

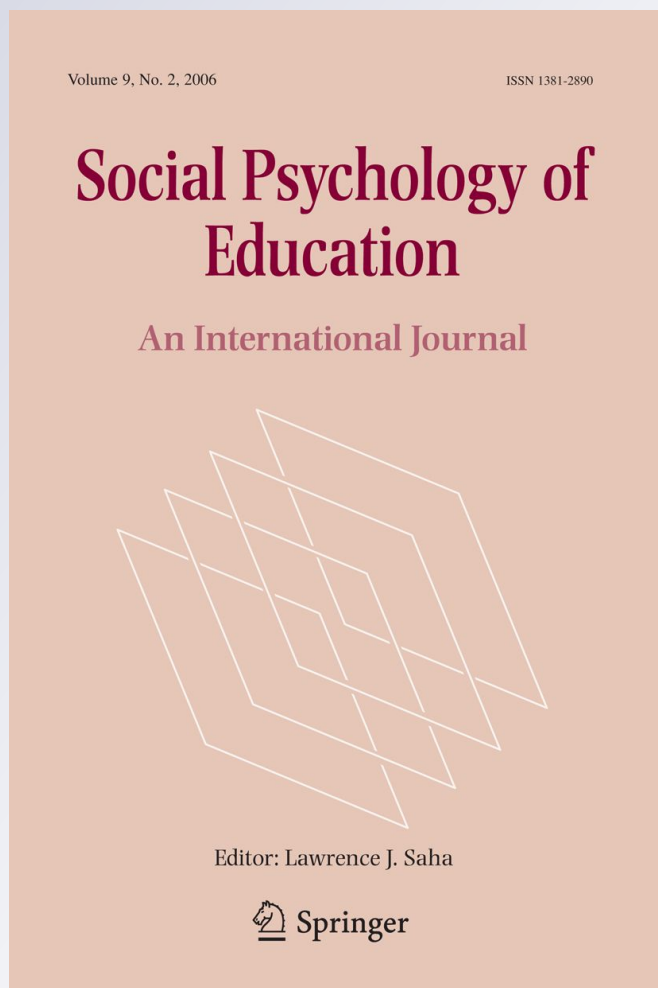
*School factors related to bullying: a qualitative study of early adolescent students*

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## School factors related to bullying: a qualitative study of early adolescent students

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**Abstract** This article addresses the issue of bullying and analyzes a set of accounts that were collected from fourteen focus group interviews with 90 secondary school children. The aim of the research was to map out the ways in which young adolescents talk about their social relations at school in relation to home and the ways they construct bullying as a school-related issue. The findings suggest that young adolescents differ in their ability to participate in the construction of social order depending on the school/home context. Further, bullying is mainly framed as an issue of the school climate on the part of the participants. The student–teacher relationship (as a hidden curriculum), academic competition and pressure of academic achievement contribute significantly to the bullying discourse in the students' talk.

**Keywords** Bullying · School factors · Qualitative study · Young adolescent students

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## 1 Introduction

There is extensive documentation of bullying as a problem in schools internationally (Boulton et al. 2007; Cowie et al. 2005; Due et al. 2005; Finkelhor et al. 2006; Lad 2006; Rigby 2005). As it is mainly identified as a serious social concern relating to children and young people, a great deal of public and academic awareness has been achieved by organizations and research centers attempting to protect children from violence. This has resulted in the identification of a number of specific characteristics of bully, victim and bully/victim and the development of a detailed taxonomy of different kinds of either bully or victim behavior (Champion and Clay 2007; Dempsey et al. 2006; Olweus 1991, 1993; Zeira et al. 2004). Most of the researchers would agree that what seems to set bullying apart from other aggressive and abusive attacks is its 'repeated' nature, fuelled by the silence and powerlessness of the victim.

The numerous epidemiological studies that have been conducted all over the world have provided reliable and detailed descriptions of bullying and victimization among school students (Ammann and Flora 1999; Del Barrio et al. 2001; Nishina and Bellmore 2006; Pereira et al. 2004; Smith 2003; Smith and Brain 2000). As a consequence, a large amount of data has been accumulated on such aspects as prevalence, frequency, intensity, duration, place of occurrence, sex differences, different forms and methods of bullying (physical, verbal, relational), behavioral traits of the participants, single or multiple victimization and so on (Delfabbro et al. 2006; Raskauskas 2010; Rigby and Smith 2011).

There is now ample evidence to suggest that bullying is linked to social and psychological difficulties (Alikasifoglu et al. 2007; Snyder et al. 2003; Sweeting et al. 2006), some of which can be long-lasting and persist into adulthood (Cowie et al. 2005; Esteves et al. 2005; Finkelhor et al. 2006).

When the academic and professional debate first started in this field, children were conceptualized as "passive victims" or "silent witnesses" (Shaw and Wainryb 2006). Recent data, though, show that children and young adolescents who live with bullying have their own coping strategies and their own perspectives on what happens to them (Cowie et al. 2005; Cranham and Carroll 2003; Kanetsuna et al. 2006). This realization led to a conviction that research in this field must involve children and young people directly, as well as those who care for and work with them.

