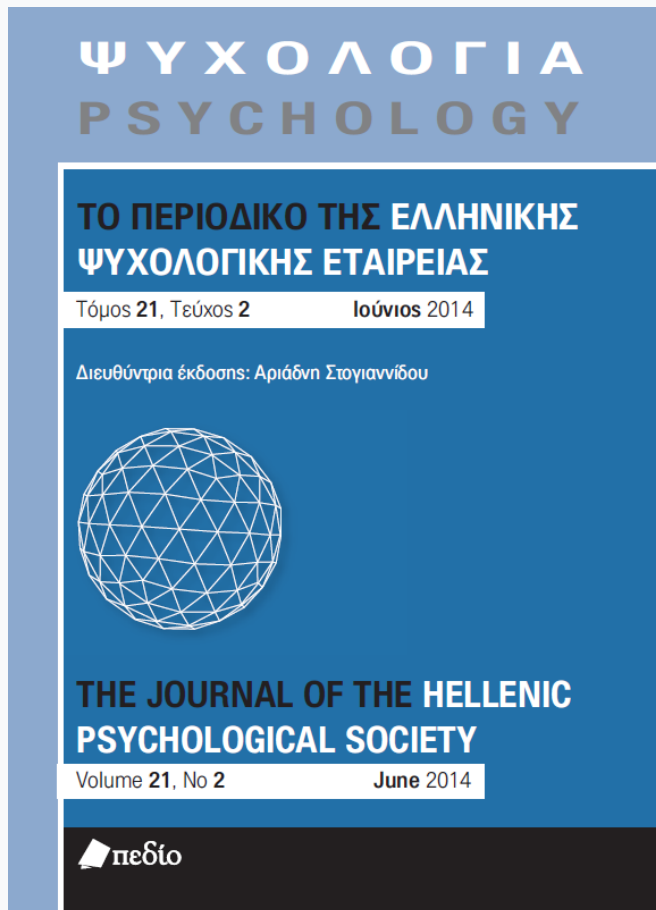


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## Bullying in Cyprus: Perceptions regarding the pupils' involvement

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of bullying among secondary and high school pupils in Cyprus and to present the differences according to age, gender and involvement. The survey involved 514 pupils aged between 13 and 16 years who answered a self-reported closed questionnaire. According to the findings, girls are more negative about bullying than boys. Only pupils aged 13 show fear of the bully and feel a need for his/her punishment but they also point out that the victim may provoke the bully; meanwhile pupils aged 16 are more supportive of the idea that the bully harms the victims. In addition the victims, the victims/witnesses, the witnesses and those pupils who are not involved demonstrate fear of the bully, seek his/her punishment and are supportive of the weak victims. In contrast, those in the bullies' category show no fear of the bully, do not agree with punishment and do not consider the victims to have been harmed.

*Keywords:* School bullying, Perceptions, Involvement (victim, bully, witness).

### 1. Introduction

School bullying among children and adolescents is not a recent phenomenon, it was however studied for the first time in Scandinavia in the 1970s by the Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus (1978). In contemporary literature, bullying has been recognized as a global phenomenon (Aluede, Adeleke, Omoike & Afen-Akpaida, 2008; Eslea et

al., 2004; Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Olweus, 1994) and attracts scientific interest due to its continuing growth rate, in both Western and non-Western societies. School bullying is broadly defined as a specific form of aggressive behaviour that occurs among children, especially at school during breaks and in relatively open areas (Bentley & Li, 1995; Slee, 1995). This behaviour is intentional, it happens repeatedly and persistently over time and

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there is asymmetry of power between the bully and the victim (Olweus, 1993).

Diverse studies (Boulton, Trueman & Fleming-ton, 2002; Olweus, 1993; Rivers & Smith, 1994) have shown that at school, aggressive behaviour may be divided into direct and indirect forms. Maunder, Harrop & Tattersall (2010) explored the perceptions of pupils and teachers about school bullying: they found that indirect forms of aggression were less likely to be defined as bullying and they were considered less serious than the direct forms. Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, Bettencourt & Lemme (2006) demonstrated that there are important differences between teachers' and pupils' definitions of bullying, as pupils are more likely to restrict their definitions to direct bullying. Moreover, the literature on child development indicates that refusal or neglect by peers can increase the possibility of causing long-term adjustment problems to the victim (Parker & Asher, 1987). According to Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio & Salmivali (2014) teachers might play a crucial role in anti-bullying programmes and it is vital to have targets of intervention. Therefore, teachers are invited to be sensitised towards any incidents and to help pupils become more aware of the different forms of bullying, as well as the negative impact that it may have on peoples' well-being.

According to Olweus (1993) three groups of people directly involved in bullying emerge: bullies, victims and bullies who are also victims. The first group includes the perpetrators of aggressive behaviour, whose main characteristics are usually impulsivity, aggression, physical strength and dominant behaviour. Bullies are more likely to make external contributions concerning bullying incidents, perhaps because it is difficult for them to accept their own responsibility for their aggressive behaviour (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2008). Furthermore, Stavrinides, Georgiou & Theofanous (2010) investigated the relationship between empathy and bullying and found that there is a negative correlation between the capacity of a child to understand the feelings of another child and the child's tendency to engage in bullying behaviours; thus, the lower the child's empathy, the more their in-

volvement in such behaviours. The authors also found that bullying was associated with social acceptance and peer relations. Hamarus & Kaikkonen (2008) suggested that for the bully, bullying is a way to gain power and maintain the status quo of a group or classroom. On the other hand, Boulton & Smith (1994) pointed out that in general bullies were less accepted and more disliked by their peers, and had the fewest friends.

