

Initiating an Olweus-Based Intervention Against School-Bullying

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Abstract

The Secondary Education Directorate of Dytiki Attiki (West Attica, Greece), through the Supervisors of Health Education and of Youth Counseling Station, contributes to the approach of the very serious problem of school-bullying through intervention programmes, like those of Health Education and especially of “School Intermediation”. The region of West Attica is well-known in Greece for intent social, economical and environmental problems and challenges that are faced. These problems become even more complex because of the presence of motley social groups of diverse origins and values-background, like domestic and foreign immigrants, ethnic groups, etc. This entire problem-nexus is transferred to the daily activities of the school societies, causing additional difficulties to the educational process. The purpose of the present work is to define the theoretical framework, which these actions at the public schools of West Attica are approached with. In this framework, there is a mention of the research questions and goals that have to be laid. In particular, the theoretical framework is mentioned for dealing with school-bullying through intervention programmes that are implemented in schools, like the one of Olweus, and to the results of meta-analysis research regarding the effectiveness of such intervention. The analysis of the theoretical framework, through which the issues of school-bullying should be approached, is mainly a subject of adults and especially of teachers.

Keywords

School Bullying, Intervention Programmes, Educators, Teachers

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1. Introduction

The region of West Attica is well-known in Greece for intent social, economical and environmental problems and challenges that are faced. These problems become even more complex because of the presence of motley social groups of diverse origins and values-background, like domestic and foreign immigrants, ethnic groups, etc. At the same time, there is a large increase of population observed in the specific region, mainly because of domestic immigration, there is a downgrading of natural resources, a loss of social cohesion

and an uncertainty regarding economic growth. As an indication, there is a rubbish dump for receiving the waste of Athens metropolitan area (Greece), amounting to more than 1,570,000 tons of urban waste annually, while the local processing unit can manage about 1,200 tons daily. Moreover, there are 23,000 tons of solid industrial waste received in the dump annually, with 4,500 tons being toxic, and 8,500 tons being oil-waste. The remaining 10,000 tons of them are non-toxic [1]. This entire problem-nexus is transferred to the daily activities of the school societies, causing additional difficulties to the educational process [2].

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The purpose of the present work is to define the theoretical framework, which these actions at the public schools of West Attica are approached with. In this framework, there is a mention of the research questions and goals that have to be laid:

- The conceptual and functional definitions;
- A review of the relevant bibliography;
- The theoretical framework and speculation about school-bullying;
- The review of empirical surveys.

In particular, the theoretical framework is mentioned for dealing with school-bullying through intervention programmes that are implemented in schools, like the one of Olweus, and to the results of meta-analysis research regarding the effectiveness of such intervention programmes. The analysis of the theoretical framework, through which the issues of school-bullying should be approached, is mainly a subject of adults and especially of teachers.

The present work focuses on school-bullying as defined by Farrington [3] and Olweus [4, 5]. It does not concern peer violence and victimization in general, according to Finkelhor et al. [6]. For the latter incidents, apart from being rare locally, compared to the former ones, their confrontation has always been within the direct jurisdiction of Teachers' Councils (the assembly of the educational personnel of a school, in the Greek education system). The regional supportive agencies have no authority to interfere, unless invited for personalized counseling or seminar activities, and the school authorities are reluctant to publish such incidents "out-doors".

2. Theoretical Framework for School-Bullying

Although the debate about the issue of school-bullying is dated back to the 19th century [7], the first systematic surveys for the study of this phenomenon have been conducted in the 1970's at the Scandinavian countries [4]. In the last decades there is a considerable activity observed for reducing this phenomenon [8]. In the conducted surveys, not only the rights of students are recognized for a safer environment but also the negative consequences of school-bullying to their mental health, even in their future lives as adults [5, 7, 9]. On the other hand, it should not be ignored that bullying has been historically observed in every educational system [8]. The fact that in the past it was not regarded as a social problem and it was not an issue for study, consequently, is based on the qualitative and quantitative differentiation of the phenomenon, the diverse forms of its expression and the

different manner which the present society deals with it [10].

