

School Bullying as a Social Construction

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Summary

This research study is an attempt to approach the social construction of the phenomenon of bullying through teachers' narratives. Eighteen semi-structured interviews were performed. The empirical material revealed that the phenomenon of bullying is a socially constructed reality, which is reinforced and consolidated by individual as well as social factors.

Keywords: Social Construction, School Bullying, Elementary School, Teachers, Bully - Victim of School Bullying

Introduction

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. Most bullying occurs without any apparent provocation on the part of the student who is exposed".

Violence in schools is formed from the terms, conditions and dimensions that we construct (Artinopoulou, 2001). In 1966 Berger and Luckmann wrote a book called "The social construction of reality" in which they stated that the phenomena of social life are reproduced through social processes. Society is understood in terms of an ongoing dialectical process composed of the three phases of externalization, objectivation and internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966:149). The Constructivist theory suggests that there are multiple realities, considering that each person constructs his/her own reality (Barbour, 2008:28). What we regard as true, which of course varies historically and cross-culturally, is thought as our current accepted ways

of understanding the world. These ways of understanding are the result of the social processes and interactions among people and they are not the consequence of the objective observation of the world (Burr, 2003:3-5). 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, 2000:319).

It is noteworthy that in most studies – both in international and Greek literature - the social construction of bullying mainly arises only through the perceptions and experiences of students (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Bibou-Nakou, et al., 2012; Thornberg, et al., 2013). Teachers' perceptions about the construction of the phenomenon under investigation, is a research field in few studies (Timm et al., 2011).

The purpose of this research study was to approach the social construction of bullying based on teachers' perceptions, who teach in Primary Schools of Lesbos Island.

Sample

The sample was selected according to Mantzoukas (2007) and is based on the subjective knowledge of the interviewer for its characteristics (sample feasibility). It was considered appropriate for the research study to include teachers of both sexes, in order to identify possible differences in their perceptions. The teachers were selected using criterion, such as work permanence, scientific training, urbanity, the functionality of the school environment in which they work and their work experience. Finally, eighteen interviews were performed.

Methodology

In this survey, a qualitative method was selected, and especially semi - structured interviews because the overall purposes of qualitative research, drawing from the philosophy of constructionism, are the understanding of how people give a meaning to their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning –making, and interpret what they experience (Merriam, 2009:14). For the data analysis, we used The Content Analysis.

Results – Interpretation

The results from the research revealed the factors that contribute to the social construction of bullying, such as the individual characteristics of students, the Stereotypes of Teachers and Families, the dimensions of the school environment, the teachers' lived experience during their student years and the influence of the media on the phenomenon of bullying. The factors leading to the social construction of the phenomenon of school bullying were the result of both the teachers' stereotypical perceptions and prejudices and the students' individual characteristics. They were the following, nationality: E17: *First and foremost there are the stereotypes. What do you think of the man who comes from Albania and Bulgaria here? How do you get round that? Sowhen you have that in mind you should behave considering all these parameters.... Yes, we have stereotypes to a great extent..... Even I have caught myself thinking that if I didn't have so many foreign students I could have a better level in class*", E12: *Greek students feel threatened. They have the ideology of their home "that foreign people will harm us"*, sex E9: *From our mentality. That is, we may consider girls more girls, while boys stronger.* E8: *Perhaps, we as teachers and parents teach boys that their role is to be strong, to survive, to have power, and* differences in appearance E16: *if someone is a bit fat. 'Well, the fat kids face racism,* E9: *The type of body, the long hair, the tone of voice, the earrings, can become a*

cause for victimization, depending on how they are perceived, Disability. E8: When a child - it happened at school - was walking with difficulty limping. Well, he/she received too many negative comments eg. ridicule, mockery and school performance

E7: *children who are good students, and perhaps this is one reason that motivates others to create trouble.*

The terms, in which we understand the world and ourselves, are social constructs, that is, "products" of a particular historical and cultural condition (Burr, 1995). Traditional and stereotypical perceptions placed upon children originating from different cultural environments (Kalati, et al., 2010) as well as gendered perceptions socially defined, explain how social norms and stereotypes influence the ways in which the occurrence of bullying is formed (Rigby, 2008). Thus, for example according to the construction of "hegemonic masculinity" (Jimerson et al., 2006:329) boys not only intimidate girls, but also boys who do not have clearly defined gender identity or display effeminate behavior (Renold, 2001). Although such behaviors are often seen as "normal" (Salisbury & Jackson 1996:105). The concept of difference, either cultural or biological, is associated with the devaluation and the divergence that leads to the perception of "not belonging to a team". Our perceptions on the body and the ideal weight are a social and cultural construction, which depend on the specific historical and social framework. These perceptions, about the body, are transferred through interaction among children and affect their relationships with their peers at school in a negative way (Sobel and Maurer, 1999:234). Diversity and strangeness result in indirect exclusion that can be discreet, or in isolation on the other hand which can be direct and physical (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008:337).

Throughout our empirical material, it emerges that family factors contribute to the social construction of the phenomenon of bullying, such as standards based on

family perceptions related to the socially constructed nature of femininity and masculinity. E5: *They had exactly the same behavior. The parents were proud of him, because he was a boy. His parents' occupation and their general socioeconomic status* E2: *Let's say that what I've already seen and discussed with other teachers is that police officers' children have a tendency in violence* E18: *Hey, because power, money gives a kind of power. A child, whose family has money, behaves in a different way. He/she is more confident and does not become victimized easily and knows how to defend himself/ herself.* What we regard as true is the resulting product of interactions among individuals (Burr, 2003:3-5). According to Dimou (2003: 153) there is a constructed idea that students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not qualify and do not always reflect the behavior and performance in school norms, and are subsequently defined negatively as "deviants".

