

With Books We Beat Violence

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Abstract: The educational programme of reading “With Books We Beat Violence” is part of the attempt to create good practices in the understanding and prevention of SVB (School Violence and Bullying). It is a collection of literary children’s books (a total of 25) on a specific subject (SVB) for the information and awareness raising of Primary School students of matters concerning prevention and dealing with phenomena of school violence and bullying. The programme has been incessantly held in the past few years, its duration is two months and addresses Primary School students of both sexes. In the first phase, the books of the programme (school year 2015–2016) had been utilized in class by the teachers through reading, conversation, concern activities and creative expression (e.g., art workshop). In the second phase (school years 2016–2017 & 2017–2018), the students borrow the book to read at home along with the leaflet and the impression notebook. Next, each student presents their book in class and a conversation follows, during which the other students ask questions. This activity is enriched with experiential drama activities (role play, frozen picture, hot chair). In the school years 2018–2019 & 2019–2020, the programme was held for a 4th consecutive year and 5th year respectively. The programme was designed and held by a school teacher.

Key words: school violence, bullying, reading, awareness raising

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of school violence and bullying has negative consequences on both the psychoemotional development of children and the process of learning. In the past years, this phenomenon has increased tremendously in Greece as well. However, several times there are misunderstandings as to what bullying is and what bullying isn’t, as a result, the incidents are either overrated or underrated (Artinopoulou, 2001; Petropoulos & Papastilianou, 2001; Olweus, 2009; Psalti, Kasapi & Deligianni, 2012). The term school violence and bullying (SVB) is used to describe a situation in which there is targeted and blatant violence and aggressive behaviour aiming at infliction, causing physical and psychic pain on their classmates of both sexes, where an intrapersonal relationship characterized by disproportionate dominion within and outside the school is concerned. The bullies are often called “the powerful ones”, who extract some benefit, such as pleasure, prestige or even material gains through these practices, whereas the children who are victimized are the “weak” recipients of their violent attacks, unable to protect themselves in a substantial and radical manner (Chapter 1, p. 7)¹.

The programme “With Books We Beat Violence” is the continuation of the attempt to inform and raise

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¹ <http://stop-bullying.sch.gr>.

awareness of primary school students in the Epirus region on issues of prevention and dealing with phenomena of school violence and bullying (SVB). It is a teaching approach by means of children's literature.

The creation of a safe school environment is the target of every school unit and the utilization of children's literature contributes in this direction. According to research, the utilization of children's literature is suggested for tackling bullying (Heath, Moulton, Dytches, Prater & Brown, 2011; Prater, Johnstun, Dytches & Johnstun, 2006) and book therapy programmes are positively influential as far as awareness raising and attitude change in phenomena of bullying are concerned (Andreou, Paparousi & Gkouni, 2013; Freeman, Hooks & Hilton, 2008). Modern children's literature, as a distinct psychoemotional, linguistic and moral shape of mediation between the child and their historical and social space crucially affects their development. The subjects of modern literature (racism, immigration, violence, loss, diversity etc.) help the child comprehend the world, the problems and mature both mentally and psychically (Katsiki-Gkivalou, 2003). In the past years there has been an increase in the publication of children's books focusing on school violence and bullying across the globe. Writers have also been intensely interested in writing and approaching the SVB issue either through comics or novels. Children's literature is an alternative way for somebody to approach the issue of SVB. Literary representations of SVB, the characters' adventures serve as suitable motives for a conversation and concern. In addition, literary texts are suitable for dramatization, role play (frozen picture, hot chair). Books on SVB help students understand not only their heroes' feelings but theirs as well, develop awareness raising and put themselves in someone else's shoes. The books were chosen according to the student's age, their reading ability, the entity that edited the books such as E.PSY.PE (Greek psychosocial company for children and adolescent), the writers who delivered the subject of bullying, children's rights, tolerance of diversity (Paradeisioti & Tziogkourous, 2008). Furthermore, the chosen books correspond to various kinds of violence: physical and verbal violence, social exclusion, cyberbullying. The books of this programme are mostly works of Greek writers but foreigners' too, which have been translated in the Greek language.

The specific subject was selected for the following reasons:

- The chance to discuss issues concerning the current, social and school environment is given;
- It helps class management (class contract, conflict management);
- It runs concurrently with the other school actions on the prevention and dealing with SVB (videos, talks by experts, dramatization, art workshop);
- The student's reading process is cultivated through the establishment of reading-friendly practices at school;
- Parents are involved since books reach home.

