School Bullying From the Perspectives of Middle School Principals

Mehmet Saldıraner [i]
Ministry of National Education

Sıddıka Gızır [ii]
Mersin University

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This qualitative study is aimed at examining middle school principals' opinions on the factors associated with bullying in their schools, the strategies that principals take to tackle bullying in their schools, and the issues that they are faced while dealing with bullying their schools. The study group was consisted of 20 voluntary middle school principals from four central districts of Mersin. The data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers through the related literature review, the expert opinions, and also a pilot study. Content analysis was used to determine certain codes, categories and themes within the qualitative data. After the data was reduced into major analytical categories, four main categories including a number of categories and sub-categories were emerged, namely prevalent types of bullying, factors associated with bullying, strategies that principals take to tackle bullying in their schools, and the issues that they are faced while dealing with it in schools. The results were discussed considering related literature.

Keywords: School Bullying, Factors Associated With Bullying, Prevalent Types of Bullying, Middle School Administrators

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[i] **Mehmet Saaldıraner,** Hatice Uluğ Pirmary School, Ministry of National Education

[ii] **Sıddıka Gızır,** Assoc. Prof. Dr., Educational Sciences, Mersin University, ORCID: 0000-0003-4071-8220

Correspondence: sgizir@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly evidenced in the related literature that school bullying has negative impacts on students' academic performance, attitudes towards school, psychological and social developments, and social relations as well as school climate, school culture and school-wide performance. With the awareness that school bullying is one of the most pressing issues affecting students and schools, a considerable emphasis on school-wide bullying prevention programs have been observed among researchers and administrators (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). In this context, a lot of prevention programs have been developed and implemented in schools, lots of articles have been written, and lots of speeches have been given to eliminate bullying in schools, but the problem persists (Evans & Smokowski, 2016; Foody, Murphy, Downes & Norman, 2018; Wong, Cheng, Ngan & Ma, 2011; Young, Tully & Ramirez, 2017). The persistence of the problem is related to the some weaknesses in current bullying research methodology, the absence of a consistent definition of bullying, and also the fact that school personnel including administrators, counselors, teachers and other staff do not comprehend the importance of the school-wide prevention programs, and the importance of their roles and responsibilities on the implementation process (Evans & Smokowski, 2016; Wong et al., 2011). Foody et al. (2018) stated that even though bullying can be observed almost anywhere, school setting is the most commonly studied one, so the responsibility for preventing and tackling school bullying has been placed on school administrators and other educational staff. It is highlighted in the literature that understanding how school administrators perceive bullying, what are the root causes of bullying in schools and perceived barriers to develop and implement effective prevention programs in schools is crucial to build an anti-bullying school culture (Evans & Smokowski, 2016; Farrelly, O'Higgins Norman & O'Leary, 2016; Foody et al., 2018; Young, Tully & Ramirez, 2017).

Research on teachers showed that their opinions, attitudes, knowledge and skills about bullying is directly related to the efforts for reducing or eliminating bullying in schools (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). Moreover, Skinner, Babinski and Gifford (2014) stated that school principal support perceived by teachers has a direct impact on teachers' self-efficacy for tackling bullying. It is also emphasized that school principals should set appropriate examples of a safe and secure learning environments for all students, otherwise serious consequences for students and schools are inevitable (Foody et al., 2018; Skinner, Babinski, & Gifford, 2014). In other words, principals' attitudes, expertise, skills, and also leadership style are critical to successfully tackling bullying in schools and teachers' active involvement in the implementation of prevention programs by building and nurturing anti-bullying school culture (Farrelly, O'Higgins Norman, & O'Leary, 2016; Meyer, 2008; O'Higgins Norman, Goldrick & Harrison, 2010). In addition, it is argued that lack of proactive action against bullying in school have been seen as a leadership deficiency for school principals. In this respect, understanding school principals' opinions on facilitators or causes of bullying and solutions for addressing bullying seems to be important to eliminate bullying in schools (Young, Tully & Ramirez, 2017). Evans and Smokowski (2016) argue that a stronger understanding of bullying dynamics in schools seems to be beneficial for school principals, teachers, school counselors and other staff, thus research on bullying must be strengthen to heighten their understanding. However, literature review revealed that there have been a limited number of research focusing on school bullying from the perspectives of school principals, especially in Turkey. With this background, this study is aimed at examining middle school principals' opinions on the factors associated with bullying in their schools, the strategies that principals take to tackle bullying in their schools, and the issues that they are faced while dealing with bullying their schools.

School Bullying

School bullying seems to be still a threat for children and adolescents despite decades of research and school bullying prevention programs implemented. In the PISA reports, bullying have been mentioned as the most serious threat to students' well-being in schools, and also the pervasiveness of all form of bullying have been underlined (PISA, 2015; 2018). It is stated in these

reports that on average across OECD countries, around 23 % students reported being victims of an act of bullying at least a few times a month in 2018, while this rate was 19% in 2015. In addition, disconcerting pictures of the reality of bullying have been presented in lots of studies carried out in different countries (Pişkin, 2010; Regmi, Gaihre & Sharma, 2019; Srabstein & Leventhal, 2010; Wang, Iannotti & Nansel, 2009; Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013).

Bullying as a serious concern for educators can be described as repeated aggressive behaviors of a more powerful person or group towards a less powerful one with the intention to harm or distress (Olweus, 1997; Rosen, Scott & DeOrnellas, 2017). Based on the pioneering study of Olweus (1993), it is stated that although bullying is defined as a peer-on-peer aggressive behavior, it is different from other types of aggression with respect to three key features, namely intentionality, repetitive nature, and imbalance of power favoring the perpetrator (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Pişkin, 2010). It is emphasized that distinguishing bullying from other forms of aggression between students seems to be critical because these mentioned unique features of bullying make it more harmful than similar forms of aggression (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger & Lumpkin, 2014).

