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THE LESSONS LEARNED LOG
AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Activity	**Lessons learned log and Policy recommendations**
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*The **European Anti-bullying Network (EAN)** was set up in 2014 and comprises 22 members (civil society organizations, public institutions and schools) from 15 European countries, actively involved in and committed to the combat against bullying and cyberbullying.*

The purpose of SociAl competences and FundamEntal Rights for preventing bullying – SAFER project is to develop and implement an innovative method for preventing school violence and bullying, aimed at fostering inclusive education and based on the enhancement of the acquisition of social and civic competences and on the knowledge, promotion and ownership of common positive values and fundamental rights, not only at the level of students and schools but also at the level of community.

SAFER PROJECT, OBJECTIVES and TOOLS

The **SAFER project** aimed at **developing and implementing new ways to prevent bullying and school violence by focusing on** inclusive education and the **acquisition of social and civic competences, along with the promotion of common positive values and fundamental rights.** The fundamental awareness underlying the project was that bullying is a complex phenomenon that originates from and lives within the whole educating community (schools and **community level). Essential outputs of the project are three tools, each one designed to fit the role and point of view of all the main actors of the educating community: the** *Guide for parents and members of the educating communities,* **the** *Students' handbook* **and the** *Teachers' manual.*

SAFER was a **36-month Erasmus + KA3 project** that involved **8 partners from 7 European Countries**: Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Portugal, North Macedonia, and Cyprus. The Lessons Learned also contain some key recommendations for the better design and implementation of new projects and policies for combatting bullying. The piloting phase involved 20 schools, approximately 200 teachers and 1000 students and 500-600 members and organizations of the communities where the schools are, plus parents.

SAFER PROJECT LESSONS LEARNED

The Lessons Learned are the result of an analysis of the piloting phase of the SAFER project, which involved 20 schools, approximately 200 teachers, 1.000 students and 500-600 community members, as well as of the collection of best practices. The best practices were selected and evaluated according to the following criteria: quality, efficacy, innovation and methodology, impact and sustainability and transferability. The Lessons Learned also

comprises some key recommendations for targeting and preventing bullying, cyber-bullying and other violent and anti-social behaviours.

Lesson 1. Bullying is not just a school problem. The idea underlying the SAFER project is that in order to properly deal with and tackle bullying phenomena the entire community must be involved. The reason for this is that bullying is a complex issue, often underestimated or even not seen by the general context. Therefore, to have some chance to prevent or contrast it the entire community -teachers, administrative staff, students, educators, parents and everyone else involved in educational process- should be aware of its functioning mechanisms and of its early symptoms. Moreover, while schools are considered to be the natural setting for bullying episodes to origin and happen, **the incidents also occur out of school,** and every school exists within a wider community. So, it is pivotal to develop community partnerships where actors that play a role in the psycho-physical development of youngsters are active participants. In Greece, for instance, some schools involved in the SAFER project invited local community institutions and associations to promote volunteering, active citizenship, solidarity and cooperation through the implementation of joint activities inside and outside the school. When messages about bullying prevention are carried out by a diverse group people tend to be more impactful. Involving the entire community may ensure that youth receive consistent messages where they live, learn and play.

Lesson 2.: Being part of a community is different from being part of a group. Participation implies that actors keep in mind that being an educator is not just about delegating the task of educating to schools, but operating with them in a circular way. Community meant as educating community is also an open system, articulated and complex that tries to adapt itself to a continuous evolution, to fit the improved, new organizational models. Schools, families, and other members of the community are active participants of the youngsters' development.

In this way they could have a deep understanding of the contextual factors shaping their children.

