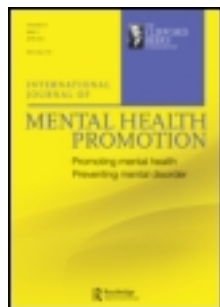


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Charisios Asimopoulos^a, Ioanna Bibou-Nakou^b, Theologos Hatzipemou^c, Eugenia Soumaki^c & John Tsiantis^c

^a Department of Social Work, Higher Technological Educational Institution, Athens, Greece

^b Faculty of Education, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece

^c Association for the Psychosocial Health of Children and Adolescents (A.P.H.C.A), Athens, Greece

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An investigation into students' and teachers' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about bullying in Greek primary schools

Charisios Asimopoulos^{a*}, Ioanna Bibou-Nakou^b, Theologos Hatzipemou^c,
Eugenia Soumaki^c and John Tsiantis^c

^a*Department of Social Work, Higher Technological Educational Institution, Athens, Greece;*

^b*Faculty of Education, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece;* ^c*Association for the Psychosocial Health of Children and Adolescents (A.P.H.C.A), Athens, Greece*

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This article presents qualitative research data about the perceptions of both primary school students and their teachers in relation to the phenomenon of bullying at school. The research was carried out through focus group interviews. According to the research, the phenomenon of bullying is recognized and understood by students as an important problem; also, students experience its effects since the first grade and seek the help of adults, in particular their teachers, in order to face bullying, without, however, being listened to in most cases. On the other hand, teachers tend to recognize as a problem only the incidents involving physical violence and serious consequences that are likely to make parents worry. Suggestions of students and teachers regarding policies and practice measures dealing with bullying focus on the enhancement of communication, awareness-raising, support by health-care professionals and cooperation with parents.

Keywords: Bullying, beliefs, qualitative study, primary school students, teachers.

Introduction: school bullying

Bullying and aggression among students at school can be defined as a situation involving intentional, unprovoked, systematic and repeated violent and aggressive behaviour meant to exert coercion and oppression, and to inflict pain, either physical or psychological, upon other students, in and outside the school setting (Olweus, 1994).

Bullying is a complex psychosocial phenomenon occurring over time and worldwide, a fact that makes bullying one of the most serious school-related problems. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) report on health behaviour in school-aged children (WHO, 2012), there is a high prevalence of victimization from bullying at school, across Europe. In particular, among 11-year-olds, the prevalence of victimization ranges from 2% to 27% among girls and from 5% to 32% among boys. The lowest rates are found in Armenia, whereas the highest rates are seen in Lithuania. Bullying-related victimization rates in Greece are 7% for girls and 8% for boys. Compared to other European countries, Greece reports one of the lowest victimization rates, and is ranked sixth out of a total of 38 countries participating in the WHO report. More specifically, in Greece, the data of a survey conducted by Giannakopoulou et al. (2010), within the framework of the EU 'Daphne' programme implemented and coordinated by the Association of Psychosocial Health for Children and Adolescents (A.P.H.C.A.), which took place in 2008 in a number

*Corresponding author. Email: chasimo@teiath.gr

of primary schools, have shown that the percentage of school children who reported being a victim of bullying was 7.87%, while the percentage of school children involved in bullying others (bullies) was 5.61 %. Three years later, in 2011, an A.P.H.C.A. survey using a similar methodology and based on a random and representative sample of 35 primary schools in Athens included a total number of 2628 students, of which 1306 were boys and 1322 were girls. This survey has shown that victims represent 15.6% of the total number of students (13.7% victims and 1.9% victims/bullies), while school children involved in bullying other students represent 3.5%. These relative rates indicate that the problem has followed an upward trend in Greece during the last years. The prevalence of the problem is considerable; therefore, it deserves attention and systematic action.

