

## School Bullying in Greek Education System: The Case Study From the Island of Lesvos

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**Abstract:** This research study is an attempt to approach the social construction of the phenomenon of bullying through teachers' narratives who teach in Primary Schools on the Island of Lesvos. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were performed. This is a micro-sociological approach that focuses on social processes, hierarchy and the structure of the classroom, the personality of the students and the learning process. The theoretical framework which this study was based on is the Ecosystemic/Bioecological theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner. The results of this study showed that bullying is not defined in its true dimensions. Physical, verbal and socio-emotional bullying are recognized more strongly by the teachers. Physical and verbal forms of violence are considered to be the most common. As to the extent of the phenomenon the views vary. Bullying occurs mainly in the school yard. The physical and verbal forms of bullying are considered the most dangerous. Views of educators on issues concerning the identity of both the victim and the perpetrator differ depending on each person's life experiences and representations. For the management of bullying teachers apply different policies at individual level, classroom level and school level. It is necessary for the educational policy to create the appropriate conditions for the teachers' redefinition, through critically oriented training procedures.

**Key words:** school bullying, elementary school, teachers, bully-victim of school bullying

### 1. Introduction

Concepts of "Aggression", "School Violence", "Bullying" are notoriously difficult to define because they depend on socio-cultural context and the historical and political conditions under which formulated and used (Artinopoulou, 2001, p. 13). The publication of Olweus' book, "*Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys*" marked the beginning of the systematic study of bullying in Sweden in 1978 (Smith & Brain, 2000). According to Olweus (1993), school bullying or victimisation is defined as "repeated negative, ill-intentioned behavior by one or more students directed against a student who has difficulty defending himself or herself. In this point it is also important to notice that most definitions agree that three factors are implicit in any bullying activity: it must occur over a prolonged period of time rather than being a single aggressive act, it must involve an imbalance of power, the powerful attacking powerless, and it can be verbal, physical or psychological in nature (Besag, 1989, p. 3; Smith & Brain 2000; Smith, Barrio & Tokunaga, 2012). Bullying behavior usually occurs

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without apparent provocation and can thus be considered a form of proactive aggression in which the targeted individual is actively sought out (Coie and Dodge 1998:2595). It can take different forms such as physical abuse (hitting, pushing and kicking) (Rigby, 2008), verbal (calling names, insults, spiteful taunts and mockery (Giovazolias, Kourkoutas, Mitsopoulou, & Georgiadi, 2010), interpersonal, socio-emotional (malicious gossip, spreading rumors and ostracism from the group, (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012), racist, sexual and electronic abuse (bullying is being exercised through chat rooms, mobile phones or emails (Bhat, 2008). According to Salmivalli (2010) the participant roles were Victim, Bully, Reinforcer of the bully, Assistant of the bully, Defender of the victim, and Outsider.

## **2. Literature Review**

The framework through which the events, results and situations are realized, comprehended, get their meaning and are evaluated is school premises. Daily interaction is forming every student's reality. That means that the student undertakes roles through interaction with other significant others, adopts attitudes and forms personal identity (Blackledge & Hunt, 2000, p. 319). When the ecological perspective is applied to bullying, a bullying interaction occurs not only because of individual characteristics of the child who is bullying but also because of actions of peers, actions of teacher and other adult caretakers at school, physical characteristics of the school grounds, family factors, cultural characteristics, and even community factors. Bronfenbrenner (1977) describes this ecosystem with a classic diagram resembling a target, with the child at the center and concentric circles representing contexts from those closest to the child (family) to those furthest away (community) (Swearer & Doll, 2001, p. 10).

A common finding from research conducted in European countries is that they approach the issue of school bullying in a macro-sociological approach focused on students' socio-demographic characteristics and in a micro-sociological approach, which focuses on the social processes and dynamics of the classroom, the personality of the students, the learning process (Artinopoulou, 2001). In Greece, most studies have investigated the phenomenon of school bullying in primary school, shedding light on aspects such as size, frequency (Sapouna, 2008), forms of violence (Gotovos, 1996; Boulton, Karellou, Laniti, Manousou, & LEMONI, 2001; Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001), teachers' views outlining the identity of the perpetrator and the victim in the phenomenon of bullying (Asimopoulos, Hatzipemos, Sumaki, Diareme, Giannakopoulou, Tsiantis, 2008), the consequences (Unicef, 2001, Smith, Nika & Papisideri, 2004), and prevention and management strategies (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001, Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2011, Thompson & Smith (2011), Yoon & Bauman, 2014). The global investigation of the phenomenon of school bullying documents the scientific originality of the present research.

