

Coping with school bullying: A cross national *pilot* intervention study

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In Australia and Greece the issue of school bullying is a significant concern of educators and students. While victims are not to be blamed for being bullied, research suggests that the strategies utilised by victims to cope with bullying may inadvertently reinforce victimisation.

This paper will outline the successful Australian “Coping with School Bullying” (CWSB) program, including the use of a translated Greek version of the CWSB DVD, and describe the outcomes of the replication of the CWSB questionnaire with Greek students to identify effective and ineffective coping. Preliminary research conducted in Greek schools indicates that the CWSB program was successful in significantly reducing bullying amongst Greek students who had reported being seriously bullied pre-program. The intervention will now be rolled out to a larger number of schools in Greece in 2013.

Introduction

In April 2010 Flinders University organised a week long training school in Melbourne, with the focus on a four year COST European Union Science and Training grant on cyberbullying of which Flinders was a partner (COST is the European Cooperation in Science and Training organisation). The training school in Melbourne involved 60 early career and postgraduate students from 27 European Union Countries and Australia <http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/educationalfutures/groups-and-centres/swapv/>. Arising out of a collaborative relationship established at the training school in Melbourne, researchers from Flinders University and two Greek Universities are currently involved in a joint anti-bullying intervention program based on Flinders research. The University of Thessaly researchers, Roussi-Vergou and Andreou, are leading the project in Greece. The Greek researchers have been working with Professor Slee’s team from the Research Centre “Student Wellbeing and Prevention of Violence” (SWAPv) at Flinders University, Australia, who have designed an intervention to help students cope with bullying. This paper provides the preliminary outcome of the application of this anti-bullying intervention in Greece.

Bullying: Definitions

Bullying may be conceptualised as a subcategory of violence in schools. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 1996) defined violence as:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation.

According to Olweus (1978) a person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending him or herself. Thus, bullying may be conceptualised as a subgroup of violent/aggressive behaviour that is characterised by two specific criteria: Repetition and an imbalance of power (Sharp & Smith, 1994).

Bullying has therefore been conceived broadly as the systematic abuse of power (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefoghe, 2002) and as a deliberate form of aggressive behaviour, perpetrated by a more powerful individual or group that is unfair or unjustified and is typically repeated. Bullying may be classified as direct, as in face-to-face physical and verbal harassment, or indirect, as in unfair exclusion and rumour spreading. A more recent manifestation includes cyberbullying involving the use of technology such as mobile phones.

School bullying: A physically harmful, emotionally hurtful and socially isolating experience

In Australia and Greece the issue of school bullying is a significant concern of educators and students. Research (Cross et al., 2009; Psalti & Konstantinou, 2007) indicates that bullying is an all too frequent facet of young people's lives. The incidence of bullying rates are self-reported as highest in the primary years and in the early years of secondary school. This is a similar pattern to that reported in Greek schools (Sapouna, 2008). In Australia, the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) reported that just over one quarter (27%) of school students aged 8 to 14 years were bullied and 9% bullied others on a frequent basis (every few weeks or more often) (Cross et al., 2009). In Greece, bullying appears to be more prevalent. Studies undertaken by Andreou in 2000 and 2001 found that the proportion of young people involved in bullying incidents (as bullies, victims or bully/victims) in Greek schools varied from 46.3% to 47.5%, respectively.

An international study by Craig et al. (2009) found that bullying in Greece was ranked the 4th highest for boys and the 6th highest for girls amongst a group of 40 countries. Another cross-national study of bullying in 21 countries across a 12-year period 1994–2006 by Molcho et al. (2009) found that the prevalence of bullying had increased during this period by 28.7% in Greece, while generally for other countries, it had decreased. The high incidence of bullying in Greek schools has prompted Greek

researchers (Andreou & Metallidou, 2004; Athanasiades & Deliyanni-Kouimtzi, 2010; Giovazolias, Kourkoutas, Mitsopoulou, & Georgiadi, 2010; Sapouna, 2008) to stress the need for anti-bullying interventions and for policy makers to acknowledge that bullying is a problem that warrants attention from researchers, educators and policy makers (Kalliotis, 2000; Smith, Nika et al., 2004).

