Bullying phenomenon in schools of Secondary Education of Western Thessaloniki

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Abstract
Bullying constitutes a major issue in many schools and communities all over the world. It involves harassment and bullying incidents which are expressed through physical, verbal, emotional and psychological threat. A more recent development of the phenomenon is cyber-bullying which is on the rise among teenagers in our times, which in the great spread of social networks tends to turn into a scourge.
The aim of this paper is to register, through a statistical survey and broader educational research, which was carried out in secondary school students in the region of Thessaloniki, the views and attitudes of students as far as this phenomenon is concerned in order to draw conclusions and also define as well as suggest means of dealing with this phenomenon, the consequences of which are becoming more and more visible in our society. Finally, to indicate the necessity for further investigate the phenomenon of school violence which is spreading not only in our country but on a global level as well.

Keywords: Bulling, inside-school violence, cyber-bullying, educational research.

Introduction

Bullying constitutes a major issue in many schools and communities all over the world. It involves incidents of harassment and abuse which are expressed through physical, verbal, emotional and psychological threat. Even though there have been programmes aiming to gather data and examine the causes of this phenomenon, such as the Daphne program (2006-2008) ,- which was implemented under the supervision of the Association for the Psychological Health of Children and Adolescents (A.P.H.C.A.)- bullying in Greece has only recently attracted the attention needed. One of the reasons is that the victims do not report the assaults. Other inhibiting factors are the ignorance and lack of sensitivity on behalf of the society. With this educational research among schools of Western Thessaloniki we are trying to contribute to the gathering of facts in order to detect the causes of this phenomenon.

Bullying was initially observed and registered as a phenomenon in the 70's and more specifically in 1978 in Norway, while 9 years later in 1987 the term "bullying" appeared for the first time in scientific publications. Actually this phenomenon is the expression of violent behavior and has been rampant since the beginning of mankind (eabc. 2012), while its excessive spread among schools and communities is exerting a negative influence not only on the school environment in general but also on the right of students to participate in the learning process in a safe, fear-free environment.

In their attempt to define bullying, a lot of researchers refer to the work of D. Olweus (1991), where bullying is understood as the exposion

of a student to repetitive negative acts by one or more students. Alternatively, bullying could be defined as a conscious and intentional act of violence and manipulation by one or more people against one or more human beings (Ross, 2002: 106). It is any form of physical or verbal abuse where there is an imbalance of power or the will to bully and dominate. (Entenman et al., 2005, Hanson, 2011). Factors that affect different aspects of and contribute to the phenomenon are:

a) The child who is the victim of bullying
b) The child or group of children who exercise bullying
c) The children who observe
d) The teachers
e) The parents

As it has already been mentioned bullying can be physical, psychological or verbal and can appear in the form of direct behaviors such as teasing somebody or calling names, racial ethnic and sexual harassment, threats, hitting and stealing(Harris, Petrie and Willoughby, 2002:4). These are the most common forms of bullying where intervening is more easily achieved. There are however other less direct behaviors like spreading rumors, the social isolation of students and hostile stares, which are much harder to identify and deal with (Hanson, 2011).

In some cases as indicated by the research the consequences can be really harmful involving anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies, physical and psychological discomfort, low self-esteem and social malfunction.(Glover et al, 2000; Rigby, 2001).