Lesson 3. Power of the peer approach. Peer education - education of young people by their peers – proved to be very effective. Peer learning supports an environment where students intentionally help each other. The approach is backed by research that highlights its efficacy. Recently, there has been a growing interest in what is termed the "protégé effect," where students deepen their understanding of a subject by teaching it to others. The protégé effect suggests that when students believe they are learning material to teach someone else, they put in more effort and engagement, leading to improved learning outcomes. Moreover, it is easier for adolescents to identify themselves with their peers, rather than with adults, while peers are seen as much more relatable. Peer education also empowers peer educators and increases their self-efficacy and sense of responsibility and, most of all it encourages young people to stand up for their victimized peers.

Lesson 4. Tailor-made interventions. Every school and youth community is different. Even though mechanisms and functioning of bullying are almost the same, age, sex, ethnicity, cultural level, and group dynamics can make a huge difference in its characteristics in certain contexts and simply using ready-made programs rarely works. So, to target the problem in the most effective way it is necessary to develop intervention plans which consider the peculiarities and the unique needs of each school/association/community. It is therefore necessary to establish **a shared vision about bullying** in the community, understanding its impact and distinctive features; identify audiences to create and adjust messages as appropriate; identify the role of each partner to help prevent and respond to bullying; and identify the best tools to be used. The WSCA methodology proposed by the SAFER project is based on social and civic

competences, common positive and democratic values and fundamental rights and it is a framework. So, any school can use and adapt this framework to design its own system of prevention/intervention choosing the most suitable pedagogic/didactic tools and actions (research-based and school-wide curriculum).

Lesson 5. Addressing bullying behaviours is not enough. Bullying is an increasingly multidimensional problem that requires complex solutions: addressing only bullying behaviours without taking into account the **roots of the phenomenon** and its underlying reasons and favorable conditions, may be useless and a waste of effort. Bullying needs a fertile ground to grow. As a matter of fact, contributing factors are 1) bystanders encouraging bullying 2) teachers' lack of preparation about the issue; 3) absence or lack of support of parents; 4) schools perceived as an unpleasant, unfair, and unwelcoming place. One of the pillars of the SAFER project is social competences promotion. Developing friendships, for example, may be a game changer. Social skills can be taught according to the age through presentations, modeling, discussion, storytelling, videos, role-playing, games, and curricular activities. Children who can empathize respond with care to what others think and feel. They understand that bullying hurts. They are less likely to bully and more likely to help children who are bullied. Early childhood educators can protect young children from becoming bullies by helping them understand how children who are bullied might feel and how they themselves would feel if they were bullied. On the other hand, children who are assertive can stand up for themselves and others in fair and respectful ways. They know how to respond to a bully in effective, non-aggressive ways and are less likely to be targeted by bullies in the first place. Positive school climates, like a healthy immune system, promotes optimal health and reduces the chances of dysfunction or disease. A perception of school as a "good place to be" trust among students and teachers a sense of fairness, belongingness, and safety.

According to what was reported by North Macedonian schools after the piloting, the SAFER project has significantly fostered knowledge and understanding of bullying by implementing comprehensive activities, education programs on empathy and respect, also creating a supportive school environment. The project promoted mutual respect and positive interpersonal relationships among students, contributing to increasing student well-being and emphasizing mental health awareness.

Lesson 6. STRESS on RESPONSIBILITY. *Be the HERO, for reducing the bullying to ZERO* **is a slogan created to promote the SAFER project in schools and to help students come to understand that a positive school climate** is everyone's responsibility. Being a hero in school or youth communities could mean saving the day for a friend, doing any helpful act of kindness, or helping another friend from a bully. Bullying usually happens when a vulnerable person is alone so, learning to STAND BY instead of being just a bystander can make a huge difference. On another hand, studies show that defending has a social cost (popularity), so it is fundamental to promote moral engagement. The schools involved in the project expressed the theme of being heroes in various ways. For example, children and parents in Cyprus participated with a group of "heroes against school bullying" in the carnival parade. Parents and children spent a fun day with their families and friends, spreading the message 'Be a HERO for reducing bullying to zero'. Empowered with the knowledge, skills and values of the program, dressed in their red capes, wearing jerseys and holding banners with the message and logo of the program that they made with the help of their teachers, they became strong anti-bullying and anti-violence heroes. At the same time, this experience shows the importance of parents' understanding and support as well as of the intergenerational sharing of values and vision.

