

Identifying Determinants of Bullying and Deciding on Measures through Engaging Adolescents in a Rural School in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a public health concern which generates a range of harmful physical, mental, and social health consequences for both its victims and perpetrators. Role of students in finding solutions for bullying has to be improved as they are affected from this issue. The aim of this study was to identify possible determinants of bullying and to decide measures, through engaging a group of adolescents in a rural school in Sri Lanka. Community-based health promotion approach was used for the study. The process was carried out for 3 months with grade nine students ($n = 68$) in a rural school in Anuradhapura district, Sri Lanka. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through, a self-administered questionnaire and ten interactive group discussions which were conducted with the selected group of students. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis respectively. Students were able to identify 16 possible determinants of bullying and they prioritized five determinants based on the importance and feasibility of changing. The prioritized determinants included lack of understanding of students on the range of harms of bullying, poor responses of students against bullying, poor relationships among students, students being in unhappy or angry mood throughout the day, and acceptance of bullying as a heroic act among students. Furthermore, seven measures to address the selected determinants were decided together with the students. Students are capable in identifying possible determinants of bullying and deciding on measures to address the selected determinants with comparatively small guidance.

Keywords: Adolescents, Bullying, Determinants, Health promotion, Rural school

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INTRODUCTION

There is plenty of published evidence regarding bullying at schools worldwide.^[1-3] Bullying at school is "any negative action to which a student is being exposed repeatedly and overtime by another student or a group of students."^[4] Bullying is a form of violence.^[5] Protection from all forms of violence is a right of a child.^[6] Bullying generates negative health outcomes in children.^[7-10] Preventing bullying leads to a safe and healthy psychosocial climate within schools.^[11,12] Therefore, school has been identified as a best place to intervene for the bullying issue.^[13]

At the global level, the prevalence of being involved in bullying as bullies and victims during the adolescence range from 3% to more than 20%.^[14] From that, facing bullying during last few months by school children is highest in poorer countries in the world including the countries in South Asia.^[15] Although 1–7.7% of school students face bullying in the region, it has been a neglected issue since many years.^[16]

In Sri Lanka, 68% of schooling boys and 51.2% of schooling girls in the ages of 13–16 years were victims of bullying, where physical bullying is much common among boys (78.1%) than girls (26.5%) and verbal bullying is much prevalent among girls (82.1%) than boys (50%).^[17] Social-ecological model of bullying describes that different factors at individual, family, peer group, social, and community level affect the bullying issue.^[18] Larger scale surveys on bullying reveal that factors such as sex, age, being LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender), race, nationality or color, religion, socio-economic status, migrant status, and school climate act as protective and risk factors of bullying among school children.^[19] Health promotion approach suggests that identifying the factors which affect for a particular health status and taking

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actions to change those factors by the people themselves, is crucial in improving their health.

Community-based health promotion is generally designed to identify and prioritize the determinants of a particular health issue and then to decide, implement and evaluate the actions to address the selected determinants together with the affected community group. Being a process, being community based, identifying and addressing determinants, measuring the progress and control over the factors which affect health are the five main principles of community-based health promotion approach.^[20]

Therefore, this study applied the principles of community-based health promotion to identify determinants and to decide measures to address bullying, collectively with a group of

adolescents in a rural school. The harmful consequences of bullying affect its victims as well as the bullies regardless of their age and the type of their school; both rural and urban school settings.^[21] However, some studies have proved that school bullying is prevailing in disadvantaged areas as well.^[22] Yet, there is little published evidence on engagement of students in rural schools, to identify the determinants of bullying and decide on measures to address this issue. The present study explores the possible determinants and measures for bullying by engaging a group of adolescents in a rural school. It is a part of an interventional study which was conducted to address the bullying issue at rural schools in Anuradhapura district, Sri Lanka.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

Community-based health promotion approach was applied for the conduction of the study.