In an early meta-analytic review of twenty years of research, Hawker and Boulton (2000) concluded that it was clear that victimisation was positively associated with depression, loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem and poor social self-concept. They concluded by noting that cross-sectional studies "...demonstrate that victims of peer aggression suffer a variety of feelings of psychosocial distress. They feel more anxious, socially anxious, depressed, lonely and worse about themselves than non-victims" (Hawker & Boulton, 2000:453). They noted that these feelings occurred among victims of all subtypes of aggression and for both sexes and all age groups. Other reviews of research have largely confirmed the initial findings reported by Hawker and Boulton (e.g. Cross et al., 2011; Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, & Ruan, 2004).

Given the amount of evidence indicating an association of involvement in bullying with psychosocial problems, Glew, Fan, Katon, and Rivara (2008) have urged bullying researchers "to focus on helping school leadership understand the importance of anti-bullying efforts, determining which interventions work best with which populations, and determining which aspects of successful interventions make them work" (p. 127). These were among the objectives as the CWSB intervention was piloted in Greek schools (Skrzypiec, Roussi-Vergou, & Andreou, 2011).

Coping with school bullying

While bullying is pervasive in all schools and victims are not to be blamed for being bullied, research suggests that children who appear to be vulnerable, socially withdrawn, anxious, or submissive, or who ineffectually respond to bullying by fighting back (i.e. with angry and emotionally charged responses) tend to reinforce victimisation (Orpinas & Horne, 2006; Perry, Hodges, & Egan 2001). The strategies utilised by victims to cope with bullying may also influence the likelihood of persistent victimisation (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, & Chauhan, 2004). Indeed, "whether a child becomes a persistent or long-term victim may depend greatly on how he (sic) copes with attempts at peer victimisation and harassment" (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006:572).

The research literature on coping clearly identifies that there are effective and ineffective ways that young people cope with problems in general (Frydenberg et al., 2004). Effective coping strategies are those which Lazarus and Folkman (1984) describe as "approach" strategies, while ineffective strategies are termed by them as "avoidance" strategies. With regard to bullying, "approach" strategies are actions that may decrease the likelihood of continued victimisation, such as for example, seeking help or support from others to stop the victimisation, while "avoidance" strategies are

ineffective approaches, such as denial and refusal to think about an incident after it has happened. Whether a strategy is consistently effective may be dependent on the context (Kochenderfer-Ladd and Ladd, 2001). For example, hitting back may sometimes be seen by some as an effective strategy for a victim defending him or herself, while at other times it could be ineffective, particularly if the victim is overpowered by the bully.

Research (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007) has revealed that ineffective or unproductive coping is highly correlated with adolescent students' reports of being victimised and with negative effects on their psychological health (apathy, depression, aggression, somatic symptoms). Research evidence suggests that developing coping strategies through a specific capacity building program will be more effective in reducing bullying and victimisation at its source than other less targeted programs. Research conducted by Frydenberg et al. (2004) has provided some direction for assisting victims develop better coping strategies and hence reduce the likelihood of further victimisation. In their research Frydenberg et al. (2004) showed that through explicit teaching, young people can be taught how to cope with stressful life situations, such as bullying. As a response to stress, Frydenberg et al. (2004) argued that young people can develop resilience by mastering more effective strategies and reducing ineffective coping strategies. In three settings involving over 400 youth aged 11–17 in Australia and Italy, Frydenberg et al. (2004) demonstrated that it was possible for trained teachers to increase students' self-efficacy and to engender their use of new and more effective coping strategies. These findings informed the development of the CWSB intervention and more particularly, the development of the CWSB questionnaire to assess students' coping with bullying, which was adapted from Frydenberg and Lewis' (1993) Adolescent Coping Scale.

The CWSB intervention program is designed to enact multi-level change in a number of ways: The program is embedded within the school's curriculum; professional development is provided for the teachers; and importantly, the program includes instruction on effective and ineffective strategies. A CWSB DVD (Slee, Murray-Harvey, & Wotherspoon, 2008), which was written and performed by high school students in South Australia, presents four different types of bullying that enables participants to explore effective and ineffective ways to cope with school bullying. It forms the focus of the intervention program that is delivered in classrooms by teachers over an 8-week period. As students discuss the bullying scenarios, the dynamics of collaborative and small-group work (Cohen, 1994; Hertz-Lazarowitz & Miller, 1992) are utilised. In this way the program may facilitate changes that are more than just discovering coping with bullying strategies. As students work together they are forced to interact in a cooperative manner and this has the potential to foster relationships with victimised students. In addition, classroom discussions may engender empathy towards victims, which would facilitate bystander interventions in bullying incidents. Thus, the program impacts the many facets of bullying on a number of levels.