Taking the children's position into consideration in mainstream research, however, we claim that less attention has been paid to children's and adolescents' extensive and analytical views about bullying (Oliver and Candappa 2003). It is important that fighting bullying and developing anti-bullying strategies address the realities of children's and young people's experiences of bullying among their peer and friendship groups (Mellor 2007). Children and adolescents have participated as informants primarily by completing questionnaires (Chan et al. 2005; Minton and O' Moore 2004; Mishna et al. 2008; Thornberg 2007) whereas some studies have used observation as a method for collecting information (Craig et al. 2000).

In addition, there is a tendency to encompass bullying as just another child protection issue, without acknowledging the complex interactions between school culture, family functioning and peer culture (Hepburn 1997). Focusing too narrowly on safeguarding children, and to a lesser extent adolescents, without a raised awareness of

the potential for partnership with non-violent peers and for tackling both the aggressor and the victim, can lead to dangerously ineffectual responses for the involved parties. [Fox and Boulton \(2006\)](#) stress the fact that a number of studies over the past few years have examined the relationship between friendships and bullying, in terms of number of friends, support and the differing function of children's friendships. Further, recently there has been growing research in the group dynamics of peer relationships and bullying ([Eslea et al. 2003](#)) and bullying problems have been studied in relation to the organization of peer networks within a classroom situation ([Salmivalli et al. 1997](#)). In addition, it has been found that as children move towards adolescence they change their views about peer status and popularity and are more attracted to aggressive peers ([Bukowski et al. 2000](#); [LaFontana and Cillessen 2002](#)). On the other hand, as they grow older, they are less tolerant of coercive, overtly aggressive strategies and prefer less visible forms of social or relational aggression for enhancing or securing their social status in their peer groups ([Neal 2010](#)). In addition, several theories on the hidden curriculum have been developed sharing a general definition of the term as a socialization process in schools ([Apple 2004](#); [Margolis 2001](#)). Daily routines, social relationships, norms and values throughout classroom life influence the authority relationships between teachers and students ([Giroux 2001](#)) and the dynamics of peer group relationships.

The present paper analyzes a set of accounts that were collected from fourteen (14) focus group interviews with 90 secondary school children; the broad focus of the interviews was social relationships and issues of conflict in the school among early adolescent students. The goal in analyzing these accounts was to reveal the particular ways in which "social relationships in the school setting" are constructed and how they are used as an explanation for problem behavior such as bullying.

Specifically, in this paper we are concerned with the ways in which the issue of bullying is discursively organized in relation to the school context and also with tracing the possible consequences of organizing and understanding the issue in this way. Insufficient attention has been paid to the school context in the discourse on student bullying as part of a larger trend in the discourse on student aggression in general ([Cassidy 2009](#); [Chan 2006](#); [Hepburn 1997](#); [You et al. 2008](#)). Aspects of the school context such as the nature of academic instruction, classroom management and discipline, and the nature of social interaction all deserve greater attention as important factors in understanding school bullying ([Espelage and Swearer 2003](#)). We believe that discussing with young people about their social relationships at school would allow us and them to gain a better understanding of the issue of bullying within and in relation to the school context.

### 1.1 Bullying in adolescence

Bullying in secondary schools has been less researched in comparison to bullying in elementary school settings ([Minton and O' Moore 2004](#); [Pellegrini 2001](#); [Pellegrini and Bartini 2000](#); [Parault et al. 2007](#)). The transition from elementary to secondary education is often associated with a decrease in severity during early adolescence ([Sweeting et al. 2006](#); [Sullivan et al. 2003](#)). On the other hand, there is evidence to

suggest that children, when going to secondary school, begin to employ new ways of relating with their peer groups, some of which are recognized as social aggressive behaviors (Pellegrini 2002; Xie et al. 2002). At the same time, young adolescents are capable of manipulating social relationships using more complex cognitive, interpersonal and social skills.

Among the theories that attempt to shed light on the ways peers contribute to bullying, dominance theory explains the increase of bullying in early adolescence as a renegotiation of their dominance relationships; thus bullying is viewed as a factor that helps adolescents attain dominance in newly formed peer groups (Adler et al. 1992; Espelage and Swearer 2003). Within the context of social dominance theory, children and adolescents tend to organize themselves in social hierarchies and compete for access to their peers with both coercive and cooperative strategies. The use of social aggressive strategies by early adolescents might be used as a mechanism to gain peer admiration and to advance in the peer social hierarchy (Neal 2010). Socially aggressive behaviors such as spreading rumors or social exclusion could be considered as particularly useful strategies for advancement in the peer hierarchy, although their relationship with popularity needs to be further examined (Rodkin et al. 2000).

