Bullying in Greek secondary schools: prevalence and profile of bullying practices

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The present article presents the findings of a quantitative study which, beyond the general purpose of extending previous findings on the prevalence and nature of peer bullying in the secondary schools of a specific geographical area of Greece, had the aim to describe the problem from the points of view of students in their different roles as observers of bullying, students who are bullied and students who behave as bullies. A total of 502 students in the first three years of four different high schools were asked to fill in the Olweus Questionnaire. The results of the present study reveal that bullying does in fact exist in Greek secondary schools, primarily in the form of verbal aggression, social exclusion and sexual harassment. Of special interest is the variance in the frequency of bullying depending on whether the students identified themselves as bullies, victims, or observers.

Keywords: Bullying, secondary schools, bullying profiles, gender differences.

Introduction

Bullying has been linked to children's psychosocial difficulties (Alikasifoglu, Erginoz, Ercan, Uysal, & Albayarak-Kaymak, 2007; Snyder et al., 2003), some of which can be long lasting and persist into adulthood (Cowie, Jennifer, & Sharp, 2005; Esteves, Musitu, & Herrero, 2005). Many studies have presented evidence that bullied students – in comparison to those not involved – present significantly more emotional problems (Delfabbro et al., 2006; Olweus, 1993) such as depression (Sweeting, Young, West, & Der, 2006) and/or anxiety (Due et al., 2005). The bullies may also present serious antisocial problems, broader difficulties in social adjustment over time (Rigby, 2004; Smith & Brain, 2000) and increased risk of deviance (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004; Nadeem & Graham, 2005).

In Greece, although recognized, the phenomenon of bullying has been widely accepted as a serious issue only since 2007 following the mysterious disappearance (and suspected murder) of a young student believed to have suffered peer victimization (*Eleftherotypia*, 8 February 2007). The number of empirical studies carried out over the last two decades in the country (Andreou, Didaskalou, & Vlachou, 2007; Deliyianni-Kouimtzis, 2005; Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2004; Sapouna, 2008) show that around 10% of students in Greek schools are being subjected to peer victimization (Deliyianni-Kouimtzis, 2005). In their study, Tsiantis et al. (2007) have called for further investigation and highlighted the need for a comprehensive assessment of the problem which will gradually lead to the development of a national policy in Greece.

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Bullying in secondary schools has been less researched in comparison to elementary level education (O'Moore & Minton, 2004; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). According to some researchers, the transition from elementary to secondary education is often associated with a decrease during early adolescence (Sullivan, Cleary, & Sullivan, 2003; Sweeting et al., 2006). On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that teenage students tend to employ new ways of relating with their peers, some of which are recognized as aggressive behaviors (Pellegrini, 2002).

The present study forms part of a greater program funded by the EU.[1] The program focused on the needs assessment of bullying in schools and on awareness-raising for teachers, parents and students.

In this study, data are presented on secondary school students and their views regarding bullying and victimization. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were carried out in four and five schools, respectively, in the Metropolitan area of Thessaloniki, Greece. A total number of 90 secondary school students (14 focus groups) participated through semi-structured interviews. The focus of the qualitative study was the identification of discursive constructions (for instance, bullying as a hierarchical issue or a family-related issue) and the subject positions contained within them among the participants.[2] That is to say, we were interested in the discursive resources which secondary school students drew on when they constructed particular versions of bullying. Our reading of the interviews suggested that there was a wide range of possible ways of accounting for bullying which was culturally available to students. More specifically, the ways that bullying was constructed in the adolescents' talk are described in the following categories: co-constructing identities and social images in the school versus the family context, bullying as a school-related problem, friendships constructed as learning morality in peer groups, bullying as racism, bullying as a gender issue, bullying as a disability issue, and bullying as an issue of family life.

This article presents the findings of the quantitative study which, beyond the general purpose of extending previous findings on the prevalence and nature of peer bullying in the secondary schools of the specific geographical area of Greece, had the following more specific aims:

(1) to determine the incidence of the different types of bullying among secondary school students;
(2) to describe the problem from the points of view of students in their different roles as observers of bullying, students who are bullied and students who behave as bullies;
(3) to determine the characteristics of the agents of bullying behavior (school, year, gender, number), as well as the settings in which the acts occur and their duration; and
(4) to examine the relevance of various variables that could affect the occurrence of bullying, such as school year, gender, and reactions to bullying.

