YOUTH PROTAGONISM: ANALYSIS OF AN ANTI-BULLYING INTERVENTION [1]

Grazielli Fernandes[2][3], Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3545-403X
Débora Dalbosco Dell'Aglio[4][5], Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0149-6450
Maria Angela Mattar Yunes[6][7], Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4653-3895

ABSTRACT: This descriptive and exploratory study investigated the protagonist actions identified in the #NoBullying intervention, conducted with 40 adolescents aged 12 to 17, elementary school students from a public school in Southern Brazil. The intervention was developed in groups, with eight weekly sessions, using experiential and participatory methodologies. The data obtained through the field diary, recordings, and transcripts of the meetings, the Intervention Assessment Measure, and observer assessment forms were analyzed based on two categories: active and engaged participation and empowerment and protection processes. The first category discusses the expressions of active and engaged participation manifested by the adolescents during the meetings, when they developed and led activities with the children at the school. The second category analyzed the attitudes and initiatives of the participants that were not planned as activities in the intervention but demonstrated the empowerment of the group. The results demonstrate that the group empowered itself and exercised its protagonism, using its knowledge in an engaged way to intervene in the school and act as a protective agent among its peers. It is concluded that the intervention offers an opportunity for adolescents to reflect, support each other, and feel empowered to face situations of violence against themselves or their peers.

Keywords: Bullying; intervention; protagonism.

PROTAGONISMO JUVENIL: ANÁLISE DE UMA INTERVENÇÃO *ANTI-BULLYING*

RESUMO: Este estudo descritivo e exploratório investigou ações protagonistas identificadas na intervenção *#NoBullying*, realizada com 40 adolescentes, entre 12 e 17 anos, estudantes do Ensino Fundamental de uma escola pública do Sul do Brasil. A intervenção foi desenvolvida em grupos, com oito sessões semanais, a partir do método experiencial e metodologias participativas. Os dados, obtidos por meio do diário de campo, das gravações e transcrições dos encontros, da Medida de Avaliação da Intervenção e das fichas de avaliação dos observadores, foram analisados a partir de duas categorias: Participação ativa e engajada e processos de empoderamento e proteção. Na primeira

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[1] Section editor: Maria Cristina Antunes
[2] Universidade de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis-SC, Brazil.
[3] E-mail: graziellifernandes@gmail.com
[4] Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre-RS, Brazil.
[5] E-mail: dddellaglio@gmail.com
[6] Universidade Salgado de Oliveira, Niterói-RJ, Brazil.
[7] E-mail: mamyunes@gmail.com

categoria, são discutidas as expressões de participação ativa e engajada manifestadas pelos adolescentes durante os encontros, quando desenvolveram e lideraram atividades com as crianças da escola. Na segunda categoria, são analisadas atitudes e iniciativas dos participantes que não estavam previstas como atividades na intervenção, mas que demonstraram o empoderamento do grupo. Os resultados demonstram que o grupo empoderou-se e exerceu seu protagonismo, utilizando seus conhecimentos, de forma engajada, para intervir na escola, e atuando como agente protetivo junto a seus pares. Conclui-se que a intervenção oferece uma possibilidade para os adolescentes refletirem, apoiarem-se e se sentirem fortalecidos para o enfrentamento de situações de violência contra eles mesmos ou seus pares.

Palavras-chave: Bullying; intervenção; protagonismo.