A more recent development of school bullying is cyber-bullying. Bullying through the internet can be defined as "an aggressive, intentional and repetitive act which is realized by one person or a group of people through the use of information and communication technology against a human being that is unable to defend himself/herself."(Smith et al, 2008). It constitutes a form of bullying which despite the similarities (exclusion, spreading of rumors, threats, harassment and repetitive aggression) is different from "traditional" forms of bullying due to the following: (Donegan, 2012)
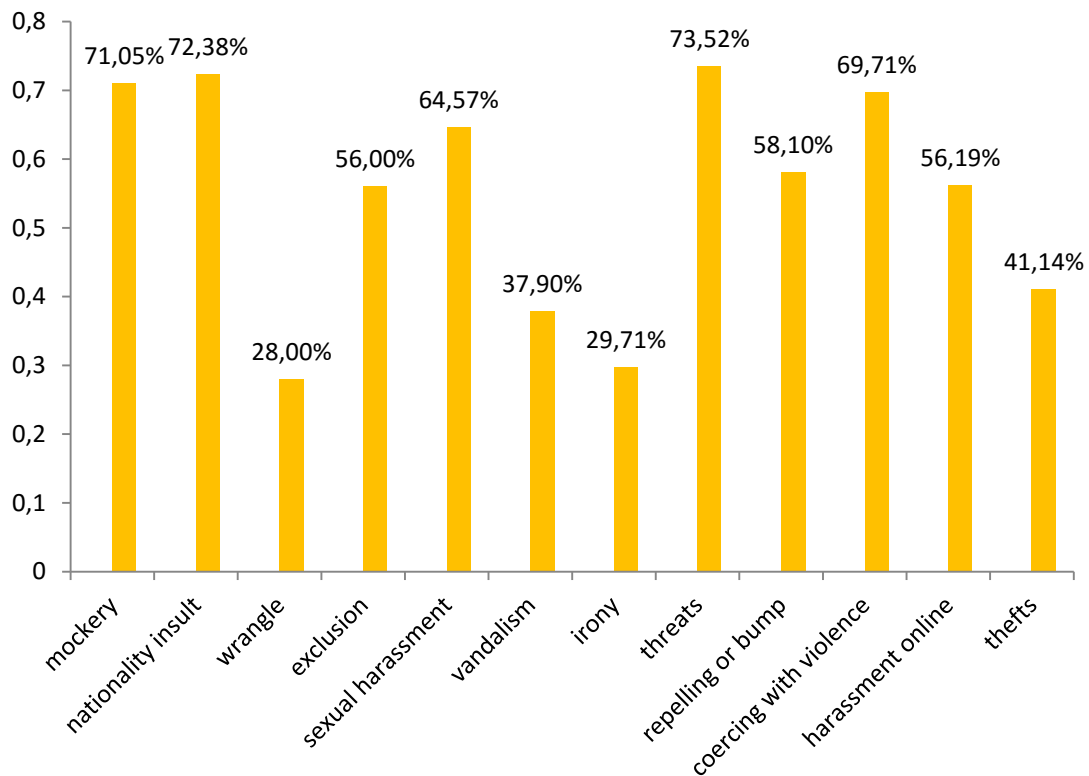
- It can occur anywhere, anytime of the day and not just during school hours
- The intimidating messages or pictures can be spread much quicker and in a much wider range than the one of the school
- The bullies can remain anonymous and thus cannot easily be traced
- The bullies do not witness the consequences that their actions have upon the victims.
- The bully is not necessarily stronger than the victim.
- The bullies do not necessarily come from families that reject praise and prefer sarcasm, rejection and criticism.
- The observers of cyber- bullying are more likely to evolve into cyber intimidators than the observers of common bullying.
- Cyber- bullies are likely to be members of either gender whereas in traditional bullying the boys outnumber the girls.
- Cyber bullying is harder recognized by either parents or teachers.

The following forms of cyber- bullying can be identified: (Europe's Antibullying Campaign, 2012; Espelage & Swearer, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

- **Flaming**, which is to send violent, rude, provocative and vulgar messages in order to cause verbal conflict among the users of the internet.
- **Harassment**, which is to repetitively send insulting and threatening messages to another person through e-mails, chatrooms or SMS which can cause emotional grief. The victim passively accepts harassment and in doing so, an unequal relationship between the victim and the victimizer is created.
- **Cyberstalking**, which is the persistent stalking behavior through the internet or mobile phones and can take various forms.
- **Denigration**, the spreading and circulating of false and humiliating comments about the victim in order to harm its reputation, through the internet or mobile phones.
- **Impersonation**, when the bully pretends to be the victim and denigrates or insults other people or even harasses them with messages in order to set up the victim and also gather information.
- **Tricky or Outing**, when the bully initially pretends to be the victim's friend in order to make him/her trust him. Once the victim is tricked into sharing private information or photographs these are circulated through the Internet.
- **Exclusion**, which is the intentional exclusion of a person from chatrooms or multiplayer on-line games in order to insult him/ her.
- **Happy slapping**, the unexpected slapping of a stranger in the street the recording of the event usually with the use of a mobile phone and spreading it through electronic means of communication.
- **Educational Research**

Aiming to examine the phenomenon of school violence described above, a school survey was conducted with the approval of the Ministry of Education and the consent of the Institute of Education Policy (I.E.P), among secondary education schools in Western Thessaloniki.

The survey was based on a questionnaire which was developed after observing the students in their schools and subsequently conducting interviews and was distributed in nine schools and a total of 552 students. The schools were chosen so as to cover a wide social range of this particular area, the urban, semi-urban and rural areas. The students on the other hand were randomly selected from 3 to 4 classes in each school. The sample was made up of girls (53%) and boys (47%) while 90% of the students identified themselves as Greeks.