Bullying is a psychosocial phenomenon with multiple causes. It has been shown that its development is associated with a dynamic interaction between individual and environmental factors. More specifically, factors playing a key role include individual and personal characteristics (temperament, development, traumatic events, etc.) (Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003; Nabuzka & Smith, 1993; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2002), family and home environment (authoritarian or flexible parenting styles, model of aggressive behaviour, violence between parents or against their children, insecure bonding with parents, etc.) (Berdonini & Smith, 1996; Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1992; Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2002; Schneider, 2000), different aspects of school environment (low levels of stimulation, moral values of the school, psychological climate of the classroom) (Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Olweus, 1993) and social factors (attitudes towards violence, portrayals of violence in the mass media and more general social problems) (Rigby, 2002; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009).

Bullying affects in various, important and decisive ways the psychosocial status, development and growth of children, and impacts not only the victims, the bullies and the bullies-victims, but also the bystanders. Physical, emotional and social effects should be identified and addressed in a timely manner; otherwise, the prognosis is very poor. Children involved in bullying incidents risk to have low self-esteem (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001), anxiety disorders (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002; Swearer et al., 2009), psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches, abdominal pain (Gini, 2008; Sraubstein, McCarter, Shao, & Huang, 2006), school refusal and learning difficulties (Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005), depression (Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Puura, 2001), suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, and Rantanen, 1999; Vossekil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002), some of which may culminate in a final tragic outcome.

A transnational programme of research and intervention regarding bullying and victimization in schools

The data concerning the extent of bullying in schools and its effects in terms of academic achievement and emotional well-being among school-aged children, in Europe generally and in Greece particularly, are a source of concern.

More specifically, in Greece, school bullying is a real and widespread phenomenon, as shown by relevant studies; however, it has been given insufficient attention until now and has not been properly addressed. Bullying incidents in schools do not come to our attention, are not taken into account, are ignored or even kept secret, presumably because of the risk of stigmatization for both the school and the students. The impact of bullying on students' mental health and normal psychosocial development is very diverse, significant and in some cases devastating, as recently shown by some incidents which were given broad publicity.

In the light of the foregoing and in order to combat bullying in schools, two transnational projects intended to ‘research and tackle bullying and victimisation at school’ have been carried out within the framework of the EU Daphne Programme on preventive measures to fight violence against children, young persons and women, and under the scientific coordination of John Tsiantis, the Child Psychiatry Professor. These projects were implemented over the period 2006–2010 and involved the participation of many universities and research centres in Greece, Cyprus, Germany, Poland and Lithuania. More specifically, in Greece, these projects were carried out by the A.P.H.C.A. in Greek primary schools and by the Faculty of Primary Education, Aristotle University, in high schools of Thessaloniki.

The objective was to prevent bullying through the assessment and mapping out of the needs, as well as through the identification and early detection of bullying behaviour, to tackle and reduce the risk factors through well-defined psychoeducational interventions addressed to students–teachers–parents, to develop management and behaviour modification skills, to evaluate the interventions, to inform and raise awareness by making relevant information available to specific target groups, to provide critical recommendations and suggestions, and finally to inform the community (Tsiantis, 2010).

The programme was based on the principles of research action. This means, it was developed as a process of identification and comprehension of the problem of bullying, through the adoption of actions and the implementation of innovative intervention methods, with the active participation of students–teachers–parents, as well as through the assessment of the effectiveness of such interventions in order to allow a readjustment of objectives and directions on the basis of the new empirical data available. The aim of the research was to map and assess the needs, and in particular to measure the occurrence of bullying behaviours in schools, to identify the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of students–teachers–parents regarding the problem and to evaluate the contribution of school environmental factors and the psychosocial status of children in the development of bullying. The research was carried out in two phases, before and after the implementation of the psychoeducational interventions. The methodology combined a qualitative and a quantitative research method. The qualitative methodology, which is set out in detail hereafter, included focus group interviews with students and teachers.

The qualitative study of the perceptions of students and teachers on bullying in Greek primary schools

To date, as highlighted by the literature review, the study of school bullying has mainly involved research focused on the investigation of quantitative data. Less importance has been given to the perceptions and opinions of school-aged children and teachers, as to what bullying really means to them, how this phenomenon is being experienced and which is the best way to combat bullying. Therefore, a qualitative study was carried out to determine opinions on bullying of fifth- and sixth-grade children and their teachers in the primary schools that had already been involved in the development of the aforementioned interventions. For this purpose, the qualitative research method used was this of focus group interviews.