PROTAGONISMO JUVENIL: ANÁLISIS DE UNA INTERVENCIÓN ANTI-BULLYING

RESUMEN: Este estudio descriptivo y exploratorio investigó las principales acciones identificadas en la intervención #NoBullying, realizada con 40 adolescentes, entre 12 y 17 años, estudiantes de primaria de una escuela pública del sur de Brasil. La intervención, en formato multicomponente, se desarrolló en grupos, con ocho sesiones semanales, con base en el Método Experiencial y Metodologías Participativas. Los datos, obtenidos a través del Diario de campo, grabaciones y transcripciones de los encuentros, la Medida de Evaluación de la Intervención y las Fichas de Evaluación de los observadores, fueron analizados a partir de dos categorías: Participación activa y comprometida y Procesos de empoderamiento y protección. En la primera categoría, se discuten las expresiones de participación activa y comprometida expresadas por los adolescentes durante los encuentros, cuando desarrollaron y lideraron actividades con escolares. En la segunda categoría se analizan las actitudes e iniciativas de los participantes que no fueron planificadas como actividades en la intervención, pero que demuestran el empoderamiento del grupo, que actuó por el bienestar de sus pares y la prevención de situaciones de violencia. Los resultados demuestran que el grupo se empoderó y ejerció su protagonismo, utilizando sus saberes, de manera comprometida, para intervenir en la escuela, y actuando como agente protector con sus pares. Se concluye que la intervención ofrece una posibilidad para que los adolescentes reflexionen, se apoyen y se sientan empoderados para enfrentar situaciones de violencia contra ellos mismos o sus pares.

Palabras clave: Bullying; intervención; protagonismo.

Introduction

Preventing school bullying is an important topic in academic, educational, and public policy contexts. Bullying is defined as repetitive, intentional, and unequal violence perpetrated by one or more people against someone unable to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993). The process involves aggressors, victims who may be passive or aggressive, and witnesses who may be indifferent to the aggression, defend the victim, support the aggressor, or assist the aggressor (Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli, 2010).

Owing to its negative consequences, bullying is considered a public health problem. Therefore, different interventions have been developed to prevent this type of violence

(Martins & Faust, 2018; Silva et al., 2018; Stelko-Pereira & Williams, 2016; Vivaldi, 2020). Some of these programs acknowledge that adolescents can be protagonists in preventing bullying because it directly affects them, and their peers are best positioned to understand their friends' issues (Tognetta, 2018; Vivaldi, 2020).

Youth protagonism has been understood as a form of active, constructive, and supportive participation of young people in initiatives and projects aimed at solving problems in their reality (Costa, 2000) in different developmental contexts, such as school, family, and the community. Based on this understanding, all students have the right to speak and be heard on matters affecting their education. Research has shown evidence that this active participation brings many benefits to children and adolescents (Shier, 2019), such as the development of self-esteem, a sense of identity, self-confidence, a vision of the future, self-determination, and the pursuit of human fulfillment by young people (Costa, 2000).

Several anti-bullying programs have already been designed considering youth protagonism. The Australian program *Cyber Friendly Schools*, based on a socio-ecological approach, focuses on the online and offline contexts in which students interact with each other. Four students from each school are selected to act as cyber leaders, who lead actions developed in the virtual environment, learn to deal with bullying incidents, and assist adults in implementing activities throughout the school (Shaw et al., 2015). In Italy, the *NoTrap!* (Noncadiamointrappola) program, which works to prevent bullying and cyberbullying, consists of three stages: awareness meetings with students and teachers, training of peer educators, composed of four or five students per class who assist in the program's activities, and workshops conducted by peer educators with their classmates (Zambuto et al., 2019). Both programs showed satisfactory results and can inspire the design of interventions worldwide.

Among Brazilian initiatives, the program 'Ethical Coexistence at School', implemented in 2015 in schools in São Paulo, stands out. It consists of actions aimed at managers and teachers, focusing on conflict mediation, improving the quality of relationships, and reducing school violence through the promotion of a positive school climate (Vivaldi, 2020). This program also includes a proposal that encourages youth leadership, called the 'Support System Among Peers', inspired by the Spanish program *Tutoría entre Iguales*, through which students offer support services to their peers, such as welcoming newcomers and facilitating their integration into the group; helping students who feel excluded; detecting conflicts, analyzing them, and seeking solutions; integrating more isolated students; and helping those who suffer abuse among peers, such as bullying and cyberbullying (Avilés Martínez, 2018).

Two other constructs that can be considered when designing anti-bullying interventions are school engagement and empowerment processes. School engagement is defined as the degree to which students are involved in school activities. It is recognized as a multidimensional concept that encompasses student involvement in school, social, and extracurricular activities; positive reactions to teachers, peers, and the community as a whole; and investment in learning and understanding ideas (Fredricks et al., 2004; Silveira & Justi, 2018).