Method

Sample and procedure

A total of 502 students in the first three years of four different high schools of Thessaloniki (population c.1,200,000) took part in the study. The schools were randomly selected from a list of public secondary schools and were from different geographical locations of the city's urban area. Of the 502 participants, 163 students (32.5%) were in the first year of

high school, 150 (29.9%) were in the second year and 180 (35.9%) attended the third year. Of the participants, 52.9% were girls ($n = 257$) and 47.1% were boys ($n = 229$). Reported ethnicity was 88.6% Greeks ($n = 445$) and 11.4% ($n = 57$) from other ethnic communities – mainly from Albania (3.6%) and former Soviet Union countries (3.4%). Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Ministry of Education. Students took the survey as part of an assessment to measure the level of bullying behaviors in the first three years of high school, which is junior high school (or *Gymnasio*) in the Greek education system. All students who participated provided informed consent and filled out the questionnaires anonymously. The survey was administered during a regular classroom period and students were monitored by the first researcher who administered the questionnaires and responded to the students' questions. Data from the four schools were combined for analysis after preliminary testing and indicated that participants were reasonably matched on the demographic variables of gender and age and in terms of socio-economic status.

Measurements

In general the questionnaires assessing bullying for students can be classified into two categories: (i) those that identify bullies and victims through self-report and (ii) those based on peer nomination procedures (Cerezo & Ato, 2005). The most commonly used self-report is, probably, the Olweus Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996), which has undergone several adaptations in many countries. Deliyianni-Kouimtzis (2005) made the first Greek adaptation for a large study of 2200 students from all types of schools (primary, secondary, representative samples of both students and teachers). The present quantitative study used the above-mentioned adaptation (Olweus Questionnaire, version for senior students). Although the Olweus instrument enables for a wider view of the problem, it, nevertheless, presents a couple of drawbacks in that: (i) it is difficult to score and (ii) lacks the social and affective structure of the whole-class group as well as teacher support for students. For this reason we added an extra questionnaire to enable information about Teacher and Classmate support as evaluated by the students themselves. Four five-point Likert-type scale items were used for the assessment of Teacher support (Cronbach's alpha, $r = 0.90$) and another four assessed Classmate support in the classroom (Cronbach's alpha, $r = 0.76$) (Teacher and classmate support scale; Torsheim, Wold, & Samdal, 2000). Further, we added an attitudes five-point Likert-type scale that measures: (i) Rigby pro-school climate (Cronbach's alpha, total scale, $r = 0.73$), (ii) conflicts in the peer group ($r = 0.62$) and (iii) stereotypes about aggression and gender ($r = 0.69$). Finally, we administered the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) that has been adapted to the Greek context (Bibou-Nakou, Stogiannidou, & Kioseoglou, 2002). The following results present data from the Olweus Questionnaire on bullying behavior.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 present descriptive data regarding the percentage of bullying behavior as recorded by the students as observers and victims.[3]

Location of bullying

For students bullied – even once or twice during the last couple of months – the playground appears to have been the most common setting, although not the only one. The

Table 1.   Events of bullying on behalf of the students as bystanders/observers (%) (Have you seen or realized that something has been happening at school in the past couple of months in one or more of the following ways?).

I have seen or realized that	Has not happened	Once/twice	Two/three times a month	Once a week	Several times a week
Other students called a student mean names, made fun of him/her or teased him/her in a hurtful way	10.1	18.3	13.3	5.7	52.6
Other students left a student out of things on purpose, excluded him/her from their group of friends or completely ignored him/her	36.6	31.9	15.1	1.9	14.5
Other students hit, kicked, pushed, shoved around or locked indoors a student	46.1	17.8	14.5	5.8	15.8
Other students told lies or spread false rumors about a student and tried to make others dislike him/her	23.1	29.1	17.8	6.6	23.3
Other students had money or other things taken away from a student or damaged	57.9	23.1	9.1	2.5	7.4
Other students threatened or forced a student to do things she/he did not want to do	52.1	22.9	11.2	4.8	9.1
Other students teased or called mean names or comments about the country of a student or the way she/he speaks the language	42.6	20.2	12.3	4.5	20.4
Other students made gestures or comments with a sexual meaning	32.0	19.4	11.8	9.9	27.0
Other students bullied a student in another way	59.0	14.0	6.2	5.7	15.1

Table 2. Events of bullying on behalf of the students as victims (Have you been bullied personally at school in the past couple of months in one or more of the following ways? (%)).