Victims, the second group involved in bullying are the targets of bullying. Victims are perceived by the rest of the pupils as different with diverse characteristics. According to Georgiou & Stavrinides (2008) there is a greater risk of victimisation when an individual appears to be different in terms of appearance or behaviour. Aggressive behaviour creates cultural norms in the school environment and often people minimise their differences out of fear or guilt that they may become victims of bullying in the future (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008). For example, if being overweight is culturally unacceptable within the pupil community, cases of anorexia nervosa may occur as children seek to avoid the possibility of becoming victims of bullying. Therefore, the phenomenon of bullying occurs in the child's social context and culture, where the interaction with others is central and seems to focus on the diversity of the individual thereby legitimising the perceptions that arise.

During the last decade, in particular, the phenomenon of bullying has been recognised as an extremely serious problem for the quality of pupils' school life. Victimisation is a phenomenon that affects a large number of boys and girls, with an increased risk of anxiety, worry, fear, anger, stress, depression, defencelessness, loneliness and shame (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merch n, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009). The longitudinal study by Stavrinides, Georgiou, Nikiforou & Kiteri (2011) has provided evidence that strengthens the relationship between bullying, victimisation, adjustment difficulties and school achievement. Adolescents who report being bullied often develop mental and physical problems (Rigby, 1999, 2003) as well as depression, low self-esteem (Olweus, 1993) and psychosomatic disorders (Kumpulainen et al., 1998).

It is noteworthy that, according to Swearer, Turner & Givens (2008), different forms of violence are likely to affect boys who are victims of bullying. Particularly, when assigned the status of gay, they experience much more verbal and physical harassment than boys who are victims of bullying for other reasons. Specifically, Aluede et al. (2008) found that victims perceive the school climate more negatively, experience higher anxiety, exhibit depression more often and have an external locus of control. Victimization, therefore, appears to be associated with internal dimensions of distress and social problems. According to a study conducted in Greece (Skapinakis et al., 2011), which concerned the relationship between bullying and early stages of suicidal ideation in late adolescents, a bullied youth is more likely to develop suicidal ideation. The powerful simultaneous relationship between frequent victimization and suicidal ideation in late adolescence is an important issue that needs to concern practitioners and attract their interest in identifying those pupils at school who may be at a higher risk of suicidal ideation.

The third group involved in school bullying consists of people who are both bullies and victims. That is, they are people who, although they bully others, are also victims of bullying themselves. It is unknown, however, whether bullies/victims were victims first and bullies afterwards, mimicking the behaviour experienced by adopting these behaviours as a survival technique, or whether they were bullies who then suffered revenge attacks. The few studies that have examined the characteristics of bullies/ victims found that these individuals exhibit the poorest psychosocial functioning compared with individuals who are either purely bullies or purely victims (Olweus, 1978). Studies also showed that bullies exhibit poorer interpersonal relationships with peers and higher levels of social isolation and loneliness (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton & Scheidt, 2001). Moreover, a more recent study conducted in Greece indicated that pupils may behave in a more aggressive way in striving to gain peers' acceptance (Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, Chatzilambou & Giannakopoulou, 2012).

Thornberg (2010) indicated that most children in Sweden have witnessed or at least heard of bullying incidents at school, portraying themselves as attendees rather than bullies and/or victims. The presence or the idea of bullying appeared to cause some kind of negative feelings, such in disquietude, anxiety, fear, discomfort, distress or precariousness. Bullying is generally perceived as wrong by children, however they do not seem to do anything to prevent it. Therefore, while positive social perceptions among children are widespread, approximately 20% of the students actively intervene to help victims of bullying (Thornberg, 2010).

A review of the research highlighted the personal characteristics of those involved and their family environment. These two components are inextricably linked, as the children's upbringing environment seems to affect their psyche and behaviour. Swearer & Espelage (2004) suggested that bullying does not occur in isolation; it is the result of an interaction of diverse factors arising in the individual, between peers, in the family, in the classroom and in different social contexts. Erikson, Lindberg, Flygare & Daneback (2002) criticised the homogeneity that characterises the research into bullying, which seems to be approached almost exclusively through an individualistic perspective. Fortunately, during the last decade, research placing emphasis on the social context in which incidents of bullying occur has increased. According to Holt, Kaufman & Finkelhor (2009) and Rigby, Slee & Cunningham (1999) certain family features are associated with bullying and victimisation of children and adolescents. Moreover, bullying that occurs among siblings, if not prevented, can be extended to school (Menesini, Camodeca & Nocentini, 2010). These findings highlight the need to increase the awareness of parents about bullying, and the inclusion of parents in prevention and intervention programs against bullying in schools.