In addition to contributing to a reduction in bullying involvement (Valle & Williams, 2021), engagement offers other benefits, such as increased student appreciation and identification with the institution, improved academic results, and prevention of school dropouts (Fredricks et al., 2004). Empowerment is defined as a process by which people participate democratically in the life of their community and gain a better understanding of

their environment. This requires mutual respect, critical reflection, care, and participation from the entire group (Berth, 2019; Martins & Faust, 2018; Perkins, 2010). Thus, empowerment cannot be seen as an individual process; rather, it is a movement that integrates society in pursuit of a common goal: reducing forms of oppression and violence (Berth, 2019).

Some research has specifically focused on youth empowerment processes (Jennings et al., 2006). According to researchers, these processes occur in welcoming environments and are specifically focused on youth through meaningful involvement and the development of knowledge, leadership, critical reflection on social forces, power relations, and active participation in the community, leading to changes in processes, structures, or norms (Jennings et al., 2006). By empowering themselves, adolescents exercise their protagonism and become active agents of transformation (Iulianelli, 2003). A Brazilian intervention, whose goal was to minimize victimization by bullying, sought to promote the empowerment of victims by improving their interactions and quality of life at school, demonstrating significant (Silva et al., 2018) and encouraging results for the development of programs with this focus.

In Brazil, since 2015, it has been a legal obligation for schools to develop anti-bullying actions, as there are already two regulations on this subject. Federal Law 13185/15 establishes a program to combat bullying in school institutions to provide a basis for the actions of the Ministry of Education, state and municipal education secretariats, and other competent bodies. Thus, to contribute to the prevention of bullying, comply with current legislation, and seek to promote the active role of students, the intervention, called *#NoBullying,* was designed and implemented.

Method

Design

This was an exploratory descriptive study, whose data were obtained through the moderator's field diary, recordings, and transcripts of the meetings, descriptive questions from the Intervention Assessment Measure completed by participants in the last meeting, and evaluation forms completed by observers during the intervention.

Participants

The study included 40 adolescents, students from the 6th to 9th grade of elementary school in a public school in a city in the metropolitan region in Southern Brazil, aged between 12 and 17 years (M=13.68; SD=1.16), 76.8% of whom were girls. The sample was selected by convenience, based on the adolescents' interest in participating in the activities, which took place on the opposite shift to their school schedule. The school where the research was conducted is located in a low-income neighborhood that was considered an irregular settlement until recently. The population lives in a vulnerable context where community violence and drug trafficking are prevalent. For many children and adolescents, school is the only space for leisure and peer interaction.

Description of the *#NoBullying* intervention

The design of the intervention was based on the Experiential Method (Martín-Quintana et al., 2009) and Participatory Methodologies (Santana & Avanzo, 2014). The Experiential Method allows for the reconstruction of daily knowledge and enables

participants to reflect on their own ideas, feelings, and daily actions (Martín-Quintana et al., 2009). Complementarily, Participatory Methodologies assume that the adult researchers are responsible for defining the research topic and offering proposals that facilitate adolescent participation, but they themselves are responsible for contributing to the modification of their developmental contexts (Pereira et al., 2016; Santana & Avanzo, 2014). Thus, adolescents are proposed as active participants who provide space for reflection and awareness of their feelings and attitudes throughout the process. Young people are empowered researchers capable of producing knowledge and transforming their social worlds, acting as representatives of their own realities (Pereira et al., 2016).

The *#NoBullying* intervention consists of eight weekly group meetings, lasting two hours per session, totaling 16 hours, similar to interventions implemented in different countries (Silva et al., 2018). It has a multi-component format that combines different approaches and techniques (psychoeducation, individual activities, group dynamics, homework) to address diverse content (Durgante, 2019) relevant to the central theme of bullying. The tasks were coordinated by a moderator (intervention implementer) in the presence of an observer who evaluated the applicator's performance and assisted in developing the activities.

The themes of each session were as follows: 1) Introduction; 2) Bullying; 3) School climate; 4) Empathy and respect for differences; 5) Support network; 6) School engagement; 7) Protagonism; 8) Evaluation of positive learning. To address each theme, strategies were adopted, such as group dynamics, board games, and memory games created specifically for this purpose, theater activities, and the creation of posters to be displayed in the school. Although the intervention cannot be defined from the perspective of the entire school, some activities seek to involve other members of the community, such as students from other classes and family members.