Chart values: mockery 71,05%; nationality insult 72,38%; wrangle 28,00%; exclusion 56,00%; sexual harassment 64,57%; vandalism 37,90%; irony 29,71%; threats 73,52%; repelling or bump 58,10%; coercing with violence 69,71%; harassment online 56,19%; thefts 41,14%

Question 1: What do you define as school violence?

Indicatively, we present some of the basic questions as well as the answers given. When asked what they define as "bullying", students tend to cling to the prevalent opinion about school violence, i.e. violent acts, insults and threats while they do not emphasize on verbal bullying and consider theft as a much more serious crime.
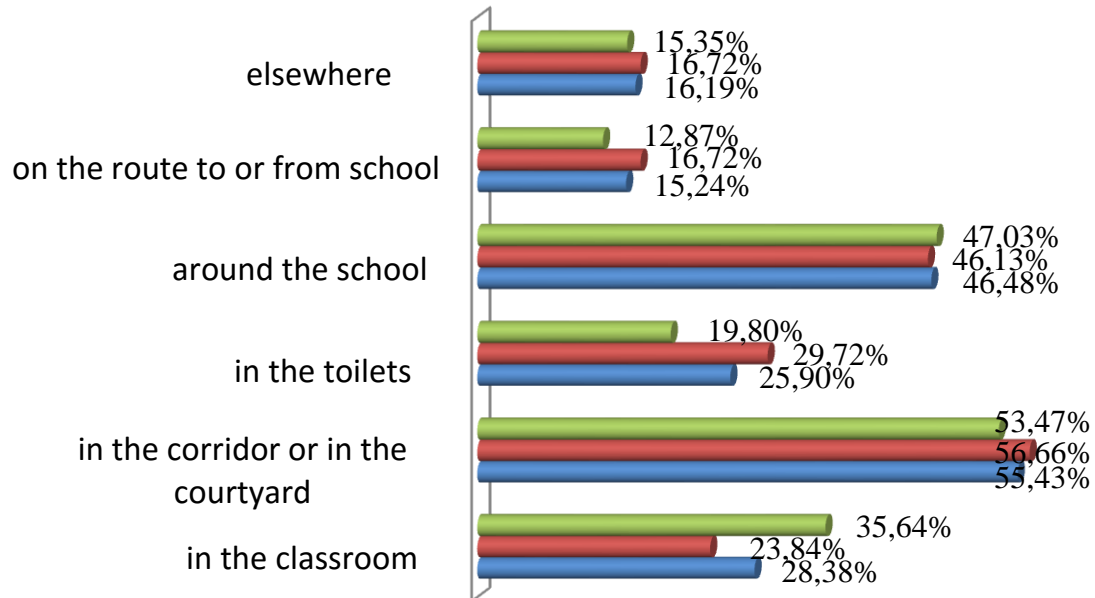
In the next question if they had even once been victims of bullying themselves, the results show that almost 30% answered positively with a slightly bigger percentage in rural areas. These results coincide with the ones in the national survey of the Ministry of Education which took place a couple of years ago. Needless to say, such numbers cannot and should not be tolerated by a society that is supposed to be civilized and thus some form of action has to be taken in order for this percentage to be reduced/lowered.

Question 2: Have you ever suffered bullying in one or more than one occasions?