In the past couple of months	Has not happened	Once/twice	Two/three times a month	Once a week	Several times a week
I have been called mean names, made fun of or teased in a hurtful way	57.1	26.0	6.0	3.1	7.8
I have been left out of things on purpose, other students have excluded me from their group of friends or completely ignored me	81.6	10.8	2.5	1.4	3.7
I have been hit, kicked, pushed, shoved around or locked indoors	91.5	5.2	1.6	0.6	1.0
Lies have been told or false rumors have been spread about me and some students tried to make others dislike me	69.2	19.0	5.0	1.0	5.8
I have had money or other things taken away from me or damaged	89.0	5.6	2.1	1.2	2.1
I have been threatened or forced to do things I did not want to do	88.2	5.6	3.7	0.8	1.7
I have been teased, called mean names, or comments have been made about my country or the way I speak the language	91.5	3.1	1.2	0.6	3.5
Gestures or comments with a sexual meaning have been made to me	69.0	16.9	5.8	2.1	6.2
I have been bullied in some other way	85.1	5.8	3.8	0.8	4.8

Table 3. Place where bullying occurs (%).

The playground/(during recess or break times)	73.4
The hallways/stairs	31.7
The classroom (with teacher present)	19.1
The classroom (with teacher absent)	32.8
The toilets	8.2
The gym class	13.0
The canteen	14.3
On the way to and from school	15.0
At the school bus stop	2.0
On the school bus	1.7
Somewhere else in school	9.2

classroom, when the teacher was absent, and the stairs were the second and the third most commonly reported settings, respectively (see Table 3).[4]

Profile of the bully

Students reported that bullies were most often boys (68.4%), causing trouble all the time in the classroom (45.3%) and behaving badly to the other students (31.9%). The main reasons for bullying suggested by students who were victimized included academic achievement (26.0%; 'I am one of the good students') and gender (20.0% for being a girl). Victims reported that bullies were most often in their year (42.0%; $n = 124$) or in a different year (25.4%; $n = 75$). Some were in a 'different class but in the same year' (19.3%; $n = 57$) or 'in a higher year' (9.5%; $n = 28$). Significantly more boys than girls stated that the bully was in a higher year than theirs ($\chi^2(4) = 25.78$, $p = 0.000$).

Although the majority of victimized students stated that they were mainly bullied by one boy (37.4%), 23.8% of them stated that they were bullied by several boys or by both boys and girls (19.0%). Responding to the question: 'Have you been bullied by students of Greek origin or of other origins?', the bullies were most often one (37.5%) or more of Greek origin (27.8%), while fewer bullies were one (11.0%) or several of other origins (5.2%).

The highest percentage of students reported being bullied mainly by one student (44.9%) or by a small group of two to three students (36.1%). In terms of the duration of the bullying experienced, the majority of victimized students claimed that it lasted for one or two weeks (63.2%). There were those who stated that the bullying had lasted for about a month (14.7%), or even that it has gone on for several years (9.8%).

Coping with bullying

The students were, then, asked how they would react in the event of being bullied by one or more of their classmates (see Table 4). The majority, that is more than one in two children, stated that they would ignore the incident (57.2%), whereas avoidance of the situation and taking revenge were used by one in three children. Also one in three students stated that she/he would report her/his experience of being bullied to an adult at school (32.8%). The remaining students would not report help seeking behavior, but would try to cope with the problem by themselves.[5]

Disclosure of bullying

In accordance with the responses, more than half the students who bullied or were bullied would confide in their friends about the bullying behavior and, to a lesser extent, in family

Table 4.   How would you usually cope when you have been bullied?