In each meeting, the following methodology was adopted: welcoming participants, presentation of objectives, review of the content of the previous meeting, analysis of the theme in the family context (meetings 2 to 6), application of activities related to the content, proposal of a task in the family context (meetings 1 to 5) to be addressed the following week, and a final reflection. From Meetings 2 to 5, the participants were able to think about and propose activities to be developed with the children. In Meeting 6, participants planned and prepared activities to be applied to 55 children in the 3rd and 4th grades, divided into four intervention groups. In this session, the adolescents prepared the material, conducted a collective rehearsal, and organized the dynamics of Meeting 7, which took place as follows: picking up the children from the classroom and leading them to the room, explaining the dynamics of the meeting, carrying out the activities (which took place in different spaces), making final reflections, and taking the children back to the classroom. The teachers of these children were informed beforehand. The activities carried out by the adolescents took place during the children's school hours and lasted for an average of two hours. The activities included videos about bullying, posters about positive coexistence, practical tasks in the schoolyard, and others. For example, one group created their own cartoons depicting positive and negative peer relationships. These cartoons were used to reflect the attitudes of students at school.

With the methodological procedures of the intervention, it was possible to listen to the life experiences and give voice to the adolescents, considering them as partners in the research and as active agents in their daily lives, so that they could participate in the decisions that affect them (Martín-Quintana et al., 2009; Soares et al., 2005). Therefore, this

study sought to investigate the expressions of protagonist actions identified in the *#NoBullying* intervention, which aims to contribute to the prevention of school bullying.

Instruments

The following assessment instruments were used in this study:

Intervention Assessment Measure. A questionnaire was answered by participants at the last meeting, which included a descriptive question in which they could report whether they had put into practice something learned in the intervention. The instrument was adapted from the study by Durgante (2019).

Observer Assessment Form. A questionnaire was answered by observers at the end of each meeting, which included two descriptive questions, in which they reported themes that emerged in the meetings and noted other relevant observations.

Moderator's field diary. Records of observations, interpretations, and inferences related to each meeting.

Ethical Aspects

The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of La Salle University (opinion no. 12087619.6.0000.5307), following the guidelines and norms of Resolution no. 510/2016 for ethical regulations in human research (Conselho Nacional de Saúde, 2016). After approval by the Ethics Committee and agreement from the school, students in the final years of elementary school (6th to 9th grades), morning and afternoon shifts, aged between 12 and 17 years, from a municipal public school located in Southern Brazil, were invited to participate in the intervention. All interested parties received an Informed Consent Form (ICF) to be signed by their guardians and an Assent Form (AF) to be signed by the participant in duplicate. The same procedures were adopted for the parents/guardians of the students in the early grades who participated in the activities of meeting 7. Initially, 139 adolescents showed interest, of whom 59 submitted duly signed informed consent and assent forms. Of these, 40 completed the intervention, resulting in a sample loss of 32.2% (19 dropouts) for various reasons, such as having to help with household chores, taking care of younger siblings, or starting vocational courses.

The intervention was applied to four groups, with an average of 10 participants, between May and November 2019, on the school premises, in a location exclusively designated for this purpose (Science Laboratory and Video Room). The sessions were recorded (as previously mentioned in the forms).

Data analysis

The responses to the descriptive questions in the assessment instruments, completed by participants and observers, the elements of the researcher's field diary, and the content of the recordings of all meetings constituted the corpus of this study. The corpus was analyzed using thematic content analysis, which comprised the following stages: memos, first coding cycle, transition cycle between the first and second cycles, and second coding cycle (Saldaña, 2009). The data were analyzed and discussed by the research group to which this study was linked. In the initial stage, the themes identified by the researcher were defined and named, followed by a discussion and review of the categories by the team. Different sources of information were used (information from the participating adolescents, observers, and the moderator) to seek data triangulation (Yin, 2005).

Results and Discussions

The results presented below demonstrate the participation of adolescents in the anti-bullying intervention developed at the school. Based on the expressions of protagonist actions identified in the intervention, two categories emerged a posteriori: Active and engaged participation and Empowerment and protection processes.

