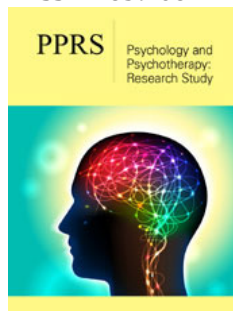


Domestic Violence and Education: The Discourse of Teachers in Primary Education in Northern Greece

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to investigate the signs that primary school teachers recognise in the school attendance of pupils living in a situation of domestic violence and the ways in which they deal with such phenomena in the school context. Qualitative research was used as methodology. The individual questionnaire was used to identify suitable participants and nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers who had identified and managed cases of students living in a situation of domestic violence. Data analysis was carried out using the method of thematic analysis. The findings of the research point to the need for further training of teachers to recognise and effectively manage the manifestations of domestic violence in students' school attendance, the need to establish a systematic school social service for a more effective response to the phenomenon in educational structures, while highlighting the importance of the role of teachers in recognising and managing such issues, as schools can be a supportive environment for coping with domestic violence.

Keywords: Domestic violence; Child abuse; Education; Teachers; Primary education

Abbreviations: DV: Domestic Violence

Introduction

DV is a long-standing phenomenon that has received considerable public attention [1]. It is a social problem that affects every aspect of the population it comprises, regardless of age, sex or gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity [2]. It is an opaque social phenomenon because of the space in which it unfolds. More specifically, violence occurs in the private space of the home, unnoticed by those outside. Due to the nature of the phenomenon, recorded rates and statistics are unreliable and do not reflect the true extent of the problem [3].

Domestic violence

According to the World Health Organization [4], DV is one of the most common forms of violence against women. It includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse and controlling behaviour. It can also include child abuse and, more generally, abuse by one family member against another. Children living in a situation of DV are exposed to four main kinds of violence. Physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse and neglect are the most identified [5], p. 10). There are many ways in which domestic violence can manifest itself and abuse can be either direct, i.e. focused, or indirect. Indirect abuse is spousal violence that takes place in the private life of the family, where children are present but are not the direct object of the abuse. For children, witnessing domestic violence, even if they do not have visual contact but hear it, has devastating consequences for them [6]. Although children are referred to as 'witnesses' to domestic violence, suggesting that they play a passive role, this is not the case. The term 'witnesses to domestic violence' does not adequately capture children's involvement in the unfolding abuse, as children go beyond passive witnessing and experience violence with all their senses [7]. In this context, children actively seek to predict and mitigate the occurrence of violence through their presence [8]. For this reason, Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith & Fellin [9] sought to avoid the passivity implied by the term 'witness' and adopted the term 'children experiencing domestic violence' to highlight the immediacy of the abuse children experience

in a spouse/partner violence environment. It can therefore be argued that the active participation and involvement of children is an integral part of domestic violence [10]. The existence of this phenomenon in the family environment is an indication of child abuse [11]. Callaghan et al. [9] argue that the existence of violence and abuse between the couple has a significant impact on children, which could also label them as victims of abuse. Similarly, as noted by Stanley [12], children living in domestic violence situations are more likely to suffer from physical abuse and neglect.

Children experiencing DV

Children exposed to DV are more likely to experience a range of difficulties than their peers. In Pingley's [13] research exploring the impact of domestic violence on child 'witnesses', it was highlighted that there are unintended effects on children's cognitive and behavioural development, and a correlation between witnessing incidents of domestic violence and children's development. Thus, in line with the above, the consequences of domestic violence are evident at the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive levels, but are also interrelated and overlapping [6-14]. DV negatively affects all aspects of a child's life and disrupts the child's relationship with school. A turbulent home environment for pupils prevents them from learning satisfactorily and from thriving in the school context. This condition is a factor in underlying emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties at school, including poor attendance and consistency [15], preventing students from achieving their educational and academic goals [14]. The state of DV in relation to students' academic performance results in lack of concentration and attention, isolationist behaviour, aggression, depression, unexcused absences and even truancy and dropping out of school [16]. In a study by McGee [17], it was highlighted that the condition of violence that may prevail in a student's home environment results in the manifestation of aggressive behaviour towards both students and school staff, lack of concentration which may also be linked to lack of sleep, frequent changes of school environment due to moving and sometimes school refusal due to the child's concern about what is happening or has happened at home.