Indeed social aggression has been found to be positively associated with bullies' perceived popularity and advantaged social network positions according to Neal's review paper (2010), even though adolescents using social aggressive behaviors were found to experience more peer rejection and less peer acceptance. On the other hand, Cillessen and Rose (2005) stress the lack of longitudinal studies about outcomes associated with children's social status, social aggression and peer acceptance or rejection.

## 1.2 Qualitative studies of bullying

The bullying phenomenon has been represented in the field of recent research by the use of the quantitative research paradigm (Minton and O' Moore 2004; Terasahjo and Salmivalli 2003). However, the present study adopts a qualitative approach and focuses on adolescent students' views on bullying. Few qualitative studies have been conducted in relation to children's and adolescents' views on bullying (Devine and Kelly 2006; Owens et al. 2000; Terasahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Yubero and Navarro 2006; James and Owens 2005). For instance, James and Owens (2005), from their analysis of 39 teenage girls' letters regarding peer conflicts, found that victimization is constructed as manipulation and maintenance of peer relations. Lam and Liu (2007), explored the self-reported histories of eight bullies that were interviewed. The authors developed a four phase model to explain the dynamics of bullying using the grounded theory approach. Gamliel et al. (2003), on the other hand, present a qualitative research of six students' potential strategies for dealing with bullying. A few qualitative studies (Cranham and Carroll 2003; Owens et al. 2000; Terasahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thornberg 2007) have focused on the nature of students' justifications and explanatory strategies regarding bullying, whereas Mishna et al. (2008) investigated bullying experiences within the social context of children's friendships. Qualitative research methodology can provide in-depth information into the dynamics of bullying

behavior and can offer insight into proximal and distant factors that influence how young people acknowledge and understand the bullying process (Mishna et al. 2008).

The present study forms part of a greater program that was funded by the EU.<sup>1</sup> The project focused on needs assessment regarding bullying in schools, and awareness-raising for the teachers, parents and students. In this study we try to examine the way high school students interpret bullying as a school related factor.

### 1.3 The context in Greece

In Greece, bullying was widely recognized as a serious social issue in 2007, when a young student disappeared under circumstances suspected of peer victimization. Apart from this event, a number of empirical studies have been carried out over the last two decades in Greece (Andreou et al. 2007, 2005; Deliyianni 2005; Georgiou and Stavriniades 2008; Kokkinos and Panayiotou 2004; Sapouna 2008), which show that 10% of the students in Greece are being subjected to peer victimization (Deliyianni 2005). The study by Bibou-Nakou (2007) calls for further investigation and a need for a comprehensive assessment of the problem and the development of a national policy.

## 2 Theoretical background of the study

The present study is informed by theoretical developments in the sociology of childhood, which emphasize children as social actors and as being active in the negotiation and construction of social reality (Mayall 2002; Prout 2005; Qvortrup 2005). Working broadly within what has been referred to as 'the new social studies of childhood', the focus of the present research was on young people's relationship cultures, that is, their own practices and systems of value.

Our research is also prompted by recent developments in social policy, including a focus on children's rights and the need to consult children and young people about issues of concern to them, principles embedded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Last but not least, the present study on bullying is also in line with the discursive, rhetorical and social constructionist approaches in social psychology (e.g. Billig 1987; Burman and Parker 1993; Potter and Wetherell 1987). The analysis presented here focuses on the particular kinds of social accomplishments that students perform by way of descriptions of bullying (Billig et al. 1988). This kind of analysis is based on an approach that goes beyond description and individual attributes and stresses the role of socially shared resources and emergent social practices (Edwards and Potter 1992).

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<sup>1</sup> Daphne Program: "Needs assessment and awareness raising program for bullying in schools. Association for the psychosocial health of Children and adolescents (APHCA). Scientific director: Tsiantis, Project No: JLS/DAP/2005-1/040/YG. Coordinating country: Greece-APHCA (Assimopoulos, H., Giannakopoulou, D., Hatzipemos, T., Konida, E., Soumaki, E.) and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Participant countries: Cyprus (Paradisiotou, A. and Tziogouros, C.). Germany (Witteriede, H., University of Lueneburg) and Lithuania (Bulotaite, L. and Povilaitis, R. Department of General Psychology, Vilnius University).

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Participants and research site

The paper is based on research conducted in five high schools (two schools in a disadvantaged area in the west, two schools in the center, and one in the eastern area of a big city in Northern Greece) which involved semi-structured interviews with 90 pupils in fourteen focus groups.<sup>2</sup> Each focus group was comprised of 5–8 participants, aged 13–15 years old. Many social science researchers prefer to work with preexisting groups since these are the networks in which students might normally discuss or evade the sorts of issues likely to be raised in the context of the research project (Frosh et al. 2001). The groups were self-selected, since talking in groups, especially groups of friends, is less intimidating and may feel more ‘natural’ than individual interviews (Krueger 1988). In addition, the students had the opportunity to communicate their point of view outside the group by completing questionnaires.<sup>3</sup>

The interview schedule covered issues such as (a) the ways young people form their social relationships at school (b) How they make friends, and (c) issues of disputes and conflict in peer relations (see “Appendix 1” for the Interview Guide).

