

## 7. WHAT IS THE TEACHER'S PROFILE IN SUCCESSFULLY PREVENTING BULLYING? A PICTURE OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

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**Abstract:** *The increasing frequency of bullying incidents is an imperative that is on the focus of the education policy makers in Romania. During the last four years, the education legislation has undergone a number of substantial changes and updates placing a strong emphasis on bullying prevention. While we have the legislative framework that defines the role of teachers in preventing and intervening in bullying incidents, it is significant to know what professional skills are needed in doing so. The aim of this research is to provide a profile of the effective teacher in bullying prevention from the standpoint of professional competences. We believe this to be important for the development of effective prevention policies. The objectives of this study are theoretical, namely: to analyze the normative framework referring to the teacher's role in bullying prevention; to examine the national legislation in the field of preventing and combating bullying; to review the literature in order to identify the professional competences involved in successfully preventing bullying.*

**Key words:** *bullying, professional competencies, teacher, prevention, educational policies*

### 1. Introduction

While the scientific literature evokes the crucial role of teachers in the prevention of bullying, in Romania there is a legislative debut which establishes the duties of teachers in the prevention and intervention in cases of bullying. The media coverage of violent scenes among pupils generated public awareness that turned its attention and expectations towards teachers.

Therefore, the issue of bullying aroused the interest of the society, the political decision-makers, and especially of the educational bodies that, on a daily basis, have to fight this scourge. According to the study carried out by the World Vision Romania Organization in 2021, which involved 817 middle and high school students, approximately 59% of the bullying among high school students occurs in the classroom, in the hallway and in the school yard.

In the case of the secondary school students, 63% of the assaults take place in the school yard and over 50% in the classroom and in the hallways (World Vision Romania, 2021). In addition to this image, there are the results of the survey carried out by another non-governmental organization, namely the Asociația Salvați Copiii România. According to them, at national level, in the 2022-2023 school year there was a third increase in aggressive incidents compared to the previous school year as currently 49% of students state that they were victims of bullying ([www.salvaticopiii.ro](http://www.salvaticopiii.ro)).

In the schools around the world, one in three pupils and adolescents are significantly impacted by the harmful behavior of peers (UNESCO, 2019). The bullying is defined as a particular form of aggression that takes place over time,

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against the background of a power imbalance between the bully and the victim with the intention to hurt (Olweus, 1994). These peculiar characteristics of the bullying make it difficult for victimized students to defend themselves (Craig & Pepler, 2007).

Student victims often experience low academic achievement, depression, low self-esteem, anger and relationship difficulties throughout their adult lifetime (Bogart et al., 2014 *apud* Taneri, Özbek & Akduman, 2021), while the bullies present a increased risk of experiencing depression and they are more prone to suicide compared to the students who were not involved in bullying (Roland, 2002 *apud* Taneri, Özbek & Akduman, 2021).

Although the involvement of the teachers in preventing and intervening in situations of aggression among students is essential, the scientific literature indicates that some teachers are poorly trained and feel insecure in solving the problem (Mishna et al., 2005). They often put effort into the effective identification and intervention, but they need continuous and personalized support to signal changes in the school practice (Pas, Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2018).

Thus, the teachers' ability to create a positive school environment and to respond to bullying depends largely on professional training, teaching standards, duties and workload. The success in carrying out these tasks depends highly on the professional training provided to teachers (UNESCO, 2022). When teachers' interventions are constant and positive, the students have higher confidence in them and they are more confident in the school institution in terms of its dealing with violence (Gervay, 2008).

## **2. Normative aspects regarding the role of the teacher in the prevention of bullying**

The recent years have seen an increase of the focus of political and educational factors in Romania regarding the bullying phenomenon. In 2019, as a result of the reporting of this situation, the political decision-makers amended and supplemented the National Education Law through a special law that provides for the introduction of refresher courses within the continuous professional training programs of teachers in order for them to acquire skills regarding the prevention of bullying (Parliament of Romania, 2019, art. 56, paragraph 1).

