

# Escaping the Bondage of Bullying: A Game-based Learning Approach

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**Abstract:** School bullying is a phenomenon of great concern worldwide, with profound implications for the emotional development of those involved. Leveraging the interactive nature of game-based learning provides a unique opportunity for active student engagement that goes beyond traditional pedagogical methods. This article aims to explore students' perceptions of bullying and present a digital game as an alternative educational approach to raising students' awareness, empathy, and empowerment. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated how an art-based virtual museum game engages students in exploring and understanding the phenomenon. A needs assessment on bullying was conducted on a student population sample during the school year 2023 - 2024. Subsequently, a digital 3D escape room type game (named "e-BOB") was used, which was redesigned and reconstructed by the students from an initial project within the Panhellenic Students Competition of Onassis Foundation "Hack the Art: Yiannoulis Halepas". The game was developed using Unity, Blender, and Krita platforms and is set in an art museum. Players interact with the sculptor's exhibits through micro-scenarios and quizzes drawn from the sculptor's life and artwork that tackle the issue of bullying. Key game features include goal achievement within a time limit and discovery of hidden elements. The analysis of the needs assessment data found that all students had been involved in bullying behaviors either as victims, perpetrators or observers. The majority of students focused mainly on direct forms of bullying and less on indirect forms, and most were unable to distinguish bullying from 'simple teasing', demeaning bullying behavior. Those at greater risk are the ones who show some element of differentiation in relation to the stereotypes of the social context in which they live. Several students indicated that the school environment needs to address the issue sufficiently. Finally, the game contributed to students' empathy about bullying, enhancing their self-reflection and managing strategies. Raising awareness, mental empowerment, and empathy for bullying requires dynamic and innovative approaches. With its potential for self-awareness and student activation, game-based learning should be incorporated into educational programs for bullying prevention and management within schools.

**Keywords:** Bullying, 3D Digital Game, Game-based Learning, Awareness, Empathy

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## 1. Background

Bullying is a concerning phenomenon with a significant impact on the emotional development of all parties involved. The multidimensional structure of contemporary societies comprises a dynamic mosaic that makes bullying not just a matter of individual behaviour, but also a reflection of broader social issues such as inequality, discrimination, and social norms. Its prevalence is of concern to the global community (UNESCO, 2022) and local communities, raising questions about the regulatory responses of both governments and academics.

In the educational landscape of Greece there has been an increase in cases of bullying. Numerous incidents of school-related violence have been recorded throughout the country this year, some of which have been particularly serious and disturbing. Scientific research, as evidenced by a recent survey by the non-profit organization "To hamogelo tou paidiou" highlights that a significant proportion of school children have experienced incidents of bullying, thus indicating the educational system's shortcomings in addressing this issue (Leriu, 2023).

Efforts are being made to mitigate bullying in the primary place where it occurs, school settings. Bullying undermines the fundamental aims of education for educational achievement without intimidation, giving priority to intellectual progress along with unhindered social assimilation (Košir et al, 2023). Modern teachers are seeking to apply a wide range of methods and techniques tailored to appeal to students, enhancing engagement and effectiveness in promoting anti-bullying strategies. Using age-appropriate multimedia resources and experiential learning opportunities, teachers enhance students' understanding of empathy, diversity, and mutual respect. In addition, differentiated approaches such as learning through art, educators provide students with creative outlets for cultivating empathy, respect, empowerment among students and inclusivity (Yan et al, 2019).

Having these as input, we utilized our school's previous award-winning project: a digital escape room for the Panhellenic Student Competition "Hack the Art: Yiannoulis Halepas". Giannoulis Chalepas (1851-1938) was a distinguished Greek sculptor whose work had roots in marble sculpture. Chalepas was known for challenging social norms and for his endurance in mental health struggles. After the death of his mother and despite financial difficulties, he secretly took up sculpture, producing numerous contemporary and symbolically powerful artworks that established him as a prominent figure in contemporary Greek art (Goulaki-Voutyra et al, 2022). Through this project, students had the chance to learn about a resilient artist who persevered in his art despite the adversities he faced. The research group explored the parallels between the sculptor's experiences and life with bullying and leveraged them in a digital escape room game.

