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From Pain to Knowledge: (cyber)bullying prevention as a coping strategy for victims and their parents

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I am an assistant professor of information science at the University of Lorraine in France. Part of my research focuses on the prevention of school bullying/cyberbullying, which I analyse as information and communication process. Indeed, prevention aims to disseminate information in order to influence and change the behaviour of the people it targets, who could be all the members of the society or the members of a specific social group (for example women and breast cancer). This is done through various communication channels: posters, clips, social advertising, in the public space, in the press, on television and on the Internet. By adding to our personal stock of knowledge, information can modify our conception of the world and our behaviour, providing us with the necessary knowledge about a problem that affects us and enabling us to take action or make a decision (Gardiès, 2012)¹.

There are three types of preventive communication : Scientific communication, which disseminates medical and scientific information about a disease or risk; Awareness-raising campaigns, generally run by public authorities; community-based' communication, which is more democratic and decentralised, coming from citizens and people affected by a disease or victims of violence; this type of communication has uncreased through social media, which have enabled the birth of online communities; for example, communities made up of patients who have become experts on their disease or the treatment they take on a daily basis. These people develop knowledge that complements and sometimes rivals the academic knowledge of experts and doctors (Raude, 2013)².

¹ Gardiès, C. (2012). *Dispositifs info-communicationnels de médiation des savoirs : cadre d'analyse pour l'information-documentation*. Habilitation à diriger des recherches en Sciences de l'information et de la communication. Université de Toulouse Le Mirail.

² Raude, J. (2013). Les stratégies et les discours de prévention en santé publique : paradigmes et évolutions. *Communication et langages*, 176(2), 49-64. <https://doi.org/10.4074/S0336150013012039>.

I'm particularly interested in this third form, and more specifically in how those involved in prevention develop new knowledge and skills, and how this enables them to cope with painful experiences. Today, I would like to present you some results of two studies I have conducted among people involved in the bullying/cyberbullying prevention. The first one is about students involved in the anti-bullying ambassador programme (Stassin, Lechenaut, 2021)³ and the second one is about associations created by parents after they have discovered their kid was bullied and/or cyberbullied (Stassin, 2021)⁴.

I. The Anti-Bullying Ambassadors Programme

The Anti-Bullying Ambassador Programme aims to transform the way to struggle bullying, to create a kinder school community, to empower students, promote a positive school culture, and ensure that every student can learn in a safe and supportive environment. Any student who wants to can become an ambassador, then receives special training organized by the local education authority. This training provides ambassadors with the tools needed to identify, address and prevent bullying. Their first task is to prevent bullying and make their classmates aware of it. They can do this by organizing debates and conferences to introduce themselves and make it easier for everyone to identify them. They can also do this by producing communication materials, posters and videos⁵, and setting up fun workshops with role-playing or board games designed to tackle the issues of violence and discrimination. Of course, an adult must be present to supervise certain activities.

The main aim of my study was to understand the reasons for their involvement and to analyse the meaning they gave to their missions. I observed several training sessions for students new to the programme, as well as annual meetings of all the ambassadors from a region; I interviewed more than 200 student ambassadors from the east of France, where I live and work. Then, I conducted interviews with about twenty of them. The results pointed

³Bérengère Stassin et Émilie Lechenaut, « Des compétences psychosociales pour prévenir le harcèlement scolaire », *Revue des sciences sociales* [En ligne], 65 | 2021, mis en ligne le 15 juin 2021, consulté le 03 juin 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/revss/6688> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/revss.6688>

⁴ Stassin, B. (2021). Les associations françaises de prévention du harcèlement scolaire : une réponse à un besoin informationnel. *Études de communication*, 57, 185-202. <https://doi.org/10.4000/edc.14029>

⁵ <https://www.ac-reims.fr/palmares-academique-de-la-9e-edition-du-prix-non-au-harcèlement-2022-124187>

out that girls were twice as likely as boys to be involved in the programme; 70% of ambassadors had already been involved in other aspects of school life, such as acting as class delegates or tutors; 65% have been bullied; 77% have witnessed bullying; 13% were bullies. Some students played all three roles: victim, witness and aggressor.

Léo, who is 17 when I meet him, was bullied when he was 14. He has many painful memories of this, but it's not what hurts him the most. The person he's most angry at is himself. Before being bullied by boys in his class, he bullied a girl himself when he was 12. He deeply regrets what he did and thinks about it a lot. He now knows what it feels like to be a victim and wonders how he could have done such a thing to someone. He consoles himself by saying that this girl seems to be doing well today. She no longer goes to the same school as him, but they live in the same town, which isn't very big. He sees her often. He would like to go and apologise to her, but he can't right now. He tries to make amends in different ways, especially by paying attention to the peer violence and trying to help the victims. A few months before our interview, he had another very painful experience, this time as a witness: a witness who tried to help, but felt powerless. A friend of his was the victim of "revenge porn", which led to an online and IRL lynching campaign made of sexism and victim blaming. The girl left school and tried to commit suicide, which deeply affected Léo, especially when he realised that his former victim might also have had dark thoughts because of him. His involvement in the programme is a way of repairing the harm he has caused, understanding the mechanisms of bullying and discovering the tools that can help combat it.

