School Bullying: Teachers' perceptions

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Abstract

In our days, teachers face many challenges, not only related to teaching but also developing professional competences as identifying and managing students conflicts. Even students face more than reading, writing or math at school. Many of them express to have participated in various forms of bullying. Teachers should provide a healthy and comfortable school environment and help their students not only to increase academic achievement but also to manage their socio-emotional reactions and problem solving.

This study explores teachers' definitions and perceptions of incidents of bullying at a middle school in Tirana through 15 in-depth interviews and using the constant comparative method of analysis. It's noted that the participants in this study defined bullying as being both physical and verbal, but no one identified emotional bullying. This last one is more difficult to be defined and addressed proactively in the way to reduce its occurrence. Bullies were characterized as: students with behavioral problems, low academic achievement, numerous absences at school and older than victims. While victims are quiet and shy, with average and over average academic achievement. About witnesses, there were no description or definitions; it was just as they didn't exist. As scenes of school bullying, the participants mentioned: school hallways, gym and school yard. At this point is still necessary an anti-bullying program intervention, especially with a social emotional focus, as a support for both students and teachers and also to have more trained teachers who will be able to identify the various forms of school bullying and reduce its occurrence.

Keywords: teacher; bullying; victim; bully; violence.

Introduction

School is a promoter of education for every student, so it must ensure learning opportunities, safety environment and equality. Teachers and school administrators should take care both for the student's achievement and well being. Recently, a series of severe events occurred in Albanian schools that have shocked not only students and teachers but the whole community: bullying incidents. Many of these events were media reported: after a banal quarrel at school a student was seriously injured with a knife by a peer; another peer who was stalked, committed suicide. This study examines teachers' definitions and perceptions of incidents of bullying that they witnessed, at a middle school of Tirana and the ways they've used to reduce it.

According to a study report carried out by "Save the Children" Foundation for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation of Disputes, it is shown that by 1435 children surveyed, 28% were involved in serious peer conflicts in school, while 42% do not feel safe in the classroom. According to the Ministry of Justice, in 2014 an increment of 8 % of the conflicts between students was reported. Kashahu and Karaj (2014) reported that the lack of depth knowledge about bullying makes teachers and executives to hold

positions. These results were not only supported by this study but also it showed that teachers can identify physical, verbal bullying and punish the bullies but can't identify emotional bullying and no actions were taken for the victims. According to the Statistical Office (2013), middle schools in Tirana have an average of 32.2 students per class, and high schools about 36 students per class.

So it's true that teachers are faced every day with overcrowding in classrooms, but this will not justify this huge gap of bullying knowledge. Asked about how they intervene in bullying incidents, teachers said they intervene by taking disciplinary actions (as a school breaking rules by students) and assigning a school parents meeting. In his study about student's perception and attitudes of school bullying Williams (2008) reported that with the previous participants suggesting that teachers are aware of bullying in their schools would lead to a reduction in bullying. On the other hand, Aronson's (2000) study, elaborated the proactive actions from teachers view and analyzed that bullying can be reduced by making "them aware of what they are doing to each other and how to stop it." It is this idea of making students aware of what they are doing that seems to be at the heart of reducing bullying through having students work together.

Literature

Bosworth (1999) according to Williams (2008), confirmed that success in the learning environment is not ensured by the absence of bullying, but effective learning environments can be enhanced when such distractions are eliminated. It is for this reason that bullying needs to be substantively addressed in public schools. Researchers Bauman and Del Rio (2006) stated that the presence of violence in schools adversely affects its climate and has great impact on students, showing fear, depression, psycho-somatic disorders and damaging their physical health.