## **3. Purpose**

The purpose of the research is to investigate through the speech of teachers, who teach in Primary Schools of the Island of Lesbos, how the phenomenon of school bullying (Bullying) is understood as a reality in the Greek Education System.

## 4. Research Method

### 4.1 Sample

The sample was selected, according to Mantzoukas (2007) based on the subjective knowledge of the researcher about its characteristics (sample of expediency). It was considered appropriate to include teachers of both sexes in order to record possible differences in their perceptions. We tried to cover different age categories, ranging from 26-54 years old. The criterion for the selection of teachers was the permanence, the scientific training, the urbanity, the functionality of the schools that serve and their years of service. A total of 15 teacher interviews were conducted.

### 4.2 Methodology

In this research the method chosen was the qualitative research and specifically the semi-structured interview. Investigating the phenomenon of school bullying requires the collection of “in-depth” informations (King & Horrocks, 2010). The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). Fifteen primary school teachers were interviewed on the Island of Lesbos. The Content Analysis was used for the analysis of the data. The unit of measure chosen was the sentence referring to the matter under investigation as a phrase. The encoding of the experiential material led to the following Thematic Units of Defining School Bullying, its forms and epidemiologic characteristics, the directions of School Violence, the perpetrator’s identity, the victim’s identity, the consequences of School Bullying, the Management Policies and the training of the educational staff on the matter.

## 5. Results: Interpretation

Educators teaching in Primary Schools on the Island of Lesbos recognize the existence of school bullying, without however being able to define it in its real dimension, a fact mentioned by Giannakouloulos, Diareme, Soumakis, Chatzipemos, Asimopoulos and Tsiantis (2010). In order to define the phenomenon of bullying they refer to its forms of manifestation, the directions of the violence, the space where it takes part as well as the consequences it brings about. School bullying is defined in terms of the people or groups of people involved in the phenomenon. E1: *“The same way the weak parts of society suffer by the powerful ones, school works accordingly, for school is a micrographic depiction of society itself”*. E14: *“First of all, it is a disturbing phenomenon which unfortunately seems to be increasing year after year. I see it as a form of classroom terrorism. That is how I would put it in words. The classroom is where it mainly takes place and less during break time, or whatever starts in the classroom continues during the break”*. Most common forms of bullying tend to be physical and verbal, as well as socio-emotional, conclusions supported by the research data by Deligiannis Kouimtzis (2005). E1: *“Yes. Kids we socialize with usually use verbal bullying. However, we do have use of violence, physical violence”*. E5: *“Yes, we could say that girls do what grown women do. Gossip, hang out in cliques, include or exclude specific kids from playing thus isolating some kids. We do have phenomena like these”*. Physical violence is mainly expressed in the form of “pushing”, “punching”, “kicking” and verbal violence with “name calling”, intimidating comments and mostly making fun of other kid’s appearance. Houndoumadi and Pateraki (2001) have recorded such incidents in their study. According to recorded material by Asimopoulos et al. (2008:6), there is a tendency not to pay the