Lesson 7. Systemic approach. An organizational culture that encourages respect, values opinions, celebrates differences and promotes positive relationships will make it even more difficult for bullying behaviour to flourish or be tolerated. Teachers and administrators should emphasize that telling is not tattling and make it clear that bullying is never acceptable. Everybody – adults, children and young people - should understand the role that they play in addressing bullying. **Parents have to learn to recognize** signs and have open-ended conversations to learn what is really going on with their children. During the **piloting implementation phase I n Greece**, four Primary Schools actively engaged some parents, encouraging them to listen to their children's experiences and become active participants in bullying prevention efforts. The crucial role of parents as a source of support in addressing bullying incidents effectively and promoting a culture of respect and empathy within the school community was enlightened through this collaborative experience.

 The three manuals – for teachers, parents, and students- were purposely designed to provide all the actors of the educating community with useful tools and shared knowledge.

Lesson 8. The use of curricular activity to overcome cultural gaps and enhance social competences. Some of the collected good practices take advantage of curricular activity to create cohesion among students, even overcoming deep differences. This showed to be useful in cases of different cultural backgrounds. Finding a common ground and a shared language really helps to talk about cultural diversity while respecting differences.

During the learning experiences in some of the Greek schools that participated in the project, for example children wrote stories about bullying, composed songs, wrote haiku poems on bullying, created theatricals and short videos, painted walls, made posters, projects, visual creations, graffities, a 3D wooden and woven boat, paintings, fabric cooperative artwork, etc.

The use of artistic expressions allowed students to experiment with expressing their ideas, and by considering and developing empathy towards others' experiences, establish a very positive school climate. The cooperation among students and teachers also contributed to improving emotional skills and increasing motivation for overall cooperation.

Lesson 9. Need for teachers' training

A safe and bully-free learning environment requires staff to be able to identify bullying when it happens in order to make the appropriate referrals. Nowadays, it is quite common for teachers to know what bullying is and how it affects students' life and their perception of school. Nonetheless, a lack of specific knowledge about what constitutes bullying and what to do when they see it still remains. The project highlighted the need of teachers and educators for specific training to support children dealing with bullying episodes and related consequences.

Lesson 10. THE IMPORTANCE OF A POLICY A *policy* is a system of principles designed to achieve specific effects by guiding action and decision making. Anti-bullying policies might be effective at reducing bullying if they are based on evidence and reliable theory and implemented with a high level of fidelity. Policy interventions for bullying can guide and/or influence student, teacher, and administrator behaviour, as well as school organizational practices. They may establish a set of rules – for example reporting procedure - *and encourage* certain behaviours or *discourage* others. At the school level, policies can guide the implementation of other targeted interventions within schools.

Lesson11. Set boundaries with technology. In order to effectively contain cyber bullying and online violence, it is necessary for the adults in charge of the younger ones to be aware of the functioning mechanisms of the Internet and the risks connected to unsupervised use of the Internet and social media.

The SAFER project's holistic approach has proven to be particularly effective in this sector too, and several of the best practices in SAFER include training and involvement of the relevant adults (parents and teachers) to better tackle cyberbullying.

What emerges from the various project experiences is the need for training of teachers and children and the creation of a reporting system, easy to understand and be accessed by students. Equally important is a support system to deal with the effects of online violence, such as the presence of psychologists and counselors, as well as a school climate that welcomes and accepts diversity.

