Using Digital Storytelling to Inform Students About Bullying: Results of a Pilot Program

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ABSTRACT

The study presents the results of a pilot program in which digital storytelling was used in order to inform fourth-grade students about bullying. The constructivist principles concerning the learning process, and in particular, the requirement of students' active participation, provided the necessary framework. Students created their own digital stories about bullying, while the researcher, although present, avoided to intervene, to guide or to lecture students to a great extent. The intervention was short in duration and easily applied, without altering the school's timetable. Qualitative analysis of the data indicates that, through their digital stories, students were able to grasp the main aspects of bullying and how they should react, but the role of bystanders was unclear to them. The results of the study might prove useful in the formation of a more comprehensive anti-bullying program.

KEYWORDS

Bully, Bullying, Bystander, Constructivism, Digital Storytelling, Victim

INTRODUCTION

Hühn and Sommer (2012) define storytelling as the act in which a chain of happenings is meaningfully structured and transmitted in a particular medium and from a particular point of view. In other words, storytelling is the art of telling a story to an audience, in order to convey important messages. Storytelling has been widely used throughout human history, mainly because of its ability to create strong feelings and emotions to the listeners. These emotions are – sometimes – so strong that the listeners identify themselves with a character of the story. So, through storytelling, the listener manages and communicates with his feelings (Papagiorgis, 1983). In recent years, because of the advancements in information and communication technologies, traditional storytelling has become digital. Digital stories are a combination of conventional storytelling (oral or written) with multimedia and hypermedia elements. Through this process, the written or the oral text is enhanced (Lathem, 2005). Most digital stories are personal narratives because the autobiographical element is strong (Anderson, 2010) and they are produced using cheap or free software (Lambert, 2002).

Digital storytelling is considered a powerful educational tool for many reasons. Ready-made digital stories cause the keen interest of students thus, they can assimilate information easily (Coventry, 2008). When students create their own digital stories, either alone or in collaboration with others, they become more competent in visualizing their thoughts (Regan, 2008). In addition, their ability to analyze and synthesize information, as well as their literacy, artistic and social skills, are more efficiently developed (Robin, McNeil, & Yuksel, 2011). Students also learn to voice criticism either on their own work or on the work of others, facilitating social learning (Robin 2008). All the above,

allow students to acquire a wide range of additional skills and abilities (e.g., creative thinking, collaborative skills, communicative skills, flexibility, taking initiatives, and leadership) that all fall under the term '21st-century skills' (Czarnecki, 2009).

Extensive research has been conducted on the educational benefits of using digital storytelling. While researchers focus on instructional settings, the improvement of literacy skills and knowledge acquisition, at the same time they acknowledge that the benefits students have, go far beyond the objectives presented above. In addition, far less research has been conducted on examining the potential of this tool in other areas where the settings are not strictly instructional or the main objective is not some form of knowledge acquisition. Such areas might be the resolution of complex school or social problems, aiding or counseling students on sensitive matters, and the acquirement of behavioral patterns. The underlying philosophy of such uses of digital stories is that they are a good method for documenting personal experiences, that they can be a form of narrative therapy and that they can help students to discover parts of their personality (Sawyer & Willis, 2011).

The pilot program described in the following sections fits in the above areas. It examines how digital storytelling can be used in raising students' awareness on bullying, a phenomenon that students, as well as teachers, quite often face at school. Knowledge acquisition was not an important factor; instead, the focus was on helping students to understand how to deal with this phenomenon. The target group was fourth-grade students at a primary school in Rhodes, Greece. What was studied was to what extent students are able to grasp, by themselves, the basics of bullying and how to react either as victims or as bystanders. For that matter, students were not presented with ready-made stories and they were not systematically lectured. Instead, they were asked to work in groups, to reflect on bullying, to negotiate their views and knowledge and to develop their own bullying digital stories.

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

Intimidating and aggressive behavior, school violence, and bullying are phenomena that are becoming more and more frequent in Greek schools. They greatly affect students' attitude and behavior, psycho-emotional development, and their school performance (Manesis & Lambropoulou, 2014) and may lead to serious psychological trauma and dysfunctional social behavior (Galanaki & Vogiatzoglou, 2015; Artinopoulou, 2009). The victim is weaker and powerless compared to the abuser. The attacks are programmed, repeated at regular intervals and the abuser's objective is the affirmation of his power over his victim (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). School violence, as a social phenomenon, has a close relationship to social discrimination, social exclusion, and cultural diversity (Nikolaou, Thanos, & Samsari, 2014; Psalti & Konstantinou, 2007). In general, the occurrence of bullying in Greek schools is lower than in other countries, nevertheless, it becomes more and more frequent (Sapoyna, 2008; Houndoumadi & Pateraki 2001). It usually lasts for a short period of time, but for 19% of the incidents, it can last more than a year (Artinopoulou, 2010).

