Chapter 15

School Bullying and Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the phenomenon of bullying is being approached. A phenomenon which is an internationally recognized problem, with multifactorial etiology. As this phenomenon manifests itself in various cruel forms, its functions are particularly aggravating and affect the mental health of children and adolescents during their school life. In order to address this phenomenon, the dire need of advocacy is proposed by the authors. Advocacy is an interdisciplinary field of many different acting individuals, aiming to influence social / educational systems and institutions. Their ultimate objective is to fight against discriminations, stigmatization and social exclusion of any vulnerable persons or groups, with the ultimate aim of promoting equality, social justice, inclusive education and the defending of human rights. In order for us to have an effective modern school and be able to alleviate any potential conflicts, all parties involved – teachers, students, parents and the wider community – ought to advocate safeguarding the rights of all students through a wider culture change.

INTRODUCTION

Rising violence in childhood and adolescence is a particularly worrying phenomenon that concerns the world community. Conflict behaviors among minors are, to an extent, an element of their daily lives and are manifested in the context of survival rules configured in any social group. Moreover, similar manifestations – in different forms – have existed in all societies and periods of time. However, certain behaviors constitute particular threats or violations, which require timely and appropriate intervention, since “bullying” is different from usual acts of aggressiveness (Leff & Waasdorp, 2013, pp. 1-2). An attempt to clarify the concepts under discussion follows in this chapter.

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School Violence: Bullying

The phenomenon of violence is defined as “the exercise of physical or any other force or the use of threats in order to impose the will (of someone)” and is usually associated with power and authority (Babiniotis, 1998, pp. 367-368). School violence includes power and control elements and refers to the imposition of the will of someone on another in order to cause damage or harm within the framework of the educational process (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014, pp. 25-27).

School intimidation or “bullying”, as it has come to be referred to in the literature, belongs to a special range of forms of school violence and is a term used to refer to the systematic, repeated and deliberate abuse of power (Smith & Sharp, 1994), the repeated exposure of a student to negative actions by one or more students and more specifically, as cited in Kassotaki-Maridaki (2011, pp. 709), “the repeated exercise of physical or psychological violence by a person or group of persons to one of their peers, who is usually less powerful, with the aim of causing them physical pain or fear or generally psychological distress”.

Consequently, there are two elements forming the central axis of bullying: the power of the aggressor and the victim’s vulnerability (Rigby, 1996, pp. 15). Therefore, bullying is defined as a form of –unprovoked – aggression, bearing the following three main features: a) the repetitiveness of the intimidating behavior, b) the intention of the victimizer to cause physical and mental suffering to the victim and c) the unbalanced distribution of power between the bully and the victim (Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Olweus, 1993). Bullying is ultimately manifested as delinquent behavior, which concludes with traits such as aggressiveness, demonstration of power and the desire of the victimizer to dominate the victim.

Bullying is now recognized as a widespread and often neglected problem in schools around the world, and one that has serious implications for children who are victimized by bullies and for those who perpetrate the bullying” (Swearer et al., 2010, p. 38), which constitutes a “serious disturbance of the normal relationships of children and particularly of adolescents” (Kassotaki-Maridaki, 2011, p. 709).

According to the U.S. Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or groups of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social or educational harm (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7).

The phenomenon of bullying was first studied in 1978 in Norway and nine years later, in 1987, the relative term “bullying” started to appear in many scientific journals. Although bullying is noted and recorded as a phenomenon of the 1970s, however, it does not actually make its first appearance during that period. In fact, it has been a common manifestation of violent behavior, which is, in a sense, inherent to man since birth and has existed as a universal timeless social phenomenon, which brings about aggravating consequences both on the mental health of students as well as on the whole process of learning.

Research on bullying began in the ’70s by Professor Dan Olweus at the University of Bergen and later spread all over Europe and the USA (Rigby, 1996, p. 12). However, over the past several decades, school bullying has been a major focus of research in several countries, particularly in Europe (Baldry & Farrington, 1998; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Rivers, 2000; Smith, 2004; Swearer & Espelage, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education found that 23% of public school students between the age of 12 and 18 reported being bullied (Robers, Kemp & Truman, 2013, as cited in Patton, Hong, Patel & Kral, 2017).