Policy Recommendations

The **SAFER project Consortium** is fully convinced that the phenomenon of bullying is a complex social issue that is influenced by myriad diverse factors. It's not merely restricted to the conflictual dyadic relationship between a bully and his or her victim, but that it's viewed as an aspect of group processes. Maybe, because the "virus" of bullying has not yet been isolated, a common strategy that could fit with the multifaceted phenomenon of bullying is not the way to follow. The persistently high rates of bullying, despite numerous attempts from the sociological and pedagogical points of view, suggest that, while consistency and coherence in schools' approaches to bullying prevention and wellbeing are important, there is no silver bullet for bullying prevention. Even if bullying happens mainly at school, any of the most salient

drivers of bullying may be beyond schools' direct control, related to parental attitudes, the community where our children live and the broader societal issues.

Addressing school bullying is an issue of concern for many Member States, among them some with particularly high bullying rates. Media attention, heightened concern on the part of lawmakers, educators, and families, the results gathered from the Safer project allow us to say that policies that can foster bullying and cyberbullying prevention are key elements for advancing anti-bullying strategies.

Policy makers should by no means be distracted from the overwhelming reality that bullying has grown into a major public issue, requiring an urgent, comprehensive, and coherent response on the side of grass-root society, public instances and policy makers alike. For, although awareness and preparedness to combat bullying has increased substantially, many children are still confronted with the phenomenon, often with devastating and lasting effects on their physical and/or mental health and integrity.

In this framework, and based on the positive impact determined by the Safer project in the local areas where it has been implemented, the Safer Consortium suggests the following Policy Recommendations:

1. to map and review funded projects which focus on or include bullying. The outcomes of such interventions could be at the basis of a guide to build future anti-bullying projects. As bullying and cyberbullying are long-standing and growing issues, it is necessary, to successfully deal with them, to go beyond the mere sharing of subjective good practices. The state of things shows that a more systematic and coordinated approach and a development program are needed to combat bullying in Europe.

2. the above mentioned European "map" of national anti-bullying policies and related best practices could also be used to establish a mechanism of country assessments to promote national dialogue and cooperation to enhance such policies. In this effort, the

EU and EAN could team up with organizations which are already working on this type of mapping.

3. To consider the opportunity to create European level guidelines for social safety and inclusion in schools, agreed on by Member States; strengthening the strategies to combat early school-leaving, gender/racial-based violence and social exclusion.

4. To set up an ongoing European campaign to stimulate awareness of bullying and structural ways to combat it. To proclaim an EU-"Day Against Bullying" that could be the focal point in annual campaigns and have a recurrently mobilizing effect.

5. Part of such a campaign could be the development of a clearing house of projects and methods. In this effort, the EU and EAN could collaborate and also involve other organizations which are already working on a similar global database, for instance in the context of the World Anti-bullying Forum.

6. The EU should consider developing a coherent view on how to deal with political hate speech and exclusion. Tendencies to legitimize ideological and political hate speech and systematic social exclusion of social groups should be more concretely recognized as a serious threat to anti-bullying, violence and in general, human rights and democracy.

7. To explore the potential of the Manuals produced within the Safer project such as Teachers' Manual, Students Handbook and Manual for Parents and Members of the educating communities that, being open educative tools, already translated into several languages, can be widely disseminated for fostering the Whole School and Community approach framework with the aim of preventing and addressing bullying and cyberbullying.

8. Starting from the work realized in the Safer project, that takes into account previous best practices, implement some European level guidelines.

9. To establish a mechanism of country assessments to stimulate national dialogue and cooperation to enhance anti-bullying policies and practices. In this effort it's very important to make connection amongst bullying, cyberbullying, teen dating violence, violation of human and children rights and other forms of peer violence, on-line and in the real life.

10. Establishment of a permanent **SAFER Observatory on Antibullying Policies in Europe hosted by the EAN European Antibullying Network** that will identify and generate evidence that Europe's decision-makers need for better harmonize the Antibullying policies in all the EU countries. The Observatory will share these evidences on Education systems – acting as a knowledge broker and bridging the gap between civil society and policy.

SAFER Observatory on Antibullying Policies in Europe