When asked if they had ever witnessed incidents of violence students offered responses that seem to be related to the previous question. 20% of the students asked had not, in their opinion, witnessed incidents of bullying whereas another 20% said they had witnessed several. At this point, it should be made clear that it is not very easy for the students to identify various incidents as bullying. In a lot of cases the incidents are downgraded or even described as a game.
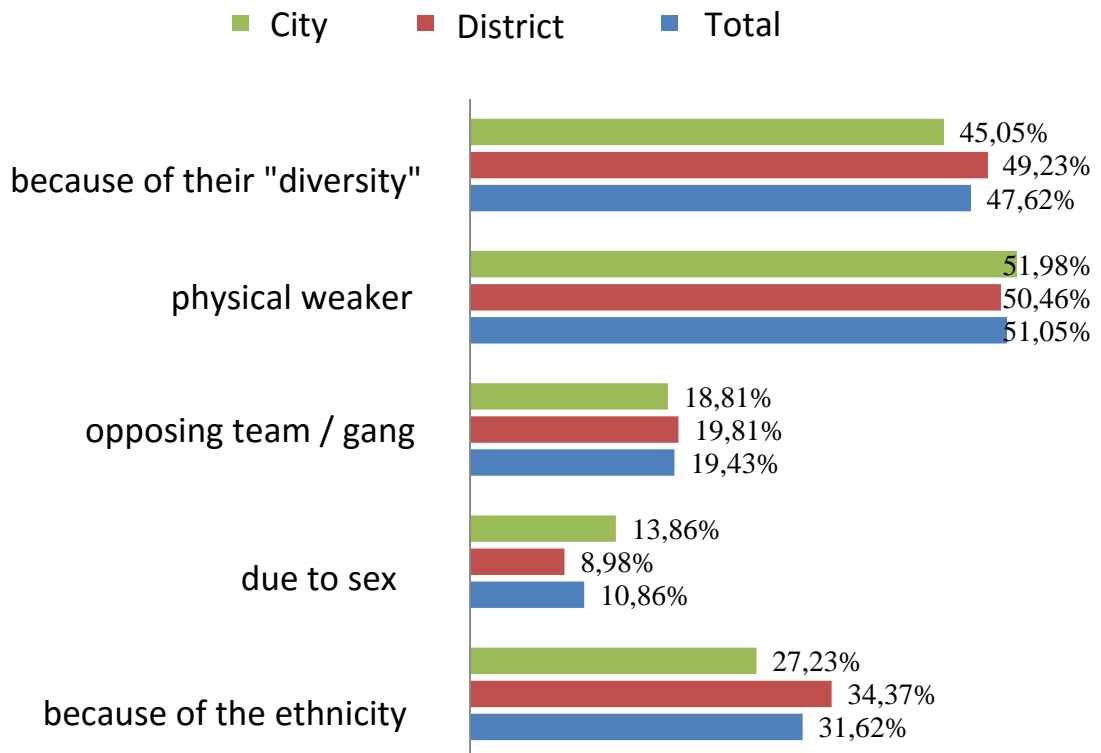
Question 3: How often have you witnessed incidents of bullying?

The places where incidents of violence occurred are also of great interest. A lot of them took place on school premises and even in areas supervised by the teachers, such as the classrooms, the hallways and the schoolyard. A few of them have also occurred at the school toilets where supervision is limited. The same applies to the area adjacent to the school.


elsewhere
15,35%
16,72%
16,19%

on the route to or from school
12,87%
16,72%
15,24%

around the school
47,03%
46,13%
46,48%

in the toilets
19,80%
29,72%
25,90%

in the corridor or in the courtyard
53,47%
56,66%
55,43%

in the classroom
35,64%
23,84%
28,38%

Question 4: Where have you witnessed incidents of bullying?

Another question sought to investigate the reasons that lead to the victimization of specific students by bullies .The main reason seems to be physical weakness. As such is considered not only the body stature, if somebody is small or weak, but also if he/she is not aggressive or does not want to participate in such incidents. The second reason is any kind of difference. This could be racial, sexual, social or even spiritual. Anything out of what is normally accepted can be targeted and attract a violent response. Nationality is not excluded and this seems to be related to the current financial situation in Greece. The worse the financial situation, the more the acts of violence. Another cause is the division of students into groups and cliques. The rival groups often fight which can sometimes lead to very undesirable results. Finally gender can be the target of bullies especially when it comes to girls.

City ■ **District** ■ **Total**

	City	District	Total
because of their "diversity"	45,05%	49,23%	47,62%
physical weaker	51,98%	50,46%	51,05%
opposing team / gang	18,81%	19,81%	19,43%
due to sex	13,86%	8,98%	10,86%
because of the ethnicity	27,23%	34,37%	31,62%

Question 5: Why does a student become a victim of bullying?