The interview data gathered from all focus groups were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed into Word documents in their entirety. Of the questions that formed part of the interview script, the ones analyzed here make reference (a) to the forms of relationships young people describe in the school versus home setting and (b) those that refer to the school as a significant factor in negotiating and understanding bullying.

We focused on these two categories, since we believe that in order to gain a great understanding of bullying as a social problem we need to understand more fully the socially shared, often largely unnoticed, school practices and young adolescents’ relationships with their peer groups and their teachers. The majority of school-related bullying research focuses largely on peer relationships with the predefined roles of bullies and victims, or the individual characteristics of bullies, victims, or bully-victims, and less attention is given to wider school relationships such as students’ experiences of school and their relationships with teachers (Ammann and Flora 1999; Chan 2006; Parault et al. 2007). On the other hand, we claim that focusing on the individual as the source of their own bullying problems provides a convenient by-passing of other relational, structural and institutional changes that may need to be made and are related to schools as institutions.

As a means of obtaining young adolescents’ consent to take part in the research, we visited their classrooms and we talked to them about the goal of our study. Parental consent letters were also given to the schools. Prior to each interview, all participants were assured of total confidentiality and their right to withdraw from participation; three students declined to go on with their initial participation in the focus groups. Focus groups were conducted by the first author who participated as moderator. In each school, participants were asked to form the discussion groups. In the vast

<sup>2</sup> No single factor such as school size, or location had a determining effect on the prevalence of bullying.

<sup>3</sup> The students completed the Olweus Questionnaire (567 students) as part of the broader planning of the program (See Tsiantis 2007).



majority of focus groups equal gender representation was achieved. However, one focus group was comprised only of girls, whilst another was conducted only with boys. The fieldwork was completed during the winter and spring terms of 2006–2007.<sup>4</sup>

During the running of the groups, the participants felt relaxed and there was an immediate rapport between the moderator and the young adolescents being invited to the discussion. The students would exchange their experiences only pausing occasionally to allow for interpretation. The researcher's intervention was thus minimal, enabling her to observe expressions of feelings, emotions, etc during the sessions. The majority of the group discussions were lively, rich and argumentative in nature, with a strong sense of collaboration among the group members.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2 Data analysis

As previously mentioned and justified, in order to map out and understand the main forms of bullying practice, we focus on the ways (a) young adolescents talk about their social relations at school versus home, and (b) they construct bullying as a school-related issue.

To preserve anonymity, the five schools that participated are referred to with their initials. In respect of the extent of bullying stories, in 8 out of the 14 groups, the students recounted one or more incidents of bullying of theirs or their peers, often in considerable detail. The prominence of bullying stories in the interviews is indicative of young people perceiving bullying to have legitimacy. Validity of the findings was confirmed by the generation of rich, believable data, while content validity dealt with the examination of the various things said on the given topic.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis of all focus group data was guided by [Potter and Wetherell's \(1987\)](#) and [Parker's \(1992\)](#) version of the Discourse Analysis method. The unit of analysis in the focus groups was the thematic content or discourse used in the groups and not the properties of the individuals. We use a discursive approach since we insist on the contextualization of the accounts young adolescents give us as researchers. Discourse analysis seems to provide a space both for enacting and for negotiating bullying and could be acknowledged as a context of empowerment of the participating students ([Willig 1999](#)). By this, we mean that the participants might identify spaces for resistance and counter discourses in order to talk about their subjective experiences of bullying and to promote alternative accounts which could then inform in order to improve professional practice on the part of the school authorities and psychosocial services. We acknowledge the fact that adolescents' discursive practices do not represent what they are *really* thinking or what *really* happens but rather that they are first and foremost resources in dialogue. Thus, we focused on both replicating the knowledge and skills of young adolescents themselves and appreciating and valuing the

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<sup>4</sup> The number of groups is justified by the saturation point of the information.

<sup>5</sup> There were some awkward or violent "sensitive moments" ([Kitzinger and Farquhar 1999](#); [Parkes 2009](#)) that have analytical interest but are outside the scope of the present paper.

<sup>6</sup> In relation to issues of reliability and validity of the qualitative methods see [Barbour and Kitzinger \(1999\)](#) and [Wetherell et al. \(2001\)](#).

ways in which they talked about bullying incidents, attributed them to several actors or situations and achieved certain outcomes. Our reading of the interviews suggested that there was a wide range of possible ways of accounting for bullying, which could be categorized as: co-constructing identities and social images in the school versus the family context; bullying as a school related problem; and friendships constructed as morality learning in peer groups (see [Bibou-Nakou 2007](#)). For the purposes of the present study, we focused on the first two accounts.