Greek schools intervention

In Greece, the CWSB intervention was customised by adding subtitles to the CWSB DVD and delivered in schools in Thessaly in 2012. Greek researchers translated and used the piloted CWSB questionnaire and administered the program in the same manner it had previously been undertaken in South Australia. Their separately funded project was run in two stages: (i) A pilot in five Greek schools in early 2012 followed by (ii) the larger intervention in 25 Greek schools. Data gathered in Greece and Australia will be loaded in the next few months onto a common SPSS data base to enable comparison.

Summary

This research brings together two related, but until recently, separate areas of research interest: Coping and bullying, and applies them across cultures. Both areas are connected to research that has focused on improving wellbeing and academic outcomes for children and young people. Now the emphasis is on the application of this approach in different contexts, Greece and Australia. The purpose of the current research is to describe the preliminary outcomes of the CWSB intervention in a small number of Greek schools where the program was piloted, to enable comparison with the South Australian school intervention.

Research plan, method and innovation

The research for the project involved a quasi-experimental research design. The delivery of an 8-session treatment intervention program: The “treatment” program represents an intervention focused on effective and ineffective strategies for coping with bullying presented by trained teachers in classrooms. As part of the intervention study, all participating students completed the CWSB questionnaire before and after program delivery, and watched and discussed the bullying scenarios in the CWSB DVD. A post CWSB questionnaire was also completed by all participating students approximately three months after program completion.

Participants

In all, the current pilot study (Andreou et al., 2012) involved 163 year eight students from three Greek secondary schools who agreed to be part of the pilot study. Students from years seven to nine (aged 12–14) participated in the intervention and completed the questionnaire as part of their involvement in the intervention study.

Instrumentation

Student questionnaires

The major dependent variables to be measured in this study were the frequency of being bullied and the coping strategies of students in the face of school bullying. The incidence of bullying was measured by asking participants how often they had been bullied and ranged from “never” to “every day”. Seriously bullied students were defined as those who reported that they had been bullied once a week or more often (Boulton & Underwood, 1992). Students’ coping behaviour was measured using the previously piloted CWSB questionnaire which asks students to indicate on a 5-point scale what they have done or would do, to deal with concerns or worries about bullying (1=never used the strategy to 5= used it a great deal). Students also completed a translated and adapted version of the Peer Relations Questionnaire (PRQ) (Rigby & Slee, 1992), which provides an indication of bullying, victimisation and pro-social behaviour (not reported here). All questionnaires were designed to be administered in classroom settings.

CWSB intervention program

A CWSB program teaching kit for teachers included the CWSB DVD with Greek subtitles; lesson plans for eight teaching periods; supporting information and class activity materials and resources — all specifically designed to raise awareness and knowledge of effective and ineffective coping strategies.

The application of the CWSB Intervention Program involved five phases:

- 1) *Staff training*. Greek researchers provided a training session for teachers to acquaint them with bullying matters and the program (using a power-point presentation).
- 2) *Administration of pre-program questionnaire*. At the first session teachers administered the pre-program questionnaire to participating students.
- 3) *CWSB Intervention Program*. Trained teachers delivered the program using the CWSB DVD, lesson plans and other activity resources. Student used workbooks during class to record their responses to class activities.
- 4) *Administration of post-program questionnaire*. At the last session teachers administered the post-program questionnaire to participating students.
- 5) *Administration of follow-up questionnaire*. Teachers administered the post-program questionnaire to participants 10–12 weeks after the program had finished.

Procedures

The CWSB questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered to students on two occasions and a third wave of data was collected from participating students to enable pre-post-follow-up data analysis. Coping strategy data was analysed in relation to a range of other student measures (e.g. demographic variables, frequency and type of bullying and victimisation, appraisal of effectiveness of coping strategies, relationships with peers, academic performance as per instrumentation referred to previously) to produce a reliable and valid instrument for assessing coping with bullying.

The CWSB intervention

All students experienced a program of eight 30–40 minute lessons of instruction by teachers, extending over one school term as part of the school's regular curriculum comprising:

- 1) An introductory session on bullying including administration of questionnaires and gathering baseline data on student's knowledge about effective and ineffective strategy use.
- 2) A series of six lessons on bullying, including exploration of coping strategies for coping with verbal, physical, relational and cyberbullying, as well as consideration of bystander strategies and a lesson with time given for students to compile their recommendations for what the school needs in order to effectively address school bullying.
- 3) A concluding lesson with administration of questionnaires to ascertain any changes in self-reported bullying on completion of the program.