Bullying can occur directly or indirectly. The direct mode of bullying includes aggressive behaviors are enacted face-to-face but it is not limited to face-to-face. For example, the bully or perpetrator(s) verbally threatens the targeted student, physically attacks to her/him (pushing, kicking etc.) and socially embarrasses her/him (taunting, name calling etc.) (Gladden et al., 2014; Wright, 2004). When bullying takes an indirect form, the bully or perpetrator(s) targets the student's reputation or social standing when the targeted student is not around, such as spreading distressing rumors electronically, spreading malicious gossip, organizing a group of students to isolate the targeted student or victim (Wright, 2004). Moreover, bullying can be witnessed within multiple context (at school, the Internet, school events, a student's neighborhood, school bus, etc.). Bullying behaviors within these contexts can take the form of physical, verbal and social/relational. Physical form of bullying behaviors can be exampled as damaging personal property, pushing, spitting, kicking and hitting, while threating verbally or with gestures or with written notes, making inappropriate sexual comments, name calling and taunting are some examples of verbal bullying behaviors between the bully or bullies and the victim. Social/relational bullying behaviors are exhibited to harm the victim's social status by attacking her/his relationships with other students (Gladden et al., 2014). Social/relational bullying behaviors can be also enacted electronically by using social media, smart phones, gaming sites, named as cyberbullying.

As a respectively new form of bullying, cyberbullying includes all key features of traditional bullying, but the means, methods and the context to enact bullying behaviors are mainly different to traditional ones (Foody et al., 2018). Despite these differences, research revealed that cyber and traditional bullying co-occurs (Leemis, Espelage, Basile, Kollar & Davis, 2018; Wang, Iannotti & Luk, 2012). Similarly, it has been stated that cyberbullying can be seen as an extension of traditional bullying, and only the location of bullying is broaden from school to the cyber space. Even more problematic is the increase in the rate of cyber sexual bullying in schools. This type of bullying (named as also online sexual bullying, online sexual harassment, sexting) includes undesirable sexual behavior, such as transmitting sexual written, audial and visual messages or comments, sharing photos and pornographic images, etc. via internet (Gross, 2016). But sexual bullying or sexual harassment is not limited in online, it is also enacted face-to-face in school context, such as written or verbal sexual comments, sharing of sexual images, and physical sexually touch or coercion etc. (Gladden et al., 2014; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Leemis et al., 2018). Moreover, homophobic bullying as new concern for educators includes aggressive behaviors associated with sexuality towards students because of their gender identity and sexual orientation, such as homophobic insults, intimidation, social exclusion, name calling, derision, etc., and it is stated that there is a high correlation between homophobic bullying and traditional bullying (Espelage, Basile, Rue & Hamburger, 2015; Farrelly, O'Higgins Norman & O'Leary, 2016).

Related literature indicated that bullying has negative impacts on victims, bullies, and also bystanders, but the most harmful effects are observed on victims, such as low self-esteem, poor academic performance, negative attitude toward school, social isolation, loneliness, poor peer relationships, not to have sense of school belonging, depression, anxiety, headache, stomachache, felling threatened, suicidal thoughts, and sleeping problems (Evans & Smokowski, 2016; Gladden et al., 2014; Manna, Colzone, Adinolfi & Palumbo, 2019). Because negative effects on students' physical and mental health, academic performance, psychological well-being, and social developments, understanding and addressing bullying have been considered as a public health and also educational priority (Foody et al., 2018). Among other important shareholders, school principal is the most important one to tackle bullying among students (Çınkır & Kepenekçi, 2003). As an implementer of the school bullying prevention policies, strategies, and programs or models, school principal's understanding of the causes of bullying, risk and protective factors, and their skills, attitudes and experiences about bullying is clearly important to success of these prevention initiatives (Çınkır & Kepenekçi, 2003; Evans & Smokowski, 2016; Farrelly et al., 2016; Foody et al., 2018; Young, Tully & Ramirez, 2017). Thus, as aforementioned, this study is aimed at examining middle school principals' opinions on the factors associated with bullying in their schools, the strategies that principals take to tackle bullying in their schools, and the issues that they are faced while dealing with bullying their schools. Because school bullying seems to increase in middle schools (Bishnoi, 2018; Manna et al., 2019; Wang, Iannotti & Luk, 2012), in this study middle school principals were selected as the study group.

METHOD

A qualitative research design was preferred in this study to examine school bullying from the first-hand perspectives of middle school principals (Putney & Green, 1999). Qualitative design was preferred because school bullying is a social phenomenon including complex interactions among the factors associated with it (Peterson & Spencer, 1993). In this respect, because it gives researchers opportunities to get a deep understanding of participants' perspectives on school bullying in their own words, face-to-face interview technique was used to collect the data (Patton, 1990).

Study Group

The study group was consisted of 20 voluntary middle school principals from four central districts of Mersin. Out of 20 principals, 7 were from Akdeniz, 6 were from Toroslar, 3 were from Mezitli and 4 were from Yenişehir. The distribution of the interviewees from each districts were specified considering the number of middle schools in each district and the size of the schools. After principals were informed about the study, voluntary principals relatively more tenured in their present schools were selected as participants of this study. The mean age of the participants was 41 with an age range of 30 to 50 years. Furthermore, the tenure of the participants within their current school was 3.5 with a range of 3 to 8years. Moreover, out of 20 participants, 3 were female and 17 were male.