necessary attention or to justify incidents that do not concern physical violence. E1: *“In our school it is rare, school bullying is not an intense phenomenon here. Small problems that may emerge are mostly connected with physical violence during play time”*. It has been pointed out that bullying mainly takes place during the last grades of primary school and is attributed to the pre-adolescent phase and the need of children for social acceptance by their peers, as supported by Carney & Merrell (2001) E13: *“I think that in the senior grades of Primary School, in which the kid places its social role in a higher position than the family, bullying comes in place. Let’s say that children of that age enter the pre- adolescent period and wish to be accepted by their peers. I definitely think it is a phenomenon of the older ages”*. Physical and verbal bullying appear to be the most dangerous forms of violence as it is pointed out that they have the most visual consequences. E14: *“Verbal bullying can also have a negative effect on the child’s mental world, whereas the physical one could even prove to be fatal even if it is only experienced once”*. According to our bibliographical review Craig and Pepler (1997) mention that the consequences of physical and verbal abuse are more easily manifested and that they play an important role in the seriousness educators place on them. E11: *“All types (of bullying) are serious. The most serious is the physical one. It is violence, physical violence, the beating up. Threats are psychologically serious as I mentioned before. Like: - when we finish school we hear lines like: I’m going to show you -. I’ve heard that. All types are dangerous; they can create different traumas to the child”*. When examining the directions of violence at school the ones recognized are, a) by the Teacher to the Student, mostly in a verbal form. E4: *“Yes, there has been noticed that teachers are sometimes yelling to impose order in the classroom. Unfortunately it is our only weapon”*. Although McEvoy claims that educators tend to overuse their power (2005, p. 3) only few from our sample admitted of having used physical violence during their professional course as teachers. E9: *“I have occasionally plucked ears and pulled some hair and I do not regret it”*. B) From Student to Teacher. According to Pervin and Turner (1998), sometimes students knowingly ignore the teacher, making personal comments about him/her or ruining their personal belongings. E9: *“As the teacher had repeatedly punished him, he smashed his car”*, c) from Student to Student. Bullying directed by one student to another. This usually takes place in the school grounds, it is perceived by the educators as the most dangerous type of violence, claim also supported by Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzis (2010). E9: *“Violence, school violence or juvenile delinquency that some kids develop for various reasons inside school are connected with motives such as vengeance, fanaticism, aggressiveness, ferociousness. As these kids have no other place to express those feelings, other students become their recipients”*, d) from Parents to Students. In some schools parents often independently decide to settle their children’s victimization, completely sidelining the school frame, e) from Parents to Educators. Teachers often report that they are being verbally and physically bullied by parents of students, which in turn negatively affects their psychological composition. Centre for Educational Research and Documentation of O.L.M.E. (2009) points out that the investigation of violent incidents both against educators or other adults is usually insufficient as no such studies have ever been conducted. E5: *“...parents’ behavior was completely unacceptable. The teacher had been treated so badly that eventually he got sick”*. Views of teachers on the victim’s or perpetrator’s characteristics differ depending on their experiences and representations. The victimizer is presented by the teachers as a bright child who often makes up ways to intimidate his/her peers. When talking about school performance they are usually categorized as *“undisciplined”*, easily distracted and over consumed in finding ways to bully his/her peers. This finding coincides with Tjavanga’s (2012) study conclusions. E8: *“...I believe below average. It is not a matter of intelligence or a bright mind. It is a matter of choosing to channel all their energy into situations like these”*. It has been claimed that boys evoke mainly physical intimidation by *“hitting”*, whereas girls are involved

in more indirect forms of bullying like “*gossips*”, “*seclusion from peer groups*”, “*threats*”. These results agree with the results from the studies by Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano and Slee (1999, p. 4), Houndoumadi & Pateraki (2001), Hess & Hagen (2006, p. 231), Sapouna (2008, p. 209). E6: “*As to the gender, (victimizer) boys 99%*”. E8: “*Surely it seems that boys are involved in physical hitting, that is physical bullying. Girls work more underground. Their actions are revealed in the process. They use gossip, seclusion in a ‘we don’t want you’ way*”. In terms of physical characteristics, children often bullying other children are the ones with apparent physical strength or height. E4: “*Usually children who intimidate are very strong or chubby with a body figure bigger than the average of that age, or they are really tall*”. Educators tend to believe that kids who are being intimidated are not particularly clever, in comparison with the classroom average. These are children who are sensitive and vulnerable, insecure or quiet, more reserved. Besag (1989) and Rigby (2002) seem to confirm the above with their scientific data. E8: “*The victims are usually more sensitive, vulnerable, insecure and quiet children*”.