## **2. Pedagogical Context**

Commencing with the initial project on the life and work of Halepa, we witnessed the transformative power of art. It serves as a potent tool for diagnosing difficulties, cultivating empathy, and healing emotional struggles. This is not the art that promotes toxic standards prevalent in contemporary youth culture, but rather the art of silence, concentration, and self-reflection that enriches the value system of young people: visual arts. This art form is harnessed as a means of education and expression in early school grades, primarily in kindergarten. However, in higher grades, starting from elementary school, students' creative expression is often curtailed, almost silenced by the onslaught of the curriculum. A dearth of art classes and infrequent museum visits hinder students' aesthetic education (Higgings, 2012).

The importance of art for children and people with emotional difficulties has been emphasized by prominent figures in psychoanalysis (Freud, 2005; Jung 1964; 2008). Art reveals the playful side of human nature and releases emotional tensions by symbolizing unconscious thoughts and desires within a controlled and healthy framework. Through constructive pedagogical approaches (Vygotsky, 1976), visual art is revitalized and catalyzes our study to attempt to change students' misconceptions and achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Considering the therapeutic value of art (Malchiodi, 2009), we connected it with a real problem of school life, drawing on knowledge from psychological and sociological subjects and utilizing the playful use of digital technology as a means of exploratory learning and student engagement (Yosep, 2023).

Learning through play is an active technique that uses games to improve students' learning, inspiring them and encouraging them to learn. The unconscious or conscious motivation that drives people to play is that they learn.

Games, whether traditional or digital, are governed by rules, have goals, provide interaction and feedback, require problem-solving, promote self-correction, have a story/scenario, and are perceived as a means of entertainment (Vandercruyse et al, 2012).

The approach of teaching-learning through alternatives such as Game-Based Learning (GBL) empowers students to approach knowledge exploratively by playing, without a sense of external evaluation. They learn experientially at their own pace, mastering the art of managing the failure of their attempts, and persisting to solve a problem. The integration of GBL elements constitutes a modern educational approach (Landers, 2014; Papadakis, 2019) focusing on the practice of constructive pedagogy. Therefore, a digital game was developed as a cognitive tool, primarily aimed at students, but not excluding parents and teachers. Based on the teachings of socio-cultural pedagogical theories, after qualitative needs assessment research, scenarios were written, drawn from real school life, which prompt students to respond to real dilemmas in their own lives.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Aim**

This article aims to examine students' cognitive readiness towards bullying phenomena. It also aims to present a digital game as an alternative educational approach to raising students' awareness, empathy, and empowerment. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated how an art-based virtual museum game engages students in exploring and understanding the phenomenon.

### **3.2 Objectives**

To investigate the level of understanding and awareness of the phenomenon of bullying

To explore the impact of educational programmes on cultivating students' awareness on bullying

To determine whether digital games can contribute to students' enhancement of empathy and empowerment on bullying

To investigate the impact of art-based interventions on attitudes towards bullying among students in a secondary school setting.

### **3.3 Method**

An intervention study was used. The study was conducted in a public vocational high school in Athens. The student population comes from different areas of western Athens, from medium to low socio-economic backgrounds. It also includes various cultural groups such as immigrant children and Roma children. Initially, an educational needs assessment of the student population was carried out.

### **3.4 Students' Needs Assessment**

The assessment was carried out in the period October - November 2023. A total of 58 high school students, aged 15-17 years, participated and a convenience sample (students who were readily available and accessible to the researchers) was used. Data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews – discussions in class, digital games which included both closed and open-ended questions, and collaborative group work. Participants were engaged in semi-structured, researcher-led discussions to explore awareness and understanding of bullying. Participants completed digital quizzes individually to assess their knowledge of bullying dynamics and finally through the collaborative group work, students were divided into groups and, prompted by a video (<https://shorturl.at/vwxyN>), depicting a girl's thoughts and feelings while being subjected to verbal, physical and emotional violence in her school, they were assigned different roles in groups (victim, perpetrator, observer, parent, teacher). Each group member recorded their feelings and perspectives based on their assigned role (Structured journal entries). Quantitative data from the digital quizzes were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine students' overall levels of knowledge about bullying. Qualitative data from the group assignments were analysed thematically to identify common themes and patterns in students' perceptions, feelings and ways of handling similar situations.