A follow-up questionnaire approximately three months following the program was also scheduled.

Results

In the first part of the analysis consideration was given to the level of self-reported bullying by the Greek students (Table 1). From Table 1 it can be seen that approximately one in three students (32.6%, $n=43$) reported being bullied and that 13.7% ($n=18$) reported being seriously bullied i.e. "once a week or more often".

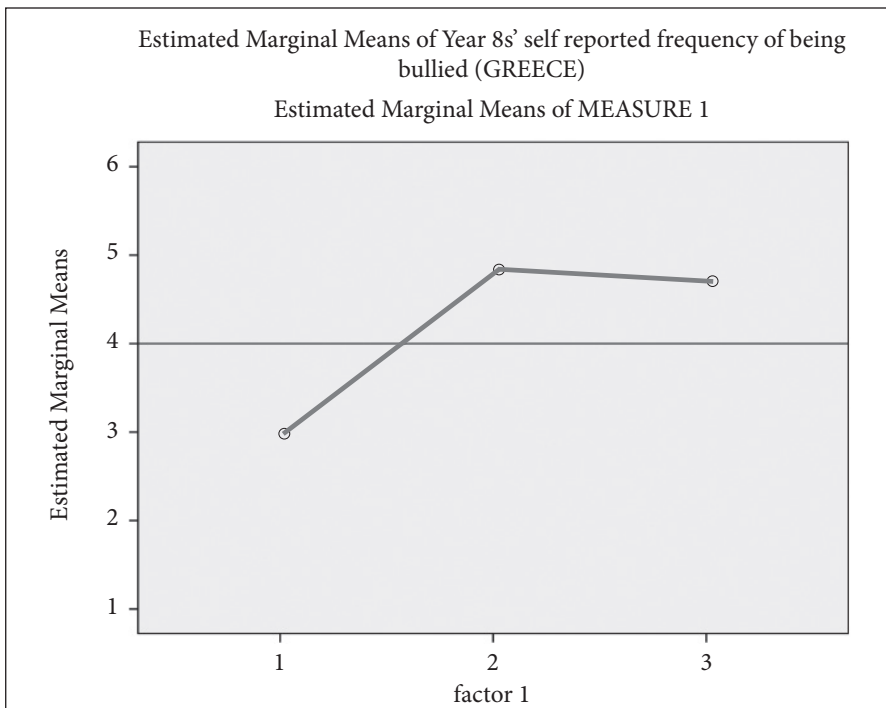
Table 1: Greek students’ self-reported frequency of bullying

<i>Over the last term. How often have you been bullied or harassed by a student or students at this high school?</i>			
		Frequency	Percent (%)
<i>Seriously bullied</i>	Everyday	1	0.8
	Most days	2	1.5
	One or two days a week	10	7.6
	About once a week	5	3.8
<i>Not seriously bullied</i>	Less than once a week	25	18.9
	Never	89	67.4
Total		132	100.0

Missing = 31

Figure 1 presents the findings for the Greek students. Although the numbers are small, it can be seen that at the post-intervention assessment significantly less students reported being “seriously” bullied and this effect was maintained at the three month follow-up ($F(2,12)=11.9, p<0.005, \eta^2 = 0.65$).

Figure 1: Mean frequency of being bullied reported by seriously bullied Greek students pre-program, post-program and 3-month follow-up



Discussion

The findings from the present study confirm that school bullying is still a frequent aspect of Greek student's lives with approximately one in three reporting being bullied and over one in eight reporting they were seriously bullied ("once a week or more often"). The analysis of self-reported victimisation by students who reported being seriously bullied before the program began, suggests that the intervention had a significant impact on these students who reported being bullied less often post-program. Furthermore, the results indicate that this decrease in bullying was sustained after a three-month period. However, due to the small number of seriously bullied students, this finding cannot be generalised. Future studies will throw light on this outcome as the CWSB program is rolled out across 50 schools in Greece during 2013.