The aim was to study the way both students and teachers understand bullying, to examine their reactions to bullying, to determine the support needs of bullying victims and to identify the views of students and teachers on the ways and strategies suggested to address the problem of bullying.

The participants

The qualitative study included a total number of 60 fifth- and sixth-grade children, boys and girls, aged 10–12 years, in two primary schools, and 32 teachers. In particular, the study consisted of four focus group interviews for students (two for fifth-grade and two for sixth-grade students) and two focus group interviews for teachers. Each group included 13–17 participants.

The method

The study used the method of focus group interviews. This is a methodological tool, which puts emphasis on the group, on the interaction between group members and on the powerful momentum developed during the interview. During the session, the researcher asks the participants, in this case the students and the teachers, to respond to open-ended questions. This type of questions allows participants to freely express their opinions, to give their own interpretation on the issue and to share their experiences in their own words. Focus groups usually range in size from 8 to 15 participants. It is argued that with less than eight participants, group members may feel too much pressure; on the other hand, if more than 15 people come to the session, participants may not have enough time to share their points of view. Each session usually lasts from 90 min to 2 h; this allows time to discuss up to 10 questions, in a way that encourages dialogue and avoids yes-or-no responses. One researcher (the moderator) leads the discussion by asking participants to respond to open-ended questions, and a second researcher (the note-taker) observes the discussion and takes detailed notes. The whole session is recorded, and then the data provided by the transcript are analysed to draw conclusions.

The questions posed for discussion during the sessions were the same for both children and teachers, but with different wording. In detail:

1. What do you think bullying means?
2. Is something like this going on at school? Where and when?
3. Why do you think this is happening? Why do some students bully others, and why do some students become victims of bullies?
4. Can you identify the characteristics of the bully and the victim?
5. How do boys and girls usually engage in bullying?
6. Have you had a personal experience of bullying? – How did you feel?
7. How do you usually cope with bullying situations affecting you or others? – Have you ever tried to talk about it and if yes, to whom?
8. Are teachers aware of bullying incidents? If yes, what have they done to deal with this issue?
9. What do you think should be done in schools to effectively combat bullying?

The results

The definitions of bullying, outlined by the students during the series of discussions that took place in the focus group sessions, include a wide range of its specific characteristics. Students seem to understand bullying in all its forms and complexity. They mention that bullying is a real, tangible problem in their schools. They think bullying includes behaviours that focus on belittling the victim, on intimidating and on exposing the victim to situations of insecurity and pain. The students are able to identify all the different forms of bullying, not only physical aggression. They know that bullying has a serious impact on

the psychosocial status of the victim, and in particular his/her self-image and self-esteem, emotions, physical and mental well-being, and sense of security. As regards the definitions of bullying, the students mention the following aspects:

Student: Bullying is when someone humiliates someone else, and makes him/her feel bad and afraid of everyone, even of the person who humiliates him/her; when it gets harder everyday to even look at him/her, talk to him/her. Because, he/she cannot predict the way the bully is going to react, and treat him/her.

Student: When someone hits a child every day, destroys his/her personal property, doesn't leave him/her in peace, harasses him/her all the time, and then the child feels bad, loses his/her courage and is unable to overcome this situation.

When describing bullying, students seem to have not only a complete but also a mixed idea of the issue. They mention imbalance of power between the bully and the victim. When describing bullying incidents, students mention both personal and environmental etiological factors, which more specifically refer to the individual characteristics of the people involved, their experiences related to their personal development in the past, their family environment and important social issues. Bullying is defined as a result of personal characteristics, such as body size and external appearance, a result of psychological problems connected to family problems or as a result of social influences, such as racism. For instance:

Student: They may have experienced something similar when they were younger, and now they are getting even.

Student: Perhaps the situation at home makes him/her more violent, he/she is very tense because his/her parents are divorced and have fights, and the child imitates his/her parents' behaviour.

Student: They badger and intimidate a weaker person, hit him/her, push him/her down the stairs, take his/her personal belongings and throw them away, blackmail him/her, say things that hurt him/her because he/she is a foreigner and they are Greek.