### 3.3 Analytical process

In our analysis, which was conducted by the first two authors and consisted of reading and re-reading the text, we tried to provide general categories of interaction rather than working with the orientation displayed in the unfolding of the sentence. We then divided the text into sections, recognizing recurrent patterns from the data. The reading of the participants' talk was guided by the theoretical notions described above (see Theoretical background). The central aim of our analysis was to explicate the interpretative repertoires ([Potter and Wetherell 1987](#)) that students used when they were talking about their social relationships at school versus home and about bullying. (For a summary of analytic stages when conducting discourse analysis with children and young people, see for example, [Aldred and Burman 2005](#)).

In general, from the qualitative data of the study, bullying emerges as part of a complex web of power relations and hierarchies both among the peer group of young adolescents and between them and the school staff. The following excerpts have been selected for their representation of particular types of discursive construction regarding social relationships and the emergence of bullying. Transcription has stressed readability at the expense of detailed nuances of pronunciation.<sup>7</sup>

## 4 Results

While the groups produced a wealth of data that was utilized in the production of the final report (see [Bibou-Nakou 2007](#)), this paper will concentrate principally on the material focusing on the first two discursive categories: (a) students' talk in relation to forming relationships in the school as opposed to the family context and (b) bullying as a school-attributed phenomenon.

### 4.1 Co-constructing identities and social images in the school versus the family context

From the overall analysis of the interview data (see [Bibou-Nakou 2007](#)), it can be clearly seen that the reasons why some young adolescents are victimized were discussed in the context of personality dispositions, peer-relational and family-relational

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<sup>7</sup> When talk has been omitted this is marked by [] in the text. Abbreviations are as follows: I = Interviewer, B1 = Boy 1, G1 = Girl 1. A-1st year of high school, b-2nd year of high school, c-3rd year of high school. The numbers refer to the specific classes. For instance, in the 1st year of high school there may be 2 or 3 classes according to the number of students attending each school.

factors. In other words, a range of characteristics both individual and social were put forward as reasons why some young adolescents who 'don't fit in' are bullied. The following extract refers to a main narrative of bullying between 'soft' and vulnerable students on the one hand, and "tough guys", on the other.

K, a1

One day last week, I was with a friend of mine, he was very quiet, you know, he doesn't talk much, keeps a low profile, and then some of our classmates came over and started kicking him, just like that, for no reason.

This extract is in agreement with the individually stressed body of research that points out the main characteristics of the children who are at risk of being bullied (see for example, [Georgiou and Stavrinides 2008](#)).

When the students were asked about their social relationships at school, their accounts made clear that in general the home offers more opportunity for closeness and for generational proximity. In the following extract, the speakers construct an argument describing home as a safe place whereas school is a place that lacks the intimate relationships and the trust among the participants.

K1, c1

I: How about your relationships at school?

B1: At home, it's better. You feel at ease and more relaxed. Whereas at school, you have to be very careful, there's always the fear that somebody will do or say some things and offend you [].

B2: I agree, at school things are very different from home, you feel worse, you get very stressed out. At home, you are with your own people; you've known them for so many years, whereas at school you've only known them for a couple of years.

G1: At school, we have problems with the teachers or students. With the teachers, for example, they never admit they might be wrong sometimes. They stick to their views and they don't listen to what we are saying. They keep saying that we are in puberty and that's it.

Older students, such as those who are in the third year of high school, are more assertive and seek more autonomy than primary school students. As can be seen from the above extract, the likely conflict between these trends and the prevailing school norms seems to be exaggerated by the fact that the teachers underestimate adolescent points of view and disregard their opinions. This might cause a conflict which according to the participant students is manifested in forms of intimidation on behalf of some high school teachers.

KDb1

B1: They (the teachers) claim that they are democratic, but this is not true. The only thing they are interested in is results and achievement. They keep threatening us with school grades.

B2: It's like blackmail, they intimidate us, they really do sometimes. They keep saying: "Just wait until you see your grades at the end of the semester": I mean,

I know a boy who really loved mathematics; in the end he dropped out of school just because one of the teachers kept insulting him, every time he made a mistake.

At school, according to the participating students there is a rather sharp social separation between them and their teachers. They claim that teachers stress the *cognitive child* by underestimating emotional learning (Mayall 2002) and by disregarding the students' ability to cooperate with teachers in improving the social order in the case of bullying.

In addition, participants appear to be rather uncertain regarding the extent to which teachers effectively practice conflict resolution and whether or to what degree they can actually be seen as a help. In fact, a number of students stressed that some teachers did not act fairly or appropriately in dealing with conflict situations and that they favored some students over others. Students in the following extract would argue that there are some teachers who do not treat all students with respect and they neither listen nor seem to understand their problems. These teachers would, in addition, pick on certain students and engage in yelling at them.

Xa2

I: How do you defend yourselves?

B2: We have the right to talk, but nobody listens to us.

G2: They think that all we do is make excuses, that it's all about excuses, I remember I went to talk to him [to a teacher], his response was "Who do you think you are?", "Get out of here". I left without being given the chance to say anything.