In a bullying situation, individuals assume one of the following roles: bullies, victims, and bystanders (Rigby, 2008). While the bully-victim pair is quite clear, bystanders' involvement is ambiguous. Bystanders can undertake one of the following roles: (a) actively take the side of the bully and become a source of power to him (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Hess, 2001), (b) passively observe and often perceived as approving the bully's actions (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008), and (c) intervene and help the victim or ask adults to intervene (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Those who intervene have the skills, the will, the confidence, and the sense of personal responsibility to help, whereas passive bystanders seem to lack all the above (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). On the other hand, the motives of students who take the side of the bully seem to be similar to the ones the bully has (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). In hypothetical situations children easily take the side of the victim and express their intention to help or to report the incident (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington 2002). In real situations, though, only a small percentage acts (Salmivalli et al. 1996).

There seem to be two categories of programs that try to deal with bullying: (a) narrowly focused, such as curriculum interventions and counseling and, (b) large-scale, whole-school interventions (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Such a large scale program is Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme-OBPP (Olweus, 2003), which tries to deal with bullying by utilizing multilayered tactics, providing measures, guiding principles and philosophies, including but not limited to: staff discussion groups, class rules against bullying, meetings with students and parents, talks with bullies, victims, and with the parents of involved students, and individual intervention plans. Kiusaamista Vastaan (Against Bullying)-KiVa program, takes an even more holistic approach to the matter (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011). In addition to the above, it includes sets of tools for educators, students, and parents, students' lessons, and a computer game. What is interesting about KiVa, besides having good results (Kärnä et al., 2011), is that it is a prevention rather than an anti-bullying program, such as OBPP, and that students are more actively involved in the process.

On the other hand, studies that were carried out in Greece, focus on investigating the duration, frequency, and psychological impact of bullying. Large scale prevention programs are sparse (i.e., Andreou, Didaskalou, & Vlachou, 2007), while their significance is studied on a theoretical/abstract basis (i.e., Koutras & Giannopoulou 2015; Nikolaou, Thanos, & Samsari, 2014; Bogiatzoglou, Villi, & Galani, 2012). Studies examining interventions where students were not just passive receivers of information but actively participated in the process are sparse (i.e., Kyriazis & Zacharias 2015). One can assume that at least in Greece, the systematic dealing with bullying is still in its early stages.

RATIONALE AND METHOD

Having in mind the above ascertainments, a pilot intervention was planned and carried out at the fourth grade (9-10-year-old students) of a primary school in Rhodes, Greece, in 2015. In total, 24 students participated in the study (10 boys and 14 girls). Constructivism provided the theoretical background but also the framework of the intervention. According to constructivism (Ertmer & Newby 2013): (a) learners build personal interpretations of the world based on their experiences and interactions, (b) knowledge has to be embedded in the situation in which it is used, (c) effective use of knowledge comes from engaging the learner in real-world situations, and (d) knowledge is validated through social negotiation. Based on the above principals, it was considered appropriate not to present students with ready-made digital stories but to ask them to create their own.

There is an additional number of reasons in support of the notion that digital storytelling might prove a useful tool in dealing with bullying. As it was already mentioned in a previous section, there is a noteworthy scientific interest in the uses of digital stories in education, though the focus is on the learning results they yield or on the skills they foster. Furthermore, digital stories are commonly used just as narrative inquiries or for narrative analyses. Less often stories are told unfiltered in order to start a dialogue among students on an important issue (e.g., Harvey & Robinson, 2012). On the other hand, it is known that the discussion of a narrative promotes the understanding of the issue being discussed (Caine, 2010) and that the viewers/listeners are benefiting by having a better understanding of the author's experiences (Lenette, Cox, & Brough, 2013). Storytelling presents an even more interesting potential. Psychotherapy has recognized the power of stories as therapeutic means decades ago (White & Epston, 1990). It can be argued that a narrative is a form of psychological intervention (Rosenthal, 2003). Therefore, besides being a good method for documenting personal experiences, storytelling can also be a form of a narrative therapy by helping students to discover parts of their personality (Sawyer & Willis, 2011).