Coping behavior in case of being bullied	%
I would tell a teacher or some other adult at school	32.8
I would ignore it	57.2
I would try to take precautions	21.7
I would burst into tears	7.0
I would run away, I would hide	6.0
I would seek help from friends	16.7
I would take revenge	27.4
I would plead with them to stop	9.0
I would avoid getting into the situation	32.8
Other	17.1

members (parents and/or siblings); 59.9%, 25.1% and 15.1%, respectively (Table 5). Even fewer would tell a teacher about it (14.8%). One in four of the bullied students and one in three of those bullying others stated that they would inform nobody, and in the case of talking to someone, they would prefer to share their experience with friends.[6]

When the students were asked how often they get help from the people they talk to about their bullying experience, according to their responses it seems that teachers try twice as hard to stop the bullying as do the students who have been told about it (see Table 6). Nevertheless, the percentage of these teachers was very low (12.8%). Furthermore, it appears that the home–school collaboration did not work efficiently in the cases of bullying (Table 7).

When the students were asked of feeling afraid of being bullied in their school, almost one in four students admitted to feeling scared of being victimized (24%).

Table 8 presents the frequency of bullying according to the statements of those students who display bullying behavior toward other students.

Reactions toward a bullied classmate

Overall, just more than half of the students stated that they would try to help a classmate who was being bullied (51.9%), and just under a quarter believed that they ought to do so (24.5%). While 9% of the students stated that they would just watch, another, albeit small percentage regarded bullying to be acceptable behavior (5.7%) or even fun (3.7%).

Table 5.   Have you told anyone that you have been bullied or that you have bullied another student (s) at school in the past couple of months?

	Have you told anyone that you have been bullied? (%)	Have you told anyone that you have bullied another student(s)? (%)
I have not told anyone	25.3	32.6
My class (home room) teacher	14.8	10.0
Another adult at school	4.4	6.3
My parent(s)/guardian(s)	25.1	17.6
Brother(s) or sister(s)	15.1	17.2
Friend(s)	59.9	56.1
Somebody else	10.7	9.2

Table 6.   When a student is being bullied at school, how often do others try to put a stop to it?

	Teachers or other adults (%)	Other students (%)
Almost never	33.7	28.4
Once in a while	17.8	23.4
Sometimes	18.5	27.4
Often	17.2	14.4
Almost always	12.8	6.4

In summary, from the study findings (Table 9), 76.4% of the students reported that they ought to/or would try to help when they witnessed bullying at their school.

The data in Table 10 reveals that the majority of participants (44.2%) reported that they would not participate in bullying one of their classmates, whereas a significant percentage (19.5%) stated that they do not know if they would take part or that they might or would join in the bulling (18.1%).

In Table 11 the results of severe incidence for each form of bullying are presented, as reported by observers, victims and bullies. The cut-off point of 'several times a week' was used as the prevalence estimation.[7] 'Calling names and insulting' were the most frequent forms of bullying among secondary school students. As can be seen from the data, the frequency varied according to whether the students identified themselves as observers, victims or bullies. We found a higher frequency of all types of bullying reported by observers, followed by those being identified as victims in all types except for hitting.

Bullying by gender

Incidence by gender appears to be one of the most relevant variables explaining for differences in bullying frequency. This result confirms the data obtained in many previous studies (Hunt, 2007; Olweus, 1993). As Tables 12–14 illustrate, in the Greek sample, significantly more boys than girls are likely to display bullying behavior in all the types except social exclusion, the spreading of rumors, stealing things and threatening to cause fear where there are no statistically significant differences. These data do not confirm the results of other studies in which girls sometimes stand out from boys in the category of verbal aggression. In the present study, however, it is again the boys who are more notable than the girls in insulting and calling names. This difference in results can most probably be attributed to the fact that the questionnaire of the present study differentiates among various types of verbal aggression.

Similar results seem to apply in respect to the data given by the students as victims. Significantly more male than female students experience acts of being bullied, such as (Table 13) being called names, and being threatened and insulted in relation to their origin.

Table 7.   Has any adult at home contacted the school to try to stop your being bullied at school?

Has any adult at home contacted the school to try to stop your being bullied?	%
No, they have not contacted the school	80.4
Yes, they have contacted the school once	12.7
Yes, they have contacted the school several times	6.8

Table 8. Have you bullied another student(s) at school in the past couple of months in one or more of the following ways? (%).