Study Setting

A rural mixed school (Type 01C) in Anuradhapura district was purposively selected to conduct the study. Type 01C schools in Sri Lanka are considered to be the schools with lower facilities compared to Type 1AB schools with best facilities.^[23] The selected school was located in a rural agricultural community.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The study setting was purposively selected for the present study to recruit adolescents from a rural school. For selecting the study participants, grades which included the students in the adolescence (10–19 years) were considered and there were students from grade six to grade 13. From that, grade nine was selected randomly as the study sample, using lottery method. All the students who were studying in grade nine at the initiation of the study and among them, who provided their parents' consent to participate for the study were recruited as the study sample ($n=68$) and the school contained only two classes for the grade nine students (Class A ($n=35$), Class B ($n=33$)).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

All the male and female students who were studying in grade nine at the initiation of the study were included with their parents' consent. There were no any specific exclusion criteria other than not providing the written consent of the parents of the students.

Study Period

The whole study was conducted from October 2018 to March 2019. Nearly 3 months were spent for identifying the determinants and deciding on measures to address the bullying issue.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, a self-administered questionnaire was provided to study participants and averagely 40–45 min were given to complete it. Secondly, interactive group discussions were

conducted with students to gather data. Verbal and non-verbal communications of the students were recorded during the group discussions and participation and enthusiasm were measured at each session by the principle investigator using predefined criteria.

Conceptual Framework for the Process

A model for the process of identifying determinants and deciding on measures for bullying was adapted from the conceptual framework for health promotion intervention developed by Samarasinghe *et al* in 2011 [Figure 1].^[20] The same framework has been adapted by another study conducted by Guruge *et al.* in 2017.^[24] The adapted model for the present study [Figure 2] contains the incorporated components of "Content" and the "Process." The "Process" (right side) indicates how the health promotion intervention develops gradually along with the time. The "Content" (left side) of the model includes the core activity which was implemented in relevant to each step of the "process."

Identification of Determinants of Bullying with Students

Before initiating the process with students, the school principal and teachers were well-informed about the expected objectives and the benefits of the study. Two fixed periods in the timetable per week (40 min per period) were provided by the school principal to carry out the study without disturbing students' academic work. A self-administered questionnaire on identifying determinants that affect bullying at school was given to students before initiating the group discussions with them.

First discussion to identify determinants that affect bullying was initiated by asking students to be grouped (5–6 students per group) according to their preference and then to discuss about the characteristics of their dream school which they would like to have in the future. As a group activity, they were asked to present their ideas as a list or a drawing at the next discussion. During the second discussion, the lists and drawings presented by students were taken into discussion and most of the characteristics of their dream school were comprised with improved infrastructure facilities. Therefore, understanding of the students was broadened by the principle investigator describing about having a better psychosocial environment within the school is important in achieving their dream school. After this facilitation by the principle investigator, characteristics such as good relationships with peers and teachers, well-disciplined students, having physically active student groups, and respecting for the differences were added by the students to the existing list of characteristics of their dream school. To achieve such kind of psychosocially safe environment within their school, students became interested in identifying "why bullying occurs at school settings?"

During the third discussion, principle investigator directed the student groups toward identifying determinants that affect bullying. There were five student groups from each class including five to six members in each group. Initially, they were asked to discuss within the groups and list out all the possible determinants that affect bullying. Then each group was asked to present their identified list of determinants. Similar determinants were not repeated. This discussion was conducted without adding principle investigator's ideas on determinants of bullying. During the fourth discussion, the list of determinants from the previous self-administered questionnaires was