In light of the above, it was decided to provide students only with a minimum of information regarding bullying so that it would be possible to test to what extent they are able to understand by themselves:

- The basics of bullying (types, duration, roles)
- The right course of action in case they are the victims
- The right course of action in case they are the observers

The phases of the study and their respective research tools and methods were:

- Preliminary phase (one two-hour session, late October 2015)
- Development of the students' digital stories (two weeks, eight two-hour sessions, early November 2015 till mid-November, 2015). Data were obtained by qualitatively analyzing students' digital stories
- Presentation of the stories, development of one final, collectively developed story (one week, two two-hour sessions, late November 2015). Data were obtained by qualitatively analyzing the short essays that students were asked to write, following the presentation of the final story

The first phase had two objectives. The first was the researcher to get acquainted with students since on the following days he was going to work with them. The second was to clarify certain aspects of bullying (i.e., how it differs from an aggressive behavior during a fight) while avoiding mentioning the term 'bullying'. Bullying was discussed only when students raised the issue but not to a great extent. Naming the roles that individuals assume in a bullying situation and giving possible resolutions to the problem, were also avoided because students would be given the chance to reflect on these matters on the subsequent phases.

The key principles of constructivism together with the roles assumed by the ones involved in bullying, as presented in previous sections, shaped the methodological approach of the intervention's second phase, which had two sub-phases. The first, which lasted for three two-hour sessions, was dedicated to demonstrating to students the use of the software tool for the development of their digital stories, namely Storymaker (http://www.questaslimited.co.uk/SPA/). This was necessary in order to avoid possible problems and delays during the next sub-phase. Storymaker allows the development of interactive stories using its libraries of cartoonish characters, backgrounds, and sounds. The characters can be animated using path animation. External images, sounds, and music can also be imported and used in a story. Although it is not available in Greek, its menus and buttons are pretty straightforward and their use can be easily understood (Figure 1).

On the second sub-phase, which lasted for five two-hour sessions, students formed six groups with four members each and the researcher gave a very abstract outline of what they were expected to do. After reminding students the discussion they had a few days earlier, he asked each group to

Figure 1. Screenshots from students' digital stories
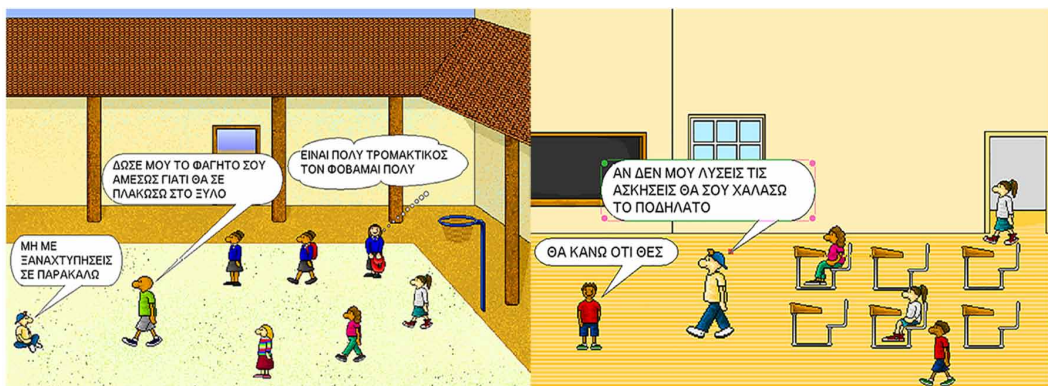
think of a bullying scenario, and, by using the developing software, develop a story based on this scenario. They were also asked to include in their stories as many characters as they believe that are involved in a bullying situation and to give a resolution to the problem. The artistic aspect of the stories was not important; what was important was the thoroughness of the scenarios, the thoughts, and dialogues of the characters from the story and the resolution that each team was able to come up with. The researcher offered no help or guidance and did not intervene in the process.

On a side note, there were some problems when students were asked to develop their own stories. Since students were accustomed to working in groups, where each member assumes a certain role, they thought that they had to do the same when developing their stories and tried to assign roles according to the story's characters. As a result, no one wanted to take the side of the 'bad guy' (bully) and, in few cases, they did not want to take the side of the victim either. This is an indirect indication of how young children identify themselves with the characters of a story, especially when it is their 'own' story (Appleyard, 1994). In any case, the researcher explained to students that each story would be collectively developed and that they all have to contribute in portraying the story's characters.

During the third phase of the study, the groups presented and discussed, with the rest of the class, their stories. By using elements from the students' stories, the researcher, in agreement with the students, formed one final story, but with a twist; it had three alternative endings: (a) the victim remained silent and continued to be tormented by the bully, (b) the victim reacted and tried to reason with the bully but failed because the bully would not listen to him, and (c) the victim became a bully himself, harassing younger students. Students were asked to write a short essay, presenting: (a) their thoughts about each ending of the final story as if they were the observers and (b) how they would have reacted in a similar situation if they were the victims.