### **3.5 Outline of Interventional Tool: Digital Escape room Construction**

Following the analysis of the students' needs assessment, we developed a project consisting of 4 groups. Each team was assigned with a different assignment. The assignments have as follows:

- Study of the life and work of the greek artist, Yannoulis Halepas.
- Bullying experiences recording and scenario writing
- Constructing the Digital World, 3D Objects, and 2D Designs
- Game programming

The first team's primary responsibility was to connect the artists' life and work in order to identify artworks that could be linked to the emotions experienced by the perpetrator, the victim, the observer so as to be included in the museum. The second team and educators participated in discussions about bullying, particularly the definition, the reasons, and the consequences for all the parties held in sessions. After completing the study and data recording, the first and second team selected the exhibits and scenarios that were finally included in the game based on the objectives set by the involved persons during the project's development. Meanwhile, the construction and design teams were developing digital exhibits, and the programming team was modifying algorithms to meet the new educational goals of the game.

Problem Selection: The Phenomenon of Bullying Exploration of the Problem's Extent:

- Incidents of bullying in the reference school
- Incidents of bullying in Greece
- International recognition of the seriousness of the phenomenon

Research Questions:

- Do students recognise whether a situation of tension between students is classified as bullying?
- What characteristics do students attribute to the bully and the victim?
- Are students aware of the significant role of the bystander?

- How do they perceive the family and school attitudes towards the phenomenon?
- Are they aware of the consequences for all parties involved?
- Do they perceive their involvement in the phenomenon?
- Are they able to choose coping strategies?

Pedagogical Techniques:

- Scrum Methodology: Scrum is the chosen methodology for developing the game. It is a management framework teams use to self-organize and work towards a common goal. It describes a set of meetings, tools, and roles for efficient project delivery.
- Storytelling
- Game-Based Learning

Criteria for selecting the type of game:

- Escape Room 3D: The aim is to allow the player, whether victim, perpetrator or spectator, to "escape" from the Escape-Boundaries Of Bullying by freeing the game's hero.
- Maintenance of a simulated museum environment featuring artworks by a specific artist chosen for their relevance to the issue.
- Utilization of an existing award-winning game: The 3D digital game "Talk to Art" is built in a virtual museum, a replica of a real museum on the island of Tinos.

Game Pedagogical Objectives:

- To explore students' understanding of the phenomenon.
- To allow students to explore the concept of bullying and understand the involved roles (bully, victim, bystander, school, family).
- To discover possible causes and coping methods.
- To connect art with the phenomenon as a means of expression.
- To encourage empathy, reflection and critical thinking while playing.
- To experience role reversal.

Development Objectives for the Game:

- To create a game that is familiar and appealing to students/players and follows the rules of an escape room, such as limited completion time, searching for and collecting clues, and escaping.
- To include essential functions of digital games, such as pause, continue, restart, and game termination.
- To incorporate quizzes related to bullying types and maximise the connection between exhibits and

Scenario content

Scenario content and possible answers should reflect the emotions of all those involved in bullying, describe possible causes and consequences, and suggest coping strategies—narrating scenarios to increase player interaction/dialogue with the game. Players should be able to express their position by choosing among four possible answers, covering all possible emotions and attitudes per scenario. The game should help students realise the therapeutic aspect of art. Students should be introduced to museum environments to become future-conscious museum visitors.