In the past couple of months	Has not happened	Once/twice	Two/three times a month	Once a week	Several times a week
I called another student(s) mean names, made fun of or teased him/her in a hurtful way	65.1	22.3	4.3	2.3	6.0
I kept him/her out of things on purpose, excluded him from their group of friends or completely ignored her	84.8	10.2	1.7	1.2	2.1
I hit, kicked, pushed, shoved him/her around or locked him/her him indoors	87.2	7.4	1.9	1.4	2.1
I told lies or spread false rumors about him/her and tried to make others dislike him/her	89.2	7.7	1.2	0.4	1.5
I took money or other things from him/her or damaged his/her belongings	95.4	1.5	0.6	1.0	1.5
I threatened or forced them to do things she/he did not want to do	93.3	3.7	1.0	0.8	1.0
I bullied him/her with mean names or comments about his/her country or the way she/he speaks the language	86.7	8.7	2.1	0.2	2.3
I bullied him/her with gestures or comments with a sexual meaning	85.5	8.5	1.2	2.1	2.7

Table 9. How do you usually react when you see or realize that a student at your age is being bullied at school?

Reactions	%
I take part in the bullying	3.3
I am forced in a way to take part in bullying	2.0
I do not do anything, but I think bullying is OK	5.7
I do not do anything, but I think bullying is fun	3.7
I just watch what goes on	9.0
I do not do anything, but I think I ought to help the bullied student	24.5
I try to help the bullied student in one way or another	51.9

Table 10. Do you believe that you could join in bullying a student that you do not like?

Statements	%
Yes	8.6
Probably yes	9.5
I do not know	19.5
No, I do not think so	18.3
No	17.9
Definitely not	26.3

Table 11. Bullying incidence in relation to the role of the students (%).

In the past couple of months (several times a week)	Observer	Student as victim	Student as bully
Calling names, insulting	52.6	7.8	6.0
Social exclusion (ignoring, not letting participate)/not being allowed to participate	14.5	3.7	2.1
Hitting	15.8	1.0	2.1
Spreading rumors	23.3	5.8	1.5
Stealing things	7.4	2.1	1.5
Threatening to cause fear	9.1	1.7	1.0
Insulting in terms of origin	20.4	3.5	2.3
Sexual harassment	27.0	6.2	2.7
Other ways of bullying	15.1	4.8	3.1

Table 12. Bullying profile groups across gender (as bully) (%)[a].

Statements	Girls	Boys	χ^2
Calling names, insulting	2.7	9.7	$\chi^2(4) = 16.678, p = 0.002$
Social exclusion (ignoring, not letting participate)	2.3	1.8	
Hitting	0.4	4.0	$\chi^2(5) = 19.960, p = 0.001$
Spreading rumors	0.8	2.2	
Stealing things	1.6	1,3	
Threatening to cause fear	1.2	0.9	
Insulting in terms of origin	1.6	3.1	$\chi^2(5) = 14.450, p < 0.02$
Sexual harassment	2.3	3.1	$\chi^2(5) = 22.695, p = 0.000$

[a] Percentages refer to bullying other(s) 'several times a week' in the previous three months.

Table 13. Bullying profile groups across gender (as victim) (%)[a].

Statements	Girls	Boys	χ^2
Calling names, insulting	6.2	9.2	$\chi^2(4) = 19.783, p = 0.001$
Social exclusion (ignoring, not letting participate)	3.1	4.4	
Hitting	0.4	1.8	
Spreading rumors	5.5	6.1	
Stealing things	2.0	2.2	
Threatening to cause fear	1.6	1.8	$\chi^2_2(4) = 13.565, p < 0.01$
Insulting in terms of origin	1.6	5.7	$\chi^2(4) = 15.669, p < 0.01$
Sexual harassment	5.1	7.5	

[a] Percentages refer to being victimized 'several times a week' in the previous three months.

Table 14. Bullying profile groups across gender (as bystanders) (%)[a].

Statements	Girls	Boys	χ^2
Calling names, insulting	49.6	55.7	
Social exclusion (ignoring, not letting participate)	13.2	16.0	
Hitting	10.6	21.6	$\chi^2(4) = 13.351, p = 0.01$
Spreading rumors	25.6	21.0	
Stealing things	7.5	7,5	
Threatening to cause fear	4.3	14.5	$\chi^2_2(4) = 31.204, p = 0.000$
Insulting in terms of origin	15.2	26.2	$\chi^2(4) = 12.011, p < 0.02$
Sexual harassment	22.0	32.8	$\chi^2(4) = 10.290, p < 0.05$

[a] Percentages refer to bullying others 'several times a week' in the previous three months.