B1: I remember once a kid, he wanted to support me, he was so scared to appear before the principal, he couldn't even talk, he was shaking, really frightened.

B3: And if we try to discuss it with teachers, they usually stick to their views, once again we hear that it's our fault.

Victims' accounts of their feelings (shaking, frightened) convey something of the helplessness, loneliness and terror which being bullied can generate (Smith 2003).

In some cases, though, students favored school over home: this was in the situation where the students described home life as dysfunctional, and home as a place full of conflicts, quarrels, abuse, and lack of intimacy or care (see Tsiantis 2007).

In our study, peer reputation was found to be one of the bases for the organization of adolescent status in the peer group when talking about school versus home relations. In the following extract, bullying is discursively organized as a negotiation of one's social identity, during the transition from primary to secondary education, or from childhood to adolescence. It appears that some students would adopt bullying in order to fit in with the peer group.

K, g5

B: The situation in High school is different to what it used to be in the primary school. There I was a top grade student, but since being here, I changed tactics.

I mean, I stopped studying hard like I used to. You see, I didn't want to be seen as a 'nerd'.

G: [] Yes, I think he's right; we've had to face some difficulties coming to high school.

B: [] I tried to change my character, to become cool,<sup>8</sup> like the others. I even started hurting some guys.

G: I believe that the way school treats us, it affects us a lot. Here, we tend to behave the way the others do; if they don't study, we do the same too.

The above account presented by the boy claims that a 'cool' attitude toward school work may advance an adolescent's status in the peer group. To gain popularity the boy in the interview above needed to disregard school work, or to act as a bully himself. The rise in bullying behavior during the first years of high school-as is clearly presented in the above extract- could be attributed to an effort by the adolescents to establish dominance in their new environment.

#### 4.2 Bullying as a school related factor

Many educational professionals believe that the nature of the relationship between teachers and students relates to appropriate or inappropriate caring that fosters a teacher/students connection (Minton and O' Moore 2004).

X, b2

G1: About our social relations at school. To begin with, I believe that at school, labels are very important. Everyone has a label and they are either respected or not. But I believe that everybody deserves to be respected by defending oneself.

G2: To tell you the truth, sometimes, I am really scared, I am afraid of their reaction, we have very little time, we have an awful lot to do, and when we get to school, they [teachers] react like we have committed a crime. They treat us like babies, and the only punishment they dish out is extra work.

From the above as well as the following extract, the school as an institution seems to play a crucial role in the emergence of bullying. The fear of doing badly at school or in examinations, and the teachers' reactions to an academic failure whilst apparently being unrelated to victimization, causes serious concern for the majority of students.

In the following extract, the imposition of rote learning and predetermined curricula seem to be an extra source of classroom maltreatment.

KD, b2

B1: Well, for me it's kind of different. I came to this school last year. In the beginning, I didn't know anyone. Now I have some friends, I came to know a lot of children. In the beginning, I remember that there was a lot of competition; everyone wanted to be first. Now things are much better. But still, I would like to complain about our teachers' demands. They put a lot of pressure on us, they demand we get high grades, they ask we learn everything by heart and they assign a lot of assignments and other school work.

<sup>8</sup> This stands for the Greek word μάγκας.

The participants discursively organize their social relationships at school by drawing on the school climate. The participants claim that a school that constantly pressures students to work hard and compete with each other causes stress and leads to bullying practices as well as playing an important role in students' psychosocial functioning. In fact, there is nothing inherently harmful or stress-inducing about achievement pressure *per se*. It becomes problematic, however, when there is a mismatch between achievement pressure felt by a student and the resources the student can mobilize to meet that pressure as can be seen in the following extract.

KD, b2

G2: What really annoys me is the fact that teachers treat us like we are criminals. It is as if just by coming to school, we want to destroy it, to provoke teachers, etc. There are some of them [teachers] who intimidate us, they say they will punish us with school grades, they threaten us. But some students can't make it, they have so many problems, and they are not very good students.

As the young people discuss their relations, it appears that their rights are not acknowledged in the school setting. In contrast, conformity and group management are recognized as the primary aims of school by the students in the following extract.

K, a1

G1: With the teachers sometimes [] they have to realize that we are children and [] they want to group us all together, it's easier for them this way. But they have to understand that each child is unique, has a different character. We don't react the same way when we are reprimanded; some children get really hurt deep down.

B1: Psychologically you mean?

G1: Yes psychologically. And then they might not feel like coming to school. I remember when I was at primary school, a girl wouldn't come to school just for this reason.

These school practices aim to create model students, stressing the importance of being 'the same as others in the group'.

Xb3

G1: I don't know why some teachers keep nagging at me about the way I dress. They stop me all the time and complain about my appearance "Why are you dressed like this or like that" etc. I mean, this bothers me a lot. Okay, if the way I dress is a problem, this concerns my people, my family and not them, the teachers. I mean, there are so many students at school, what's wrong with me anyway? And I believe that the way they judge my appearance really affects the way they treat me as a student.