Reading literary works on issues that address social subjects like school violence and bullying, proves notably useful. Children's literature contributes to the emotional development of children, since through their identification with the heroes in the story, they can realize and understand the heroes' feelings, follow the way the heroes tackle similar situations and contact strategies used by the book heroes. Moreover, through reading children's books, the child can observe the same incident from different angles, core with harsh situations and also get to know solutions to issues that they face themselves (Karpozilou, 1999). Additionally, through literature, they can manage negative feelings such as fear or anger (Papadopoulou-Mantadaki, 2007). Furthermore, the potential of children's literature can deter bullying since it is considered to be an acceptable and a safe way to point out the issue of SVB and make this phenomenon and its consequences understood to the students. In conclusion, utilizing children's literature through reading activities and role play can contribute to the student's change of attitude and

behaviour when it comes to school violence and bullying.

2. Description of the Reading Programme “With Books We Beat Violence”

It is a reading programme with a specific subject “School violence–bullying”. It addresses Primary School students of both sexes aged 9–10. It has been running in the past few years in classes C & D in a Primary School of the Epirus Region and has a duration of two months. There is cooperation between the teacher running the programme and the school teachers and the programme books are also used by other classes.

Next, there is a presentation of an indicative teaching proposal of the way children’s literature dealing with SVB and the cultivation of reading can be utilized for the promotion of emotional and social learning. Through connecting the stories of children’s books with the life and the feelings of children-readers, elements of the texts in the books are absorbed with a view to the promotion of emotional maturity, moral values and the improvement of students’ behaviour within the school environment by appropriating the heroes’ positive standards, by rejecting negative bullying attitudes and by adopting ways of reaction and resistance to issues of bullying.

2.1 Targets and Goals

The target of the programme is double; on the one hand, there is an attempt to cultivate a child’s love for good books and, on the other, give them the chance to find out about school violence and bullying through fiction, literature, fairy tales that touch students. Through the choice of appropriate books for children’s age, students can approach and comprehend the phenomenon of SVB.

It is a suitable and compatible way to accommodate children’s age and students’ needs. The programme aims at the students’

- Awareness of issues regarding school violence and bullying
- Recognition of various aspects of bullying
- Identification of the roles of the offender, the victim, the onlooker/ - s
- Proposal of ways to deal with the phenomenon of bullying
- Development of awareness raising through their identification with the book heroes.

2.2 Methodology

The approach is multidisciplinary, placing emphasis on experiential learning through work in small groups, by cultivating in this way the oral, written and artistic expression of the students. The teacher serves as the coordinator and animator throughout the programme.

The programme is carried out in the context of the Flexible Belt course and the Innovative Actions for Culture, the Environment, Health Education and Reading. Reading aims at familiarizing the young student with books, reading and the gradual establishment of a friendly relationship with the literary book. This relationship will help them develop their critical and creative thought, activate their aesthetics, try out their feelings thus developing their emotional intelligence, cultivate their verbal expression both indirectly and experientially, and, in conclusion, fully construct their personality.

2.3 The Educational Material

The programme includes

- The book of 25 boxes
- The book list

- The notebook of impressions
- The leaflet–letter
- Utilization suggestions
- Reading memento/souvenir

2.4 Teaching Practices

- Reading
- Creative expression (atr, comics, poster)
- Presentations of the books — Discussion
- Production of writing (a letter to a child victim, give the story a different ending)
- Lending books home and exchanging them, so that all children can read the books by themselves, with their parents or their siblings.
- Role play – Dramatization
- Argumentation/Reasoning

2.5 The Activities

The students present, discuss the books they read, ask questions, write in their notebook of impressions, draw, comment based on their experiences, recommend and exchange books they liked more. Additionally, they share their personal stories, suggest solutions to the heroes in the books. The teacher is the coordinator and animator. Book presentations take place in the classroom or the school library. Each child writes the title and their thoughts on the book they have read in the notebook of impressions. It is a unique notebook which is included in the educational package. When the programme is complete, the children receive a certificate of participation as a souvenir.

More specifically:

Activity title: Presentation of the story

Activity duration: 2 teaching hours

Kind of activity: personal narration, conversation

Description of the activity:

The child presents the book they read to the whole class, narrates its story, reads their favourite excerpt and presents a picture of the book that impressed them. Next, after the completion of the presentation, the students ask them questions about the hero, the problem they faced, how they managed to cope with the difficulties. There follows a conversation among students on bullying and violence, what shape it was, how the hero tackled it, what else they could have done. The teacher coordinates the conversation and directs the students to ask their classmate for more on the book.

Questions that help the understanding:

- Who is the hero?
- What is their problem?
- Could the hero be your friend?
- Which character would you like to be in the story and why?
- What would you do if you were in their shoes?
- What are your feelings after reading the story?
- Have you even faced a similar problem? How did you handle it?