Bullying is a complex phenomenon and despite the generally accepted definition, the understanding and interpretation of aggressive behaviour is not clear. The dominant approach is to investigate how pupils, in their own society, perceive the phe-

nomenon. The extent to which individual perceptions influence aggressive behaviour is not yet clear. A number of studies reported a significant correlation between perceptions of bullying and bullying behaviours (Andreou, Vlachou & Didaskalou, 2005), while other studies reveal that individuals' perceptions of bullying are small to moderate factors (Boulton et al., 2002). Scholte, Sentse & Granić (2010) reported that although many children and adolescents have a negative attitude to bullying, they are nonetheless involved in bullying either directly or indirectly. A possible explanation of this paradox is that people's behaviours are not merely driven by their perceptions, but are influenced by the social context in which they are present.

Results of studies (Nansel et al., 2001; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Psalti, 2001) suggested that bullying behaviours tend to peak in secondary school, while as people become older these behaviours decline. This may occur due to the pupils' need to redefine their social position, with their transition to high school and a new group of peers. It has also been found that gender relates to bullying, with boys being more likely than girls to be bullies or victims of bullying.

Baldry (2004) supported the view that pupils' perceptions of the victims are generally positive and there is a tendency not to blame them for what happens. Furthermore, differences were observed between the sexes, with girls generally being more positive and supportive of the victims than boys (Rigby, 1996; Rigby & Slee, 1993). This may be due to the perception that girls, because of their socialisation, have greater empathy than boys (Burr, 1998). In contrast, Baldry (2004) indicated that girls tend to blame the victim when she is a boy, whereas the reverse is observed in boys, who tend to blame the victim more when it is a girl. Due to the fact that indirect verbal aggression is more common among girls, while direct aggression is more common among boys, it is possible that the perception that bullying is something negative is supported more strongly when it takes place among pupils of the same sex.

Rigby (1996) asserted that a significant proportion of pupils state that they could understand the reasons why bullies intimidate other children

and that victims should defend themselves. Houndoumadi & Pateraki (2001) suggested that boys tend to understand bullies more than girls, and they reported that they like bullies because they are *cool*. Children often seem to have negative perceptions of victims and positive attitudes to bullies (Psalti, 2012), claiming that they are strong, brave and admirable (Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991). Furthermore, when a bully acts alone he/she is viewed as more powerful and courageous than when a group of bullies act together. In addition, it has been found that children despise the victims, as they believe that the victims deserve what has happened to them; therefore, they do not want to interact with them, because they are *weak* or *gay* (Rigby, 1996, 1997). According to Askew (1989), there are many social norms in Western societies that support the stereotype of the strong/fighter person, which makes aggression tolerable and weakness unacceptable, especially for boys. Blaming the victim is a mechanism that probably refers to a general model of causality of performance, where observers tend to blame the victim because they carry out internal attributes instead of external, in order to protect themselves.

Rigby & Slee (1991) advocated that while teenagers are generally positioned against bullying, perceptions towards victims become less supportive as people become older. In particular, their study showed that teenagers dislike the victims and show admiration for bullies. More recent findings suggested that, as pupils mature, their perceptions become more positive towards bullying (Swearer & Cary, 2003) and they report greater involvement in such incidents. This is especially accurate for boys (Rigby, 1997). According to Menesini et al. (1997), bullies tend to understand other bullies, they feel less sympathy for the victims, they are less intrusive when witnessing bullying and they are more likely to help bullies to bully other children whom they do not like. Similarly, according to the findings of a study conducted in Greece (Psalti, 2012), bullies and bullies/victims, especially at secondary school, reported more positive attitudes to bullying, as well as less positive feelings about victims.

In addition, Pellegrini, Bartini & Brooks (1999) found that bullies have more positive attitudes to bullying compared to the victims, the bullies/victims and pupils who are not involved at all. It seems that the negative attitudes associated with bullying or moral disapproval of the phenomenon correlate with the support for victims and avoidance of participation or involvement in such behaviour (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). In addition, Pellegrini & Bartini (2000) noted that these positive attitudes to bullying, especially on the part of the bullies, may serve as a strategy to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with feelings that are inconsistent with the prevailing norms among peers and/or cultural norms. Nevertheless, they indicated that it is not possible to predict whether and how pupils are involved in bullying simply by exploring the beliefs about the phenomenon.

Ojala & Nesdale (2004) investigated whether children's attitudes to bullying are tempered by the rules of group membership and by the incoming threat to the specific characteristics of the in-group. The results suggested that bullying was more acceptable when directed at a member of the out-group who was perceived as similar and who may represent a threat to the in-group. Equally important was fact that the rules of the group are important for the identity of its members and that the group's members tend to behave according to the intra-team rules, even when it comes to bullying behaviours. In fact, the rules of the group express important aspects of the identity of its members and it is expected that its members will develop incentives to behave in accordance with its rules. In this context, Boulton et al. (2002) claimed that interventions against bullying need to be focused on shifting people's attitudes and perceptions of bullying to and not just on changing their behaviours.