Table 1:

Themes	Sub -theme
Signs that teachers recognise in the school attendance of students living in a situation of DV	1.1 Reduced academic performance and attendance 1.2 Extreme behaviours and responses 1.3 Prevalence of anxiety and sadness 1.4 Signs of physical abuse 1.5 Poor physical appearance and lack of grooming 1.6 Parental behaviour 1.7 Information from the local community
Ways in which teachers deal with incidents of DV	2.1 Reporting incidents to school principal 2.2 Cooperation in managing cases in the school context 2.3 Talking to the Parents 2.4 Taking action in the classroom 2.5 Student support and expression of concern

The role of teachers

The role of the teacher is crucial in recognising and observing the changes that take place at a physical and behavioural level, as well as in relation to a child's school attendance and performance, and their presence is extremely important in recognising and detecting domestic violence [18]. Teachers are key figures in the protection of children, as their professional role requires constant contact with students, which gives them the advantage of perceiving and observing signs that may be related to domestic violence and abuse phenomena [19]. In identifying, managing, and reporting abuse to the relevant authorities [20], the role of teachers is crucial. The significance of their role lies in the fact that if an adult in the child's environment does not recognise the abusive condition in which a child lives, the abuse may not be disclosed [21].

Materials and Methods

The methodology used in this study was qualitative research. A total of nine (9) semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via telephone and Zoom video conferencing platform due to the condition imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study used purposive sampling, where subjects were strategically selected to meet the objectives of the study. Specifically, criterion sampling was chosen as the purposive sampling approach. To identify suitable participants, two criteria were set for this study: teachers working in primary education who have identified and dealt with students experiencing domestic violence in the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace in Northern Greece. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, based on the six phases defined by Braun & Clark's [22] thematic analysis approach.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 reveals that four major themes emerged, and nineteen subthemes developed from the nine semi-structured interviews: (1) Signs that teachers recognise in the school attendance of students living in DV, (2) Ways in which teachers deal with incidents of DV, (3) Emerging difficulties, (4) The reluctance of report to relevant authorities.

Emerging difficulties	<p>3.1 Parents' reactions and resistance</p> <p>3.2 The inertia of the school administration</p> <p>3.3 The nature of the procedures required</p> <p>3.4 Lack of expertise</p>
<p>The reluctance of report to relevant authorities</p> <p>DV: Domestic Violence</p>	<p>4.1 the reaction of the parents</p> <p>4.2 personal acquaintance with the parents</p> <p>4.3 doubts about the existence of domestic violence</p>

Theme 1. Signs that teachers recognise in the school attendance of students living in a situation of DV

Sub-theme 1.1: Teachers of students who had experienced domestic violence reported rapid changes in their school attendance, with persistent students showing no interest in the educational process and lessons and coming to school unprepared. In addition, these students were often absent from school without justification. As a positive environment in the privacy of the home can enrich a child's school experience, a negative environment can have detrimental effects on school attendance by reducing academic achievement due to the condition of domestic violence [16]. Therefore, one indication is low school performance [23]. One teacher also observed a rapid turnover in her students' school attendance. "In the second case we went through, now a month ago something like this, a situation where I saw her very distracted, not interested, not doing the homework" (p.3 female). Students' low academic performance may be attributed to their constant vigilance regarding the condition of violence and their concern for the wellbeing of their mothers, as well as their inability to control their emotions and concentrate in school [24]. The prevalence of domestic violence has been shown to have a negative impact on students' academic performance. This can manifest in a lack of concentration and attention, an increase in unexcused absence from the school setting, and, consequently, an elevated risk of dropout or truancy [16].

Sub-theme 1.2: A clue for the teachers was the pupils' behaviour and reactions that were aggressive not only towards other pupils but also towards the teachers themselves. Two distinct types of response to domestic violence have been identified. Children may either become quiet and withdrawn or they may become rowdy and aggressive [14]. "He was aggressive, he was aggressive towards his classmates, he often isolated himself, he went into different corners, he fought easily, he complained easily, that is, he had reactions that were outside the normal limits and disturbed the class in general, from there the invitation to me started because he disturbed the class" (p.7 female). "He called me names and showed no respect." (p.9 female)

However, in addition to the aggressive behaviour, some of the pupils had an internalisation of their emotions and manifestations of psychosomatic symptoms. "In the first case, I identify more because she was a good student but had a lot of psychosomatic issues, e.g. anxiety, perfectionism, insecurity, frustration" (p.3 female). Holt's [25] research indicates that instances of aggressive behaviour towards other students and fighting are indicative of the frequency with which children exhibit self-destructive behaviours or internal

aggression (58.3%). This is accompanied by a low tolerance for irritation. In particular, 75% of respondents reported that they often observed children living in violent environments becoming angry easily. Furthermore, 77.3% of respondents indicated that children were often irritable and irritated. Conversely, children's aggression was not solely directed towards other students; it was also directed towards teaching staff.