As for their socio-economic level, teachers support that usually the victims come from a low socio-economic background, in which parents are working in professions which are not listed in a high social rank. Although supported in bibliography by Dye, Merlo, Harel-Fisch, Damsgaard, Holstein, Hetland, Currie, Grabhainn, Gaspar de Matos & Lynch (2009), this view has been disputed by Olweus (2009). E11: “*It is poorer kids, whose parents have jobs not particularly respected or appreciated, if I may say, who are automatically rejected by others*”. When it comes to gender issues and school bullying, teachers mention that girls are mostly intimidated as they are more sensitive and shy than boys. The attitude expected by girls towards school bullying is stereotypically and socially defined, as according to the social role they are attributed from a young age, they “should” be more sensitive, spiteful and sociable (Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; Watson, 2007). Boys on the other hand are raised with a completely different socially assigned role when it comes to violence and aggressiveness, making their involvement to cases of intimidation or bullying somewhat expected and legitimate (Hoffman, 1977, p. 712; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Kaukiainen, 1996, p. 11). Based on these perceptions it is natural that boys who deviate from their socially assigned role and appear to be more sensitive, become victims and are bullied even by girls. E5: “*Girls might be bullied more than boys because they are more sensitive and self reserved, but many time boys are bullied as well for being shy and reserved*”. According to the results of the study, students originating from ethnic minorities have more possibilities to be victimized in comparison with native students, point also mentioned by Sapouna (2009). E6: “*I have experienced this for many years. ‘The Albanian’, the ‘Ukranian’...*”. According to the findings of the study conducted by Sapouna (2009), students of ethnic minorities hold more chances of being victimized in comparison with Greek students.

From the analysis of the recorded data it seems that the phenomenon of school bullying brings about serious repercussions in the psycho-emotional development of the children, either on the victim’s or the victimizer’s side or even the psychology of witnesses of such incidents. Children who are bullied at school are conquered by fear, which in turn negatively affects their school performance, a symptom confirmed by the study of Tjavanga (2012). E9: “*maybe in their mind the sense of fear becomes their thought. When you feel threatened, this becomes your main concern and learning comes second*”. As claimed by Hawker & Boulton (2004, p. 441) they find it difficult to adjust, they feel sad and depressed. Socially stigmatized, they become isolated, they have a hard time rejoining their peer companies and find excuses like sickness or tummy aches so as to avoid school, as Thornberg (2010) confirms. E10: “*they don’t want to come to school in the morning and find strange excuses, like ‘my stomach aches’ or they say that they don’t feel well*”. Educators mention that children who are being bullied are also

negatively affected in their academic performance as they tend to focus more on the intimidation by their peers than their school studies. As confirmed by Smith & Thompson (1991 as cited in Hanish and Guerra, 2000, p. 116) and Rigby (2002), children who become witnesses of bullying incidents experience retaliation fear which largely explains why they usually do not report the bullying incidents. E7: *“They might be afraid to talk about it because of possible consequences. Usually people who intimidate continue to do so, inside or outside school”*. Consequently, we are often unaware of the scale of bullying and we are therefore unable to intervene.