Stavrinides, Paradeisiotou, Tziogouros & Lazarou (2010) conducted a survey in Cyprus to establish the prevalence of bullying among elementary and high school pupils. The results showed that 83% of participants were categorized as not involved, only 5.4% as bullies, 7.4% as victims, and finally only 4.2% as both bullies and victims. Overall, 17% of children are involved in bullying and vic-

timization. From the age comparisons it was concluded that while older boys have significantly more involvement in bullying, there are no similar differences in victimization. These findings indicated that bullying is not an isolated phenomenon in schools in Cyprus and that further exploration is needed.

Consequently, it is essential to explore how secondary and high school pupils perceive bullies and victims. Apart from the determination of beliefs involved in the prevalence of bullying among school-aged youth, this study seeks to explore any differences in the phenomenon depending on age, gender and pupils' involvement in bullying. With the plethora of potentially negative consequences of bullying and victimization it is necessary and useful to explore how pupils engage in bullying, as this may help practitioners to develop prevention and intervention programs, in order to reduce bullying behaviours. The literature reveals that bullying can have a significant impact on the lives of both bullies and victims. Given the limited number of studies about bullying in Cyprus, this study aims to fill the gaps in the research data as well as generate further investigations in the Cypriot community; thus, helping to produce a better understanding of the phenomenon and contribute to the development of school based interventions against victimisation.

The above literature review leads us to hypothesise that male participants will perceive bullies less negatively and victims less positively than female participants (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). Moreover, the participants will perceive bullying negatively and this will be especially obvious in high school pupils (Swearer & Cary, 2003). The participants' perceptions of victims will become less positive as they grow older, that is from secondary school (aged 13 years) to high school (aged 16 years); therefore, the participants' perceptions of bullies will become more positive (Swearer & Cary, 2003). In addition, those participants who identify themselves as bullies will have more positive perceptions of bullying and more negative perceptions of victims compared to those who identify themselves as purely victims, as victims/bullies, as witnesses or as people who have

no involvement in bullying (Pellegrini, Bartini & Brooks, 1999; Psalti, 2012).

## 2. Methodology

### Participants

In the study 514 pupils participated from 29 departments of four public secondary schools and four public high schools of the Limassol district. Of the total number of participants, 48.4% (249 individuals) were boys and 51.6% (265 individuals) were girls, while 50.6% (260 individuals) were 13-year-old pupils and 49.4 % (254 people) were 16-year-old pupils.

### Materials and procedure

Data were collected using a closed questionnaire. Participants were invited to complete a questionnaire using paper-and-pencil within thirty five minutes in the presence of the researchers. Secondary school pupils' parents had to give their informed consent for the children to participate. High school pupils, were initially informed about the purpose of the study and about their right to withdraw at any time. The questionnaire included demographic questions, such as gender, age, grade class and a question concerning involvement in school bullying, where participants were invited to note down whether they identify themselves as victims or/and bullies or/and witnesses or none of the above. As individual perceptions of how to define this phenomenon may vary, in order to reduce subjectivity, in the first page of the questionnaire the following definition of bullying was given, accompanied by some examples (Swearer, 2003):

*Bullying occurs when a child or group of children deliberately harm and/or molest another child. The victim, that is, the child who receives harassment*

*finds it difficult to defend him/herself. Of course, this is not a rare isolated incident, but repeated incidents. Harassment happens time after time.*

*Examples:*

- *Blows, pokes, kicks, pinches, destruction of personal belongings.*
- *Spreading bad rumours, ridicule, insults, taunts, teasing.*
- *Grimaces, gestures, nicknames, ironies, exclusion and/or isolation from the group.*
- *Threats from individuals who are members of gangs*

Subsequently, there were 25 items related to school bullying, of which 15 were taken from the Swearer (2001)<sup>3</sup> questionnaire, while the remaining 10 were inspired by the research of Boulton et al. (2002)<sup>4</sup>. To ensure validity of meaning, 25 items were translated from English into Greek (forward translation) and then another translator translated the Greek text back into English (back translation). It was found that the content of the items had not been altered and the Greek translation was used for the research.

In addition, the reliability of the items was tested. To determine the internal validity of the scale of school bullying for the Greek/Cypriot context, we needed to remove five items to ensure a high *Cronbach's alpha* (=0.837). The final scale measuring bullying consisted of 20 items, of which 9 were related to the bully (e.g. *Bullies hurt kids*) and 11 were related to the victim (e.g. *I wouldn't be friends with weak children*). The items are formulated either for or against the victim and the bully, and the participants rate each of the items on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=disagree and 5=agree.

### Statistical analysis

Participants' responses to the survey were submitted to factor analyses and analyses of variance using the SPSS v. 18.

3. After our contact with Professor Susan M, Swearer (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), she provided us with the questionnaire «The Bully Survey-Student Version», part of which we used in this study.

4. The questions were published in the author's article.

### 3. Results

#### Perceptions of bullying

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the participants' responses in the related items of bullies and victims. The means shown in the table reveal that bullying is perceived negatively by the participants and it is considered a major problem.