The data in Table 14 show student responses when identified as observers. Students as observers appear to confirm the results that boys carry out and experience more bullying acts than girls in most types of bullying.

Bullying by school year

In regards to the school year, the incidence of bullying depends on the point of view that the students adopt and the type of bullying involved (see Table 15). According to students as bullies, the bullying tactic of social exclusions, hitting and spreading rumors appear to be significantly higher in the third grade, in comparison to the first grade of high school. Further, according to students as bystanders, the majority of bullying tactics significantly increased from the 1st to the 3rd grade, with the exception of insulting in terms of origin, where there was a statistically significant decrease. No statistically significant changes were found in regards to the school year and the bullying tactics, according to students as victims.

Discussion

Despite the significant progress made by some countries in addressing the issue of bullying in schools at a national level, in Greece related attempts are very recent. The present study provides a comprehensive assessment of both the magnitude and the forms of bullying among secondary school students. More specifically, it presents a detailed account not only of the bullying practices, their duration and where they take place in a secondary school setting, but also of adolescent students' reactions to bullying behavior and ways of dealing with it.

Table 15. Bullying profile groups across years (%)[a].

Statements	1st school year			2nd school year			3rd school year		
	Bully	Victim	Bystander	Bully	Victim	Bystander	Bully	Victim	Bystander
Calling names, insulting	3.1	8.7	46.3	6.7	7.4	53.0	8.1	7.4	58.0
Social exclusion	1.2*	4.3	13.7**	0.7	0.7	13.3	4.1*	5.8	16.3**
Hitting	0.6*	0.6	12.3**	0.7	1.3	15.9	4.6*	1.1	18.9***
Spreading rumors	0.6*	5.0	23.0	0.0	4.7	23.6	3.5*	7.4	23.4
Stealing things	0.6	0.0	5.0*	0.0	2.0	7.4	3.5	4.0	9.7*
Threatening	0.6	0.6	6.8	0.7	1.4	8.8	1.7	2.9	11.4
Insulting in terms of origin	1.9	2.5	20.5*	0.7	2.0	24.3	4.1	5.7	16.9*
Sexual harassment	1.9	5.6	24.8*	2.7	5.4	23.0	3.5	7.4	32.4*

[a] Percentages refer to bullying others or being victimized 'several times a week' in the previous three months.

*Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) over time in each group of participants (bullies, victims, bystanders) and not within-groups differences.

**Used to differentiate the comparison in each group of participants.

In summary, the students identifying themselves as bystanders reported that the types of bullying that occur mostly (*several times a week*) include: verbal bullying, in the form of calling names (52.6%), spreading rumors (23.3%) and calling non-native students names (20.4%), followed by physical bullying (15.8%) and social exclusion (14.5%). Students identifying themselves as victims, on the other hand, reported that the types of bullying that occur (*several times a week*) are: verbal bullying in the form of calling names (7.8%), gestures with sexual connotations (6.2%), telling lies (5.8%) and, lastly, physical bullying (1%). Students identifying themselves as bullies reported that the types of bullying that occur (*several times a week*) include: verbal bullying, in the form of calling names (6%), gestures with sexual connotations (2.7%) and physical bullying (2.1%). An accurate comparison of the present data with that of other national or international studies is difficult, mainly due to (i) the differences in the questions used and (ii) the differences in the cut-off points in assessing the existence and/or the severity of bullying. Nonetheless, the results of the present study reveal that bullying does in fact exist in Greek secondary schools, primarily in the form of verbal aggression, social exclusion and sexual harassment. Another Greek study (Sapouna, 2008) found a similar tendency, however, with a lower overall frequency of bullying.

Of special interest is the variance in the frequency of bullying depending on whether the students identified themselves as bullies, victims or observers. The results of the present study showed a strikingly higher frequency of all forms of bullying reported by observers than by bullies or victims. Even though physical aggression is a serious form of bullying behavior, the data show that only 2.1% of students as bullies reported it as occurring several times a week, in comparison to the even lower 1.0% of students as victims, who identified the other forms of bullying acts as having a higher frequency.