Data collection from sources - Evaluation of data - Development tools

For writing scenarios about bullying:

- Documentary "Bullying Diaries" filmed in Greece and the United Kingdom, created within the framework of the European project "European Antibullying Network," funded by the Daphne III program of the European Commission, and implemented by "The Smile of the Child" in collaboration with 16 organisations working in the field of bullying from 12 EU countries.
- Seminars, "Art Therapy Activities" for educators (Open Educational Institute), by Dr. Maria Athanasekou.
- Conference Attendance
- Discussion and documentation of students' viewpoints regarding scenario development.
- Assessment of scenarios with the school psychologist

For the construction content of the game:

- For the museum's construction (Figure 1), Google Earth images of the building (Tinos— Museum of Marble Crafts of Piraeus Group Bank Cultural Foundation) were utilised to analyse its external architecture, followed by its creation through the Unity platform.
- Virtual tours of the Telloglou Foundation of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki were utilised to create 3D sculptures.
- Illustrations from books about the artist's life and work were studied to construct 2D copies of works designed by the 2D design team.

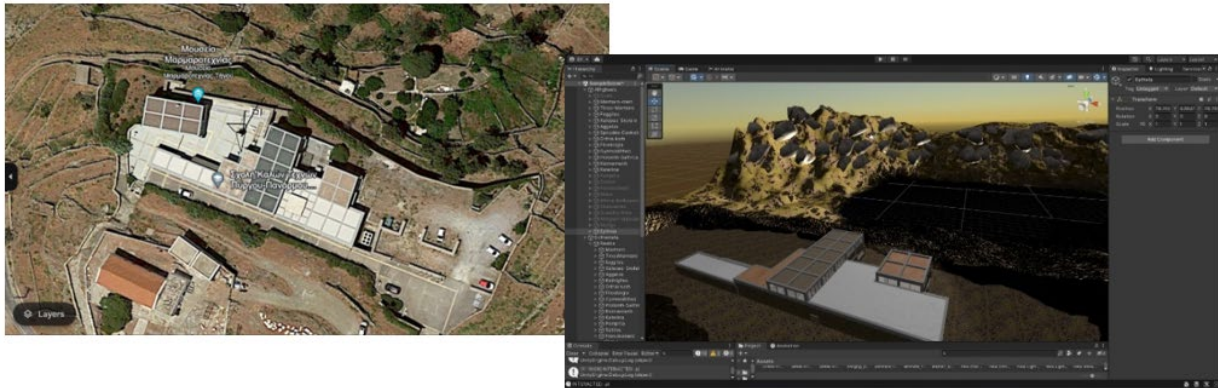


Figure 1: Building

### 3.6 Game Development

The digital three-dimensional game "Hack the Art - Talk to Art" was redesigned and reconstructed by the school students, focusing on bullying and following the objectives set.

For the development of the game, the following platforms were used:

- Unity for building the digital world (Figures 1, 3-6)
- Blender for creating the 3D sculptures (Figure 6a)
- Krita for the creation of 2D drawings and GIFs (Figures 2, 6b)

Hardware Specifications:

- CPU: Intel i9 12900H 3.8 GHz
- RAM: 32GB DDR5
- GPU: Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070 Ti
- Storage: 1000GB SSD
- Operating System: Windows 11 64-bit