The participants as a total group took the view that people who bully or harm others make them feel bad and they should be punished. At the same time, the participants agreed to assist the victims, they did not support their victimisation and they felt

sadness and sympathy for the weaker children. They even tended to dislike the bullies and considered that weak children were as good as strong children. They tended to disagree with views such as *Bullying is good for wimpy kids*, *Being bullied is no big deal*, *I would be friends with a bully*, *Bullies don't mean to hurt anybody*, and *Children should be allowed to bully others who deserve it*. They also tended not to be fearful of people who bully in their school and they reported that they would be friends with children who seem to be weaker. Furthermore, the participants rated as neutral views such as *Most people who are victims of bullying ask for it* and *Children are bullied because they get on*

**Table 1**  
Means and standard deviation of the participants' responses in the related items of bullies and victims (N = 514) (1 = disagree and 5 = agree)

School Bullying Items	M	SD
I don't like bullies	3.85	1.24
It's ok to tell a teacher to help someone who is being bullied	3.83	1.07
I'm afraid of the bullies at my school	2.39	1.32
I think bullies should be punished	4.22	1.05
I feel sorry for kids who are bullied	4.08	1.09
Bullying is a problem for kids	4.37	0.96
Bullies hurt kids	4.12	1.11
Bullies make kids feel bad	4.41	0.98
I think children should help other kids when they get picked on	4.24	1.02
Weak children are just as good as strong children	3.82	1.27
It's ok to like weak kids	4.07	0.98
It's never right to pick on weaker kids	4.47	0.93
Most people who get bullied ask for it	2.97	1.19
Children get picked on because they get on other people's nerves	2.97	1.07
Children should be allowed to bully others who deserve it	2.29	1.33
Bullying is good for wimpy kids	1.66	1.10
I wouldn't be friends with weak children	2.25	1.15
Being bullied is no big deal (insignificant event)	1.80	1.04
I would be friends with a bully	2.11	1.07
Bullies don't mean to hurt anybody	2.09	1.06

**Table 2**  
**Factor analysis with orthogonal rotation (varimax)**

School Bullying Items	Fear towards the bully and his punishment	Bullies hurt victims	Support the weak victims	Victim provokes the bully
I don't like bullies	0.443			
It's ok to tell a teacher to help someone who is being bullied	0.518			
I'm afraid of the bullies at my school	0.553			
I think bullies should be punished	0.619			
I feel sorry for kids who are bullied	0.532			
Bullying is a problem for kids		0.651		
Bullies hurt kids		0.655		
Bullies make kids feel bad		0.665		
I think children should help other kids when they get picked on			0.621	
Weak children are just as good as strong children			0.648	
It's ok to like weak kids			0.634	
It's never right to pick on weaker kids			0.547	
Most people who get bullied ask for it				0.661
Children get picked on because they get on other people's nerves				0.742
Children should be allowed to bully others who deserve it				0.608
Bullying is good for wimpy kids		-0.449		
I wouldn't be friends with weak children			-0.445	
Being bullied is no big deal (insignificant event)		-0.410		
I would be friends with a bully	-0.607			
Bullies don't mean to hurt anybody	-0.519			
Eigen values % of Variance	2.57 12.85	2.37 11.84	2.26 11.32	1.79 8.93

**Table 3**  
**Distribution of participants according to age, gender and involvement in school bullying**

Involvement	Secondary School 13 years old	High School 16 years old	Males	Females	Frequency	Percentage
Victim	14	6	13	7	20	3.9
Witness	96	102	79	119	198	38.5
Bully	7	1	5	3	8	1.5
Victim/Bully	3	4	3	4	7	1.4
Bully/Witness	32	35	42	25	67	13.0
Victim/Witness	28	16	19	25	44	8.6
Victim/Witness/Bully	33	25	40	18	58	11.3
No involvement	47	65	48	64	112	21.8
Total	260	254	249	265	514	100.0

*other people's nerves*. In general, the participants of the study seem to disagree with school bullying. In particular, they hold a negative image of the bullies and a relatively positive image of the victims.

To highlight the internal structure of the items in the bullying questionnaire, we performed a principal components factor analysis of participant responses with orthogonal rotations (varimax), which revealed four factors that had eigenvalues greater than one. The four factors represent 44.94% of the total variance. The item loadings on the factors are presented in Table 2. The first factor explains 12.85% of the total variance and consists of items concerning the denial and fear of the bully, the publication of the act and its punishment (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha=0.697$ ). The second factor represents the 11.84% of the total variance and consists of items about bullies harming victims (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha=0.636$ ). The third factor, which explains 11.32% of the total variance, consists of items that refer to a positive perception of the weak children who are victims of bullying (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha=0.664$ ). Finally, the fourth fac-

tor, which reflects 8.93% of the total variance, comprises proposals which refer to the view that the victim provokes the bully (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha=0.583$ ).

#### **Differences of bullying perceptions according to gender, age and pupils' involvement**

Based on the answers given by the participants to the question of involvement in school bullying, eight distinct categories of involvement emerged. Table 3 shows the number of people in each category of involvement according to age and gender.