In addition, it is emphasized in the literature that the number of participants in qualitative studies generally becomes obvious while the study is carried out, because new codes, categories and/or themes are not emerged from the data after a number of interviews (data saturation) (Marshall, 1996). In other words, the codes, categories and/or themes emerged from the data become repeated. So, the data saturation has been keep in the mind throughout the data collection and data analysis processes, although the size of the study group was specified at the beginning of this study.

Instrument

The data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers through the related literature review, the expert opinions, and also a pilot study. Firstly, a draft interview guide including a number of questions were prepared considering the related literature and research questions and then, this guide was submitted to three experts on educational sciences and

qualitative research to take their opinions. After required revisions were made considering experts' opinions, the pilot study was conducted with three middle school principals to test the sequence, content and wording of open ended questions included in the guide, and also the approximate length of interview time. The pilot study was also carried out to make validity and reliability studies (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). It is stated in the literature that pre-testing of interview guide is one of the procedures to obtain reliability (Silverman, 1993), and also one of the ways for increasing the validity of the interview guide in qualitative studies (Şimşek & Louis, 1994). After the revision on the interview guide based on the pilot study, the instrument including seven questions was used to collect the data.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to determine certain codes, categories and themes within the qualitative data. In order to identify and categorize the masses of information, the data was reviewed and processed a lot times. After the data was reduced into major analytical categories, four main categories were emerged, namely prevalent types of bullying, factors associated with bullying, strategies that principals take to tackle bullying in their schools, and the issues that they are faced while dealing with it in schools. It was also observed that each main category included a number of categories and sub categories. For example, the main category of factors associated with bullying in schools included five categories, namely family factors, personal factors, environmental factors, school factors, and teacher related factors. Each categories also have some sub-categories, such as personal factors including five sub-categories, called as adolescence period, personal characteristics, academic failure, physical characteristics, and past experiences about bullying.

In addition, triangulation with multiple analysts was used to achieve the validity and reliability in this study. Five interview transcripts were randomly selected, and submitted to four persons who are familiar to qualitative research for analysis in order to triangulate the data analysis. Aforementioned final categories and sub-categories were emerged as a result of comparing the results drawn from the researchers and other analysists, and the last reviewing.

RESULTS

In this section, the main categories, categories and sub-categories emerged as the results of the analysis are presented by displaying examples of the original data in order to indicate the fairness and accuracy of the data analysis.

Prevalent Types of Bullying

The results showed that the most prevalent types of bullying observed by the participants in their schools are physical, verbal/indirect, cyber, and sexual, respectively. When the results examined in detail considering the differences in the frequency of each bully type among the districts, it was observed that verbal and/or indirect bullying behaviors are the most observed bullying behaviors in the districts of Yenişehir and Mezitli, while physical bullying behaviors are the most observed ones in other districts.

Almost all of the participants stated that smacking, kicking, pushing, hitting, and pinching are some of the most frequently observed physical bullying behaviors among students. They also mentioned the imbalance of physical power between students as one of the reasons of physical bullying. One participant remarked that:

> *"We have been observing mostly the use of physical power among bullies. Every time, the student perceiving himself/herself as more powerful than the others fells himself/herself as justified. Then, s/he shows power over a weak student and tries to harm her/him. That is, there are a lot of physically harmful behaviors exhibited by powerful student to weak ones (P8)".*

Related to verbal and/or indirect bullying, participants mentioned that name calling, teasing, insults, intimidation, socially isolating the victim, and spreading distressing rumors and/or malicious gossip were examples of verbal bullying behaviors among students. A principal noted that:

"We frequently witness insult, teasing, verbal manipulation, naming, social isolation, etc., but sometimes such behaviors lead to fight between the bullies and the victim. Generally, a group of students together verbally manipulate or harass one student; then this student feels her/himself isolated from her/his class or school (P1)".

Another principal stated that when socially isolated students couldn't be identified, they can self-harm. He exemplified his observation as the following:

"There was a student whose parents had been divorced. He was a sensitive person. He was socially isolated by others. One day, he got permission from us to go home, then his dead body was found in a construction side (P12)".

One of the other most frequently observed type of bullying by the participants was cyber bullying. One participant mentioned about cyber bullying as the following:

"It is forbidden to bring a phone to school, but students secretly bring it. They take pictures of other student's negative appearances in the toilet or outside, then they threaten to display or share these pictures via internet, or they share them to humiliate the student (P7)."

The results also showed that sexual bullying is less frequently observed type of bullying. But participants emphasized that sexual bullying behaviors are hard-to-observe behaviors because such behaviors occurred via internet.

Factors Associated with Bullying

The opinions of the principals on factors associated with bullying in their schools were examined under five categories, namely family factors, personal factors, environmental factors, school factors, and teacher related factors. Each category has also some sub-categories as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors Associated with Bullying

Categories	Sub-categories
Family factors	Parental attitude
	Socio-economic status of the family
Personal factors	Adolescence period
	Personal characteristics
	Academic failure
	Physical characteristics
	Past experiences about bullying
Environmental factors	Negative role models
	Immigration
	Moral degeneration
School factors	Educational policy inaccuracies
	Overcrowded schools
	Inadequate physical and social facilities
Teacher related factors	Negative attitudes and behaviors towards students
	Work overload

Family factors

All the principals were agreed on the fact that family is the most influential factor for students to exhibit or to experience bullying behaviors. Their views in this respect were categorized as *parental attitude* and *socio-economic status of the family*. They pointed out that if parents are careless, insensitive or unconcerned towards their children, or resort to violence and abuse them, their children can exhibit or exposed to bullying behaviors in school. But they also added that oppressive attitudes and punitive behaviors of parents lead students to exhibit similar behaviors. One participant explicitly stated that "They (children) take their parents as role models. They learn such behaviors form their parents (P7)". Some of the participants also noted that the children of divorced family; children have irregular family life, and also children of uneducated parents or parents not caring about education of their children tend to exhibit bullying behaviors in school. In addition, participants mentioned that children from families with low socio-economic status and from different cultural background are the potential victims or bullies in school.