In the international bibliography, there is not a generally accepted theory about the phenomenon of school-bullying [11], for various reasons [12]. In this framework, a series of surveys is confined to empirical data [4, 13, 14, 15], while other surveys follow either the ecological systemic approach [16, 17], stressing the dynamic interaction among students and the social networks that are formed, or the social theory of information processing [18], considering bullying as a group-phenomenon and stressing the social processes that take place within the group (school class). Nevertheless, apart from the conducted studies for defining the problem (e.g., see [19]) and describing it in both a quantitative (e.g., see: [20-23]) and a qualitative manner (e.g., see: [12, 24-28]), various methods for coping with it have been developed (e.g., see: [29-34]) and anti-bullying legislation has been established in some countries (e.g., see: [35-36]).

3. Review of Some Empirical Surveys of Local Interest

According to the international epidemiological data, one out of seven students has suffered bullying in school [5]. More recent survey-data of the World Health Organization (WHO) conducted in 2010 from 39 countries [37] report that 8-12% of the students declare that they have exerted bullying on their schoolmates. In this survey, respectively, 9-13% of the students declared that they have suffered bullying in school. The relevant evidence for Greek students is amounted to 9-23% for those who have exerted bullying and 7-10% for those who have suffered bullying [37]. These numbers are differentiated in the European survey conducted within DAPHNE III programme [10], where 31.98% of the sample declared being victims of school-bullying while 30.2% declared being offenders, either repeatedly or for several occasions. The observed difference between the two surveys is justified to a large degree by the different time period that is set by the mass as a reference point for the recording of this phenomenon. Thus, in the survey of WHO, the bullying incidents have taken place at least twice a month for the last two months, while in the survey of DAPHNE III they have taken place either repeatedly or for several occasions in general.

According to previous surveys, following this framework, one out of two students had been recorded of suffering bullying behaviour at some stage of his/her school-life [38]. At the same time, a large number of researchers in the international bibliography attempt to investigate the aspects of this phenomenon through the implementation of relevant intervention programmes [11]. Specifically from the studied surveys, the most effective intervention programmes required

actions on different levels [4,15,17]: personal; classroom; total of school and the broader community. Respectively, according to the meta-analysis results of an international survey for the evaluation of a large number of intervention programmes against school-bullying [11], the most significant practices include: disciplinary methods; guardian meetings; surveillance of the school courtyard; communication with parents; seminars/conferences conducted in school; application of classroom regulations and classroom management practices. In addition, the common elements of the most effective intervention programmes that aim at reducing victimization include: relevant video screening; disciplinary methods; projects with classmates; meetings of parents and collaborative group-project. In any case, the factors that affect the success of such intervention programmes are the duration and intensity of implementation, as well as the acceptance of the largest possible number of elements for a programme [11].

As it is observed from the review of the Greek bibliography, very few surveys have studied the role of adults in school-bullying incidents. The results of these surveys demonstrate the different opinion of students. Specifically, 1/3 of students consider that the adults do not try to stop bullying behaviour and whatever actions of theirs are not systematic too [39]. At the same time, it is considered that the teachers are not aware of the prevailing situation in schools, regarding school-bullying [40], while the majority of parents (68%) do not collaborate with school for the common suppression of this phenomenon [39]. In addition, the majority of students who suffer bullying (40%) do not talk about it to any adult, neither parent nor teacher, while only 19.6% of them report an incident to their parents [40].

The international experience has also demonstrated that students, in general, whether they attend schools that are situated in middle-class areas or in areas of low socio-economic background either, they hesitate to seek help. Many times, both school and teachers alike are not sufficiently informed about the most effective prevention measures during bullying. The socio-economic and the cultural differences also constitute a major challenge for the effective implementation of intervention programmes against school-bullying [41].