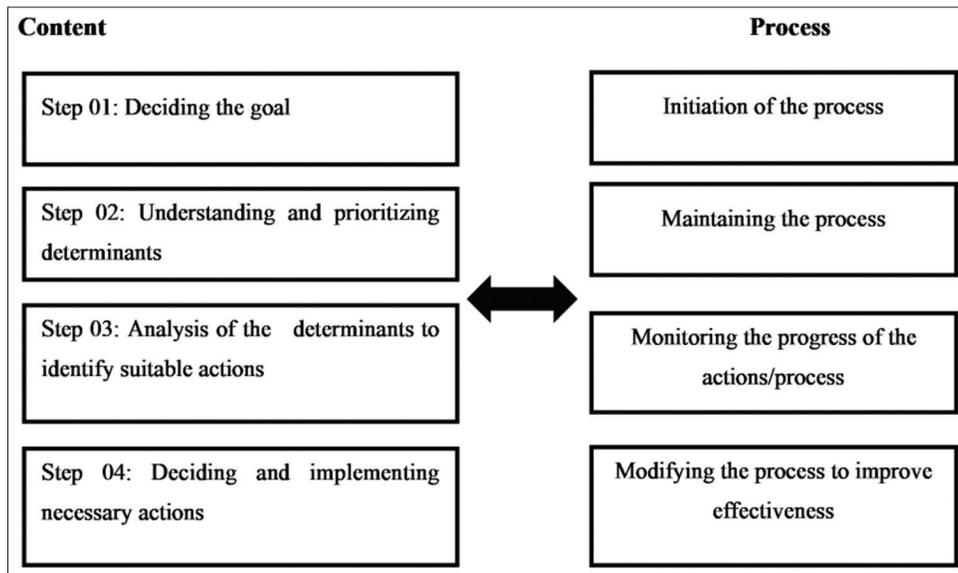


Figure 1: Health promotion intervention model (Samarasinghe et al., 2011)

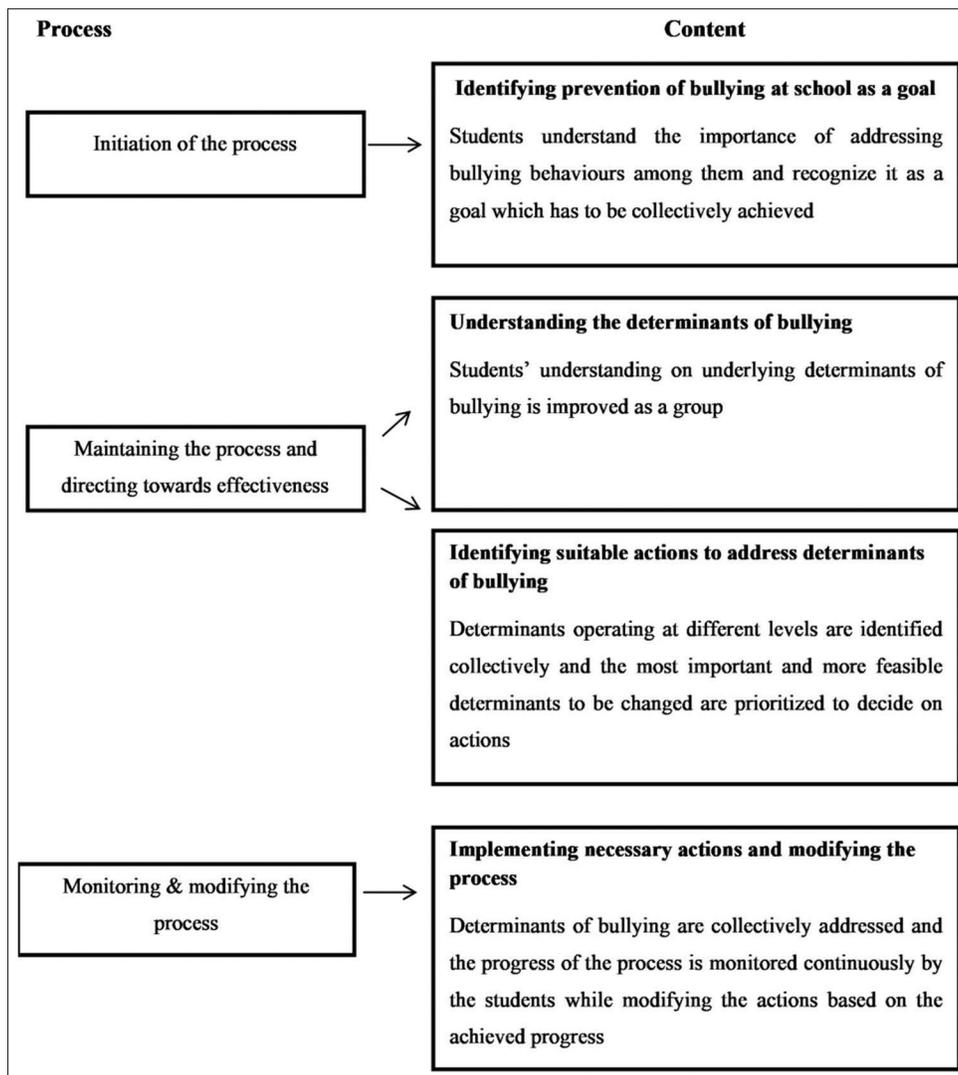


Figure 2: Conceptual framework for the process of addressing bullying among students

also taken into consideration with the list of determinants identified as groups during the third discussion. Both lists were compared by the students to select a common list of determinants.