A year later, the proposals of the group of experts convened for the operationalization of these legislative prescriptions took shape in the development of methodological norms regarding the prevention of bullying, thus becoming mandatory (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). The main objective of these methodological norms is aimed at creating a positive school climate and ensuring the pupil's well-being within the schooling environment.

It also mentions the need to establish the anti-bullying working group with a role in preventing, identifying and solving aggressive incidents (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, art. 5, paragraph 1). In order to optimize the prevention of bullying, schools have the responsibility to implement their own plans to maintain a safe schooling environment by applying prevention policies (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, art. 4).

Special attention is paid to the professional training of teachers, both during

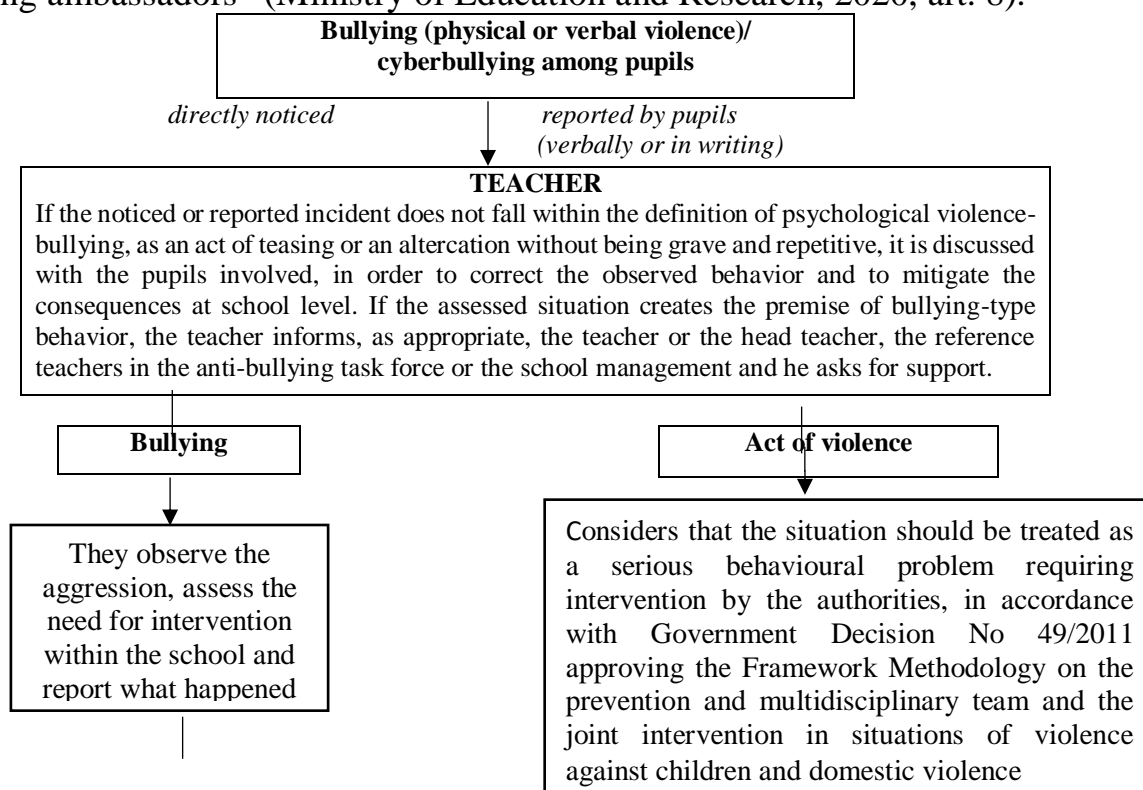
the initial training, by including some topics related to bullying, as well as through the continuous training programs (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020-Annex 1, art. 3, paragraph 2).