RESULTS

The students' digital stories, six in total, were analyzed using the iterative coding process (Creswell, 2002; MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998) to identify the categories, themes, and patterns that emerged from the data. The analysis of the digital stories was not limited to the examination of texts and dialogues. The images, characters, scenarios, voices, sounds, and animations that were used were also included in the examination. The stories were viewed once, by three individuals, to identify the main ideas. Then, they were reviewed in more detail and the ideas were labeled with codes. The codes were developed on the fly but all stories shared the same set of codes. This process was repeated two more times to reduce overlap and redundancy of the codes, until a small set of sub-themes, under a few major categories, were identified. The results of the process are presented in Tables 1 to 3.

Physical together with verbal bullying was the main theme in all scenarios. There were no cases of emotional bullying, cyberbullying, and of sexual harassment. The stories although simplistic, accurately illustrated what bullying is: the repeatedness of the incidents, the use of violence and bad language, the abuser's overwhelming power, the victim's reluctance to report the events. Emotions, like fear, depression, loneliness, embarrassment, and humiliation, were presented exaggerated but, nevertheless, they were accurate too. An interesting finding was that bullies in all cases were boys and portrayed as fat, besides being strong. In three cases (out of six) it was explicitly stated that the bully was an older student. In all cases but two, the victim was a boy. Bystanders were included, but in four cases there were no dialogues or thoughts accompanying these characters, so it is impossible to know which type of bystanders were portrayed. In one case, there was a passive bystander who was afraid of taking the victim's side, because the bully might turn against him. On another story, an observer, after witnessing the events, talked with the victim and helped him to beat the bully. The rest of the stories ended with the victim talking to an adult (two to a teacher, two to the victim's mother, one to the headmaster).

Students' essays, twenty-four in total, were analyzed using the same iterative coding process as in their digital stories. The results of the process are presented in Table 4.

Table 1. Bullies

Category	Theme	N = 6
Type of bullying	Verbal	1
	Verbal, physical	2
	Verbal, threats	2
	Verbal, physical, threats	1
Gender	Boy	6
	Girl	0
Characteristics	Strong, fat	1
	Strong, fat, older	3
	Strong, fat, tall	2
Recurrence of incidents	3 times	3
	4 times	3

Table 2. Victims

Category	Theme	N = 6
Gender	Boy	4
	Girl	2
Emotions (multiple emotions)	Fear	6
	Loneliness	4
	Embarrassment	3
	Depression	2
	Humiliation	4
Reports the events during the story	yes	0
	no	6
Ending of story	Talks to teacher	2
	Talks to headmaster	1
	Talks to mother	2
	Bystander beats bully	1

Table 3. Bystanders

Category	Theme	N = 6
Included	Yes	6
	No	0
Type	Passive observer	4
	On the side of the victim	2
	On the side of the bully	0
Emotions	Not expressed	5
	Fear	1

It has to be noted that the three alternative endings of the final digital story forced students to face an absurd dilemma; in essence, all endings were 'wrong'. Three were the key elements for evaluating their essays; the reasoning for rejecting all endings, the reasoning for selecting their own 'right' course of action and the person that one would seek help from. The negative emotions one has when being bullied, were enough for rejecting the first two of the alternative endings. As for the third alternative ending, the reason for rejecting it was almost totally in line with the phrase: "We do not treat others in the same way they (wrongfully) treat us".

There were six cases (two boys and four girls) in which students stated that they would remain silent as long as the abuser's actions are tolerable, but they concluded that the situation will quickly become intolerable and that they would talk to an adult. In four essays it was unclear when students would react, while in the rest of the essays, students stated that they would react immediately. In two cases students (all boys) stated that they would take matters into their own hands and react violently, either by themselves or with the help of friends. In all the other cases, the negative emotions of being bullied were once again the reason for seeking help if they were the victims of bullying. Finally, in all but two cases, talking to a parent, a teacher, the school's headmaster, to a friend or a combination of the above, were considered the "right" reaction if students were bullied or witnesses to bullying. The two cases were the ones in which students stated that they would react violently and that they felt confident that they would win the fight.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The pilot study presented in the above sections used digital storytelling in a way that deviates from its mainstream uses, that is in a strictly instructional framework, for simply telling a story, or for acquiring literacy skills (Robin, 2006; Sadik, 2008). Taking advantage of storytelling's compatibility with young students' mentality (Ohler, 2006), the study explored if it is possible to use digital storytelling to raise students' awareness of bullying.