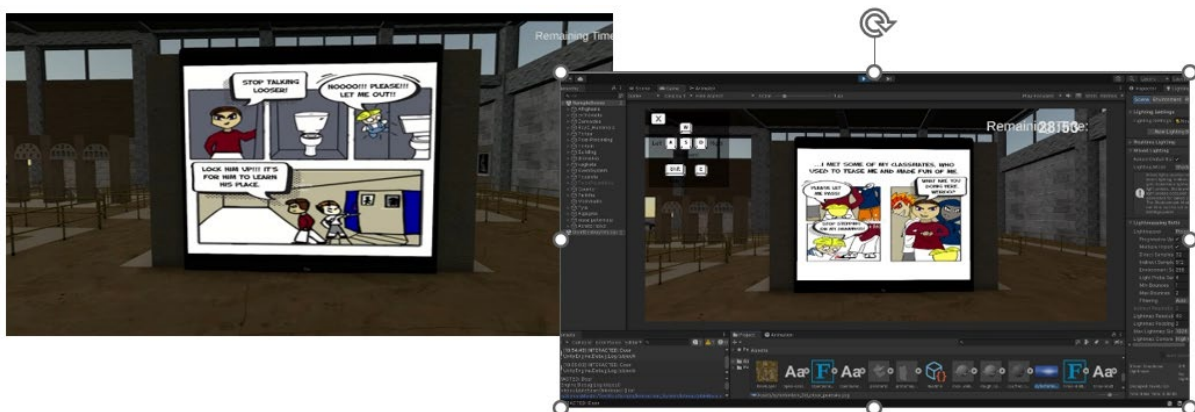
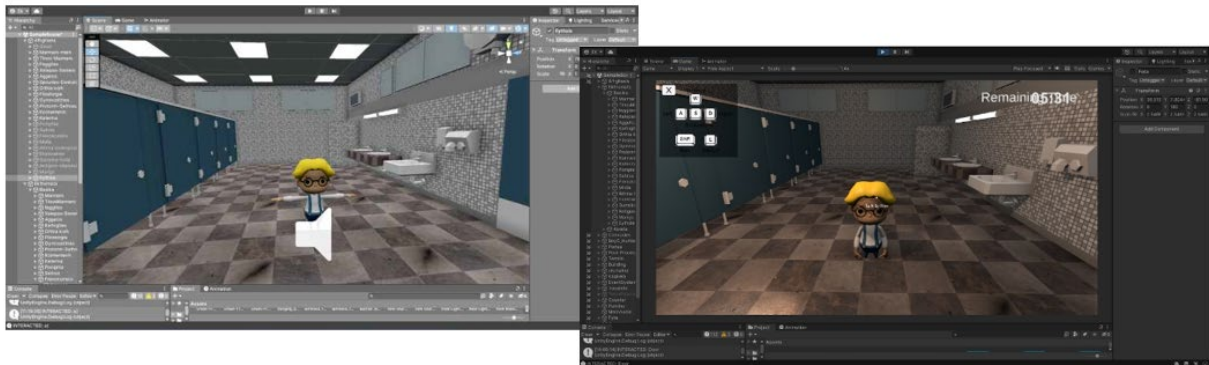


Figure 2: Comic

### 3.7 Game Description

Upon entering the museum, the player finds themselves in front of a video wall where a comic is displayed to narrate the game's main scenario and set the objectives for the player (**Figure 2**). The main scenario revolves around a student who visits the museum director to appreciate the copies of drawings of sculptures by a painter. However, in the museum, he encounters his classmates who bully him and, this time, lock him in the museum's toilets. The player's objectives are to answer the questions posed for each exhibit and collect clues to free the student (**Figure 3**). The player navigates through the museum, seeking out each exhibit that illuminates for interaction.

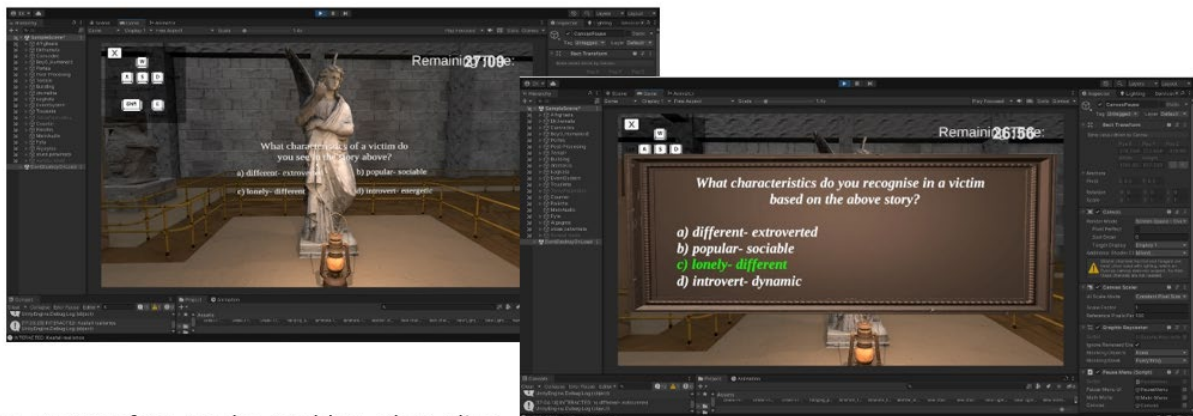
The game progresses through three difficulty levels.