During the fifth and sixth discussions, student groups were facilitated by the principle investigator to explore other deeper level determinants that affect bullying behaviors, but cannot be identified much easily. The list of determinants was revised after this facilitation and another few determinants were added to the common list of determinants prepared by the students themselves. The final list of 16 determinants was taken into consideration at the seventh and eighth discussions with the students to select the most important and easily changeable determinants that affect bullying. Students were divided into ten groups according to their preference and approximately five students were included in each group. Then each group was named as A, B, C...etc., and was given a determinant card to fill by themselves. In the determinant card, students had to go through the 16 determinants again and to identify the most important and easily changeable two determinants that affect bullying. Once a group comes into an agreement on the selected two determinants, a group member from each group marked them on the classroom blackboard. Likewise, all the groups marked their two determinants on the blackboard and with the common agreement of all the student groups, the most important and changeable five determinants were selected based on the frequency of mentioning each determinant.

Deciding on Actions

Based on the next step of the conceptual framework in Figure 2, another two group discussions were taken with students from both classes to decide on the actions to address the selected five determinants. Within the first discussion on deciding actions, small group discussions among students were facilitated and asked them to come up with their own activities to address selected five determinants of bullying. During the second discussion, principle investigator provided technical inputs on students' suggestions and modified the activities accordingly together with the student groups. Some of the decided activities allowed them to measure the progress of changing determinants by themselves.

In total, ten interactive group discussions were conducted with students to identify determinants of bullying and to decide on the actions. Each discussion was conducted for nearly 40 min. The number of students participated for each discussion was varied from 50 to 62.

Ongoing Assessment of Students' Apparent Enthusiasm

Students' apparent enthusiasm for the process was measured before and at end of each discussion conducted with them. This was done by the principle investigator based on pre-developed criteria. The criteria included the number of students attended for the discussion, frequency of asking questions from the principle investigator by the students in relevant to the process, frequency of answering the questions raised by the principle investigator, and the number of new suggestions given by students.

Data Analysis

Data generated from the open-ended questions included in the self-administered questionnaires which asked about the

perceived determinants of bullying at school was coded and given a numerical value to perform descriptive statistical methods to obtain percentages. Qualitative data obtained during the group discussions were analyzed manually based on the principles of thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the ethics review committee of the Faculty of Applied Sciences at Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. Administrative clearance to conduct the study in selected school was obtained from the Provincial Department of Education in Anuradhapura and from the principal of the school. Written consent from the parents of the students was obtained through an assent letter enclosed with an information sheet and the letter was sent to home through students before the commencement of data collection. The reply letter with consent was posted or handed over to the principle investigator by the students themselves.

RESULTS

Study Participants

Study participants were selected from two available classes in grade nine including both male and female students [Table 1]. Mean age of the students was around 14 years and the majority of the sample was comprised with male students (57.35%) than female students (42.65%).

Identified and Prioritized Determinants

Students were able to identify 16 possible determinants that affect for bullying and nine out of them were identified by the students themselves without any facilitation from the principle investigator. The rest of the seven determinants were identified by the students after a small guidance was provided by the principle investigator. The identified list of determinants is indicated in Table 2.

From the list of determinants in Table 2, nine determinants in the upper part came out from the self-administered questionnaire and the interactive group discussions. Jealousy toward each other was reasoned out by the students as a result of being clever, beautiful, rich, getting praised by others, and being a popular person in the school. Another determinant mentioned by the students was bullies that were victims of bullying at some point in their life. They described it further, when bullies had faced bullying at their school or at home, they tend to see others suffering like they did. When mentioning about negative qualities of the students as a determinant of bullying, students categorized being stingy, dishonest, sneaking, impatience, arrogant, and erudite under the negative qualities. Furthermore, economic factors such as being poor and the stigmatizing poor students by other students were identified by students as two separate determinants. Furthermore, students identified being disabled physically or mentally and the deviant

Table 1: Study participants

Gender	Number of total participants	Class A	Class B	Mean age
Male	39	20	19	14.10
Female	29	16	13	14.17