Sub-theme 1.3: The prevalence of the feeling of fear was recognized by the teachers as an indication of living in an environment of domestic violence. Characteristically, one participant reported: "Now the little child that I tell you and again I can't tell if they are also a victim or just a bystander they are scared, that is, you approach them, and they might put their hand forward because they are scared." (p.1 female). In addition, it was argued that these children present a sad face and are distracted. "They are sullen they are distracted, and they generally look so very... how can I put it now... immersed in thought, there is a sadness in their eyes, that's all I can say" (p.1 female). As outlined by Buckley, Holt & Whelan [26], a defining characteristic of these children is their anxiety about their safety and the feelings of fear and dread that are deeply instilled in them. In McGee's [17] research, in addition to fear, it also refers to the intense distress that children may experience, which has implications for the children's educational experience.

Sub-theme 1.4: Physical abrasions and scars are arguably the most conspicuous indications of the occurrence of acts of domestic violence. Research indicates that teachers are more likely to report incidents of physical abuse of a child [19]. Children residing in a domestic violence situation are highly susceptible to physical abuse, as they actively participate and engage in violent incidents in an attempt to halt the violence [12]. Furthermore, the perpetrator may be concurrently abusive to the child or may abuse the child as part of the violence against the woman [11]. "We... we... I probably in the morning when I saw the child I saw beyond the fact that he was unattended, sometime after the spring I saw he had bumps on his arms [.....] After a while, after a few days I saw on his head, probably not I saw on his arm a big bite mark... they said the brothers had a fight and it happened. Shortly after, after a week or so he came and so as I was going near the children I saw blood on his head, there was an open wound on his little head." (p.2 female). However, there is an erroneous belief that if a child living in a violent family environment is only harmed when they experience physical abuse. Physical abuse is one of the last stages in the cycle of violence [27].

Sub-theme 1.5: It is evident that domestic violence is a significant contributing factor to both child abuse and child neglect. Children who are subjected to this form of violence are

at a significantly heightened risk of experiencing neglect [12]. The interviewees through their testimonies claimed that children who experienced an abusive family environment lacked a well-groomed physical appearance and nutritious food. The following is a typical quote: "The child was not, was not looked after, he was untended, his clothes, his cleanliness all of that was completely untended." (p.2 female). However, this apparent lack of attention may be attributed to the fact that domestic violence can result in the primary caregiver becoming physically and psychologically vulnerable, factors that impede and inhibit a woman's satisfactory response to her maternal role and difficulties in dealing with childcare and personal care, respectively [28].

Sub-theme 1.6: Parents' reactions and resistance show that students may be victims of domestic violence. This includes aggressive behaviour towards teachers, spousal violence in school, the mother's submissive attitude and frequent changes in the child's environment. The following teacher interviews show typical examples: "a couple rather very well off, very socially in a very good social and economic position etc... we learned that they were divorced, the mother got a restraining order and the father came during breaks with the demand to see the child or at the end of school, so we had seen the presence of the parent, the on-call parent, the teachers etc., there was even a beating in front of the parents and the children and us, the mother said something, the father said something, the father broke her sunglasses, the mother gave him a punch, that is, things that were never seen before, but it happened." (p.1 female).

"Just... but we understood from the attitude of the children and the mum when we saw her that she wasn't talking, so it meant for us that mum was in the same situation." (p.5 male). Furthermore, domestic violence impedes the child's developmental need for security and stability [7]. Consequently, the child may be subjected to frequent changes and moves, which also results in frequent changes in the school setting [17].

"I don't know, I know for sure that the father was at home for a while, then he left, then he came back, then the mother left, she went to X. and took the child to another school, then they came back, that is, they are not together for very long, they leave, and he comes back and comes back." (p.9 female).