The teachers of our sample have experienced or were witnesses of violent behaviors towards other children. E20: *that was what I had experienced when I was a student, because my father was a builder.* E18: *I had seen the violence of teachers on these children, who were usually socially weak, no doubt about it, most importantly they were both socially weak and had a weak school performance and teachers would take it out on them.* E1: *When we were in our youth, violence was a type of game But now these phenomena have taken alarming (dangerous) dimensions. They believe that the negative emotions that they experienced during their childhood years result in a different treatment of students who are being victimized.* E3: *I can't say that it's in a great extent, but I have to admit that it is something that has affected me inside. "When someone new comes to class, I remember those early scenes Research studies refer that almost all the teachers who were bullied as children and several felt the effects persisted they carry this message forward into adulthood (Mishna et al,*

2005: 729). Moreover, all these affect the way they respond and handle the bullying incidents, something that is confirmed in literature by Holt et al. (2011:125).

Teachers recognize that factors often associated with the type of the school environment, contribute to the identity construction of the bully and the victim. They argue that, according to the way school perceives "difference", being transferred to a new school may constitute a reason for victimization, or maybe not. E9: *Look, in fifth grade I changed schools, I experienced a total rejection by teachers and students and today I can say that I was repeatedly bullied. In six months, my father was transferred to a village on the island and I found myself in another school with very calm conditions. Also, teachers thought that they should serve as role models for students.* E1. *It is possible that we (the teachers) are to blame as we come across as the leader, the one responsible for everything, maybe they also want to substitute the teacher.* According to Kallioti, et al. (2002: 36) the prestige, the power and the attractiveness of teachers can provide incentives, so that the child wants to imitate them. The size of the school plays a key role in the occurrence or non – of bullying. It is supported that, in small school facilities, important efforts have been made to reduce bullying as much as they can with the development of positive relationships between teachers - students being a key factor - something which doesn't happen in urban areas where the relationships developed at school are more impersonal. In most schools, teachers often point out that there is a preexisting perception about students who do not comply with school regulations, a process which inevitably leads to the identification of specific students with a formal or informal characterization. This characterization is accepted from the students, who regard themselves as victims or bullies and they think that this is an integral part of their identity. E12: *He is a "dangerous" student. The previous teacher was always referring to this child and his behavior, as if it was*

not an unreasonable behavior. The teacher's expectations of his/ her students are adjusted to the above stereotypes (Blackledge & Hunt, 2000: 391). E2: Let's talk about what school promotes. When as a teacher and part of the system, I promote only the good students, the other students who do not perform that well might resort to beating.

Based on our empirical material, it seems that teachers' perceptions are also affected by what emerges from media. E4: *three or four days ago, in discussions in NET, I heard that we are fourth in the world in bullying. That is, by the media. I believe that it is a growing phenomenon, which has been arised the past few years.* The generalized perception of teachers that even though the phenomenon of bullying has been taking place all the previous years in recent years it has grown to a great extent, seems to be partly mediated through media projections. The special role of media gives them strength and power, in such a degree that more or less they seem to define our perception about reality and incidents which do not take place in our immediate environment (Malapetsa & Charogianni, 2004:39). It is noted by teachers that the media serve specific interests and through exaggeration try to attract the audience. The media constitute the identity of the perpetrator and attribute causes of behavior either in family factors, or individual personality traits and stereotypes. E2: *It comes out through TV series, Video Games, TV shows, comics, which we provide: a role model of the "superhero" who can do everything, control everyone and even the specific type of the victim.* E17: *Usually, it is either the family to blame or the child's physiology etc. we set a society by side, as well as poor conditions and all the rest that the Media usually do.* In a survey of Terenghi (2012) it is noted that the construction of the abusers' and victims' identity, is due to specific stereotyped ways of newspapers to depict bullies and victims.

Conclusions

According to our empirical material, factors such as cultural relativity (relativism), prejudices and stereotypes regarding the socio - economic level and ethnicity are thought to contribute to the construction of school bullying. The stereotypical perceptions and prejudices concerning the criteria that form the evaluation of the phenomenon have been socially established by the scientific community, creating a regulatory framework through which we interpret and recognize the social construction of bullying. The constructed image of the "other" is transferred to children, resulting to a state of competition and hostility towards children of different socio - cultural backgrounds and different characteristics. The way in which the others conceptualize, encounter and interpret their behavior in everyday interaction, depends on what we already know about them, as well as in formulations "commonly accepted" and still valid until they are disputed (Blackledge & Hunt, 2000). The media amplify the scientifically constructed reality over the characteristics and factors and build up a regulatory conception on the phenomenon of bullying. Phenomena of social life are reproduced through the social processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The socially constructed diversity of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds causes their victimization. Historically, it has been proven that people who possess the greatest social and economic power, form / arrange the cultural tools of the interpretation of reality, building up the patterns of integration and divergence in society (Descartes, 2012).

Meanwhile, the teacher contributes to positive school spirit together with his/ her colleagues and interprets the phenomenon of bullying via the student's

experiences, the school routine and the influence of contextual factors (scientific community, the media, stereotypes) (Blackledge & Hunt, 2000).

In conclusion, the phenomenon of bullying is constructed throughout the lived experiences of teachers, social interaction, stereotypes and prejudices of the family and school regarding the subject's gender, ethnicity and socio - economic level based on the process of externalization, objectification and internalization. The Media play a significant and important role. Therefore, through the teachers' perspective, it is recognized that bullying is a reality which can be constructed and reconstructed according to the criteria and framework in which it appears. It is necessary for the educational policy to create the appropriate conditions for the teachers' redefinition, through critically oriented training procedures. The teacher needs the theoretical and regulatory tools in order to subvert the constructed - as problematic - situation, since it is a reflection of the typical regulatory image of bullying.

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