The coping resources of children may be severely taxed by repeated experiences of victimisation (Lazarus, 1984). Bullying incidents which are frequent and occur over long periods of time, overwhelm the coping capabilities of victims. The type of bullying directed at victims, such as name calling or physical bullying, may also influence how well one copes (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Skrzypiec, Slee, Murray-Harvey, & Pereira, 2011). Andreou (2001) has reported that Greek children did not generally know how to deal with aggressiveness or reported they approved of violence as a means of resolving conflict. So that they can be helped to sort out a bullying situation, an important element of many anti-bullying programs is encouraging victims to tell someone (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000). Indeed, this is the number one coping strategy reported by trainee teachers as the tactic they would most recommend to students (Nicolaidis, Toda, & Smith, 2002; Spears, Campbell, Slee, & Tangen, 2010). In addition to this, victims are also encouraged to speak to their parents or guardians and in some schools, peer support systems have been developed to counsel or advise other pupils (Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Sharp & Smith, 1994). However, many victims do not seek help. This could be due to a fear of retaliation from bullies and shame over peers' perceptions of them (Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998; Naylor, Cowie, & del Rey, 2001). Smith and Shu (2000) found that around 30% of bullied pupils in English schools told no-one, and this was more likely amongst boys (40%) than girls (20%). Cross et al. (2009) noted that students in Australia reported that only in rare cases does the bullying stop when an adult is told with almost 50% indicating it stays the same, while in some instances it gets worse. The research emphasises the importance of school based interventions to reduce bullying.

Interventions may be categorised broadly according to whether their purpose is primarily to prevent bullying from happening or alternatively to deal with cases of bullying if and when they occur. However, a rigid distinction cannot be made; for instance, disciplinary actions taken when a case of bullying is identified may impact not only upon the person being treated but may also make it less likely that others will bully; that is, it may also have a preventative function. Some interventions are not primarily directed towards changing the behaviour of individuals who become

involved in bullying, but are concerned rather with establishing an environment or ethos in which bullying is less likely. For instance, by developing in members of the school community (including both teachers and parents) a better understanding of the problem and promoting more pro-social attitudes and empathic feelings towards others; or alternatively by reducing the motivation to bully by involving students more deeply in school-related study. These may be described as preventative measures. Many programs include both preventative and intervention elements.

Despite considerable efforts of schools to address bullying issues, and national imperatives for schools to put in place policies and procedures to deal with the problem, much of the work undertaken in schools remains at the level of broadly based, and not necessarily research-informed, interventions. With recent advances in knowledge about the indicative elements of effective intervention programs (e.g. Slee et al., 2009) it is now understood that interventions must attend to critical elements including the “dosage” (e.g. length and intensity of the program), “fidelity” (e.g. the lessons are taught as intended), and professional development (teachers are given some professional development relating to the topic).

The research from the pilot study in the Greek schools reported here is characterised by a number of strengths and limitations. The Greek researchers faithfully translated both the written material and the CWSB DVD into Greek. The study replicated Australian research in terms of quality assurance delivering the lessons across an eight week period collecting pre, post and follow-up evaluations. Limitations included the use of self report data by students in relation to school bullying. The small numbers of students and schools involved highlight the need for a large scale study, and in fact this study is now under way in Greece. Whether these findings can be generalised is dependent on the next phase of the research, which is to unite data from Greece and Australia. Doing so would enable tracking of a sufficient number of seriously bullied students to determine the impact of the CWSB intervention and if in fact these promising preliminary findings can be supported.

In summary, it is well accepted that education is positively related to health, and that schools play a key role in promoting healthy behaviours and attitudes. The responsibility of educators as reported by The United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991) is for protecting children’s quality of life and their rights to be educated in a safe environment, free from all forms of violence, victimisation, harassment, and neglect, is understood (Cross et al., 2011). The National Safe schools Framework (Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA], 2010) affirms the need for all Australian schools to provide a learning environment free from bullying and harassment <http://deewr.gov.au/national-safe-schools-framework-0>.

The daunting task facing school administrators concerns how to choose the best quality programs that are underpinned by an evidence-base, and how these may translate into effective anti-bullying approaches. In considering a program the following factors should be considered:

- i) whether the program has an identifiable theoretical base;
- ii) whether there have been independent evaluations conducted of the program;
- iii) the extent to which the program identifies the “pill and dose”, that is the number nature and quality of the lessons;
- iv) whether the program is developmentally appropriate.

The findings from the present Greek pilot study suggest it is possible to effectively intervene to reduce school bullying in schools and they replicate the findings from Australian research (Slee, Skrzypiec, Campbell, & Spears, 2012).

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