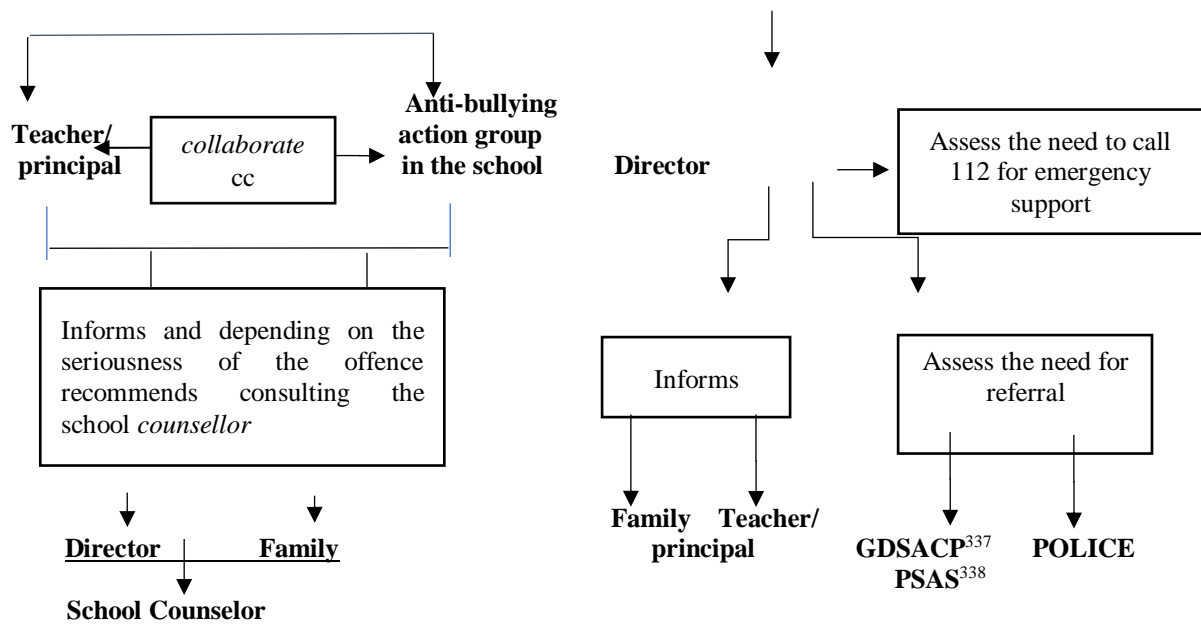
The duties of teachers in fighting bullying, as presented in the current legislation, actually render the professional competences required in this field. Therefore, we can deduce that a successful intervention also requires a high degree of development of professional competences in this field. From a legislative viewpoint, teachers have the responsibility:

- to identify bullying situations;
- to identify pupils facing the risk of aggression and report the identified cases;
- to proactively collaborate within the multidisciplinary team to solve bullying cases;
- to analyze each case of bullying;
- to apply bullying prevention measures to secure the victim (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020 - Annex 2, art. 2).

This normative act also provides for the intervention procedure for the teaching staff in bullying situations, entitled *Info Chart - Learning Tool*. This procedure illustrates the “map” that a teacher must go through when he directly notices the aggression or when it is reported to him by pupils. At the beginning of each school year, members of the anti-bullying task force are proposed who are teachers, parents and students.

Its mission is to transpose into school practice the legislation concerning the prevention, identification and reporting of situations of violence against pupils; to receive and resolve reports of bullying in school; to draw up the school's anti-bullying code; to collaborate with other teachers and parents to resolve bullying incidents; to organise information/ debate sessions in schools with parents, teachers and pupils; to train and coordinate pupils appointed by school councils as “anti-bullying ambassadors” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, art. 8).





### INFO GRAPHIC LEARNING TOOL

#### The teacher intervention in bullying situations in educational establishments

(Ministry of National Education, 2020)

In contrast, “*the continuous professional development of pre-university teachers is based on the professional standards for the teaching profession, on quality standards and on the professional competences, appropriate to the teaching roles*”<sup>339</sup> (Ministry of Education, 2022, art. 2, paragraph 1). The professional improvement is achieved through continuous professional development programs that are accredited in accordance with the training profile in the teaching career. Thus, the teacher must acquire professional competencies for educational counseling and social skills and in other priority thematic areas for the education system (Parliament of Romania, 2023, article 187, paragraph 10, letter f)<sup>340</sup>.