According to the data, the students were more likely to be bullied by their own classmates than by students outside their class. As to where the bullying actions took place, most often it was the school playground, followed by the classroom when the teacher was absent. These results are similar to previous studies both in Greece (Deliyianni-Kouimtzis, 2005; Sapouna, 2008) and outside (Nansel et al., 2001; Wei, Jonson-Reid, & Tsao, 2007).

With respect to school year, students of the third year of secondary school are those who experience the most acts of social exclusion with students of the first year being those who experience the least – a finding that is contrary to the international literature findings.

Across grades, bullies, victims and bystanders/observers seem to agree that there is an increase over the years in social exclusion. Students (bullying several times a week) who identified themselves as bullies reported that physical bullying, lies and threats increase with the years at school, whereas those who identified themselves as observers stated that there is an increase in stealing and sexual bullying, along with a decrease in picking on non-native students.

The most common strategies used to deal with bullying were reported as being in the following order: ignoring, telling the teacher and avoiding the situation. There is evidence to suggest that among other variables, the coping mechanisms adopted by students depend on the forms of bullying. Kanetsuna, Smith, and Morita (2006) showed that in order to deal with physical bullying, avoiding the bully(ies) was recommended, whereas for social exclusion or for the spreading of rumors nothing was done. Our study is limited to asking students about how they would cope with an unspecified kind of bullying action.

As regards the disclosure of bullying, almost 60% of students said they would tell a friend about the bullying incident and only a very small percentage said they would choose to tell their teacher (14.8%); needless to say, this alarming finding reveals a definite lack of

trust and confidence in teacher(s) assistance. On the other hand, there is extensive literature suggesting that it is important for the students to tell others about their experiences of bullying, with a view to being helped to resolve the problem (Hunter & Borg, 2006). Peer-support systems have been shown to be effective mechanisms in the intervention to counteract bullying; unfortunately, however, Greek schools lag behind in such initiatives. In the present study, more than half the students (51.9%) stated they would help and nearly a quarter (24.5%) said that they would like to be able to help if they witnessed a fellow student being bullied; this finding coupled with 80.6% who expressed feelings of empathy toward the victim could, suggest that the vast majority of students in Greek schools might agree to participate in a peer-support scheme if one was established. This is further supported by the fact that almost two-thirds of the students stated that they would not take part in any bullying actions (62.5%).

In terms of gender, students who identified themselves as bullies, victims or observers agree that males use gestures with sexual connotations significantly more as a form of bullying; bullies and observers stated that males use more physical aggression and picking on non-native students, whereas bullies and victims reported that males use more verbal bullying in the form of name calling.

Overall, our findings allow us to conclude that bullying is a problem in Greek schools. The different views of the problem held by students as bullies, victims or observers confirm the nature of bullying as a secret and complex phenomenon taking place in the school and deserving whole-school approaches. Intervention schemes would need to take into consideration student profiles as bullies, victims or observers, the bullying contexts and settings, gender differences regarding the forms of bullying as well as the most effective ways of dealing with it. In addition, the lack of a collaborative culture between students' families and school staff, coupled with the students' reluctance to inform their teachers, we feel, calls for immediate intervention in the Greek school system.

Disclosure statement

Authors declare no actual or potential conflict of interest.

Notes

1. Daphne Program: 'Needs assessment and awareness raising program for bullying in schools', Association for the Psychosocial Health of Children and Adolescents (APHCA); Scientific director: J, Project No: JLS/DAP/2005-1/040/YG. Coordinating country: Greece-APHCA (H. Assimopoulos, D. Giannakopoulou, T. Hatzipemos, E. Konida and E. Soumaki) and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Participant countries: Cyprus (A. Paradisiotou and C. Tziogouros), Germany (H. Witteriede, University of Lueneburg) and Lithuania (L. Bulotaite and R. Povilaitis, Department of General Psychology, Vilnius University).
2. See Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Asssimopoulos, and Chatzilambou (2012) and Bibou–Nakou, Tsiantis, Asssimopoulos, Chatzilambou, and Giannakopoulou (2012) for the methodology and the findings of the qualitative study.
3. For further details of the findings from the quantitative study, see Bibou-Nakou and Markos (2013).
4. Students could check more than one response.
5. Students could check more than one response.
6. Students could check more than one response.
7. The students filled in the questionnaire on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = 'never', 2 = 'two–three times', 3 = 'two–three times per month', 4 = 'once a week' and 5 = 'several times a week').

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