- Which phrase or picture made an impression on you and why?
- What would you change about the story if you could?

The questions of understanding and interpreting the text help the students to comprehend, feel and express their views, their thoughts and emotions. Moreover, they help the students verbalize their own questions to their classmates. The questions that help the students understand the story they read or the teacher read are briefly given above. The activities of reading and presenting the books take place within an atmosphere of trust, encouragement, cooperation, communication and spontaneity enforcing in this way their relationship with books and each other.

Furthermore, the other activities adjacent to other forms of art like: painting, music, role play, give the reader another more familiar perspective in order to respond and promote the text in a multiple way. During Aesthetic Education students draw subjects from the books they read or create awareness raising posters of SVB. Finally, during Flexible Belt role play techniques, such as frozen picture, hot chair, acting a scene from the book are utilized. The aim of the activities mentioned above (role plays, creative writing, art/visual expression, expressive reading) is to promote emotional learning and connect the story in the book with the life and the feelings of the child–reader for a possible absorption and incorporation of parts of the text regarding principles and behavior (Patera, 2012).

3. Assessment, Discussion and Suggestions for Expansion

There is positive response of students to lending books on SVB, diversity, cyberbullying. These are issues that activate the students' interest. Students realize various aspects of SVB in stories of the books, they deeply understand the phenomenon, they approach it from a lot of angles and probably adopt attitudes and behaviours to tackle it with. They learn to understand diversity, rights, mutual respect, their own feeling and other people's feelings as well. They develop awareness, express themselves and at the same time travel in the magical world of books.

Students' active participation in the reading process, the book presentation and the discussion that follows during the whole of the programme, The increased interest of students in subjects that pertain to bullying, as well as their desire to read more books contribute to the positive assessment of the programme. A change in the attitude, the vocabulary and the behaviour of the students who participated in the programme was notable. They showed more interest in children who spent break time alone or whenever they observed something that could have been a bullying incident, they would notify their teacher, the school head, their parents. Consequently, there was an improvement in the social state of the class, as observed by the teacher during the lesson, and in the school yard as well during the whole of the programme. Students are more aware of bullying issues, they have more positive social contacts and a more positive attitude to the students of the whole school units.

The school community approved of the programme, school teachers utilized some books of the programme in class. The books of the programme reach the students' homes and a lot of parents read them with their children, which may help them talk with them about behaviours, attitudes in the school environment, in the neighbourhood, at home, thus adopting positive role models and rejecting aggressive and violent behaviours. Moreover, the parents of the students who participated in the programme considered that book reading and discussion on SVB helps understanding, prevention and dealing with the phenomenon.

Of course, we have to emphasize that prevention and dealing with SVB phenomena requires full approach and cooperation of all the involved parts (school, family, society). It would be interesting if other teachers utilized

the programme so that it would be enriched with new material, teaching proposals, good practices. In addition, it could be enriched with more book titles and more activities. Our ultimate goal is for the programme to constitute a different educational package and be included in the Net of School Libraries as a separate programme so that schools of the Epirus Region can borrow it.

Bullying does not occur only at school, it is directly related with the society's general attitude towards violence and suppression, tolerance of diversity. The school constitutes part of the problem but part of the solution as well. Therefore, it is important that the meaning of the engagement with the phenomenon of bullying in the school environment is identified via school interventions that raise students' awareness and inform them of the multifactorial phenomenon of bullying. In addition, programmes should involve all students, teachers, parents for the accomplishment of greater effectiveness.

3.1 School Interventions

School interventions are significant and important for the prevention, awareness raising and dealing with bullying. Intervention programmes and specifically the ones that have been designed by teachers and respond to the special needs of the school unit are a good practice as to the awareness raising and prevention of school violence and bullying. The programme "With Books We Beat Violence" is a programme of awareness raising of school violence, bullying, cyberbullying, diversity which was designed by a school teacher and has been implemented in the past few years in the school where he/she works. The interventions aiming at the students' information and awareness raising are effective, because, in the first stage, students are acquainted with the phenomenon of school violence and bullying, they realize what bullying is or isn't, the consequences it has on the participants or onlookers, they get to know possible ways of dealing with school violence incidents. In the second stage, the interest of the school community in its inclusion in its planning, school interventions regarding school violence and bullying improves the school climate, the relationships among students and also the relationships between students and teachers to a great extent, thus creating a safe learning and teaching environment. In conclusion, children's literature is an appropriate and different way for students to approach the phenomenon of bullying, acquire the culture of reading books and at the same time adopt positive attitudes and behaviours.

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