Bullying is a phenomenon that has to be dealt efficiently and quickly, since its implications can be severe for victims (Hawker & Boulton, 2003; Olweus, 1994), as well as bullies (Nansel et al., 2001). Most prevention programs' objectives, at least in Greece, try to raise awareness by simply informing students (i.e., Bogiatzoglou, Villi, & Galani, 2012); their active participation is hardly a feature. In contrast, this study relied solely on students' participation, by adopting a constructivist approach (Ertmer & Newby 2013; Jonassen, 1991). By working in groups, students were able to reflect on bullying, to negotiate their views and knowledge, and to embed the results of this negotiation into their stories, which represented situations where this knowledge and views are used. In addition, during the intervention, students were not systematically lectured about bullying nor were they previously lectured for that issue by their teacher, and, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no other anti-bullying programs were carried out at this school. Therefore, it can be assumed that their digital stories were not the result of someone imposing his thoughts and views on them, but a combination of: (a) pieces of previous knowledge and experiences they might have had, (b) their own point of view, (c) their own understanding of what bullying is, and (d) how they think one can deal with it. The same holds true for their essays too; whatever reasoning they presented was the result of their own reflection on the matter.

It is quite important to have in mind the above when interpreting the results. Based on students' stories, it can be concluded that students:

- Were capable of grasping, by themselves, the basics of bullying and the emotions one has when being bullied. This is in line with findings of other studies (i.e., Oliver & Candappa, 2003). They were also able to understand that the victim is reluctant to report the events since there were no stories displaying the opposite behavior.

Table 4. Analysis of students' essays

Category	Theme	As observers $N = 24$	As victims $N = 24$
Time to react	Immediately	15	15
	Delayed reaction	-	6
	Not specified/unclear	9	3
Course of action (multiple actions)	Talks to teacher	11	11
	Talks to headmaster	7	6
	Talks to mother	-	15
	Talks to parents	-	5
	Talks to a friend	4	3
	Violent reaction/beat bully	2	2
Reasons for rejecting ending 1 (multiple reasons)	Not good to live in fear	20	
	Life would become intolerable	3	
	Not good to be humiliated	9	
	Others will laugh at the victim	9	
	Not specified	2	
Reasons for rejecting ending 2 (multiple reasons)	Not good to live in fear	22	
	Life would become intolerable	4	
	Not good to be humiliated	13	
	Others will laugh at the victim	15	
	Not specified	2	
Reasons for rejecting ending 3	We do not treat others in the same way they (wrongfully) treat us	21	
	Not specified	3	
Reasons for reacting as victims (multiple reasons)	Not good to live in fear		15
	Life would become intolerable		5
	Not good to be humiliated		8
	Others will laugh at me		5
	I can tolerate intimidating behavior up to a point		6
	Not specified		1

- View bullying only as physical and verbal harassment. Other types of bullying were not presented, probably due to students' age or because physical and verbal bullying are more easily understood as Oliver and Candappa (2003) point out.
- Were not able to adequately portray bystanders. it seems that their role needs to be clarified and analyzed to students.
- Were able to show empathy, their emotions for the victim, and their intention to help, only when they were asked to (in their essays). This stresses the importance of the above assertion but is also in line with other studies indicating that in hypothetical situations children easily express good intentions (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington 2002).

- Were capable of understanding that a bullying situation can be resolved by asking for help from an adult.
- Although the majority stated that if they were being bullied they would report the incident immediately, this has to be viewed with caution, since, once again, it refers to a hypothetical situation.

The findings of the present study support the idea that, by developing their own digital stories, students were able to organize their thoughts about bullying, to reflect on the matter and to understand its implications. On the other hand, it is unclear if it helped students in shaping attitudes and behavioral patterns; the digital stories and the essays were hypothetical situations; it is unknown how they would react in real situations, but this is also the problem of all anti-bullying programs (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Finally, the study has limitations that need to be acknowledged. Even though all necessary precautions were taken, one can never be certain whether students expressed their actual thoughts and feelings on bullying. Since it was a pilot study, it was limited only to one school in Greece and had a limited number of participating students, therefore its results cannot be generalized. Further studies are needed in order to identify differences or similarities to the findings of the present study and to obtain more reliable results. Nevertheless, results indicate that digital storytelling could be a useful tool in dealing with bullying. Furthermore, since the intervention was short in duration, it can easily fit in a school's timetable, either as a stand-alone intervention or as part of a more comprehensive bullying prevention program.

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