Table 2: Identified list of determinants

<i>Determinants identified by the students without any facilitation from the principle investigator</i>	
1. Jealousy toward each other	6. Deviant physical appearance
2. Bullies also have been subjected to bullying	7. Misusage of power attributed with different positions hold in school
3. Negative qualities of the students	8. Being stigmatized by others
4. Being poor	9. Considering the victim as a weaker
5. Being disabled	
<i>Determinants identified by the students after the facilitation from the principle investigator</i>	
1. Lack of knowledge about the range of harms of bullying	5. Accepting bullying as a heroic act among students
2. Poor responses of students against bullying	6. Absence of a systematic reporting system to teachers about bullying
3. Poor relationships among students	7. Being in an unhappy or angry mood
4. Lack of equal opportunities and responsibilities for students within the classroom	

physical appearance which they referred to “being ugly” as two separate determinants. Students pointed out that the misuse of power attributed with the positions hold by some students (i.e., being a class monitor, prefect, president or secretary of various clubs in the school) affect for bullying. Considering victim of bullying as a weaker either physically or mentally or socially by the bullies was clearly stated as another determinant of bullying.

Lower part of the Table 2 indicates the determinants identified by the students after a small facilitation from the principle investigator during an interactive group discussion. Lack of knowledge or understanding about the physical, mental, social, and educational harms of bullying was identified by the students as a factor which supports the continuation of bullying at school. Not revealing about bullying incidents to others, not supporting to victims and supporting to bullies were categorized under the determinant of poor responses of students against bullying. Under the determinant of poor relationships among students, students mentioned about lack of unity in the classroom and lack of understanding about each student.

Lack of equal opportunities and responsibilities for students within the classroom were identified as a determinant of bullying and students mentioned that it can be a factor which affects for jealousy as well. Another determinant they identified was accepting bullying as a heroic act among students or as a mean to become a hero in the class. Absence of a systematic reporting system to report bullying incidents to teachers was pointed out as a determinant of bullying as students described when reporting these incidents in an open forum, it may lead to another bullying incident later. Furthermore, students mentioned that being in an angry mood most of the time of the day can be another factor which may lead to catch a victim and getting fun of him/her.

From the above list of determinants, lack of knowledge about the range of harms of bullying, poor responses of students against bullying, poor relationships among students, accepting bullying as a heroic act among students, and being in an unhappy or angry mood were prioritized by the students based on their importance and feasibility of addressing.

Measures to Address Prioritized Determinants

In total, seven actions were decided and described by the students to address the selected five determinants, which were modified after the technical inputs from the principle investigator and the decided actions are indicated in Table 3.

DISCUSSION

The key finding of this study was that students were able to successfully engage in a community-based process of identifying determinants and deciding measures to address bullying at school. Without any facilitation of the principle investigator, students were able to identify some determinants already found in the existing literature as risk factors of bullying. Those determinants included; Being a disabled student,^[25,26] physical appearance,^[19,27] stigmatization,^[28] poverty,^[29] being avoided by peers, low social status, and being different or being perceived as weak physically or mentally.^[30-32] Apart from that, students were able to predict the possible determinants of bullying such as jealousy toward others, poor relationships among students, negative qualities of students, acceptance of bullying as a heroic act, and being in an unhappy or angry mood along the day. Furthermore, they were able to prioritize five determinants of bullying based on their importance and feasibility of addressing.

Prioritized determinants included lack of knowledge about the range of harms of bullying, poor responses of students against bullying, poor relationships among students, accepting bullying as a heroic act among students, and being in an unhappy or angry mood. They selected these determinants to decide the most suitable actions to prevent bullying at school. One of the key factors which affected for the success of this study was that the process of identifying determinants was carried out using a student-centered participatory approach. Involvement and engagement of the students who play the role of bully and the victim in identifying the determinants and deciding on measures of bullying offered the affected group the opportunity of finding “why it happens” and “how can they prevent it.” Rigby has recommended that “asking from students about what is happening” is a best way to collect data about bullying at school.^[8]

This study incorporated the same recommendation and health promotion approach allowed the students to identify the factors that affect bullying and thus to decide actions to prevent it by themselves in their own school setting. The initial strategy of using “Dream school” concept to engage the students in the process paved the way to sustain their enthusiasm throughout the study. Initiating a process with a practical goal which is familiar to the target group leads to improve their interest in working toward achieving that goal. Winning the hearts of school staff is really important in ensuring the sustainability of any intervention carries out with students. For that, principle investigator of the present study had to convince the importance of this kind of study for the school community and regular updates on the progress of the study was provided to the school principal and to the teachers-in-charge.