The school violence/bullying is one of the themed fields in which the accredited training programs can be proposed and developed (Ministry of Education, 2022). With the issuance of Law no. 198 of July 4, 2023 of pre-university education, the National Plan to Combat School Violence (NPCSV) is also approved. The purpose of the NPCSV is to prevent and reduce all forms of violence in school, including the bullying (Parliament of Romania, 2023, art. 65, par. 2). Also, express reference is given to the continuous training of the teaching staff, which represents a right and a responsibility (Romanian Parliament, 2023, art. 188, paragraph 1).

Therefore, we can conclude that these normative frameworks are much needed because they provide unitary and thorough benchmarks in the prevention and intervention in cases of bullying, but much is still to be achieved. There is a long way to go until they are done because the fight against bullying is a relatively recently add-on in the initial and continuing training programs in our country. The results of the study by Verseveld et al. (2020) show that teachers demonstrate a lack

<sup>337</sup> General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection

<sup>338</sup> Public Social Assistance Service

<sup>339</sup> Ministry of Education (2022). Ordinance no. 4.224 of July 6, 2022 approving the Framework Methodology on quality assurance of programmes for the continuous professional development of teachers in pre-university education and the accumulation of transferable professional credits.

<sup>340</sup> The consolidated form of Law no. 198 of July 4, 2023, published in the Official Gazette no. 613 of July 5, 2023, on September 4, 2023 is made by including the changes and supplements added by the Emergency Ordinance no. 72/31 August 2023.

of skills and time to manage bullying. The authors recommend investing in initial teacher training programs so that they are well prepared from the very start of their career.

### **3. The training and development of professional skills- a part of the global educational approach**

During the *International Conference on the fight against aggression among students* organized by UNESCO and the French Ministry of National Education in 2020, the body of specialists sought to generate a global impulse to eradicate aggression in schools by increasing the awareness of all the responsible parties, by disseminating good practices, by mobilizing governments and the entire educational community. At the expense of a limited success of schools in preventing the bullying, the concept of *developing a global educational approach* is advanced, starting from the premise that the school operates within a wider education system and educational community, which are supported by the society.

Such a comprehensive perspective aims to recognize the importance of the school's "*interconnection with society at large, including educational, technological and societal systems, as well as social values and pressures, factors that can influence the frequency and the type of bullying that occurs in a school*" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 2)<sup>341</sup>. Therefore, this comprehensive educational approach incorporates nine key components that are effective in reducing bullying:

- strong political leadership and a solid legal framework to fight bullying, school violence and violence against children in general;
- training and support for teachers related to bullying and pupil-centered classroom management and wellbeing;
- school programs, learning and teaching to promote a positive school climate;
- a psychologically and physically safe environment in schools and classrooms;
- reporting mechanisms for pupil victims and support and care services;
- the participation of all interested parties in the educational community, including the parents;
- the responsibility and involvement of pupils;
- the collaboration and partnerships between the education sector and a wide range of partners (other government sectors, NGOs, academia and digital platforms);
- the monitoring of the bullying in schools and the interventions assessment (UNESCO, 2020, p. 3).

Therefore, in the effort to prevent the bullying, teachers must benefit from training in order to increase their knowledge in the field of prevention and intervention, as well as in promoting the pupil's well-being (UNESCO, 2020). To create a school culture that does not tolerate the bullying, all educational components must be included in the anti-bullying program (Taneri, Özbek & Akduman, 2021).