Of the 514 people surveyed, 402 individuals reported that they had had involvement in bullying either as victims (20), as witnesses (198), as bullies (8), as victims/bullies (7), as bullies/witnesses (58), as victims/witnesses (44) or as victims/witnesses/bullies (58). The remaining 112 people reported no experience of involvement in school bullying. Hence, about four-fifths of the children reported that they were somehow involved in bullying.

**Table 4**  
**Factorial means according to gender and analysis of variance**  
**(The positive sign refers to an increased perception of the factor)**

Factors of School Bullying	Males	Females	F	p
Fear of bully and his punishment	-0.169	0.158	14.066	0.000
Bullies hurt victims	-0.248	0.233	31.501	0.000
Support for weak victims	-0.164	0.154	13.289	0.000
Victim provokes the bully	0.036	-0.033	0.613	0.434

**Table 5**  
**Factorial Means According to Age and Analysis of Variance**  
**(The positive sign refers to an increased perception of the factor)**

Factors of School Bullying	Secondary School 13 years old	High School 16 years old	F	p
Fear of bully and his punishment	0.199	-0.204	21.748	0.000
Bullies hurt victims	-0.089	0.091	4.181	0.041
Support for weak victims	-0.043	0.044	0.965	0.326
Victim provokes the bully	0.113	-0.116	6.833	0.009

The perceptions of school bullying are reported according to the participants' characteristics. To check the interaction of the independent variables of gender, age and involvement of participants in the perception of school bullying, an analysis of variance (*Multivariate ANOVA*) was carried out. While the results showed that the independent variables did not interact with each other, the main effect of each variable was tested separately (*One-way ANOVA*). The results are presented according to gender, age and the participants' involvement.

Table 4, which shows the means of four factors for the perception of school bullying according to participants' gender, reveals that gender differentiates participants' responses on the first three factors. Specifically, girls score higher than boys on the factors of disapproval and fear of the bully, the recognition of such behaviours and the bully's punishment. Furthermore, the factors *Bullies hurt victims* and *Support for weak victims* are supported by girls, but they are not supported by boys.

Age differences were also observed in the responses of participants in the first, second and fourth factor (see Table 5). Children who were 13 years old perceived the factor of the fear of the bully and the factor of the victim who provokes the bully to a greater extent, compared to 16 year old children, whose mean score is higher on the factor that bullies harm the victims.

Finally, participants' varying involvement in school bullying is related to the factors by which the phenomenon is perceived (see Table 6). More specifically, it was found that the victim fears the bully and supports his/her punishment more than the witness ( $p < 0.026$ ), the victim/bully ( $p < 0.038$ ), the bully/witness ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the victim/witness/bully ( $p < 0.002$ ) do. At the same time, the witness perceives the specific factor less intensely than the victim/witness ( $p < 0.029$ ) does and more than the bully/witness ( $p < 0.018$ ) does. In addition, the bully/witness perceives the factor less intensely than the victim/witness ( $p < 0.000$ ) and the individuals without in-

**Table 6**  
**Factorial means according to the involvement of participants and analysis of variance**  
**(The positive sign refers to an increased perception of the factor)**

Factors of School Bullying	Victim	Witness	Bully	Victim / Bully	Bully / Witness	Victim / Witness	Victim / Witness / Bully	No involvement	F	p
Fear of bully and his punishment	0.521	0.005	-0.046	-0.378	-0.323	0.363	-0.272	0.117	3.71	0.001
Bullies hurt victims	-0.316	0.110	-0.707	-0.813	-0.287	0.151	-0.159	0.159	3.52	0.001
Support for weak victims	0.115	0.059	0.309	-0.398	-0.219	0.164	-0.357	0.128	2.41	0.020
Victim provokes the bully	0.161	-0.147	-0.223	-0.074	0.365	-0.101	0.511	-0.191	5.11	0.000

involvement ( $p < 0.004$ ). Moreover, this factor characterises the victim/witness and the individuals without involvement more than the victim/witness/bully ( $p < 0.001$  and  $p < 0.015$  respectively).

The second factor, which points to the idea that bullies hurt the victims, also reveals significant statistical differences depending on the individuals' involvement with bullying. In particular, the victim perceives the factor more than the individuals without involvement ( $p < 0.047$ ) do. The witness perceives this factor more than the bully ( $p < 0.022$ ), the victim/bully ( $p < 0.015$ ) and the bully/witness ( $p < 0.004$ ) do. The bully and the bully/witness ( $p < 0.024$  and  $p < 0.022$  respectively) express less support for the idea that bullies hurt the victims than the victim/witness and the individuals without involvement ( $p < 0.016$  and  $p < 0.003$  respectively) do. On the other hand, the victim/bully express less agreement to this factor compared to the victim/witness ( $p < 0.016$ ) and the individuals without involvement ( $p < 0.011$ ). Finally, the victim/witness/bully perceives the factor less than the individuals without involvement ( $p < 0.046$ ) do.

The third factor refers to a positive perception of support for the weak victims and distinguishes the participants' varying involvement in bullying.