4. The Intervention Programme of Olweus Against School-Bullying

The intervention programme of Olweus had been initially applied in the city of Bergen (Norway) between 1983-1985, having 2,500 participating students, within the framework of

a national campaign against school-bullying. Within that framework, a diachronic cohort survey was conducted that demonstrated a significant reduction of self-reporting by students for bullying incidents [4]. As an indication, after 8 months of application of the intervention programme, the reduction of the number of students who had suffered bullying reached 62% (from 10% of the total sample to 3.8%), while the relevant percentage of students who had exerted bullying reached a 33% reduction (from 7.6% of the total sample to 5.1%). Respectively, after 20 months of application, the reduction of bullying victims reached 64% (from 10% of the total student sample to 3.6%), while the reduction of bullying offenders reached 52.6% (from 7.6% of the total student sample to 3.6%). More recent surveys about the effectiveness of the particular intervention programme for students of the secondary education [42] demonstrate a reduction of the number of students, being involved in bullying incidents (either suffering or exerting), close to 30%.

The intervention programme of Olweus for dealing with school-bullying presupposes an awareness of the problem and the will of all the members of school community to participate [5,43,44]. Within this framework, relevant actions should take place on the levels of school, classroom and individuals alike. Particularly on the school level, the proposed actions are:

- An attitude-survey through questionnaires for recording the problem, for sensitizing the students and for better planning the intervention programme;
- A relevant meeting in school with the purpose of a “collective commitment” on behalf of the members of school-community for accepting the responsibility of implementing the intervention programme. At the same time, the results of the attitude-survey could be presented for the activation of the participants;
- An increase of surveillance of inner school areas in order to consolidate a sense of security and to become clear that bullying behaviors will not be acceptable. Of course, according to Olweus, the degree and the framework of surveillance should be decided by school-teachers;
- Improvement of school-courtyard through the promotion of positive activities for the students;
- The establishment of an open communication line for the students who suffer bullying, in order to express themselves without fear;
- Informing the parents about the actions of school and a more frequent communication between teachers and parents;
- The setting of teachers work-teams that, through frequent meetings, will contribute to the development of the social

network of school and additionally they will be informed about the problems that disturb the school-life.

- Finally, the creation of training programmes for parents, with the participation of teachers, in order to create a common attitude towards the problem.

On the level of classroom, some proposed measures are:

- The designing of classroom regulations against bullying that will have been decided by the students through their class assembly. The regulations should be hanged up on a visible spot inside the classroom. The desirable set of rules should be properly clarified to the students and it should include, besides their self-commitment: their active participation for averting this phenomenon; to enforce actions against the exclusion and the social isolation of their classmates. A combination is also suggested of encouraging positive activities and of imposing certain sanctions in case of bullying incidents;
- The organizing of ordinary assemblies of the classroom, under the supervision of the teacher, for the evaluation of the current situation and for exerting a social control of their classmates;
- The promotion of collaborative learning, aiming at a mutual positive interdependence of the students. Of course, the co-existence of victims and offenders within the same working group should be avoided, at least initially;
- Positive activities on the level of classroom, provided that the active participation of all students is ensured;
- Classroom assemblies with the participation of parents/guardians, teachers and students, if the latter wish so, having the purpose of: reinforcing the parental role; promoting their role as active observers of bullying incidents; avoiding the incrimination of the students who have exerted bullying.