I: How do you deal with it?

G1: I mean, every time I tell them "It is none of your business, why do you keep nagging at me?" the response is "Don't talk back".

The students complain that there is little room for them to express their views, or to demonstrate their ability to hold their own. We do know, though, that the greater the teachers' pressure for student conformity, the greater the bullying (Lam and Liu 2007). Bullies not only resist authority, but also feel negatively about being obedient to teachers.

X, a2

G: 'Cos B1 has, since the beginning, been acting weird, misbehaving, acting silly. I mean he will not obey the rules, and all the teachers put the blame on him for everything. No matter what happens in the classroom, they believe he is to blame; I mean, it is partly his fault as he showed this kind of behavior right from the start.

I: What are the rest of you doing about it?

B1: Nothing, as soon as we are about to say something to defend ourselves, the teachers stop us and say "Don't talk back".

G: Yes, but you talk back *all* the time

B1: What can we do? Just shut up and listen? *You* listen to *them*. You see, suspension is very common practice here. A boy-I remember- he brought a game, I started playing with it, and then K said that I hurt her and I was put on detention for it, I was suspended for two days. *It's not* fair, not fair at all. I mean we were all doing the same thing, but only I was punished.

In terms of the student-teacher relationship as a hidden curriculum (Apple 2004; Giroux 2001; Lynch 1989; Margolis 2001), the participants point out that practices such as calling names, displays of favoritism or scapegoating, taking out anger on students, or hurtfulness are considered as bullying practices. The student in the above extract, trying to navigate on the axis of autonomy/dependency, views his position as regulated mainly by the teacher.

The social relationships developed in the school culture seem to play an important role according to the student in the following extract. The participant argues that the social climate of the school, as expressed during her absence from school due to medical reasons, makes her feel anxious and upset and affects her engagement in school matters.

KD, b2

G2: I was worried, because when I got ill, I stayed off school for a couple of days, nobody called to ask how I am. I was waiting for them to tell me what's going on at school, about the lessons, or the teachers, our mates, but nobody bothered.

## 5 Discussion

This study based on interviews with high school students of both sexes in Greek schools, shows how they interpret and draw on bullying as a school-related factor in their everyday lives and their social interactions.

First, from our interviews, in general, there was an absence of school policy in relation to bullying, according to the students. This is true given the fact that there is

no integration of violence prevention and/or intervention in existing school activities and the curricula (Andreou et al. 2007).

In terms of the ways in which young adolescents talk about their social relations at school and at home, the findings suggest that the adult models of young adolescents differ in these two settings. That is, the participating adolescents seem to favor home over school as the place where they are cared for, can relax and engage in meaningful activities. It seems that at home, the emotional closeness of young adolescents with their parents allows them to share the same experiences and concerns, thus mediating their participation in the social life of the family. On the other hand, though, they differ in their ability to participate in the construction of social order in the school context. They are not acknowledged as adequate partners in their contribution to school life and are frequently underestimated, participating in fixed models of social interaction with their teachers. These accounts are supported by Mayall's (2002) findings and share the same discursive field produced by sociological studies about the contribution of family intimacy in the construction of psychosocial well being of children and young people (Hultqvist and Dahlberg 2001).

In order to work out their social relationships within their peer groups, students tend to renegotiate their social status in those groups. Thus some students in our study adopted more social aggressive behaviors as a way to gain peer acceptance. According to social dominance theory, a number of students moving into early adolescence change their perceptions about peer status and popularity and adopt some sort of anti-social behavior in order to enhance their social standing (Adler et al. 1992; Neal 2010). For boys especially, peer groupings are the primary arena within which comparison and relativity of status thrive (De Bruyn and Cillessen 2006). The present study, hopefully, suggests that one way of exploring the phenomenon of bullying is to consider research evidence on the peer culture, since this tells us something about the relations between teachers and pupils and pupils in their peer groups. Pellegrini, for instance, has developed a significant body of research around bullying during the transition from elementary to secondary school (Pellegrini 2001; Pellegrini and Bartini 2000).

In terms of school-related factors, the students framed bullying as an issue of the school climate. Specifically, the student-teacher relationship (as a hidden curriculum), academic competition and the pressure of academic achievement contributed significantly to the bullying discourse in the students' talk. Indeed, the pressure of academic achievement is generally considered to be a factor closely associated with bullying among school students (Sullivan et al. 2003; Yoneyama and Naito 2003). There has been little explanation, however, as to exactly how it works.

The insufficient attention paid to the school climate in the psychological discourse on student bullying is part of a larger trend in the discourse on student aggression in general (Espelage and Swearer 2003; Hepburn 1997). Most intervention programs dealing with bullying have focused on changing the individual characteristics of the bullies and the victims and have paid little attention to the school context and its ecology (Rigby 1996).

