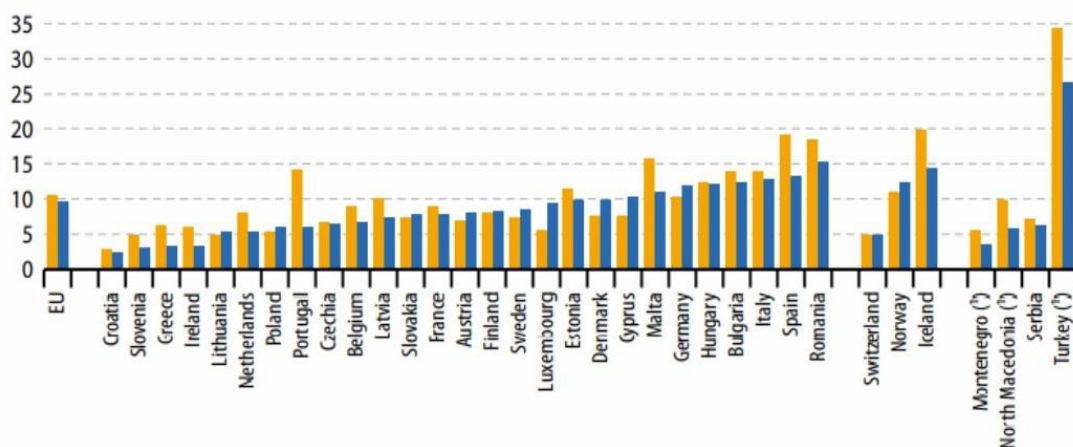

Fig. 1. The early school dropout rate by country in 2016 and 2021

There are different ways of academic accommodations for students as: flexible classes – offer possibility of online classes, if a student cannot be present and also, allowing absences for mental health problems. If these are put into practice, there is an enormous possibility for students going through bullying to feel included in school environment. Furthermore, children who deal the most with bullying are from 7 to 12 years old.

One of the explanations is the reduced level of social and assertiveness skills to deal with bullying. Thus, they can experience isolation (Frisen et al. 2007). In this case they need to know it is **safe to report** any incidents that includes bullying and will receive emotional support.

Another way to help the children who experience bullying is to have access to **quiet places** that can help them concentrate during an exam, homework. For example, if a student is triggered by sounds or other distractions, they can go to a supervised space where there is a full access to notes, lectures or online resources, to take their exams or do an undone homework. This could help them feel secure and understand. Providing **remote learning options (temporary) or flexible seating arrangements** can also help. Offering **alternative formats for assessments**, such as a written project instead of an oral presentation, if the student has trauma-related reactions standing in front of the classroom.

Also, **empowering students** is very crucial in this process of helping. They need to be involved in decision making like what to read, how they can do homework, ideas about group

activities, workable buddy systems. This could help minimise discrimination.

The school administration can also try to **minimize exposure to bullying during vulnerable times**, such as lunch or between classes. This entails implementing a monitoring system of the students, with staff involved.

Lesson 4. Helping victims re-integrate socially and rebuild confidence

All the tools and practices discussed in this module and previous modules help schools to socially reintegrate victims. For some of them the road might be easier, but for others, long-term efforts could be needed. To reinforce the importance of social reintegration of bullying victims, we provide below an example of such a plan, for Jenny (16 years old).

The bullying story:

Jenny, a 16-year-old high school student, with great academic performance, has endured consistent bullying for the past six months. Initially, the bullying began in subtle ways, such as snide remarks about her weight and whispered conversations that Jenny overheard in class. These incidents escalated when a group of peers started targeting her appearance, openly mocking her clothing choices and making comments about her weight.

The bullying then transitioned to online platforms. Using social media apps popular among her peers, the bullies created a group chat where they posted memes and hurtful messages about Jenny. She was excluded from this chat group that included most of her classmates

The situation worsened when classmates began excluding Jenny from group activities. This exclusion occurred both in and out of school. In group projects, her peers left her without a role or disregarded her input, labeling her as "difficult", "bossy" or "not cool enough" to contribute. Outside of school, she noticed she was left out of invitations to social gatherings, events, and study groups. As word spread about her online humiliation, fewer students wanted to be seen interacting with her, fearing that they might also become targets.

One day, a classmate laughed into Jenny's face referencing the chatgroup where they mocked her and she began feeling anxious and very insecure. She wanted to know more about this chatgroup, so she tried to speak with colleagues that she believed were "friends". One of them was in this chat group and showed Jenny some messages. She started crying and feeling very upset. In the next days, she become extremely self-aware and started fearing going to school. The face-to-face mean remarks also continued. Criticism about her appearance and personality caused Jenny to internalize the negative messages, leading to feelings of inadequacy and shame. Jenny's academic performance began to drop as her focus waned.

Jenny developed physical manifestations of stress, including headaches, stomachaches, and fatigue. Her parents noticed she asked to stay home from school due to these symptoms. She stopped participating in her favorite activities, including the school choir, where she had once excelled as a lead vocalist. She avoided eye contact in hallways, rarely spoke in class, and began sitting at the back of the room to avoid drawing attention. Her teachers noticed her disengagement but initially attributed it to typical teenage mood swings.

Her parents started to confront her about these changes and she finally confided in her parents. Although they were supportive, they felt and unsure how to address the situation. Jenny agreed to speak with the school counselor, accompanied by her mum. This marked the first step toward intervention, as the counselor began working closely with Jenny and her parents to develop a plan to address the bullying and support her recovery.

The school's initial reaction:

The counselor, with Jenny's permission, announced the school administration about Jenny's story and they conducted a thorough investigation, speaking with Jenny, the bullies, and witnesses. One colleague (witness) cared a lot about Jenny and she shared with the school administration screenshots from the chatgroup to help Jenny, with the remark that she wanted her name to be left out of any written reports on the topic (the administration respected her request).

All the students in the chatgroup and their parents were informed that they are required to participate in a group discussion about the recent findings. Most of them attended and agreed that such behaviour should be punished. Some of them also agreed to participate in a restorative circle activity, in which Jenny and her family also had the chance to present their perspective and pain.

The chatgroup was closed and, upon multiple discussions regarding consequences, the entire classroom was mandated to participate in 10 group counselling sessions, with the aim of reconnecting, learning proper social-emotional skills and online proper conduct. More severe punishments were also discussed, but they eventually settled for this one. The school administration also revised the anti-bullying management plan of the institution, to make it more efficient.

The social reintegration actions:
- Jenny participated also in 10 individual counselling sessions.
- A go-to person for support during the school day.
- A buddy system was employed and Jenny was paired with a colleague who can support her.
- Jenny was encouraged to rejoin the choir, by some colleagues in there and by the music teacher.
- Parents validated her and encouraged her to participate in the family life.
- At the end of the semester, the head-teacher organized a class-trip to enhance group cohesion through extracurricular activities and most colleagues participated.

Reflection questions: Think about your school. What elements from the case study could be implemented? Can you think of other ways to support victims like Jenny?

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