Closing the presentation of some of the questions given to the students it would be useful to mention views concerning ways of dealing with this phenomenon. Educating both parents and teachers seems to be on top of their priorities followed by other practices such as disciplinary measures by the headmaster and better supervision by the teachers. These views reflect the tendency of the students to shift responsibility to others instead of dealing with the problem themselves keeping in mind the fact that the sample studied involved high school students. There are of course views that consider the participation of the student councils and the presence of a psychologist at schools necessary but they are outnumbered by the previous ones.
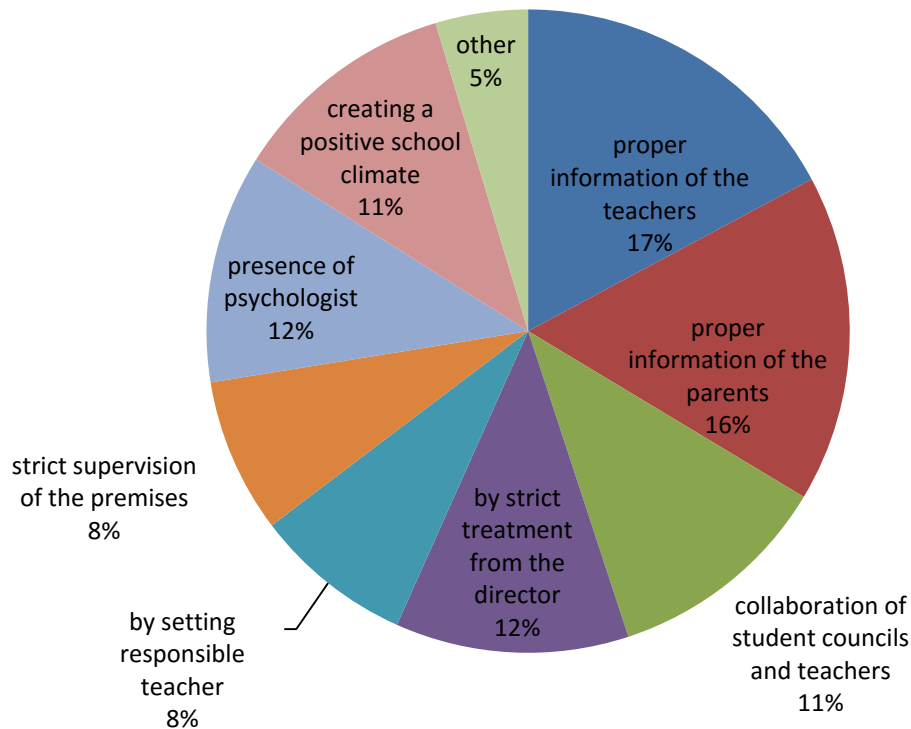
Question 6: Students opinions to the phenomenon confrontation

Perhaps we should first focus on the students themselves, try to approach them and make them more sensitive towards the matter. Stale lectures would not help in this respect. Other stimuli could be used to get them motivated. Having achieved this we can then deal with all the rest.

Conclusions

The necessity to further investigate the phenomenon of school violence which is spreading not only in our country but on a global level as well, becomes clear when considering the students' views as well as the interest society is showing towards school bullying. (Georgalis & Kofou, 2013)

Programmes like the Observatory of School Violence and Bullying are in the right direction but are not sufficient by themselves to deal with the phenomenon. They need to take an active role in engaging the students by organizing relevant activities. In order to achieve their goals it is important for them to have sufficient human and financial resources.

Staffing of such initiatives also constitutes a problem. It is unthinkable to educate some people who will then educate others. What is needed are experts who would directly educate teachers, parents and students. Unfortunately, it has often been observed that the instructors involved are not selected on the basis of their qualifications but their occupation.

A continuous flow of statistical data and relevant studies are needed in order to come up with new ways of approaching and dealing with this phenomenon .The study at hand has tried to move in that direction. One single survey, however, no matter how organized and broad, is not enough. New repetitive efforts need to be organized to allow for the dispersion as well as the temporal and spatial development of the phenomenon to be studied if we are to identify a developmental pattern.

A lot has yet to be done and every effort of putting forward the phenomenon contributes to the exoneration of the victims and a change in attitude and dealing with violence overall. Experience shows that the more familiar the problem, the greater the preoccupation with it, which can only have positive effects. Unfortunately, there are views that support that by organizing programmes about bullying there is a chance of increasing the incidents because problems come to light. These views take us back to earlier times when we used to turn away from the problem and describe incidents of violence as something else.

The conclusions drawn by the results of the survey are numerous and of great importance. First and foremost students need to be informed about the nature of the phenomenon and the way in which it is expressed. Although students seem to be aware of "bullying" and most of them gave answers about different forms of school violence, they deal with it according to their own perception of it. These perceptions are formed and preserved by a set of moral, social and cultural influences stemming from their environment. As a result, every child can perceive the same violent incident differently.

Another important matter is the reactions of students when witnessing bullying and especially in areas where supervision is limited. Most of the students stated that they witnessed such incidents in places such as the school toilets or outside school where there is no supervision. The most common reaction in such cases is to avoid involvement or walk away without even mentioning the incident, simply waiting for an adult to notice the event and take action. Such conduct, however, is not acceptable. Finally, special emphasis should be placed on examining the deeper causes of the phenomenon. Causes such as racism, any kind of discrimination, even the fear of anything unknown, can trigger such incidents. Therefore, by confronting these phenomena we can actually deal with school violence itself.

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