**Figure 3: The Victim**

1st Level - Definitions, Roles

At this level, through 5 questions, the aim is to present and define the phenomenon. The exhibits are placed linearly, and regardless of whether the player answers correctly or incorrectly, a pop-up canvas appears with the correct answer or definition (**Figure 4**). This specific technique was chosen to allow the player to recognize by themselves whether they answered incorrectly or to enhance their self-esteem and confidence if they answered correctly. To find the next question, the light of the current exhibit goes out, and the next one turns on.

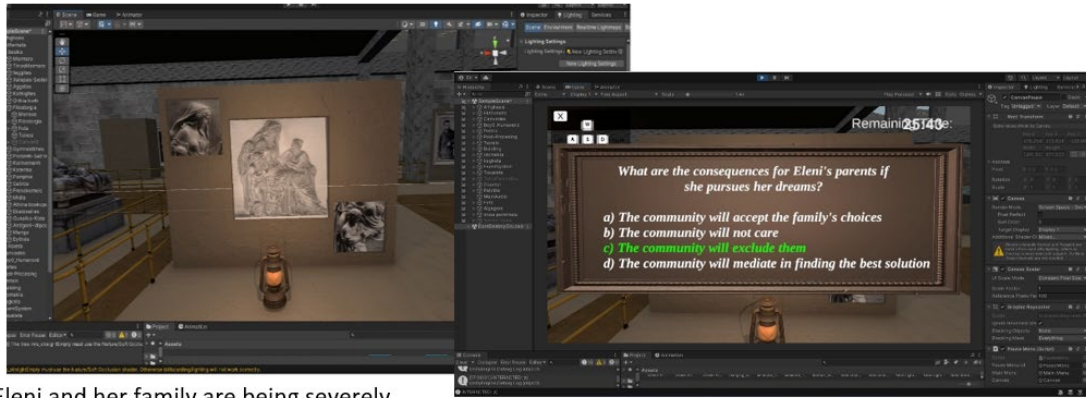


The story refers to the problem that Elias faced when a student of his videotaped and uploaded a discussion with his only friend about his sexuality

**Figure 4: Level 1**

2nd Level - Consequences

The difficulty level increases as more exhibits are placed in different random positions within the museum. Once again, the illumination of the exhibit is the guiding light for the player. The goal of the questions and scenarios at this level is for the player to discover the consequences of the phenomenon on the bully, the victim, the observer, the family, and society (**Figure 5**). Like the first level, the player progresses through the museum regardless of whether they have answered correctly.



Eleni and her family are being severely criticized by the Roma society, in which they belong, since Eleni does not conform to its standards.

**Figure 5: Level 2 - Consequences**

3rd Level - Coping Strategies / Put Yourself in My Shoes (**Figure 6**)

This level is the most challenging level, where the player has to answer ten questions contrary to the previous levels, collect clues hidden in some exhibits, and correctly answer all the questions based on the knowledge gained from the previous two levels. At this level, the players are required to find the correct answer by themselves. Every time they answer correctly, the light of the exhibit goes out along with the question, and if there is a clue in the exhibit, it appears for the player to collect. The question disappears if the player answers incorrectly, but the light remains on for the player to return and answer correctly. Collecting a clue from an exhibit is only possible if the player has answered correctly.

Completing the game requires answering all questions correctly in the 3rd level and collecting all hidden clues before the time limit expires. If the player fails, they become trapped in the museum.

**4. Results**

The following results were derived from recording the responses observed. At the same time, students played the game on the computer of the school, which was capable of running it, with a small student sample. Further investigation into the results with a larger sample is pending.