The results indicate that this factor characterises the witness more than the bully/witness ( $p < 0.047$ ) and the victim/witness/bully ( $p < 0.005$ ). The bully/witness is also differentiated by the victim/witness ( $p < 0.047$ ) and the participants without involvement ( $p < 0.024$ ), in fact, the latter two perceive the factor more intensely than the former. The third factor is also perceived more by the victim/witness than by the victim/witness/bully ( $p < 0.009$ ). At the same time, the victim/witness/bully perceives the factor to a lesser extent compared to the individuals without involvement ( $p < 0.003$ ).

Finally, there are also significant statistical differences in the participants' involvement, in the fourth factor, capturing the idea that the victim provokes the bully. Specifically, this idea is perceived more by the bully/witness and the victim/witness/bully than the witness ( $p < 0.000$  and  $p < 0.000$  respectively). Moreover, the bully, the victim/witness and the participants who have no involvement perceive this factor to a lesser extent than the victim/witness/bully ( $p < 0.046$ ,  $p < 0.002$  and  $p < 0.000$ , respectively) does. This factor is also perceived more by the bully/witness as compared to the victim/witness ( $p < 0.014$ ) and the individuals without involvement ( $p < 0.000$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine perceptions of secondary and high school pupils in Cyprus about bullying, in order both to identify the beliefs about bullying among young people of school age, and to elucidate the differences according to gender, age and the involvement of pupils. This study complements the up-to-date research data on the phenomenon of school bullying and may generate further investigations in the Cypriot community, contributing to a better understanding of bullying.

The important findings suggest that a large proportion of the secondary and high school pupils are somehow involved in bullying. Overall, 39.7% of participants reported being involved in bullying and victimization variously as purely victims, purely bullies, victims/bullies, bullies/witnesses, victims/witnesses or finally as victims/witnesses/bullies. This percentage is significantly greater than the 17% prevalence found by Stavrinides et al. in 2010 in Cyprus. This difference may be due to the fact that the present study has been conducted in secondary and high schools in urban and suburban areas of Limassol, while the study conducted by Stavrinides and colleagues (2010) took place in primary and secondary schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas of Cyprus. In addition, it was found that 38.5% of the participants report being purely witnesses of bullying incidents, while 21.8% report not having any experience of involvement.

Pupils' perceptions reflect a generally negative perception of the bullies and a relatively positive one of the victims, which is in accordance with previous research findings (e.g., Scholte, Sentse & Granici, 2010; Thornberg, 2010). This image suggests that pupils oppose the notion of school bullying by condemning and rejecting it. Nevertheless, this finding comes in sharp contrast to the finding that an increased number of children report being either directly or indirectly involved in bullying behaviours. In short, bullying persists in Cyprus, despite the fact that children hold a negative view of it. Perhaps, while children concede to socially desirable responses at the manifest level, they

maintain views supporting bullying at the underlying level and they eventually engage in bullying behaviours. However, in the framework of the dynamic interpersonal interactions of the school environment, the latter views and behaviours are met with disapproval and rejection; thus, the participants may have reported that they are opposed to school bullying, as this is the socially accepted thing to do.

Results from the factor analysis of the 20 items comprising the scale of bullying, suggested that children's views of bullying are structured around four organising principles. The first principle concerns the fear of the bully and his punishment. The second is related to the harmful effects of bullying that the victims experience. The third organising principle refers to the support for the weak victim, while the fourth principle summarises the idea of the victim provoking the bully. The findings seem to strengthen the results of earlier studies related to the fear of the bully (Thornberg, 2010) and his punishment (Boulton et al., 2002), the support of the weak victim (Baldry, 2004; Boulton et al., 2002) and the victim's provocative behaviour towards the bully (Rigby, 1996).

#### Differences according to the participants' gender

Initially, no significant differences between boys and girls were found, as far as the perception of the factor is concerned, which conveys the idea that the victim provokes the bully. It was revealed, however, that girls expressed to a greater extent than boys fear of the bully and they provided greater support for the idea that bullies are harmful and they should be punished. Girls also showed greater support for the weak victims compared to boys, a finding supported by previous studies (Rigby, 1996; Rigby & Slee, 1993). The results appear to be consistent with the second hypothesis made, that girls, regardless of age, will perceive the phenomenon of bullying more negatively than boys. Similar findings emerged from the research by Houndoumadi & Pateraki (2001) in Greece which showed that

boys tended to understand the bully more than girls. Perhaps, this is due to the cultural norm that boys should be strong and 'macho', while sensitivity is perceived as a sign of weakness. Therefore, male pupils in Cyprus may be more supportive of the bullies in order to avoid being perceived by others as weak.

### **Differences between secondary school and high school pupils**

In this study, it was also predicted from previous findings (Rigby & Slee, 1991; Swearer & Cary, 2003) that pupils would be less supportive of the victims, and more supportive of the bullies, as their age increases from secondary school to high school. The results of this study showed that even though 13-year-old pupils exhibit fear of the bully and consider his/her punishment necessary, compared with 16-year-old pupils, the idea that the victim provokes the bully is perceived by them to a greater extent. Furthermore, 16-year-old pupils in contrast to 13-year-old children rated more highly the view that the bullies harm the victims. This is possibly the case because as children grow up they show greater empathy (Rigby & Slee, 1991). In addition, in contrast to our initial hypothesis, there was no difference in the perception of the factor that refers to the support of the weak victims according to age.