Active and engaged participation

This category discusses the expressions of active and engaged participation manifested by the adolescents during Meetings 6 and 7 of the intervention, when they developed and led activities with the children at the school. Initially, when the structure of the intervention was presented, the adolescents were asked to develop and implement activities for children at school on the themes of bullying and school coexistence. From the second to the fifth meeting, they were able to talk amongst themselves and reflect on these activities according to their life experiences and the knowledge acquired throughout the intervention. This is a mobilization process, foreseen in participatory methodologies, which begins with the mediator's proposal and invites the adolescent to participate in the stages effectively and with engagement (Soares et al., 2005). As observed in the Field Diary, the adolescents were satisfied with developing these activities with the children, especially because they were students in the final grades of elementary school and felt responsible for the well-being of the younger ones.

In Meeting 6, the central theme was engagement, understood as the involvement of adolescents in the proposed intervention, a process in which they contributed constructively, proactively, and intentionally to try to solve problems that directly affect them (Silveira & Justi, 2018). Engagement only occurs when there is a change in the learning environment (Silveira & Justi, 2018). Therefore, the idea was not to transmit ready-made knowledge or provide predetermined tasks for adolescents to apply to children. In contrast, an environment conducive to participants sharing their ideas, creating strategies, and collectively developing this work with a participatory attitude was created, making them multipliers in bullying prevention actions. In this way, it is possible to deconstruct the invisibility of children and adolescents in investigations on topics of interest to them, considering them as agents with voices and opinions (Soares et al., 2005). Furthermore, according to a review study, school engagement and bullying experiences are related (Valle & Williams, 2021). Thus, if teenagers feel involved in the activities, they tend to feel part of the school routine, minimizing situations of violence.

In this meeting, the mediator acted only as a facilitator, enabling the integration and exchange of experiences within the group and making the execution of the plan possible. It was clear how crucial the students' engagement was for them to work as a group, think about, and develop the activities to be applied in the following meeting. This group involvement was also noted by two observers in the assessment form: "The girls from the project brought a dynamic activity for the next meeting, showing the engagement they are having," and "The students demonstrated considerable interest in carrying out the activities."

In Meeting 7, the adolescents led activities with 55 third- and fourth-grade children (an average of 14 participants per intervention group), as planned in Meeting 6. These participants had the opportunity to occupy a space that was rightfully theirs, act in defense of collective well-being, and contribute to change in their surroundings. Analysis from the field diary demonstrates that this meeting was important for both adolescents and children. By feeling a sense of belonging to the school, the teenagers realized that they could change

their context and not passively wait for adults to solve their problems. The children, in turn, showed satisfaction at participating in this different moment within the school, where they were welcomed and listened to by their peers.

Finally, the groups reflected on what they had learned that day. The adolescents asked the children how they felt, emphasizing the importance of positive relationships between peers. Below is an excerpt from a conversation between teenagers and children:

Did you feel happy when you opened the message inside the balloon [activity carried out with the children]? Did you feel good when your classmate praised and hugged you? (Participant 1, F).

Yes [several students answered].

Why don't you do that more often? A friend comes to school, go ahead and hug your friend (Participant 2, M).

You should think that you shouldn't treat people the way you wouldn't like to be treated (Participant 3, F).

When you see these tasteless jokes, you have to either call a responsible adult, teacher, or principal, or go home if you are not feeling good about something that happened at school, and talk to your parents at home. Talking to parents is very important. If you see anything wrong, talk to the adults (Participant 1, F).

During the meetings, the groups of teenagers frequently discussed the topic of bullying based on their experiences and knowledge acquired throughout their school lives. This acquired knowledge was also shared with the children at certain times. The following statements demonstrate the confidence of the participants in discussing this topic.

What do you understand about bullying? (Participant 3, F).

Throwing a ball at a friend's face. Hitting. Hitting every day. Calling someone a name they don't like. Hitting them every day and saying a lot of swear words.

Bullying can also occur when someone frequently calls you by a nickname you don't like. From the moment you don't like someone doing something to you, it can be considered bullying (Child 1, M).

Why do you think these people do this to you? (Participant 4, M).

Do you think they have a reason for this? (Participant 5, F).