Interactive group discussions allowed the students to work as a group rather than individuals. It helps to keep the students engaged and involved. One of the most important things is that students themselves were able to identify the factors and decide on the actions for an issue which affect for their health though they are not adults. The actions decided by the students were

Table 3: Decided measures to address selected determinants of bullying

<i>Decided Action</i>	<i>Description</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Session on types and harms of bullying	A session to improve students understanding and knowledge on different types of bullying and range of harmful physical, mental, social, and educational consequences of bullying. Session will be comprised with interactive discussions and activities	X				
Changing sitting rows	Usually students used to sit in the same place/row in the classroom for the whole year they suggested changing the sitting row once a week according to a roster developed by them. It allows them to spend time with all the students in the class and to know them well				X	
Dividing responsibilities in the classroom	Students suggested preparing a list of responsibilities in the classroom including cleaning the classroom and the yard, providing assistance for sick students, informally counting the bullying incidents in the classroom, etc. After deciding on the responsibilities students prepare a roster to divide these responsibilities among themselves. Furthermore, they agreed to mark the fulfillment of each responsibility daily				X	
Nominating the hero of the classroom	Students decided to exhibit a list of characteristics of a real hero within the classroom and then to spread it to the whole school. Within the list, bullying is indicated as a weak act not a heroic act and the real hero is decided by the students at the end of each month using a secret poll					X
Mood card	Students design a mood card for each row of the classroom and one student is responsible to mark the mood of each student in the row at the end of each day. They calculate the average number of happy moods in the classroom at the end of each month and take necessary actions to improve classroom happiness level					X
Story cards	Story cards are created by the principle investigator and each story card contains a fictional story about a bullying incident. Student groups are asked to identify the type of bullying and the immediate actions/response they can take against that particular bullying incident.		X			
Poster campaign	Posters are created by students and exhibited at the risky places of bullying inside the school. Posters include the harms of bullying, how to identify a bullying act, actions against bullying and mainly the message of bullying is not a heroic act is conveyed through these posters.		X		X	

1-Lack of knowledge about the range of harms of bullying, 2-Poor responses of students against bullying, 3-Poor relationships among students, 4-Accepting bullying as a heroic act among students, 5- Being in an unhappy or angry mood

simple and cost effective and that natural wisdom of the students in developing measures has to be utilized and can be enriched with the technical inputs from the researcher. Although, they do not have any proper experience on research or they do not have received any proper training on health promotion approach, a little guidance was enough for them to direct toward achieving the aims of this study.

One of the weaknesses of this study was the use of subjective measurements such as apparent enthusiasm of the students. To reduce the subjectivity of such kind of measurements, the assessment of students' enthusiasm were based on pre-developed criteria. However, it may not remove the effect of subjectivity on the study fully. However, only for that reason, we cannot simply ignore the importance of assessing enthusiasm of the relevant community as it helps to shape the next step of the process based on the level of current enthusiasm.^[20] The methods and strategies applied within this study may not be able to replicate as in the same way because this study was conducted with a selected group of students in a rural school. Yet, the health promotion model used for the present study can be adapted for different health concerns in different contexts in a successful manner.

CONCLUSIONS

The finally derived main determinants by the students were "Lack of knowledge about the range of harms of bullying," "Poor responses of students against bullying," "Poor relationships among students," "Accepting bullying as a heroic act among

students," and "Being in an unhappy or angry mood throughout the day." Knowledge improving session on types and harms of bullying, changing sitting rows, dividing responsibilities in the classroom, nominating the hero of the classroom, mood card, story cards, and poster campaign were the activities determined and carried out by the students to address the derived determinants. The main conclusion of the study is that students were succeed in identifying 16 possible determinants and deciding on seven actions to address bullying at school, when they are guided properly in accordance with the health promotion principles. Existing capacity of students to engage successfully in the process of identifying determinants and deciding measures to address bullying should not be underestimated and students should be involved in any effort executed to prevent bullying at schools. Furthermore, if teachers can be trained on the approach used within the present study it will be helpful for the school staff to deal with bullying among students in a more effective manner.

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