The tools employed to assess the students' attitudes towards the bullying phenomenon are:

- A multiple-choice question game with one correct answer (closed-ended) relevant to bullying scenarios (Table 1)



Figure 6a. Ekatoxiras, a sculpture of Halepas broke, and another hidden clay head was revealed from inside. People who are bullied, hide and close themselves up like Halepas did with the clay head in Ekatoxiras.



Figure 6b. The story features professor Kostas's attempt to combine the art of Halepas with bullying and creative learning.

**Figure 6a-6b: Level 3 – Coping Strategies / Put Yourself in My Shoes**

Table 1: Multiple-choice question game

Q	Players correct (%)
What forms can school bullying take?	73,68%
What is the key feature of bullying behaviour?	84,21%
"Boys are more violent than girls"	10,53%
The person who practices bullying behaviour often feels popular and derives pleasure from the act.	78,95%
How might a child who is being bullied feel?	84,21%
School violence can cause significant consequences for the child	73,68%
Children who are commonly bullied have low self-confidence	52,63%
Your classmate while you are playing football accidentally hits you in the leg. Is this bullying behaviour?	78,95%
The children-observers reinforce the behaviour of the abuser by their silent attitude	78,95%
What should you do if a child spreads bad rumours about you at school and on social media?	73,68%
Which of the following is considered cyberbullying?	63,16%
After an argument at school, a group of kids send you threatening messages on a social network. What do you do?	42,11%
One of your friends tells you an embarrassing piece of information about another classmate. What do you do?	34,63%
What should you do if someone is harassing you via chat?	47,37%
What can I do if someone creates a fake profile using my name to send harassing messages?	57,89%
What is it called if an adult contacts a child via the internet to meet and exploit the child?	21,05%
What are some dangerous things you can post about yourself online?	57,89%

- Printed forms for collecting students' responses and reactions

According to the observations, the following results were recorded:

For the initial level focusing on definitions and roles of those involved:

Regarding the question "What is bullying?", the most common responses were:

"Intentionally repeated aggressive behaviour" and "The use of violence against someone weaker."

In a question concerning the differentiation of roles of those involved in a bullying incident based on a given scenario involving a girl from a low socioeconomic background who receives daily sarcastic comments from her classmates but does not react, students selected the answer "There are no roles since it is not a bullying phenomenon."

Regarding the question "What characteristics do you recognize in a victim based on the above story?" based on a story involving a video-recorded conversation among friends about one of their sexual identities and the unwitting public sharing of the video resulting in the protagonist leaving school, students attributed the following characteristics to the victim: "Lonely" and "Different."

In the second level concerning the consequences that the involved parties may face:

In the question "What are the consequences for Eleni's parents if she pursues her dreams?" based on the story of a young Roma girl from a supportive family who wants to study and differentiate herself from the traditions of her community, students stated that the community would be indifferent.

In the question "What are the main feelings of Anna's classmate after he chooses to defame her?" based on a scenario of online defamation with fabricated visual material due to romantic rejection, students chose the answer that the bully would feel "confidence, satisfaction, and uniqueness."

In the question "What are the possible impacts that Jason will have?" based on a scenario involving a young man who lost his mother and turned to alcohol, displaying violent and inappropriate behaviour towards classmates and teachers, students believed he would suffer from health problems, both physical and mental.



In the question "How will this incident affect Mary's parents?" which was based on a story of repeated sexual harassment within the school leading to suicide attempts, students expressed that they would feel frustration and anger.

In the question "What are the negative consequences for the school?" based on the previous scenario of sexual harassment, students responded that there would be a breakdown of trust and communication within the school between students, students and teachers, and between the school and families.

In the third and final level concerning coping strategies and role reversal:

In the question "You would be a bullying victim if: ", students answered, "Your classmates make fun of you every day in the schoolyard, and you don't like it."

In the question "Why did Mr. Costas select this activity?" which was based on a scenario describing an art teacher assigning an activity related to the works of sculptor Chalepas and asking his students to paint their emotions, students selected the answer "to help his students identify the feelings of the abuser and the victim."