Personal factors

Participants expressed that *some characteristics of adolescence period, personal characteristics, academic failure, physical characteristics (especially being physical powerful), and past experiences about bullying* are important factors facilitating bullying in schools. They stated that in the *adolescence period*, students need to prove themselves to others, want to show their abilities, and believe that they can do what they want, so some of them tend to exhibit bullying behaviors. Moreover, participants mentioned about some *personal characteristics* as causes of the bullying, such as jealousy, the need to control others, overcoming the personal deficiencies by pressuring on others. One participant said that "Some students feel themselves inadequate or insufficient for doing something with respect to social, physical and/or economic power. They make this situation a matter of pride, and then they use violence to someone else for coping with this feeling (P15)". *Academic failure* was also seen as a facilitator of bullying. One principal's views are important in this sense: "If a student is unsuccessful academically and can't express her/himself in any way, s/he can express her/himself with such bullying behaviors (P1)". Besides academic failure, *physical characteristics* of a student, especially being physically powerful than others, was raised as a factor associated with bullying. Additionally, participants stated that students *experiencing bullying in the past*, as a victim or a bystander, they may exhibit bullying behaviors when they grow up. One of the participants confessed that "Their past experiences may be a cause; s/he may be bullied in past. When s/he gets power physically or socially, s/he may become bully for a powerless student (P13)."

Environmental factors

Analysis of the data revealed that *negative role models, immigration and moral degeneration* were environmental factors associated with bullying from the views of principals. They pointed out that *negative role models,* especially with aggressive behaviors in social media, television programs, peers, and neighborhood, lead students to be bully in schools. One principal explicitly said that "Our students come from shantytown (suburb). They always witness aggressive behaviors towards them or anyone else in there; sometimes at home, sometimes at neighbor. Students are like a camera. Consequently, they reflect such behaviors to school. It is my sight (P16)". Another principal stated that "Some students need to behave like a bully to become a member of a popular group in the school. If they don't do that, they can feel lonely. Also, the bullies are role models for such students (P15)".

Moreover, the results showed that *immigration* is one of the important factors enabling bullying. Participants emphasized that immigrant students are the potential victims. One principal explain this issue as "Our school is in an immigrant area, they are mostly from Syria. There are a lot immigrant students. They don't know our language and cultural features. In other words, they are socially powerless, and open to expose to bullying (P12)". Also, principals argued that *moral degeneration* in society stemming from technological developments, changing human needs,

degeneration in family relationships and in social cohesion of society was raised as an issue. One of them pointed out that "We were respectful, tolerant, and responsible people in the past. Nowadays, people don't have such values. We forgot them. Our children started drawing a path for themselves. This lead to bullying. We didn't witness such student behaviors in the past (P2)".

School factors

Educational policy inaccuracies, overcrowded schools, and *inadequate physical and social facilities* were stated as school related factors causing bullying in schools. Frequently changing educational programs (short-term educational programs), the priority of academic performance in education, and inefficacy of character and moral education were seen as *educational policy inaccuracies* by the participants. "We couldn't teach moral values to our students. Moral or character education has been trivialized, academic performance comes first in our educational system. We are good in training students, but we couldn't educate them effectively. Then, bullying becomes inevitable (P18)" one principal said in this respect. Moreover, principals complained about *crowdedness* of their schools. They said that they couldn't effectively observe their students and also intervene in bullying because of the crowdedness of their schools. The last school-related factor associated with bullying was *inadequate physical and social facilities* provided to students by schools. Almost half of the participants stated that the limited number of sportive, social and cultural activities caused by the limited number or capacity of human resources, gymnasiums, studios or workshops for visual arts, music etc. lead students to exhibit bullying behaviors in schools. They noted that students spending quality time with such activities may not need to display such behaviors.

Teacher related factors

The result indicated that *teachers' negative attitudes and behaviors towards students* and *their work overload* are important factors associated with bullying in schools according to all principals interviewed. They complained that teachers may be seen as negative role models for students by displaying authoritarian attitudes, displaying aggressive behaviors, controlling students excessively, and rejecting their needs, expectations, and personality traits. Participants related teachers' such attitudes and behaviors to their *work overload*. They also pointed out that teachers don't show respect and interest in students' needs, and don't express pedagogical and social care toward students, therefore students tend to behave aggressively; feel unaccepted and don't belong to their schools.

The Strategies Principals Take to Tackle Bullying in Their Schools

The strategies principals take to tackle bullying in their schools was examined under four categories, named as *identification, cooperation, intervention strategies, and prevention strategies* as presented in Table 2. Almost all the participants stated that *identification* is the most important part of coping with bullying. They said that bullying is identified based on especially *victims' and bystanders' reporting*, and also *teachers', school counselors', and parents' reporting*. Participants mentioned that although they try to identify diversely bullying, they are frequently informed about bullying by victims and/or bystanders as one principal explicitly stated "We try to observe bullying, but bullying have been occurring when and where we could not see. Fortunately students experiencing or witnessing bullying report it to us (P13)". Moreover they noted that students reporting bullying is kept private because these students are also afraid of bullies and being stigmatized as telltale.

Besides victim or bystander, participants were informed by teachers about bullying in their schools. One participant stated that "Teachers are more advantageous than us to identify bullying, because they are always with students and have a chance to observe more closely them. Unfortunately, we are frequently dealing with bureaucratic issues (P3)". In addition, a few participants emphasized on the importance of the reports based on the results of some tests carrying out by school counselors to identify bullying. Parents' reporting is also stated as

a mean of identification, but principals noted that it takes a long time for parents to notice the bullying. For example one principal stated that "The victim tells her/his family when it becomes irresistible. Sometimes it takes a long time (P17).