As the issue is particularly complex, a comprehensive, multi-level and multi-directional approach philosophy is required to try to cover the extent of the phenomenon. It is in vain to act sequentially and in isolation if resonant, concordant

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<sup>341</sup> International conference on the fight against harassment between students. Recommendations of the Scientific Committee on the fight against harassment and cyber-harassment.

interventions are not agreed upon. The actions can be placed at several levels (*cf.* Cucuș, 2022, p. 221):

– *the legislative level*, by generating an explicitly protective normativity, for example by the law (or orders, methodologies and so on) of education or other secondary norms; the guiding principles, directions, strategies must be prefigured at the macro level so as to target the whole, the general field of positioning or actions; from this viewpoint, we believe that there are still many things to be done: preventive laws for teachers, pupils, students; methodologies to more carefully regulate the relational field generated in the school: pupil-teacher, pupil-pupil, teacher-teacher, teacher-parent, teacher-manager, manager-local authority and so forth;

– *the institutional level*, through clear stipulations of the rights and duties of the educational partners in the internal order regulations or in the ethical codes, which must be observed; the explained procedures, even if they can generate bureaucracy, bring a certain level of security and clarification of what is allowed to happen in the school; also, there is a need for a clearer distribution of roles among managers, school psychologists, educational advisors, parents, police, representatives of the local administration regarding the prevention or fighting of violence;

– *the level of the teacher training*, both during the initial phase and during the exercise of the profession; there is a need, from this viewpoint, for a rethinking of the training competencies regarding the future teachers through a new institutional formula that emphasizes the selection and the quality (among other things, not through a focus only on didactic, technical competencies, but also on psycho-relational, self-development, conflict prevention or management, and so on); from this perspective, we believe that this should not be neglected, for example, during the initial preparation phase (at the level of the future didactic master's degree), by broadening the area of knowledge, practice and involvement of future teachers in counseling and educational mediation activities, in meetings or lectures with parents, by participation in board meetings, extracurricular activities developed by the school and so forth. With regard to the continuous training, the spectrum of competences can be developed and nuanced in relation to the psycho-cultural particularities of the pupils, to the community specificities, to the multiplicities of belonging or to the experiences of the students;

– *the personal, individual level*; until we protect our law or institution, we must protect ourselves by carefully monitoring these phenomena, by professional responsibility (to do what it is expected of us), by self-reflection, by keeping our own conduct under control with patience, intuition, dedication and grace; of course, conflicts may arise among the actors participating in the educational process, but these must be avoided, and if they do occur, until the application of procedures or the involvement of third parties, they must be regulated immediately, on the spot, by ourselves; as in the case of an accident, the “first aid” is of great importance, the first actions are life-saving or, on the contrary, they are life-threatening;

– *the tertiary, complementary level*, which can ensure a certain expertise of knowledge or specialized action, in the knowledge of the case (through research in the field, through doctoral theses, through methodological-scientific works from universities, specialized institutes, schools). A certain capital of knowledge and

intervention experience has been achieved, but it is not available, known and used enough. It would be time for this “database” to be institutionalized, nurtured and used in an integrative, system-wide vision. It would be necessary to establish a permanent *board*, provided by technicians, to monitor and ensure an involvement by offering expert services for decision-makers, school managers, teachers, parents and so on.

#### **4. Professional skills in preventing the bullying**

At the level of the scientific literature, there is no generally accepted definition of the concept of competence. The specialists concerned with this issue have recently made an important distinction regarding the terminology used in English that is between “*competence*” and “*competency*” (Roelofs & Sanders, 2007). The “*competence*” is a comprehensive concept that defines skills or capabilities of people or organizations, while the specific “*competency*” (plural *competencies*) is part of “*competence*”, being a narrower, more atomistic concept used to label a particular ability (Mulder, 2001 apud Roelofs&Sanders, 2007).

A comprehensive definition of competence is synthesized by Mulder: “the competence is the ability of a person or organization to achieve certain levels of performance” (Mulder, 2001, p. 76 apud Roelofs & Sanders, 2007). This author notes that competencies of individuals consist of: “*the integrated action proficiencies which are made up of clusters of knowledge structures, cognitive, interactive, emotional, and where necessary psychomotor skills and attitudes and values which are necessary for performing tasks, solving problems and more generally the ability to function in a particular occupation, organization, position, role*”<sup>342</sup>, (Mulder, 2001 apud Roelofs & Sanders, 2007, p. 125).