In the question "If you were Thomas' older sister, would you do the same?" which was based on a scenario describing the role an older sister takes when learning that her brother is being abused, students answered, "Yes because they deserve it and I would want to protect my little brother."

In the question "Do you think this is the right approach?", which paralleled the action of Yiannoulis Halepas hiding a clay model within another work, with the choice of an individual experiencing bullying and concealing their true feelings, students responded, "No, the person who is being bullied should not behave in the same way as the perpetrator."

In the question "What do you think should be done?", which was based on a scenario describing students' inappropriate behaviour towards a new teacher, students answered, "The students involved should be punished with expulsion or a reduction in disciplinary privileges."

The question "How would you handle the situation if you were Mark?" was based on a scenario describing the profile of a student coming from a violent family environment, engaging in violence towards classmates, and feeling strong at school while feeling weak at home, students answered, "I would find another way to express my feelings and ask for help."

## **5. Discussion**

According to the outcomes of the investigation of the educational needs of the student population and the intervention through the digital game, the following points emerged:

In terms of the level of understanding and awareness regarding the topic of bullying, the students' need assessment revealed varying levels of awareness and understanding. Our study highlighted different levels of awareness and understanding of bullying among students. This is in line with previous studies (Hellström & Lundberg, 2020; Yosep, I. et al, 2023). In particular, while some participants demonstrated clear knowledge, others showed misunderstandings or gaps in understanding. This diversity highlights the importance of tailored interventions to address the different needs of students.

As far as the role of educational intervention programs is concerned, our findings support the effectiveness of educational programs in raising students' awareness of bullying dynamics, in line with previous studies (Jones & Brown, 2020; Gaffney et al, 2021; Hamdani et al, 2024). Collaborative group work, which was enriched by digital quizzes, provided a platform for students to engage and reflect on the different perspectives of bullying scenarios. These interventions not only increased students' knowledge but also promoted empathy and critical thinking skills, in line with the objectives of bullying prevention programs.

Regarding the impact of game-based learning, the findings of this study underscore the potential of game-based learning as an effective tool for promoting students' learning, awareness, and handling of bullying. Colliver and Veraksa (2019) highlight that game-based learning is a useful way to understand young children's perspectives on their learning through play. Similar to our research findings (Smith et al, 2021; Jones and Brown, 2022), investigating the use of a digital escape room activity on bullying, revealed that participants demonstrated high levels of engagement and enthusiasm throughout the game as they actively collaborated to solve puzzles and navigate bullying scenarios. The immersive and interactive nature of the escape room not only captured the students' interest, but also allowed them to take ownership of their learning experience. Nevertheless, Bezençon et al. (2023) point out that such an activity can have heterogeneous effects.

Despite engaging in a virtual museum space, students primarily focused on the challenge of the escape room rather than the museum's content. Their interest was piqued by the 2D and 3D artworks created by members of the development team, with less enthusiasm shown for other sculptures. Upon encountering the artist's works in a physical space again, they will establish correlations and demonstrate greater interest.

In addition to the above mentioned, digital escape rooms, through simulated scenarios and decision making in real-time, provides students with the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills, empathic understanding and skills to manage bullying behaviour. Through interactive play, students are encouraged to explore the underlying dynamics of bullying, discern its root causes, and devise strategies for appropriate responses (Wang et al,2024).

## 6. Limitations

The study team acknowledges that students' responses may be influenced by contextual factors, including (a) the positioning of the question choices, (b) the length of the response text, and (c) time constraints leading to the expression of initial, rather than deeper, thoughts. Moreover, it is recognised that repetition and time for reflection are necessary to facilitate changes in attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. Additionally, it should be noted that three of the students engaged in the project development were concurrently preparing for university admission, which may have affected their availability and level of engagement.

## 7. Conclusion

Raising awareness, mental empowerment, and empathy for bullying requires dynamic and innovative approaches. With its potential for self-awareness and student activation, game-based learning should be incorporated into educational programs for bullying prevention and management within schools. Moreover, learning through art can help students explore complex emotions and interpersonal dynamics related to bullying in non-confrontational ways, fostering deeper understanding and empathy.

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