With the recognition that bullying is a pervasive problem within schools and that it comes at a huge cost to the health and well being of its youth, many intervention programs have been developed. Although, studies that explore the attitudes and perceptions of teachers to the phenomenon of bullying are rare (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Marachi, Astor, and Benbenishty, 2007; Byers et al., 2011). Even so, there are some data about this phenomenon. Craig and Pepler (1997) reported that teachers intervene to stop bullying in only 4% of the cases, while Craig, Pepler, and Atlas (2000), noted that teachers intervene only in 15-18 % of school bullying incidents. According to the researchers Holt and Keyes (2004) there is a discrepancy between bullying reported by students compared with that of teachers. They think that this inconsistence of findings relates to how teachers define bullying, where teachers are generally more alert and sensitive to physical and verbal violence but they cannot say the same regarding the social exclusion or emotional bullying.

Perceptions of teachers against bullying of all forms, impact their involvement to intervene. Researchers argue that the dynamics of bullying behavior among students can only be changed through raising awareness of adults and their interventions, policy development at school, as well as coordination to follow the procedures to respond reports of harassment/bullying (Dedousis - Wallace and Shute, 2009).

Similarly, in a study on the student's perception of what teachers do to reduce bulling, it was found that the students report that their teachers do very little to interrupt the phenomenon (Unnever and Cornell, 2003).

Further, teachers play a key role in identifying signs as victimization, as well as violation. This is why they are regarded as a decisive factor not only to discover the phenomenon of bullying but also to create appropriate conditions, encouraging students not to remain silent when faced with bullying (Smith & Shu, 2000). Researchers Pepler, Smith and Rigby (2004), after a meta-analysis based on 13 studies concluded that the main factor for success on the reduction of school violence is the high level of commitment of teachers to stop violence. Furthermore, schools have an obligation to address bullying and they must take responsibilities when the bullying situations and their consequences aren't properly handled (Kevorkian & D'Antona, 2008).

Also as noted by Williams (2008) students may perceive their school as disorganized, which could

suggest that they are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior such as bullying, when: (a) school rules lack clarity or are erratically enforced, (b) when students diagnosed with antisocial disorder are placed in schools that are dilapidated and overcrowded, (c) when students do not receive tests and papers that are graded in a timely manner and (d) when course requirements are unclear and teacher expectations are inconsistent, unclear, or questionable.

Arllen, Gable, and Hendrickson (1994) noted that similar factors to those cited above have been associated with an increased risk of antisocial behavior. These factors include inconsistent teacher expectations, failure to acknowledge schoolwork completed, absence of teacher praise, lack of teacher time spent on instruction, not enough emphasis on individual student responsibility, and low emphasis on academics. Using "The Great teacher program" for middle school teachers, (Orpinas et al., 2004) showed that improving teacher management skills to reduce power struggles and aggression, enhance skills to assist students who are the targets of aggression. In their research (Dake et al., 2003) found that 98.6% of teachers felt a responsibility to prevent bullying in the classroom; they lacked confidence in their ability to deal with bullying; the approach found to be successful is the "whole school approach" that incorporates activities at both the classroom level and school level to decrease bullying. This is why it's so important to increase the teacher's awareness of bullying and their ability on professional problem solving.

Besides literature, Coghlan (2000) believed that language can play a vital role in reducing violence, since language can be an aid in setting the groundwork for violence and peace. Students can be better prepared to articulate their feelings, desires, and thoughts. Students can develop these language skills through discussion in academic controversy, which if encouraged by the teacher, will help students develop ways of handling opposing views (p. 87); according to (Dake et al., 2003), we are helping students by changing their attitudes, thanks to teachers intervention.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore teachers' definitions and perceptions of incidents of bullying that they witnessed, at a middle school of Tirana and the ways they've used to reduce it or handled with. So, the research questions were: "How do they define 'bullying?" and "How do they respond against it?"
Considering the influence of their behavior in bullying response, it's hoped that the current study will give e better understanding of teachers' role, their knowledge and their interventions in school bullying.