According to the students, the most common forms of bullying in primary school include insults and verbal threats, destruction of personal property and behaviours of social aggression resulting to social isolation (i.e. spreading malicious gossip or rumour). Also, racist insulting comments are mentioned as a frequent form of bullying at school.

Regarding gender-related bullying, boys and girls mention similar levels of insulting comments and threats; while boys are more often involved in physical aggression incidents, girls tend to be involved in rumour spreading incidents resulting to social isolation. Students also refer to bullying incidents through fixed phone communication or by SMS through mobile phones.

In general, students state that bullying occurs more often during break times, at places that are usually not supervised by teachers, in secluded corners of the playground, at the backyard, in the toilets; they also mention, however, that bullying incidents take place outside the school premises, on the way to and from school. As far as they can remember, and insofar as they are aware of what is happening, bullying incidents at school occur far more frequently among first-grade children, who are bullied by older students. Some victims, once they grow older and move into late primary years, may be themselves engaged in the same bullying behaviours inflicted upon them through subconscious processes of identification with the aggressor, and tend to do onto other younger children what has been done to them, thus creating a vicious cycle.

Contrary to students, teachers fail to give clear and complete definitions on bullying. They define a limited range of behaviours, which are related to physical coercion and

abuse. Furthermore, many teachers recognize bullying signs as a real phenomenon in school life; however, they tend to underestimate the problem and pay less importance to the issue, compared to students. Some teachers believe that bullying is a normal part of the school group life. They only mention the negative impact on students' physical health, and fail to identify their well-being and personal security. They acknowledge bullying as a problem and a situation that needs to be systematically addressed only when physical aggression is involved. In particular, they believe bullying is a problem only when it bears the risk of physical harm, a situation that will entail the involvement of the parents and the need to establish liability on the part of the teachers. Teachers mention the following:

Teacher: I believe that in primary schools there are no such bullying incidents . . . , perhaps among high-school students . . . There may be some cases in primary schools but these are one off incidents.

Teachers: In fact, the extreme incidents are rare; what's most common is kids being kicked, kids forcing other kids to obey to them through verbal aggression or limited physical aggression. But this is a wholly different thing; it is part of a game within a group which functions inside a specific area and concerns students who want to be the leaders, or to impose their own will on the rest.

Teacher: Such things do happen but there is no danger of any kind. The important thing is to ensure they pose no threat to physical integrity. In general, we are responsible for the children's physical health; in other words, parents will ask if their child is hurt, why and where. Usually parents seek to identify where the responsibility lies only for what they can see.

Teacher: When I was a student, we did not depend on teacher's help for no reason. We fought to settle our differences alone. As years go by, kids, and especially boys, tend to behave more and more like mama's boys.

According to the teachers, bullying is the result of a number of factors including the psychopathological characteristics of the students, the problems in the family environment and the neglect of children by their parents, the parents' disinterest as to establish cooperation with teachers, racism, the lack of a psychosocial support network at school, the weaknesses of the education system and the weakening of the pedagogical nature of school due to its one-sided focus on the provision of sterile knowledge. Indicatively, the teachers mention the following:

Teacher: These are particular cases. There are always one or two students each year with special problems. There is one kid who is seen regularly by a psychiatrist.

Teacher: She is constantly harassed; they are basically trying to hurt her feelings, even during class. They keep saying you are Albanian, you stink, go away, leave us alone, and so on

Teacher: Kids, who behave in such a way, at least in our school, have also problems at home which lead to this behaviour.

Teacher: We often think it's a waste of time to try to help children act as members of a team, learn how to express themselves, communicate and respect their fellow-students. So, we stick more to our curriculum.

As regards the efforts of the school to cope with bullying, the students express negative feelings. In their view, the school is addressing the problem in a piecemeal manner, and is simply dealing with cases of physical abuse. They believe that the school fails to undertake concrete and systematic initiatives. The main criteria used by the students to assess school effectiveness focus on the role of the teachers. In particular, these concern the supervisory role of the teachers, the response of the teachers to their appeals and the ability of the teachers to focus on their concerns and intervene in a direct and protective manner. On the basis of these criteria, the students have negatively evaluated their teachers' performance.