Finally, on the individual's level, the suggested actions include:

- Discussions with the students who suffer or exert bullying, initially on a personal basis and later on, if necessary, within discrete groups. In any case, the protection of victims must be ensured, as well as their support by professionals, if required.
- Discussions with the parents of students who are involved in bullying incidents, supporting of their role for encouraging their activation and reparation of material damages, if any. These conversations can be conducted either individually or collectively, according to the seriousness of the situation and the will of the parents to communicate in a positive attitude. For the parents of students that exert bullying, the development of a relation

with their children is suggested, based on confidence, on setting family rules and on creating a reward/sanctions framework. For the parents of students that suffer bullying, respectively, the participation to sports and activities is suggested, that will improve the self-respect of their children and their encouragement in making friendly relationships that will prevent their isolation;

- Using of imagination on behalf of teachers and parents;
- Activation of students who are observers of bullying incidents;
- Joint groups of parents and students that exert or suffer bullying, that will initially discuss separately, provided they negotiate about different issues, and later on commonly;
- Change of classroom, or even of school environment, for the students that exert bullying, unless it is deemed more effective to transfer the students that have suffered bullying.

Naturally, the particular intervention programme should be adapted to the specific needs of every school. Especially for the schools of a low socio-economic background, it must be recognized that teachers face exceptionally stressful conditions, which prevent them from taking actions for a more effective dealing with school-bullying. That is why it is suggested for these particular areas that the intervention programmes should also include a thorough evaluation of the stressful conditions encountered, as well as methods of coping with them. The supervision and training of teachers for approaching groups of students having special features is also considered especially significant, within the previous framework. As it is also suggested in the intervention programme of Olweus, meetings with the prominent members of the community may have a positive contribution to the local society, in addition to promoting activities that concern the youth and the sensitizing of the public [41].

5. Application & Discussion

After considering the international practices against school-bullying, the regional supervisors of the school supporting agencies of West Attica decided to initiate an anti-bullying intervention programme, in Spring 2013, through the implementation of a pilot-project proposed by the local Secondary Education Directorate. There was neither any similar experience/background before in this area nor, notably, any relevant national legislation. Thus, the designed activities had to be short-term and long-term ones.

The short-term activities would detect the extent of the problem and they would provide some sort of immediate

intervention. In this respect, for the former part (detection), a survey was designed by using a questionnaire, based on the revised Olweus Bully Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ) [4, 15]. The survey was preceded by preliminary classroom seminars and informal exploratory discussions with students and teachers. The collected data are still under processing. For the latter part (immediate intervention), the proposal of peer support schemes [45] had been initiated, in a network of schools, as a part of the previously mentioned pilot-project. Those immediate activities had been conducted under the direct supervision of the local supervisors of Health Education and of the Youth Counseling Station.

In long-terms, the indirect involvement of more experts was considered necessary for the local study of this phenomenon (bullying) in a holistic/systemic manner. The environmental conditions, as monitored by the supervisor of Environmental Education, and the respective vocational ones, as monitored by the two supervisors for career guidance, are of profound impact to the overall social conditions. The unemployment rates are vast (> 27%) and cause stressful conditions in the families, with the expected consequences to the behaviour of adolescents. Along with the inner-family conditions, minor-offence criminality and the emergence of nationalism is also observed in the social environment. In addition to the involvement of the supervisors, joint seminars are conducted for teachers, who are unprepared to cope with this phenomenon [22].

The overall approach is to make the anti-bullying intervention an integral part, both of the regular extra-curricular activities of schools (namely, the annual Health Education optional programmes) and of the regular curricular subjects (i.e., the “Project Course”: a mandatory semester course, focusing on team-work and having a topic selected by the attending students).

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, as it can be observed from the international bibliography, a holistic approach is required for coping with school-bullying, through taking actions with the participation of all concerned parts. In addition, the international experience from the implementation of relevant intervention programmes, like the one of Olweus, could be proven especially useful. Therefore, the international experience is utilized by the regional supervisors of Health Education, of Environmental Education and of counseling services of West Attica in order to design specific intervention programmes that are called “School Intermediation Networks”. The participation of different educational experts (supervisors) from the higher administration level of education ensures a holistic confrontation of the diverse encountered problems

and better coordination of the joint relevant activities. Through these programmes, the teachers of participating schools may exchange knowledge and experience, in joint meetings, for copying with various situations successfully, in a typically problematic area.

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