Design

The current study is based on a qualitative research method, addressing the research questions and so gaining a better understanding about the interpretation of school bullying incidents. The strategy of inquiry utilized was biographical research, concentrated on teachers work on managing student's conflicts, especially recalling bullying incidents during school life.
Sampling was opportunistic and thus no random selection of teachers was undertaken. In order to directly address the research questions, this study sampled those individuals who were information rich, specifically, criterion sampling.

Participants

Middle school teachers from 2 Schools in Tirana. Of the total (N=24) teachers, to the interview call responded (N=15) of them. Their ages spanning from 27 to 58 years old and 11 were females and 4 males (this report is typical in this profession) with 2 to 34 school teaching experience. Most of them held Bachelor qualification in Education and some Master degrees. Most had not experienced any training in bullying during their undergraduate education courses, while some others reported that the training was not always focused directly on bullying itself but instead discussed class general behavior management.

Materials and procedures

In the framework of the awareness campaign "Stop Violence in Schools" 2015-2016, two general workshops were held, discussing school challenges. During the interviews, a set of interview questions was used to guide opportunities to explore issues of bullying that teachers witnessed in school. Interview questions asked participants to recall their experiences with bullying, based on 5 important stages: (a) knowledge about bullying, (b) description of bullying participants, (c) common places for bullying incidents, (d) school challenges and (e) handling bullying situations.
Then 5 psychology students were trained to administer the interviews, during one week. The first question was related to the recognition that they had about the phenomenon of bullying and if the answer was "yes", then they were asked for the definition. When the answer was "no", or the respondent had no precise knowledge

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about the phenomenon, the interviewer offered a brief description and definition of the theoretical dimensions of the phenomenon. The collected data were analyzed by the constant comparative method and the emerged themes were coded.

Results

The results of the current study identified 4 themes: (a) categories of bullying, (b) characteristics of bully and victim, (c) scenes (as common places) and (d) interventions. The analysis of teacher definitions of bullying showed that the most of them defined it as both physical and verbal. Asked if they ever heard about bullying and how would defined it, there were 4 answers not well orientated, confounding "*Bullying*" with: "*Buddhism*" and "*Bulimia*" (as in Albanian, "bullying" is pronounced "*Bullizem*"; "*Buddhism - Budizem*" and "*Bulimia - Bulimi*". So their answered: "*Bulling is the Indian religion*"; "*As I know is an eating disorder…bulimics eat a lot and then vomits*". The others that were much more orientated defined it as physical and verbal: "*When a child beat and punch another child*"; "*Students harming their peers, …quarrel* "; "*Is, when children insult and attack each other*"; "*Midler form of aggressive behavior among children*". It's so important to highlight the fact that, somehow they have information about the phenomena, but it's incomplete and centered only on physical and verbal category of bullying. Also no one defined any form of emotional bullying, as if it didn't exist. This lack of identification is worrying because it means that no action will be taken, to handle it in a proactive way. Their perception of how bullying effect school life resulted to be worrying because the majority of the participants underestimated the consequences of bullying and defined the situation as not so serious. "*My darling, they are children…children fight with each other every time, so what consequences will be? " Hey, they fight today, and make peace the next day*"; "*Those who injured or killed their peers are drug users and not just bullies, so isn't bullying the reason why they injure or kill*". Only few of the participants have an equilibrated attitude about the bullying consequences: "*Incidents of bullying are a serious problem, because if students injure each other, some of them will abandon the school or worse, others will get involved in criminal behavior*".

Discussion

Teachers as educators should provide a healthy and comfortable school environment and help their students not only to increase academic achievement but also to manage their socio-emotional reactions and problem solving. Study results stated that teachers really need support regarding bullying by increasing their awareness about bullying dynamics. It's supported from previous studies (Bennett 2009; Williams 2008; Kashahu et al., 2014).
The results of this study provided insights into various aspects of bullying and they confirmed some of what is already known especially for physical and verbal bullying. The idea of emotional bullying can be teased out and examined as an entity in its own right.
Previous research (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Yoon, 2004) stated a difference in teacher attitude between covert (emotional & relational) and overt (physical & verbal)