Although Olweus (1993) stated that the behavior of bullies cannot be explained as a consequence of school-related factors such as academic pressure or academic failure, nevertheless the findings of the present study indicate that school climate does affect students' behavior. Feelings of inadequacy to participate in school life and for



this to be meaningful seem to be contributory factors to students acting as bullies. Heavy emphasis on competition and pressure from teachers to achieve academically are argued as sources of frustration by the study participants which result in bullying behavior. Similarly, the work of [Delfabbro et al. \(2006\)](#) points out that bullying extends further than peer bullying and includes bullying by teachers, especially for students who gradually disengage from studies and lose their interest and motivation. Although there are certainly many situations where teachers are justified in imposing their authority because of inappropriate behavior amongst students, poor relationships between some teachers and their students suggests the need for programs and classroom structures that foster greater mutual understanding and respect. The qualitative data from the report of [Oliver and Candappa \(2003\)](#), for instance, showed that the willingness of teachers to listen to and to act on student suggestion form key elements in students' positive assessment of their school attempts to deal with bullying.

Further, [Cunningham \(2007\)](#) showed that students who reported low levels of bullying and victimization appeared to be the most strongly bonded to schools that foster prosocial behaviors and beliefs, while [Catalano et al. \(2004\)](#) claim that school bonding is crucial for reducing the risk of the development of problem behaviors such as bullying. Alienation from the social and academic aspects of school impedes students in feeling comfortable with the academic goal and structure of the school environment.

In general, there is evidence to suggest that a positive school ethos is strongly related to facilitating academic success and positive peer relationships ([Allodi 2010](#); [LeBlanc et al. 2007](#); [Smith 2003](#)). Teachers need to foster positive student relations by treating all pupils with respect, by not indulging in discriminatory behavior, and by modeling positive behavior and addressing the students' emotional needs along with their formal education ([Bell McKenzie 2009](#); [Pooley et al. 2008](#); [Olweus 1991](#)). On the other hand, [Rigby and Bagshaw \(2003\)](#) found that bullies tended to judge teachers as unfair in their behavior towards students and to be opposed to collaborating with teachers to counter bullying; this tendency was stronger in high school students in comparison with younger and older age groups.

Our findings should also be dealt with in terms of developmental issues: taking into consideration that some of the principal dimensions of the adolescent tasks of growing up involve the gradual acquisition of autonomy, independence and responsibility, adolescent students acquire these qualities through a process of testing out boundaries with parents and teachers ([Delfabbro et al. 2006](#)). Consequently, teachers need to be able to contain students' anxieties and to provide models for identification which teenagers can push and rebel healthily against.

Considering the qualitative nature of our study, it is important to recognize that this methodology limits the generalizability of the findings. While this study advances our understanding of the school-related factors of bullying, it does not provide the answer to why similar school factors result in one student becoming a bully and another a victim. Further, regarding the topic of the interviews, it would be of value that interviews should be had with the teachers of students with detailed qualitative analysis of teachers' talk. With these cautions in mind, this study provides rich descriptions of adolescent students' arguments on their bullying experiences as part of their social relations at school. Our findings are consistent with the school factors that have been mentioned in the literature, but not researched in depth, that is, the culture of

bullying (Rigby 2005), the student-teacher relationship (Olweus 1993), the school climate (Boulton et al. 2011; Espelage and Swearer 2003) and academic competition (Rigby 1996). Consequently, apart from trying to change the individual students concerned, it becomes necessary to change the educational paradigm that formulates student-teacher relationships, the nature of learning and the manner of keeping necessary order. It is essential for schools to be a 'safe' place where students learn an alternative mode of human relationships. Maintaining a healthy balance between care and control is fundamental to helping adolescents learn and develop (Boulton 2005).

The results of the present study have far-reaching implications for schools, since they stress the importance of developing school bonding through the acknowledgment of students' rights, emotional and social competence and academic achievement. It is fruitful to stick to the somewhat self enhanced notion that adolescents will in all cases be better served if they are able to voice their opinions and reveal the reasons for their involvement in bullying practices.

### Appendix 1: Interview schedule of the focus groups

The interview schedule covered issues such as:

1. Let's talk about your social relationships at school, who are these, how do you feel about them in comparison to other settings?
2. What about your relationships with adults at school?
3. How do you make friends, tell me more about your friends, what are they like, your feelings about them (ways of cultivating, testing and maintaining friendships and developing a social identity)
4. Issues of disputes and conflict in peer relations
5. How are conflicts important in your daily activities and peer cultures, issues on cooperation and competition
6. Incidence of bad experiences in terms of your social relationships at school
7. Sources of support when facing bad experiences. How do you manage situations as social distance and peers' unfriendly behavior?

If a narrative of bullying emerges within the students' discussion groups, questions about the bullying experience are asked such as the following:

- a. Nature of bullying
- b. Impact of living with bullying-how do bullying experiences influence relationships and welfare. Long-term impact of bullying experiences
- c. Ways of dealing with bullying experiences
- d. Responses of helping agencies.

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