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Prospective teachers' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about school bullying

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Summary

The main purpose of this study was to evaluate the level of knowledge prospective teachers have about bullying, as well as their attitudes and beliefs about this issue. The majority of prospective teachers held negative attitudes about bullying. However, few indicated feeling confident or prepared to deal with the problem. Females reported greater responsibility on the part of teachers and lower levels of self-confidence than did males. The greater the responsibility that student teachers placed on themselves the greater was the responsibility that they placed on the school system, and the greater was the concern and confidence they felt. Prospective teachers were willing to learn more about bullying.

Introduction

School personnel have both a legal and an educational obligation to prevent and intervene in school bullying as soon as it occurs. Sadly though, it seems that teachers may lack sufficient knowledge or the necessary skills to deal effectively with this problem (Boulton, 1997; Yoon, 2004; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Anti-bullying programmes generally contain some common elements. They recognize the need for the school community and especially the teaching staff to be aware of the prevalence and seriousness of the problem of bullying in schools (Rigby, Smith, & Pepler, 2004). At the teacher level, the strongest predictors of whether teachers will implement a bullying prevention programme are their perceived need for such a programme, their perceived level of bullying in their classrooms, and their affective involvement, including empathy for victims (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003).

The first step in combating the bullying problem is “to ensure that teachers are adequately trained to deal with bullying incidents, and that they feel confident in addressing all types of bullying behavior” (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005, p. 432). This preparation should begin at the teacher training level. The few available studies (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005; Benítez, García-Berbén, & Fernández-Cabezas, 2009; Beran, 2005; Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000;

Kandakai & King, 2002; Nicolaides, Toda, & Smith, 2002) have concluded that prospective teachers do not feel adequately prepared to deal with bullying, therefore more training in how to handle bullying is necessary. Although prospective teachers report high levels of confidence in their ability to cope with bullying situations and tend to over-estimate their effectiveness in bullying intervention, they do not have a clear understanding of the nature and definition of bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005; Craig et al., 2000). Additionally, they consider bullying to be a quite serious problem, and they clearly see their role as important (Nicolaides et al., 2002).

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to evaluate the level of knowledge prospective teachers have about bullying, as well as their attitudes and beliefs about this issue. This investigation is expected to provide information about the adequacy of the teacher preparation programmes with respect to bullying in schools. Additionally, the present study investigated whether there were any differences in knowledge, attitudes and beliefs as a function of prospective teachers' gender and year of study.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 560 female and 116 male students (mean age = 20.19 years, $SD = 2.09$) enrolled in a four-year teacher preparation programme at the Faculty of Primary Education, School of Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. The characteristics of the sample proportionally reflected the sex of the larger student population in this Faculty.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed early within the academic year. Participants were informed that data collection was anonymous and that the objective of the research was to gather information about their attitudes towards school bullying.

Measures

The Greek adaptations of the *School Bullying Questionnaire* (Nicolaides et al., 2002) and the *Teachers' Attitudes About Bullying Questionnaire* (TAABQ; Beran, 2005) were administered.

Results

To determine which of the TAABQ's items measure the types of attitudes of interest in the present study, a principal components analysis with varimax rotation was conducted. Five dimensions emerged: Teacher Commitment,

System Commitment, Concern, Confidence and Lack of Preparedness, which explained 54% of the variance. The internal reliability of the five dimensions was satisfactory (Cronbach alphas: .81-.72).

In general, prospective teachers were willing to learn more about bullying. The majority of them held negative attitudes about bullying. However, few indicated feeling confident or adequately prepared to deal with the problem. Also, although the majority of the respondents believed that bullying in Greek schools was an important issue, they did not report high levels of affective involvement, including empathy for victims.

Next, Pearson r correlation coefficients were computed among the TAABQ's scales and perceived seriousness. The greater the responsibility that student teachers placed on themselves the greater the responsibility that they placed on the school system (Pearson $r = .575, p < .001$), and the greater the concern (Pearson $r = .374, p < .001$) and confidence (Pearson $r = .364, p < .001$) that they felt.

Linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which prospective teachers' gender and year of study accounted for individual differences in their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about school bullying. The analysis showed that females reported greater responsibility on the part of teachers ($\beta = .15, S.E. = .06, p < .001$) and of the whole educational system ($\beta = .08, S.E. = .06, p = .044$), as well as lower levels of self-confidence than did males ($\beta = -0.18, S.E. = .08, p < .001$). Also, females were more concerned about the problem of school bullying than males ($\beta = .08, S.E. = .06, p = .047$).

Prospective teachers' concern and sense of preparation in managing bullying differed as a function of their year of study. Prospective teachers in the last years of study were more concerned about the problem ($\beta = .11, S.E. = .02, p = .006$), and felt less confident in managing it ($\beta = -.11, S.E. = .02, p = .006$) than those who were at the beginning of their training programme.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that prospective teachers hold negative attitudes towards the problem of school bullying. The finding that the vast majority of pre-service teachers considered bullying to be a serious problem and indicated feelings of concern is consistent with in-service teachers' reports of negative attitudes about bullying behaviors in other countries (Boulton, 1997). The increased media attention focused on bullying recently in Greece may be the cause of this heightened sensitivity to bullying (Beran, 2005).

A quite promising finding is that prospective teachers placed great responsibility on themselves. It is reasonable that teachers who see themselves and the schools as important agents for counteracting and reducing bullying problems among their students are more likely to involve themselves in anti-bullying efforts (Olweus, 2004). One meta-analysis of 13 evaluation studies concluded that an important component of successful outcomes in reducing bullying in schools is related to the degree of commitment of the teacher to end the bullying (Pepler, Smith, & Rigby, 2004).

Prospective teachers were not satisfied with their initial training in preparation for coping with bullying problems in school, and they seemed amenable to learn more about it. It is acknowledged that initial teacher education cannot be expected to provide all the knowledge and skills that the teacher's role require, and that teachers should be life-long learners (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012).

Confidence in identifying and managing bullying was relatively low, in contrast to the high degree of commitment and concern. This lack of confidence may be attributed to the lack of training prospective teachers have received that specifically addresses bullying; or it may reflect their uncertainty about their abilities as teachers in general, rather than about bullying in particular (Beran, 2005). Future research should focus on assessing prospective teachers' personal experiences with bullying and examine the associations of these experiences with knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about this issue.

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