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bullying, when the more traditional overt forms of bullying are well known and understood. This study results, partly confirm findings of these previous research: they knew something about overt bullying but nothing stated for covert bullying. The concerning part of the study is that some teachers may justify the physical bullying as being just normal as growing up and underestimate the emotional bullying effects on students well being. Teachers were not well orientated on their definitions, confounding "Bullying" with "Buddhism" and "Bulimia" (as in Albanian, "bullying" is pronounced "bullizem"; "Buddhism - Budizem" and "Bulimia - Bulimi". This finding reconfirmed the previous research of Kashahu & Karaj (2014), and so, thanks to a linguistic committee should be established an Albanian word for bullying instead of "bullizem" (which in Albanian language it doesn't have any sense).

The consequences of this information gap on bullying, may have encouraged bullies to retain their behaviors against victims, and otherwise the victims feeling even more helpless and unprotected. Emotional bullying victims may be less likely to report the bullying for fear of a dismissive attitude by teachers or because they have seen no consequences for the bullies, thus making it futile to report the problem. Bullying studies mostly are focused on the bullies, victims and bystanders effects (Olweus, 1993; Olweus et al., 1999; Rigby, 2004; Silvernail et al., 2000). In this study, teachers neither mention the bystanders or witnesses. This shows a huge lack of information and it gets even more difficult to intervene and reduce bullying short or long effects. Also this study finds that teachers feel unprepared to deal with bullying issues (Byers et al., 2011). During the interviews some teachers showed to be tired, but even more important is the fact of significant proportion of respondents seeing their profession associated only with teaching and learning time, that's all. It's seems like they don't want to get involved.

It should also be noted, that no action was mentioned for the victim. It looks like, bullies reactions are more evident than victims suffering, and this is a concerning issue that should be addressed. This is a clear indication of the lack of knowledge of effective strategies for teachers to solve real situations of bullying in schools, which is related to the lack of professional theoretical preparation about school bullying. It is this lack of knowledge that leads teachers to think that these situations can be "solved by itself".

Limitations

The sample size was relatively small and only two schools were used in the study. This impinges upon being able to generalize the results to the wider population.
The participants do not represent the diversity that is found in most schools, nor do they represent the lived experiences of other teachers. Another limitation of this study is the limited capacity for recall that a person possesses. Since the participants were asked to recall experiences with bullying, it's difficult to know what might have been overlooked because of the limited amount that a person can remember. The participants may have wanted to protect themselves, and so have projected themselves in particular ways to the interviewer. At last, as they knew and talk to each other, they may have influenced (voluntary or not) to the other responders. We

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have only a point of view, there are no perceptions taken by the students, school administrators and parents.

Recommendations

Future research should include a larger sample size to strengthen the findings of this study and to extend upon what has been revealed. Teachers perceive bullying as being less serious and they have no interventions for the victim and are less likely to intervene and need to know all the bullying dimensions; they should be trained.

It would be interesting in the future to investigate the impact that this training may have on teacher attitudes and intervention strategies in bullying. With better training opportunities and clearly articulated whole school policies and intervention programs for all forms of bullying, it may be better managed in schools in the future. In this way teachers can: provide opportunities for students to redefine themselves in positive ways; assist in building a student's positive self-concept, allow discussion about how to address certain situations and to create collaboration with the school psychologist. Another element that will help alleviate bullying is the implementation of a social justice curriculum. Providing students with a curriculum based on critical literacy will allow them to evaluate the processes, materials, and activities around them. Students need this ability in order to see the possible future consequences of their actions. Interventions within the family are extremely important. Schools need to adopt and maintain a whole-school prevention program. The school acts as a moderator, providing evening workshops and presentations for the community, connecting parents to outside supports, and providing students with healthy ways to manage school bullying issues.

It would be reasonable to organize an awareness campaign for students, parents and the community. All participants should communicate much more with each other in order to prevent bullying.

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