Their mixed feelings to approach their teachers relate to their concern as to how effective the teachers' overall intervention will be, as to whether they will be able to put an end on bullying and how well they will play their protective role and prevent the revenge of the perpetrators. These factors often seem to act as obstacles preventing students from seeking help from their teachers. In particular, as regards the way bullying is handled in schools, the students mention the following:

Student: Teachers should start listening to the children, rather than wasting time during breaks, turning away kids and telling them to do what they think is right.

Student: Teachers should take a closer interest in bullying. They should respond to our appeals as soon as possible, rather than saying 'you should solve your own problems' or 'it serves you right'.

Student: Teachers decide to resort to punishment only when things become really serious, or unbearable.

Student: The only person who cares is our class teacher. But this is not always the case. Teachers from other classes don't pay attention when we report an incident to them. If someone gets hit, they say 'OK, now you two apologize to each other', and that's how the incident ends.

Parents are a source of support in the fight against bullying. The students usually approach them when all their other efforts to deal with the problem have failed. Parents are, according to students, the 'last line of defence'. This is mainly due to two reasons. First, students are worried that their parents may react without thinking and even rush to impulsive vengeful acts. Second, they are afraid that the involvement of their parents may generate taunting comments on the part of their fellow students. Some students also mention that they avoid seeking for parental help because then their parents will be aware of their sufferings and may reprimand them, or because they are feeling guilty for being bullied and do not want to be placed in a difficult position. In particular:

Student: There are some things that we tell to our parents. That is when we realise that we cannot deal with something alone, only in this case.

Student: If someone goes and tells something to his/her mother or father, they will call him/her 'mama's boy' all the time, and they will spread rumours to the whole school that he/she is wearing diapers.

Student: I never talk about these things to my parents because they will make a huge fuss over this, and I don't want this to happen.

Teachers, on their part, express their disappointment at the support they receive from the school environment or the education system in general, in order to deal with bullying. They feel they are left on their own, and have no clear directions as to how they should deal with the incidents that come to their attention. The Ministry of Education has not yet adopted an official anti-bullying policy in terms of responsibilities, recording of incidents, management processes, supervision and evaluation of results.

Teachers also mention that the indifference of the parents and their lack of cooperation pose serious obstacles to their fight against bullying. They easily take an antagonistic stance against the parents, as to who – teachers or parents – takes better care of the students.

They also stress other important factors, such as the lack of specific knowledge about bullying, communication problems and lack of in-depth cooperation among teachers, absence of mental health professionals at school, as well as various environmental factors, such as the large number of students, and problems with the school building. In general, they feel frustrated and mention the following:

Teacher: There is no specific guidance or standards to deal with bullying incidents. Each teacher does what he/she thinks is best, according to his/her temperament and personality.

Teacher: We simply exist together in the same place. I'm dealing with a student in a certain way, another teacher uses another method, a third teacher has his/her own way too ... We never work as a team developing and fostering a common approach. And then confusion reigns.

Teacher: There is no cooperation between teachers and parents. There is always someone who destroys what you've built. This is unacceptable.

Finally, during the discussion in the focus group interviews, teachers and students also mention the methods they use to deal with bullying incidents at school.

To this end, teachers adopt the model of *intimidation* (*I will report you to the headmaster*), the model of *revenge* (*I will call your parents*) and the model of *defusing the bullying incident* (*through individual and group discussions inside the classroom*). On the other hand, students adopt various methods to deal effectively with bullying, such as the model of *self-defence* (*I do to them what they are doing to me*), the model of *solidarity* (*supporting the group of friends*), the model of *help-seeking* (*I will tell the teacher*) and the model of *avoidance* (*I say nothing and walk away*).

Discussion

The study findings suggest that students and teachers use different approaches in order to deal with the problem of bullying at school. They identify and evaluate bullying in a different way.