Table 2. The Strategies Principals Take to Tackle Bullying in Their Schools

Categories	Sub-categories
Identification	Victims' and bystanders' reporting
	Teachers' reporting
	School counselors' reporting
	Parents' reporting
Cooperation	School counselors
	Teachers
	Parents
	Students
Prevention strategies	Effective use of counseling services
	Directing students to sportive and cultural activities
	Character and moral education
	Creating a safe school environment
Intervention strategies	Supporting school counselors
	Giving advice to the bully and the victim
	Threatening bullies
	Reconcile the bully and the victim
	Implying school discipline procedures

In order to tackle bullying, participants *cooperate with school counselors, teachers, parents, and students*. Among others, school counselors were the most frequently cooperated ones for the participants. They stated that counselors were important to identification and intervention of school bullying. One principal noted explicitly that;

> *"Counselors observe students, do individual counseling, use some psychological tests or students report their problems to counselors, so they are informed in anyway. Then they carry out some activities, programs, prevention studies etc. Sometimes they meet families. They also cooperate with voluntary teachers. We couldn't overcome such problems without counselors (P1)."*

More than half of the participants mentioned the importance of cooperation with teachers to eliminate bullying. It was stated that there are formal and informal or academic, social and affective relationships between teachers and students, therefore teachers have opportunity to identify and intervene bullying. But almost half of the participants complained about teachers' uncooperative behaviors about bullying. Some of them related this issues to teachers' workload, while some related to unwillingness or being not informed about bullying. One of the participants said that "Teachers couldn't care about students, they can only deal with academic issues. When there is a problem with a student, they come to us and complain. They don't try to solve the problem, or they couldn't solve. Sometimes I think that they don't want to deal with such issues. This may be because of their workloads (P7)".

Moreover, participants mentioned the importance of informing parents and ensuring their cooperation. They noted that parents are collaborative when they visit parents at home, observe their living environments, and give information about bullying. In addition, a few participants also noted that they receive support from students while dealing with bullying, but majority of the participants complained about difficulty in getting students' help, because students are afraid of bullies.

Analysis of the data also revealed that effective use of counseling services, directing students to sportive and cultural activities, character and moral education, and creating a safe school environment are *prevention strategies* for the participants. Almost all of the participants said that they

don't know the specific prevention and intervention strategies about bullying, so they direct such bullying related issues to school counselors and support what they do. Similarly, they mentioned about their tendency to the effective use of counseling services to prevent bullying in their schools. In this context, principals stated that counselors give information students, parents, teachers and other school staff about bullying (what is bullying, who is the bully, victim or bystanders, what can do if they witness bullying, etc.), and they support all related activities of counselors. One of the participant stated that "our counselor visit the classes and give information about bullying. Sometimes we invite a specialist in bullying to train teachers about what can they do about bullying in classes. I believed that these seminars, trainings or information meetings are very useful (P15)". Principals also mentioned that they have been directing students to sportive and cultural activities in the belief that such activities are important to create cohesiveness and cooperation among students. Moreover, almost half of the participants emphasized on the importance of character and moral education to prevent bullying among students. They stated that although there isn't any specific course on moral education, they try to give some moral values to students through some school-wide activities.

In addition, almost half of the principals noted that creating a safe school environment in which teachers are sensitive to students' needs and expectations and students feel safe and believe that their administrators and teachers support them if they need anything is very important to prevent or eliminate bullying. One principal said in this respect that "If our students come to school happily, if they are happy and feel safe in school, there is no such thing as peer bullying. Or at least, you minimize the bullying. This may related to the creating such a school culture (P6)".

The category of *intervention strategies* includes supporting school counselors, giving advice to the bully and the victim, threatening bullies, reconcile the bully and the victim, and implying school discipline procedures. As mentioned before, participants heavily rely on school counselors to intervention the bullying. Participants noted that school counselors give individual counselling to the bully, and also the victim to strengthen her/him, give information to parents and receive their support, form a peer group as intermediatory, and make follow-up studies. Principals also stated that they invite bullies to their rooms and give advice about not to do bullying, but if bullies don't care about their advices, they threatening or punishing them, such as preventing an activity s/he likes, not taking the school team, etc. They also mentioned about their attempt to reconcile the bully and victim. Furthermore, participants regretfully said that they had to follow the school's discipline procedures when bullying continues despite all precautions and practices, such as directing the bully to the Student Behavior Evaluation Board, and giving reprimand or suspension. One principal noted that "There are students ignoring their family and teachers, no matter what you do for her/him. We direct such students to discipline committee and give punishment to them. It generally works, but sometimes don't work. We don't know what to do at such times (P2)".

The Issues that Principals are Faced while Dealing with Bullying Their Schools

The results of the analysis indicated that principals are faced with *family, teacher, student and school related issues* while dealing with bullying in their schools (Table 3). *Family related issues* includes sub-categories of the family attitudes and family social status. More than half of the participants complained about families neglecting their children, having too much or too little trust in their children, not accepting the mistakes or misbehaviors of their children, and being unwilling to cooperate with school staff to cope with bullying. One of them stated that:

> "*If families are not accept that there is an issue with bullying, the main problem appears. We mostly have trouble bringing families to school. If families don't come to school or we couldn't reach them, we are alone with student. Then we have difficulty in resolving the problem. And sometimes families couldn't accept their child's misbehavior or they believe that their children are perfect. Some of them are assertive about that their children are pure. This is impossible!* (P1)".