No (Child 2, F)

Usually, those who bully you or other people don't really have a reason like that. Usually, they want to take out what they have inside them (Participant 3, F).

They [aggressors] want to make you feel the same way that they feel.

Many times, those who bully have also been bullied. They want to make you feel what they once did. They want to make you feel inferior to them (Participant 4, M).

If you're sad, don't try to make the other person sad. Try talking to that person; try a dialogue, a conversation, a joke, maybe. Not a joke where you're going to insult them, make them sad, or laugh in their face (Participant 2, M).

The participants held discussions with the children, demonstrating their understanding of the topics discussed. Engagement is also related to this investment in learning to understand ideas and perceive how schools work (Fredricks et al., 2004; Silveira & Justi, 2018). From this, the adolescents acted as protagonists in influencing their reality, guiding the children on how to handle situations of violence they might experience at school, and the importance of supportive friendships. This protagonism requires a change in the culture of individuals and the school as a whole (Costa, 2000), and these interactions exemplify how resolute adolescents are in changing their environment, demonstrating that violent attitudes at school can be replaced by a positive and healthy relationship between peers.

Although the teenagers carried out the activities with the children in only one meeting, it was possible to observe expressions of motivation for the development of future actions of this nature. The participants themselves showed their willingness to continue contributing as agents of change in school at the end of the intervention.

> We could continue doing this [activities with the children] after the program ends (Participant 6, M).

> I go to school, come home, and stay locked up at home all day. If there were more activities to do with the students, I would like to participate in them. More activities at school outside of school hours; more projects (Participant 7, F).

These accounts demonstrate that schools can assist students in building their autonomy by offering spaces and opportunities that foster their creative, constructive, and supportive participation in solving real problems, such as bullying (Costa, 2000). These two meetings planned within the *#NoBullying* initiative granted the adolescents the status of protagonists, as they defined the tasks to be developed, organized a schedule with the stages, conducted their own rehearsal, and collectively applied the activities with the children. The moderator only played the role of an available and present consultant (Soares et al., 2005). It is expected that after the intervention, the students will continue to act in pursuit of bullying prevention and become multipliers and leaders in this process, which, as demonstrated, results in a greater sense of school engagement.

Empowerment and protection processes

In this category, we analyzed the attitudes and initiatives of the participants that were not planned as activities in the intervention, but which were identified during this process and demonstrated the empowerment of the group, which acted for the well-being of its peers and the prevention of violence. During the meetings, the participants observed the school's atmosphere during recess, with the eyes of researchers, and noticed many classmates alone or in games that involved aggression. At the same time, they understood that exercising empathy was essential to prevent bullying and help other classmates.

From this new perspective on the school provided by the intervention, one participant noticed that a boy was suffering from violence from his peers and intervened. With this empathetic and supportive attitude, she demonstrated that the school's students can be protagonists in the prevention of bullying.

> There's a little boy I've witnessed being bullied. They threw his backpack, stepped on it, and slapped him. And I stepped in and said, 'Stop, it's getting ugly, stop.' And even [...] one day I went to the cafeteria with a friend of mine, and I saw him crying in the corner. I went and talked to him [the same boy]. I presented our project and said that I was participating in a bullying prevention program at the

school. He asked me where my classroom was. I told him. He said, 'Now at least I have someone I can trust.' And I said: 'Who?' And he said: 'You' (Participant 8, F, emphasis added).

The teenager went beyond simply intervening at a specific moment; over time, she established a supportive friendship with the child based on trust. At the end, when completing the Assessment Measure, the participant responded: "Well, I helped a boy stop being bullied at school, today we are friends." The teenager demonstrated empathy towards the child, which is a protective factor in cases of bullying (Palladino et al., 2019).

Another similar situation occurred during Meeting 4 (Empathy and respect for differences), when a group of female students was rehearsing for a play in the schoolyard. At that moment, the teenagers witnessed a situation in which a boy verbally abused a classmate. The group's immediate reaction was to speak to the class teacher, who responded that "[...] the school would be a better place if there wasn't so much whining [...]," according to the girls' account. Upon returning to the classroom, the incident was discussed by the entire group for a while. The following are excerpts from these reflections.