Educators follow various policies concerning the management of school bullying incidents in a personal, classroom or school level. They try to juxtapose the two children — victims and victimizers — so that both sides are cross referenced. To avoid any possibility of distorting the facts, they also take into consideration all the witnesses’ accounts. In cases in which educators believe that they are dealing with a one-time incidence, they deliberately choose to ignore it, which — according to Olweus (2009) — is interpreted by the students as a silent acceptance which has the opposite results than the ones pursued. A great percentage of teachers adopt alternative intervention methods and investigate their appropriateness depending on each school bullying case. This policy is also supported by Rigby (2011, p. 282). On a classroom scale, educators are trying to timely diagnose the phenomenon, a policy recommended by Olweus (2009). E7: *“We are trying to dissolve these groups as soon as they are created, before things get out of control”*. They perform teaching methods which enhance cooperativeness and healthy competition, like for example group teaching. According to Olweus (2009, p. 106), students who are encouraged to participate in this type of teaching, tend to be more accepting and less prejudiced towards children with a different ethnic and cultural background and thus reduce their intimidating activities. In many primary schools in Lesbos Island another policy preferred by teachers concerning the management of school bullying is to urge students to confide in their teachers whether they are being bullied themselves or witnessing incidents of bullying so that this is not an ongoing situation. In case the students distrust their teachers they are also advised to talk to their parents. Of course, the fact that in many cases students suppress the incidents due to retaliation fear, is also mentioned and corroborated by the bibliography of Athanasiades and Deliyanni Kouimtzi (2010, p. 336) who claim that the students do not talk about their intimidation as teachers tend to use ineffective methods of intervention practices such as punishments and expels. A small percentage of educators have reported that they use a verbal intimidation practice including yelling and repercussions in the form of depriving privileges like break time or distancing from other students. E9: *“teachers might deprive the child from its break time and separate him/her from the others, they might yell — not call names. They might say for example that that person is not like the others, and thus target him/her. This is one form of punishment”*. Of course, enforcing strict disciplinary measures like physical punishment can bring according to Mayer (1982) the opposite results, as it promotes antisocial behavior. Only very particular cases of teachers mentioned the use of the Sociometry method, which as reported by by Coie, Dodge and Coppotelli (1982) detects negative relationships between children that could eventually lead to bullying incidents. In a school level practices like: Student supervision during break time. According to Whitney & Smith (1993), Rigby (2008) and Olweus (2009) bullying incidents are mostly manifested at times when there is decreased teacher supervision. B) Cooperation between teachers. Support and interaction between experienced teachers with younger educators who lack the necessary flexibility to handle bullying incidents seems to be very effective. According to Olweus (2009) interaction among teaching staff is a very constructive way to resolve situations like these. C) Inform and work together with the school principal — as long as he/she is easy to talk to, otherwise such action is avoided. E12: *“It depends on whether the Principal is easy to approach and cooperate with. There are Principals who are intractable, in which case you choose to act on your*

own and do whatever you can”. Finally, d) cooperate and consult specialists and psychologists. These practices are also bibliographically supported by Olweus (2009). As all educators that composed the sample of the study, lack of training on school bullying issues is making their work harder. More training is needed as Allen (2010) supports. E1: “We, teachers, are not experts. At least I don’t feel that I am an expert in handling all cases of bullying”. E5: “We have not been trained and as a result we have not accordingly trained the children. That is, tell them how to behave to other children and how we should behave as teachers”.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite recognizing the phenomenon of school bullying, educators teaching in Primary Schools on Lesbos Island do not define it in its true dimensions. They mostly recognize the imposing of power by the strong onto the weak. Physical, verbal and socio-emotional bullying are more intensely located. Physical and verbal violence are more frequent, as they are direct forms of intimidation. The degree of danger in forms of violence is judged upon the consequences the latter bring about in the physical and mental health of the children and it is pointed out that no form of violence should be underestimated. The ineffectiveness of the educator justifies the more frequent occurrence of school bullying in spaces without sufficient supervision. As a phenomenon it takes place mostly in senior classes of primary school. The victimizers are described by the teachers as intelligent, as they invent ways to intimidate their peers. As to their school performance it is usually average, often suffering from ADHD and are characterized as “disobedient”, “undisciplined” and extremely “active”. In terms of gender, boys are mostly involved in school bullying. Educators connect low socio-economic status of the students with the victimizer’s identity. In the category of children who are bullied teachers list mostly insecure, anxious, sensitive and quiet students who find it difficult to develop interpersonal relationships. They are not characterized as particularly bright and educators tend to base this evaluation on their school performance. Girls seem to be more frequently victimized as well as boys who are characterized by somewhat effeminate behavior. External appearance plays a defining role in the identity of the victim. Students originating from different – especially Eastern countries – also seem to be chosen more.

In order to manage the phenomenon of school intimidation, educators try to juxtapose the two children – victim and victimizer — so as each one can present their case and thus avoid the danger of distorting the facts. Involving witnesses of the events is thought to be necessary, as their manifestation could clarify the whole situation. In a classroom level the pedagogical management of the phenomenon is accomplished by flexible teaching schemes which in turn enhance the children’s intelligence. In terms of discipline a great percentage of educators rely upon the classroom rules, whilst only few educators apply a depriving disciplinary method. Only few teachers impose strict punishments which include physical or verbal discipline. In cases of serious incidents of school bullying, a close and constructive interaction between the teachers and parents is pursued, whereas the principal’s involvement is often avoided. The educators point out that there is a deficient training system surrounding issues like bullying and a lack of infrastructure which holds their educational work back.

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