Table 3. The Issues that Principals are Faced while Dealing with Bullying Their Schools

Categories	Sub-categories
Family related issues	Family attitudes
	Family social status
Teacher related issues	Apathetic teacher attitude
	Work overload
	Limited number of school counsellors
	Prioritizing academic performance of students
Student related issues	Victims not reporting bullying
	Peers
School related issues	Overcrowded schools
	Bureaucratic procedures

Almost half of the participants also complained about that families with high social status force principals' senior managers to forgive or absolve the bully's disciplinary actions. In other words, they are troubled with such families trying to encompass them while they are dealing with bullying in schools.

Moreover, the category of *teacher related issues* included apathetic teacher attitude to bullying, work overload, prioritizing academic performance of students, and limited number of school counsellors. Participants stated that teachers' apathetic attitudes to bullying lead bullies to continue their harmful behaviors and also victims to be harmed. Participants also added that teachers don't have enough time to deal with sufficiently students because of their work overload as mentioned before. Participants also complained about teachers prioritizing academic performance of students or not prioritizing moral development of students. Aforementioned, principals believe in the importance of moral education to cope with bullying and they have difficulty in teachers not regarding moral education of students. Furthermore, participants complained about the limited number of school counsellors employed in their schools. They stated that counsellors are the most important assistive staff for them, but with limited number of school counsellors, coping with bullying takes a long time.

Participants also raised *student related issues* that they encounter while coping with bullying. They pointed out that some of the victims don't report bullying because they are afraid of bullies or being labelled as telltale or some of them have introvert personality. Participants emphasized on their need of victims' reporting to cope with bullying, otherwise they may not identify and intervene the bullying. One participant said that:

> *"If victim is afraid of the bully, s/he doesn't tell anybody. Recently, a student told her family that she was being bullied. Then, s/he told everything to the members of school discipline commission. She said that the same bully have been enacting harmful behaviors to five students in the same class for a long time, and unfortunately, none of them didn't report it earlier (P17)".*

Furthermore, participants stated that peers are more determinative on students' behaviors, so they have difficulty in coping with bullying. One of them said that "In fact, the biggest problem is peer influence. If a student primarily regards her/his peer opinions, impressions or beliefs, you can't do much (P4)".

School related issues included the sub-categories of crowdedness and bureaucratic procedures. As mentioned before, crowdedness of the school was perceived as one of factors facilitating bullying. The participants also perceived the crowd of schools as an obstacle to identify, prevent and interfere with bullying. One principal noted that "The number of students for each classes is approximately 50-55, so teachers cannot effectively deal with all

of them. In other words, almost 350 students per teacher. Teachers have trouble in breathing. We are in the same situation (P8)".

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this qualitative study, school bullying was systematically investigated from the first-hand perspectives of middle school principals. The results showed that their views can be examined under four main categories, namely prevalent types of bullying, factors associated with bullying in schools, the strategies principals take to tackle bullying in their schools, and the issues that they are faced while dealing with bullying their schools. Participants stated that the most prevalent types of bullying observed in their schools are physical, verbal/indirect, cyber, and sexual, respectively. But it must be stated that verbal and/or indirect bullying behaviors are the most observed bullying behaviors in the districts of Yenişehir and Mezitli, while physical bullying behaviors are the most observed ones in other districts. This may be because of the fact that Mezitli and Yenişehir districts are more centralized than other districts and more structured with respect to urbanism. Also the educational status of families living in these two districts higher than the districts of Toroslar and Akdeniz. According to the report of Humanitarian District Development Index prepared by the Foundation of Humanitarian Development, the education index is .738 for Mezitli, and .691 for Yenişehir, while it is .450 for Toroslar and .386 for Akdeniz (Şeker, Bakış & Dizeci, 2018, s.77-80). Although the findings of the studies examining the relationship between bullying and parents' education level are contradictory, some of the studies showed that being bully or victim can be associated with low level of parental education (Çakır, Özgen & Ayas, 2016; Lopez-Castro & Priegue, 2019). In addition, similar to the results of this study, previous studies demonstrated that the most prevalent types of bullying among adolescents were verbal / indirect / social, physical, cyber and sexual, respectively (Andrade et al., 2019; Reisen, Viana & DosSantos-Neto, 2019). In these studies, sexual harassment was stated as one of the least reported type of bullying. According to Reisen, Viana and DosSantos-Neto (2019), this is because of the fact that sexual bullying are enacted through words and taken as verbal bullying.

Moreover, factors that are conducive to students' bullying behaviors in schools from the views of the principals were examined under five categories, namely family factors, personal factors, environmental factors, school factors, and teacher related factors. All the principals agreed on the fact that family is the most influential factor for students to exhibit bullying behaviors. Their views in this respect were categorized as parental attitude and socio-economic status. Aforementioned, the participants pointed out that if parents are careless, insensitive or unconcerned towards their children, or resort to violence and abuse them, their children can exhibit bullying behaviors in school. But they also added that oppressive attitudes and punitive behaviors of parents lead students to exhibit similar behaviors. Similarly, Bishnoi (2018) noted that "Much violence is learned through what happens in the home" (p. 414). It is also stated in the literature that a person with experiences violence in the home is likely to extend that violence to other relationships, thus her/his home life may be seen as an important predictor of future bullying behavior (Akyol, Yıldız & Akman, 2018; Bishnoi, 2008; Langhrichsen-Rohling, Hankla & Stromberg, 2004). Some of the participants also mentioned that the children of divorced families; children have irregular family life, and also children of uneducated parents or parents not caring about education of their children tend to exhibit bullying behaviors in school. Similarly, the results of some previous studies showed that low family cohesion, authoritarian and punitive parental attitudes, family conflict, low parental warmth and involvement are family factors associated with bullying among adolescents (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Lopez-Castro & Priegue, 2019). In addition, participants noted that children from families with low socio-economic status and from different cultural background are the potential victims or bullies in schools. In a similar vein, Burnukara and Uçanok (2012) stated that low family socio-economic status is a risk factor for bullying. Juan et al. (2018) also pointed out that students from families with lower SES were more likely to be bullied than students from families with higher SES.