We can talk to the principal (Participant 7, F).

Teacher, we tried to delve deeper, but he [the teacher] kept going on with this 'whining' thing (Participant 9, F).

There was a point when we said, 'Oh, teacher, you have to do something to help this girl, because this is something the boys are going to do again.' He put his hand to his forehead and said, 'Oh, you guys, for God's sake' (Participant 7, F, emphasis added).

The class teacher did not take a stand in defense of the victim, but the students did not passively accept the decision and chose to take other measures, demonstrating protagonist actions. The participants did not confront the aggressor and were not disrespectful, but tried to ask the teacher for help, although unsuccessfully at that moment. At the same time, they understood the importance of having a systemic view of these negative relationships (Berth, 2019), because otherwise, they would have simply accepted the teacher's position. Instead, the group chose to talk to the school counselor. According to the Field Diary, the girl involved is frequently victimized by her peers, which can be considered bullying; therefore, the attitude adopted by her classmates in favor of the girl at that moment can be understood as a protagonist and protective action based on the empowerment of the group. It is noteworthy that this peer support is fundamental for overcoming bullying situations (Fernandes et al., 2020).

In both cases, the teenage girls witnessed violence but did not remain indifferent to the events, adopting an active stance and empowering themselves individually and collectively. Through critical reflection, awareness of the consequences, and, above all, the adoption of strategies to intervene (Perkins, 2010)—characteristics of empowerment processes—the participants exercised their protagonism and acted to prevent bullying. Only a small percentage of students who witness bullying situations intervene in favor of the victim (Salmivalli, 2010), which contributes to the maintenance of violence in schools. Therefore, adults working in schools should foster supportive and empathetic friendships among students, which was constantly encouraged during the intervention.

Based on the reflections that emerged during the meetings, the adolescents began to perceive problems at school and discussed ways to make this space more welcoming for everyone. One group, for example, chose to write a letter to the school's management team,

in which they pointed out problems and requested a different perspective on the students. Below is an excerpt from the letter.

> Dear Principal, we, the bullying prevention group, wrote this letter with suggestions to make the school a better place. First, greater supervision during student recesses. In one of our project classes, we noticed commotion and even violence among students. Second, adults have a greater understanding of students. Third, activities that encourage student socialization should be promoted. We suggest greater involvement from the student council (Participant 10, F).

The group came to understand that simply recognizing the problems was not enough and that they needed to try to solve them. Recess, for example, is a conducive environment for bullying, especially when there is no adequate supervision (Olweus, 1993). In the participants' view, interactions between children need to be monitored by adults to minimize violence. They recognize that they cannot change this reality alone; therefore, they request support from adults. Furthermore, the participants asked for more understanding from adults and more actions that enabled interaction between peers.

This activity of sending the letter to the management team was not planned in the meetings, but it was welcomed by the mediator, who understood that adolescents have the right to express themselves and to be heard and respected in their initiatives (Soares et al., 2005). It was then suggested that the letter be written jointly by the entire group. In this initiative, empowerment processes can be identified, insofar as the participants no longer accepted living in a passive relationship with the adults at school and wished to be heard and respected. Therefore, this is a confrontational stance to minimize injustices in the view of these students (Berth, 2019). This empowerment was an important step for them to adopt the protagonist attitude of sending a letter to the management team.

Protagonism requires changes in the culture of individuals, schools, and the socio-community context in which the action takes place (Costa, 2000). Consequently, managers must make an effort to transform the ingrained culture in schools that adults are the holders of knowledge. The role of the educator is also to assist in building the autonomy of students, in addition to enabling the creative and constructive participation of adolescents who are seeking solutions to problems at school (Costa, 2000).

In the last meeting, participants reported on the lessons learned during the intervention that they used in their daily lives, based on the assessment measure. Many wrote that they began to adopt positive attitudes in the school environment in order to prevent bullying and establish positive relationships with their peers.

> I saw several people bullying each other, and I helped the people who were suffering and tried to talk to their guardians about them being bullied, because I learned in the program that it's not right (Participant 11, F).

> I have seen my friend bully others several times, and I told them not to do it (Participant 12, F).

> Helping a girl who was isolated during recess (Participant 13, F).