(the example of Léo)

Regarding the reasons for Léo's involvement - and that of all the others - and the meaning they give to their missions, the results indicate that for them it is a matter of:

- repairing a harm suffered or caused; overcoming victim status;
- changing things;
- providing the help they would have liked to receive ;
- acting in the place of adults who are too passive (in their opinion);
- Breaking the law of silence;
- Understanding bullying / harassment / Learning new things;
- Passing on their knowledge to their peers;
- Improving their communication skills in graphics, multimedia, writing and speaking.

To conclude this first part, I would like to quote another student: Julia. Julia had been the victim of homophobic bullying for several years. During the interview, she told me: *"I'm not a victim anymore, I'm an expert, I know how it works, homophobia, sexism, and I'm a fighter against all forms of bullying"* (Julia, 17) A few years later, when I was carrying out a survey on another subject (the information behaviour of LGBT people), I met Julia by chance in an association where I was making observations. She was very involved in the association. We had an informal chat and she said that: *"I don't know if my work as an ambassador has changed the mentality of the people at my school, but it has saved my life, it has given me a vocation: fighting"*.

II. Associations

My second study focused on prevention associations set up by parents after they discovered that their son or daughter was being bullied at school and/or online. For this study I conducted observations in the associations, I also carried out interventions in partnership with some of them, I conducted interviews with founding members and I also analyzed their Twitter accounts. The aim was to understand the reasons why they set up their association and how they got the knowledge they needed for their prevention work. Indeed the parents I met didn't know about bullying until their kid was a victim. They only heard about it when their kid was being bullied or cyberbullied. For two of them, it was a tragic discovery: A mother lost her 13-year-old daughter to suicide; a father almost lost his son, but arrived in time to call for help. Discovering that your kid has been bullied raises a strong information need. What does to be bullied or cyberbullied mean? Why did not I notice it? How could I have? How can I talk about it? How can I deal with the situation? Who can help me? How can I help other children and parents? To tackle bullying, people need to understand how it works. People also need to find ways to help and treat it, which were almost non-existent in France at the beginning of the last decade. The French authorities have only been tackling bullying in schools for about ten years... There is a real gap compared to other European countries, but I don't have time to go into it now. Getting the information we need means learning new things to reduce uncertainty and anxiety and to make better decisions and take action.

The parents' first motivation for setting up an association was to be able to cover their own needs, as well as the needs they had found in other people. They do this in their spare time because they all have a job on the side. They are all volunteers. There are several ways for them to develop new skills and knowledge about (cyber)bullying. Firstly, they use their personal experiences (and those of their children) as a source of knowledge. By forming an association, they also create a kind of "community of practice" because most of the members who have joined are also parents of victims. They share a common concern, a set of problems, an interest in an issue (school bullying / cyberbullying). They learn from each other by sharing their experiences and putting their feelings into words. They read specialist literature, attend training courses and conferences. They learn about bullying but also about related phenomena: sexism, racism, homophobia and online hate. They learn by teaching others (people, students, parents they meet as part of their prevention work). Some of them write books, testimonies or autobiographies, but more theoretical works. Knowledge is shared and built through a process of commodification, involving the creation and use of artefacts and documents, but also through a process of socialization, making it possible to verbalize and formalize what is tacit (Wenger, 1998)⁶.

Part of their communication is done on social media. They have also had to learn how to manage an online presence and publish relevant information in a safe and responsible way. They have become experts not only in prevention but also in digital communication. In an association, each member contributes according to the time they have available, but also according to what they know how to do. For example, one mother told me that she was in charge of social media in the company where she works, so she has put her skills at the service of the group. Similarly, a father who works as a lawyer is in charge of matters relating to the law, making complaints to the police, etc. Everyone is a piece of the puzzle.

Most of these associations now play an important role in preventing bullying in France. Some are given media coverage and are recognised by the government as important stakeholders. They are certified as official partners of the French education system. One of

⁶ WENGER É., 1998. *Communities of practice : learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 318 p.

them even helped to draw up the anti-bullying ambassadors programme. These parents have been able to transform the painful experience of bullying into experiential knowledge that they offer to others, in a sense of mutual support and solidarity.

III. From Pain to knowledge

I've seen a lot of suffering in the course of this research. I've met students who have been abused, but who have also abused others. I have met parents who are overcome by guilt but who are fighting to make sense of this tragedy. The stories were very painful, difficult to hear. The atmosphere during the interviews was tense. Some people cried. I had to learn how to manage their emotions but also how to manage my own emotions, to do emotional work/labor (Hochschild, 1983⁷; Davies & Spencer, 2010⁸), to take into account the role played by emotions in a research process. What really interested me as an information science researcher was seeing how important information and knowledge are in our lives, particularly when we're facing difficulties, violence and even illness. I saw how the information need led people to develop new knowledge and skills, to create social links, to reinforce self-esteem and confidence, to go 'From Pain to Knowledge'.

⁷ HOCHSCHILD A. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, The University of California Press

⁸ DAVIES J., SPENCER D. (éd) (2010). *Emotions in the Field The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*. Stanford University Press