Miller believes that the effectiveness of teachers in preventing the bullying can be encompassed by a series of actions such as: the concern for the pupil's well-being and learning; the creation of organized and planned learning environments with clear rules for pupils; engaging pupils in active and relevant learning tasks; providing a diversity of classroom methods and strategies that emphasize each pupil's success; interacting more frequently with each pupil when they are behaving positively than when they are behaving negatively; conveying rules of conduct through classroom rules, expectations for classroom activities, expectations for transitions, and all key classroom procedures that are important to the pupil success; using different methods of encouragement to elicit motivated and responsible behavior from pupils; providing extra help to pupils who need it; modeling respectful behavior through positive and professional interactions with all; consideration of the pupil who seems scared, lonely and unsuccessful; communicating his support, concern and commitment to the well-being of each pupil; communicating requirements and supporting pupils' progress to them; creating a school safety climate where respect is taught, expected, practiced and modeled; developing relationships among pupils outside the classroom (Miller, 2008, p. 248).

At the level of the scientific literature, we find that the teachers' intervention

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<sup>342</sup> Mulder, M. *Competentieontwikkeling in organisaties: perspectieven en praktijk*. The Hague: Elsevier bedrijfsinformatie, 2001

depends on a series of variables such as self-efficacy, beliefs, knowledge and level of empathy (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Teachers who are more confident in their own skills intervene more often in incidents of bullying (Fischer, John & Bilz, 2021). They are more willing to intervene if they appreciate that a behavior is serious, if they feel empathy for the victims, if they realize that they have a role in reducing bullying and if they trust that their intervention will be effective (Howard, Horne & Jolliff, 2001 apud Holt et al, 2013; Kallistad & Olweus, 2003 apud Holt et al, 2013). When the teacher ignores bullying incidents or when he reacts harshly and humiliatingly to the bully, he models insensitive and uncaring behaviors (Yoon & Bauman, 2014).

If the pupils perceive the relationship with teachers as negative, hostile, lacking trust, they also show academic disengagement and feel disconnected from the class collective. Conversely, the pupils who feel attached to teachers and experience academic success are less likely to exhibit aggression (Hawkins et al., 1998). An empathetic teacher is attentive to the pupils' needs and they makes an effort to meet them, showing them their own model of empathy (Bucher, 1998).

## **5. Conclusions**

The purpose of this paper was to illustrate a profile of the teacher effective in preventing the bullying from the perspective of professional skills. In order to achieve this approach, we examined the normative framework in Romania that relates both to the continuous training of teaching staff and to the management of aggressive incidents within schools. Thus, we defined what the teachers' responsibilities were in managing this issue. We then reviewed the scientific literature to identify the types of professional skills needed in this endeavor.

Therefore, we can conclude that the legislative support does not guarantee the success of an intervention in bullying incidents in the classroom. The key factor is the teacher's personality and professional training. At the level of the scientific literature, the opinion of specialists converges on three variables that could influence the teachers' intervention: the perception of gravity, empathy and self-efficacy. Thus, the professional training should be directed to the teachers' attitudes and beliefs in such a way as to optimize empathy towards victims, trust in their own interventions and the perception of severity (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). A teacher confident in his own skills, empathetic and aware of the seriousness of bullying will be even more effective in implementing prevention programs within the class and the school.

Although there are few studies that have analyzed teachers' responses/reactions to bullying incidents, some teachers use ineffective strategies such as advising the victim to avoid the bully or even recommending to deal with it alone (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015). In agreement with the authors Benítez, García-Berben and Fernández-Cabezas (2009) we believe that a teacher training program would be an ideal context in which the difficulties teachers have in managing bullying can be discussed. And we also believe that they themselves should be the subject of further research (Fischer, John, & Bilz, 2021).

We believe that by knowing the obstacles teachers face, we can create professional training programs focused on their personal and professional



development needs. In conclusion, professional training programs should also include the individual factors of teachers for better personal optimization in the effort to eradicate the bullying phenomenon. It is also important to allocate more generous space in initial teacher training programs to this issue. Teachers have the right to benefit from professional anti-bullying training through accredited institutions, but, also, they have the duty to improve professionally when the schooling practice requires this (Parliament of Romania, 2023).

### **Acknowledgement**

The authors have equal contributions to this article.

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