> When I see someone alone, I try my best to make them happy and find many friends (Participant 14, F).

Participants began to express actions in response to negative peer situations, such as bullying, or positive situations, such as collective well-being and empathy. It is believed that the methodologies adopted in designing the intervention may have contributed to these results, which demonstrate protagonist actions on the part of adolescents, with processes

of collective empowerment, making them multipliers of prevention. The proposal is to decentralize the traditional role of adults and make children and adolescents active partners in the pursuit of social change (Soares et al., 2005). In this way, participants can build their autonomy through practice, in real cases, based on active participation in their social environment (Costa, 2000).

Final considerations

Preventing and intervening to overcome bullying requires a planned and systematic approach, in which the protagonism of the students is evident, giving them what is rightfully theirs: voice and recognition (Tognetta, 2018). These empowered peers feel like visible, participatory citizens who can act in defense of bullying victims (Cowie, 2018), protect themselves, and contribute to the promotion of collective well-being. The *#NoBullying* intervention offered participants a collective space in which they could exchange experiences, talk about their experiences, and, above all, become protagonists in the school.

In general, throughout the intervention, it was possible to observe the group's movement towards empowerment and exercising its protagonism in the school, using its knowledge in an engaged way to intervene in this social environment in which they spend a good part of their lives. Considering the proposed objectives, the group should be integrated; therefore, these adolescents were encouraged to establish positive bonds with each other, as many were only schoolmates and not classmates. Protagonism is precisely this interrelation between the trajectory of studies and participation in groups and the relational trajectory, which refers to the relationships established throughout their lives, both with the adult world and with their peers (Costa, 2000).

Adults working in child and adolescent development contexts play a key role in providing adequate support and acting as facilitators for students. Students need to be seen and heard, receive support when expressing their ideas, have their opinions considered, be involved in decision-making, and have power and responsibility in these decisions (Shier, 2019). This process represents youth protagonism, which is a way for young people to act based on what they feel and perceive about their realities (Costa, 2000).

Although the proposed objectives were achieved, this study has some limitations. The first is related to the structure of the intervention, which was directed only at a group of students and not the entire school population. In addition, the intervention was considered short-term, totaling 16 hours. Since bullying is a relational and systemic phenomenon, it is recognized that a program directed at the entire school community, carried out during the school year, may have greater potential for success (Olweus & Limber, 2019). Another limitation is the gender imbalance in the sample composition; therefore, in future studies, it is pertinent that the intervention be an integral part of the curriculum, which could contribute to a greater balance in the participation of boys and girls. Moreover, the school where the research was conducted is located in a context of social vulnerability, with some adolescents working and caring for siblings and having few alternatives for activities complementary to school. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the results found are specific to the local context and culture and therefore cannot be generalized to other countries or even other regions of the country.

Despite these limitations, the study has strengths, such as its multi-component format that allows access to the central theme of bullying using different methods and approaches. These adolescents, who live in a vulnerable context, had the opportunity to spend more time at school during extracurricular hours to discuss their experiences, deepen their knowledge

of the subject, and reflect on their rights, especially the right to live in a respectful and violence-free environment. The intervention constituted a space for expression and an opportunity for adolescents to reflect, support each other, and feel empowered to face situations of violence against themselves or their peers.

The use of Participatory Methodologies and the Experiential Method in this research was an important methodological strategy that enabled the active voice of the students. Young people were given the status of active subjects, establishing collaborative and participatory forms of knowledge construction and offering space for their actions throughout the intervention. Techniques and procedures were adopted, such as stimulus material (videos, narratives), dramatic techniques enacted by the participants themselves, and written records, which are indicated as appropriate when using participatory methodologies (Soares et al., 2005), in a reflective process about their feelings, actions, and ideas (Martín-Quintana et al., 2009).

The intervention provides this collective discussion, values life experiences, and enables engaged and empowered participants to exercise their protagonism in bullying prevention. Based on the results of this research, it is considered fundamentally important that researchers and educators, when developing actions and programs aimed at adolescents, use Participatory Methodologies and the Experiential Method so that these young people can feel empowered and true protagonists, acting effectively in a protective way in actions and decisions related to their daily lives.

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