Participants also expressed that some characteristics of adolescence period, personal characteristics, academic failure, physical characteristics (especially being physical powerful), and

past experiences about bullying are conducive to bullying in schools. In a similar way, Espelage and Swearer (2003) pointed out that bullying increases in the adolescent period, and some adolescents who are bullies tend to display aggressive and manipulative behaviors over other students to have high social status or to gain popularity. This increase is explained by dominance theory. According to this theory, dominance as an important factor in social relationships refers to a hierarchy arranged in terms of individuals' access to resources. Students in transition stage of adolescent period may view bullying as a strategy to attain dominance in their peer groups (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Bishnoi (2018) also mentioned that students in adolescence period seek autonomy from their families, and they mostly reliance on their peers to gain social acceptance and social support. Sometimes this reliance causes pressures on them, and also causes an increase in bullying. Furthermore, participants mentioned about some personal characteristics as causes of the bullying, such as jealousy, the need to control others, overcoming the personal deficiencies by pressuring on others. Similarly, related literature showed that low level of global self-worth, and also low level of self-worth in some domains of behavioral conduct, academic skills, and social acceptance are associated with bullying (Bishnoi, 2018; Pouwels, Lansu & Cilessen, 2016).

Negative role models, immigration and moral degeneration in society were perceived by the participants as environmental factors associated with bullying. According to them, negative role models, especially with aggressive behaviors in social media, television programs, peers, and neighborhood, lead students to be bully in schools. Also, similar to the views of the participants, it is stated in the related research that immigrant students are at high risk for experiencing bullying because of their cultural backgrounds differing from non-immigrant students' backgrounds (Maynard et al., 2016; Vitoroulis & Georgiades, 2017).

Furthermore, the participants perceived educational policy inaccuracies, overcrowded schools, and inadequate physical and social facilities as school factors causing bullying in schools. Frequently changing educational programs (short-term educational programs), the priority of academic performance in education, and inefficacy of character and moral education were seen as educational policy inaccuracies by the participants. Similarly, it is emphasized in the literature that bullying is mainly a moral issue and moral disengagement is one of the most important predictors of bullying behavior (Gini, Pozzoli & Hymel, 2014; Menesini, Emanuela & Nocentini, 2015). In addition, similar to the findings of this study, Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson and Guo (2013) associated school size with the frequency of bullying behaviors. They stated that large school size leads to decrease in student attachment to teachers, school, and extracurricular activities. Also, Bishnoi (2018) mentioned that when unsatisfactory peer relationships are combined with limited access to school activities, the rate of bullying behavior among students may increase. It is also emphasized in the literature that physical activities have some positive effects on students' physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional developments. Specifically such activities can encourage empathy, cooperation, emotional intelligence while diminish aggressive behaviors (Herazo-Beltrán et al., 2019).

Moreover, the result showed that teachers' negative attitudes and behaviors towards students and their work overload are conducive to bullying in schools according to the principals. Bishnoi (2018) stated that bullying may expand in schools if there is an insufficient adult supervision, and also if most of the students are bullied by teachers in their schools. Doumas and Midget (2019) also related teacher attitudes and behaviors, teacher-student relationships with students' bullying behaviors. In addition, Shamsi, Andrades and Ashraf (2019) stated that although teachers are at the frontline to deal with bullying among students, their ability to identify, intervene and prevent the bullying is influenced by their workload, the frequency of interaction with the students, the nature of bullying behavior, and their responsiveness toward students.

In addition, the strategies that principals take to tackle bullying in their schools was examined under four categories, named as identification, cooperation, prevention and intervention strategies. The results indicated that participants cooperate with teachers, school counselors, parents, and students in order to identify, intervene, and also prevent the bullying in their schools. In the meantime, the

participants mentioned about some family, teacher, student and school related issues that they are faced while dealing with bullying in their schools.

More than half of the participants mentioned the importance of cooperation with teachers to deal with bullying. It was stated that there are formal and informal or academic, social and affective relationships between teachers and students, therefore teachers have opportunity to identify, intervene and prevent the bullying. Similar to these findings, Shamsi, Andrades and Ashraf (2019) emphasize on the critical position of teachers to identify bullying early and also consider them as useful resources in identification, intervention, and prevention of bullying. But almost half of the participants complained about teachers' uncooperative behaviors about bullying. Some of them related this issues to teachers' workload, while some related to unwillingness or being not informed about bullying. Related literature showed that as well as teachers' workload, some other factors are related with teachers' response to bullying (Farley, 2017; Shamsi, Andrades & Ashraf, 2019). For example, Farley (2017) mentioned that personal experience with bullying, coping skills, empathy and beliefs about bullying are some teacher characteristics influencing their response to bullying. Moreover, Farley stated that most teachers have difficulty to differentiate bullying behaviors from other misbehaviors of students, and also noted that their direct intervention in the incidents of bullying may be associated with their perception of administrators' and other teachers' response to school bullying. In a similar way, Skinner, Babinski and Gifford (2014) emphasized on the direct impact of principal support on teacher self-efficacy for dealing with bullying.