Teachers do not seem to fully understand bullying in all its forms, in the way students do. In particular, they perceive bullying only as an incident of physical aggression. Data show that teachers believe bullying is a problem requiring a systematic approach only when physical violence is involved. They underestimate and overlook the other forms of bullying. That is to say, they underestimate the forms of psychological and social violence. Similar conclusions are drawn by other relevant international research. In a study conducted by Craig, Henderson and Murphy (2000), 116 Canadian secondary education teachers who participated in the sample identified bullying as a form of physical aggression, much less as a form of emotional aggression while they never mentioned social isolation. Similar results were found in a study conducted in the UK by Boulton (1997), which involved 138 teachers from all grade levels. Bauman and Del Rio (2006) and Ellis and Shute (2007) asked teachers to compare different forms of bullying (physical, verbal, relational bullying) in relation to the degree of severity according to their personal standards. Results have shown that teachers consider relational bullying as the least serious, and physical aggression as the most serious form of bullying.

It has also been shown that as teachers do not identify all forms of bullying, they tend to report less cases of bullying than those reported by students. Similar conclusions have been drawn from other relevant research. According to a research conducted by Pervin and Turner (1994) in the secondary schools of a UK town, 26% of the students reported being bullied, while their teachers estimated that this only happened to 5% of the students. Another research, which was conducted in the USA by Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, and Sarvela (2002) and involved 739 primary school children and 39 teachers, has shown that teachers mentioned less bullying incidents than those reported by students.

It seems that adult perceptions on bullying between children are erroneous, a fact which influences and determines the behaviour and reactions of the children themselves.

Swearer et al. (2009) identify some false perceptions about bullying that exist as dominant social myths. Myth one: Bullying is an individual aggressive behaviour that only occurs between a bully and a victim. This perception ignores the dynamic group nature of the phenomenon which implicates everyone at school through specific roles. Myth two: Physical bullying is more damaging than social or relational, or cyber bullying. In fact, all forms of bullying can be just as harmful as physical bullying. More specifically, relational and social bullying, as well as cyber bullying, can be more easily hidden from adults, as they do not leave a trace. Therefore, they remain undiscovered and children may carry their effects into adulthood. Myth three: Bullying is a 'normal' part of growing up. The truth is that bullying is a pathological form of aggressiveness used in a destructive and sadistic way against others. Myth four: The victim provokes the bully into reacting, and this may partly justify the bully's behaviour. The truth is that, according to its definition, bullying is a situation involving intentional, unprovoked, systematic and repeated violent and aggressive behaviour inflicted by the bully to the victim. Myth five: The victim should fight back and the bully will leave the victim alone. This is not true because usually the victim is weaker than the bully and therefore unable to stand up for him/herself. If the victim fights back, he/she may be exposed to a high risk of revenge. Myth six: Adults should not encourage students to snitching. The truth is that adults should do everything possible to break this code of silence that the bully imposes to the victim. Children should be aware that the role of important adults is to care about them and protect them, and that their appeal for help is not called 'snitching'.

Overall, according to students and teachers' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, bullying seems to be a real and widespread phenomenon in Greek primary schools, and it has already become a matter of concern to the society in general; however, at schools, bullying is still not recognized in all its forms, and consequently it is not properly addressed.

The victims-students often become withdrawn and avoid seeking help from the adults. Teachers rarely discuss the topic of bullying – behaviours and incidents – openly in class, and refer to harmless acts of violence on one hand, and behaviours that result in serious physical harm on the other. Parents seem to ignore the whole situation, and are usually the last resort for children who find it very hard to cope with bullying. In general, the study shows lack of information, limited awareness, underestimation and insufficient guidelines as to how bullying should be addressed, as well as lack of prevention and response measures. As a result, both children and teachers are left without competent support to deal with bullying.

It is therefore necessary to develop and implement policies designed to minimize risks, to enhance the protective factors, to facilitate access to support resources and to promote prevention and response programmes based on participative approaches that bring together children, parents and teachers. The selection and implementation of appropriate policies should be the result of processes that take account of the perceptions and views expressed by the children and their teachers, as to what bullying really means to them, how they experience this problem and how bullying can be effectively addressed.

It seems that the only sufficient deterrent to school bullying is the school itself. It is the school that identifies the problem, becomes more sensitive to bullying, deals with the real experiences of the students by taking into account their views about how this problem can be effectively addressed and develops systematic and consistent methods of prevention and response.

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