### **The relationship between the participants' perceptions of and their involvement into school bullying**

The findings of this study showed that perception of bullying vary depending on the involvement of pupils. The results showed that the victims, the victims/witnesses, the witnesses and the individuals with no involvement fear the bully, agree with his/her punishment and support the weak victims. Furthermore, the latter three groups do not support the view that the victim provokes the bully. The categories that include the bullies, such as the bullies/witnesses and the victims/witnesses/bullies did not report fear of the bully and do not agree with

the bully's punishment or with the support for the weak victims and finally, they do not think that the bullies harm the victims. In particular, the victims, the individuals without involvement, the witnesses and people who are purely bullies reported showing fear of the bully and they believe that the bully should be punished, in contrast to the ratings given by victims/bullies.

People who are purely bullies or purely victims, the victims/bullies and people with no involvement support the weak victims. Furthermore, the bullies, the victims and the victims/bullies disagree with the view that the bullies harm the victims. The victims/witnesses/bullies and people who are purely victims show greater support for the idea that the victim provokes the bully, unlike those who are purely bullies and those without involvement. Therefore, the third hypothesis, concerning the favourable perception of school bullying and the unfavourable perception of victims by the pupils who belong to the categories in which bullies are included, seems to be verified for victims/bullies, bullies/witnesses and victims/witnesses/bullies, but not verified for people who are purely bullies, perhaps due to the small number of people who are classified as purely bullies in the total sample. Consequently, these findings appear to strengthen the findings of previous research projects (Pellegrini, Bartini & Brooks, 1999; Psalti, 2012).

The relationship between pupils' perceptions of school bullying and involvement in activities of bullying seems to be of paramount importance. Longitudinal research can be used to examine the phenomenon, and future studies should focus on the relationship between perceptions and their manifestation through behaviour. What is the essence of bullying, how does it develop and how is it maintained in the community of young children and adolescents? Dealing with bullying in a broader social and cultural context is crucial. The prevention and intervention programs should not focus merely on the bullies and victims; they should also include all pupils and take into account the school's social climate. It is vital that intervention strategies focus on children who witness bullying, in order to be able to support the victims and to discourage

the bullies (Bardly, 2004; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004).

Bullying requires the attention of everyone who is concerned about the welfare of children in school. The paradox is that, while many prevention programs have been designed, most studies have shown that the phenomenon of bullying in schools does not seem to decrease (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008). Therefore practitioners are facing a great challenge for the coming years in addressing behaviours related to bullying. It is equally important to have a better understanding of the perceptions of children and the factors that contribute to engagement in such incidents.

The limitations of the study include the narrow sample within the Limassol district schools, which may have influenced the results in a particular cultural direction. Furthermore, data were collected through the utilisation of self-report questionnaires, which may limit their interpretability; hence, reports from additional sources, such as teacher's observations would be useful in strengthening and validating self-reports. This study did not examine the perception of bullying from the perspective of teachers and parents, which might be a topic for future research. Finally, further research is needed for a better and an in depth understanding and to develop our awareness of this specific area; as it will help practitioners to develop both efficient and effective prevention and intervention programs.

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## Πρόσληψη του σχολικού εκφοβισμού στην Κύπρο ως προς την εμπλοκή του μαθητικού πληθυσμού

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### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στόχος της παρούσας μελέτης είναι η διερεύνηση των αντιλήψεων των μαθητών Γυμνασίου και Λυκείου στην Κύπρο ως προς το σχολικό εκφοβισμό και η ανάδειξη των διαφορών σύμφωνα με την ηλικία, το φύλο και την εμπλοκή. Στην έρευνα συμμετείχαν 514 μαθητές/τριες ηλικίας 13 και 16 ετών, οι οποίοι απάντησαν σε κλειστό ερωτηματολόγιο. Σύμφωνα με τα ευρήματα, οι γυναίκες είναι πιο αρνητικές απέναντι στον εκφοβισμό απ' ό,τι οι άνδρες. Οι μαθητές/τριες ηλικίας 13 ετών επιδεικνύουν φόβο απέναντι στο θύτη και θεωρούν αναγκαία την τιμωρία του, ενώ επισημαίνουν παράλληλα ότι το θύμα προκαλεί το θύτη, ενώ οι μαθητές/τριες ηλικίας 16 ετών υποστηρίζουν περισσότερο ότι οι θύτες βλάπτουν τα θύματα. Επίσης, τα θύματα, τα θύματα/μάρτυρες, οι μάρτυρες και οι μη εμπλεκόμενοι δείχνουν φόβο απέναντι στο θύτη, επιζητούν την τιμωρία του και τάσσονται υπέρ των αδύναμων θυμάτων. Αντίθετα, οι κατηγορίες που εμπειριέχουν τους θύτες δεν δείχνουν φόβο απέναντι στο θύτη, δε συμφωνούν με την τιμωρία του και δε θεωρούν ότι βλάπτουν τα θύματα.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: Σχολικός εκφοβισμός, Αντιλήψεις, Εμπλοκή (θύμα, θύτης, μάρτυρας).

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