Among others, school counselors were the most frequently cooperated ones for the participants. They stated that like teachers, counselors were important to identification, intervention and prevention of bullying among students. Almost all of the participants confessed that they don't know the specific intervention and prevention strategies about bullying, so they direct bullying related issues to school counselors, and then support what counselors do about bullying. Participants noted that school counselors give individual counselling to the bully, and also the victim to strengthen her/him, visit classes and give information about bullying and its negative consequences, give information to parents and receiving their support, form a peer group as intermediatory, and make follow-up studies. Although there is a limited research on school counselors' roles and responsibilities in bullying, there are some research implying school counselors' importance by discussing their roles in addressing bullying (Swank, Smith-Adcock & Weaver, 2019). In these studies, it has been emphasized that school counselors are best suited to coordinate and lead bullying prevention efforts within schools (McCormac, 2014). Swank, Smith-Adcock and Weaver (2019) noted that administrators' support to school counselors for implementing anti-bullying programs may increase the success of these programs. So it seems that participants cooperating with counselors, believing their professional competence and also supporting them in their anti-bullying interventions have been using one of the best suited approaches to eliminate bullying in their schools. However, participants complained about the limited number of school counsellors employed in their schools.

Moreover, participants emphasized on the importance of informing parents and ensuring their cooperation. Similarly, related literature showed that developing partnerships among educational professionals and parents helps prevent bullying and its negative effects while helping to promote social skills and competence of students who are victims, bullies, and bystanders (Yang, Sharkey, Chen, & Jimerson, 2019). However, almost half of the participants complained about that some families with high social status force principals' seniors to forgive or absolve bully's disciplinary actions. This result is interesting with respect to the fact that there is not any similar result reported in the related literature. Participants also mentioned about their cooperation with students who are victims and/or bystanders to identify and intervene bullying, but they also noted that some victims and/or bystanders don't report bullying because they are afraid of bullies or being stigmatized as telltale. Oliver and Candappa (2007) mentioned about students' fear of reprisal, lack of confidence in adults' ability to help and also the school's inability to protect victims as some factors contributing to students' reluctance to report bullying in schools.

The results also showed that besides cooperation with teachers, counsellors, parents and students to deal with bullying, participants have been using some other strategies to intervene the bullying, such as inviting bullies to the administrative office and giving advice about not to do bullying; but if bullies don't care about the advices, threatening or punishing them (preventing an activity s/he likes, not taking the school team, etc.), reconciling the bully and victim; and if the bullying continues despite all precautions and practices, directing the bully to the Student Behavior Evaluation Board and giving reprimand or suspension. In the main time, as mentioned before, almost half of the participants emphasized on the importance of character and moral education to prevent bullying among students, and they mentioned about their efforts to give some moral values to students through some school-wide activities. In addition, the same principals noted that creating a safe school environment in which teachers are sensitive to students' needs and expectations, and students feel safe and believe that their administrators and teachers support them if they need anything is very important. In the literature, such a school environment refers to a positive school climate or atmosphere implying supportive and positive relationships among students, teachers and other educational staff, and also an environment in which students feel safe themselves (Farina, 2019; Kartal & Bilgin, 2009). It is also stated that a decrease in bullying behaviors are observed in a school with a positive climate encompassing rule clarity and fairness, positive disciplinary actions, high academic standards, teachers' positive treatment towards students (Farina, 2019; Ma, 2002). Farina also noted that students in such a school may feel comfort to report bullying.

In general, it may be proposed that the principals are aware of the risk factors that are conducive to school bullying, its negative consequences for both students and schools, and the importance of cooperated actions to tackle bullying. But it was observed that principals have not received any specific anti-bullying training; they have not got any schoolwide anti-bullying policy and a comprehensive prevention and intervention plan that have been implemented in their schools. Because of the multi-causality nature of the phenomena, preventing and reducing school bullying need to implement a multifaceted schoolwide anti-bullying programs with the support and cooperation of teachers, counselors, students, parents and also other community members. In the literature, it is stated that although a lot of prevention programs have been developed and implemented in schools, the problem persists (Evans & Smokowski, 2016; Foody et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2011; Young, Tully & Ramirez, 2017). This problem is related with the fact that school personnel including administrators, counselors, teachers and other staff do not comprehend the importance of the school-wide prevention programs, and the importance of their roles and responsibilities on the implementation process (Evans & Smokowski, 2016; Wong et al., 2011). Moreover, principals' attitudes, expertise, skills, and also leadership style are critical to successfully tackling bullying in schools, and also to teachers' active involvement in the implementation of prevention programs by building and nurturing anti-bullying school climate and culture (Farrelly et al., 2016; Meyer, 2008; O'Higgins Norman, Goldrick & Harrison, 2010). Consequently, it seems that developing and implementing an effective school-wide prevention programs, and also creating an anti-bullying school climate require providing anti-bullying trainings, resources, workshops and guidelines to school principal and also teachers, counselors and other educational staff. Furthermore, principals' efforts on developing and implementing effective prevention programs should be directed and supported by anti-bullying legislation.

Lui, Wong and Roland (2018) also noted that the effectiveness of a school anti-bullying program requires considering the uniqueness of the sociocultural context. Ecological perspective focuses on not only the individual characteristics of a child but also the family, peers, teachers, other educational staff, and the community as important factors to provide an in-depth understanding of the bullying behaviors. Thus, it may be proposed that cultural codes and the cultural influences must be considered while developing and implementing a comprehensive school bullying program.

Finally, it must be stated that the results of this study should be considered as descriptive of middle school principals' opinions on the factors associated with bullying in their schools, the strategies that principals take to tackle bullying in their schools, and the issues that they are faced while dealing with bullying in their schools at only one point in time and place. That is, although

school principals in various schools may likely to share common concerns, generalization of the results reported in this study must be made with caution.

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