Sub-theme 1.7: The indicators discussed above are factors that school staff themselves may notice. However, particularly in small communities, it is likely that the local community is already aware of the existence of domestic violence within a family, which may become known and transferred to teachers, particularly those who have worked in a school unit for many years or come from the town in question. Specifically, through this research it was found that many times teachers' suspicions about the existence of domestic violence in a student's family environment are based on the information they receive from the local community. "Just the child's behavioural problems, they were leading us to varying thoughts and locally we had heard that, there was no evidence it was just blah blah blah you know? But it had background, where there's smoke there's fire and where it's a small place these things are heard, the shouting, this and that..." (p.3 female). This may be

indicative of the existence of domestic violence, yet it also presents challenges for educators, as they lack the requisite information to act in an appropriate manner. Consequently, they are compelled to address the incident in an informal manner within the classroom [19].

Theme 2. Ways in which teachers deal with incidents of DV

Sub-theme 2.1: A common practice in the way of handling domestic acts in the classroom was observed to be informing the school principal, as the majority of the interviewees claimed that anything they learn or observe needs to be reported to the school management. "We informed the principal of course because in all these cases and the protocols say that the school principal should be informed." (p.8 female). This practice follows the legal framework that obliges teachers when they are informed or find out about a crime of domestic violence against a student, it is necessary to inform the school principal without delay (Greek Law 3500/2006 art.23 par.1).

Sub-theme 2.2: The protocol of primary schools requires that issues arising in the school context be discussed collaboratively, i.e. a meeting of the teachers' collective is held in order to inform all teachers about the current issues and to act accordingly in order to address the problems that arise. "Of course, in order to decide all this to go to this result there is also a meeting of the teachers so that we can discuss how to act and what to do." (p.4 female). Often, teachers work with each other to deal with a situation through the internal resources of the school, such as the support of either parents or students. "So there in the presence of the head teacher, principal I don't remember what it was, in the presence of the teacher and if there was a vice-principal in the school, vice-principal, so we all had a little meeting together and the mum and I tried in different ways to support the mum in the way I thought would be good for her in relation to her child, in the presence of all the other teachers I mentioned before." (p.7 female). Collectively addressing issues raised in school contexts encourages and motivates teachers to deal effectively with the difficulties they face in relation to their role, while teamwork reduces feelings of loneliness in managing emerging issues and they do not feel exposed.

Sub-theme 2.3: When the teacher recognizes and detects such signs, it is beneficial to contact the parents of the students [18]. In the present study, the teachers sought contact with parents in order to inform them mainly about the inappropriate behaviour of their children and to draw their attention, as the conditions prevailing in the family environment are transferred to the student's school environment. However, in this context they seek to adopt a non-judgmental attitude so as not to provoke resistance from parents. "No, I'm not saying I'm holding a grudge that your child is being spanked and that's forbidden and I'll make a complaint etc., I'm just getting the message across and saying what I want to say, that is, the child should be careful because he is repeating some patterns that he sees from you but I say it in a way that I don't offend and I think that has an effect because if you go against the parent, if he doesn't have evidence, you know there is no complaint to the police etc., from the mother or from the child etc., well you can't do much.

That way I have seen an improvement.” (p.1 female). It is important that the teacher’s attitude is not characterised by aggression, insinuations of guilt and criticism, but rather a discussion for the benefit of the child [18].

In addition, an effective practice, according to the teachers, is to intimidate parents by reporting to the relevant authorities. “I tell him that if we let it go on, an adult prosecutor may come to the school and you and I may have a problem [.....] there of course he cut me off in a bad way I tell him but the school is our business and we don’t allow violent behaviour because there will be a complaint from a parent so there he kind of softened up and the child had a good enough behaviour at school I think, that is, he had kind of pulled himself together.” (p.1 female). This practice appears to reinforce and facilitate the management of incidents of domestic violence in the school unit by teachers. However, the threat of reporting to the relevant authorities may result in acts of domestic violence being covered up, potentially leading to an intensification of violence in the privacy of the home.

Sub-theme 2.4: In cases where teachers perceive that a child is experiencing domestic violence, they seek to have classroom or individual discussions with the students in order to inform children about this phenomenon and the importance of expressing all that they live in a protected environment. The following quote is a typical example: “I think that in cases where you see here and there you get signals that something is wrong you make a generalised intervention e for the whole class to participate so that what you want to get across you get across and sometimes through such conversations talking one student talking the other and the one you want to get across maybe unlocks and says a word or two or maybe he can catch you at the end and talk to you himself because he sees that there is support here.” (p.8 female)

Very interesting is the practice of a teacher who, in collaboration with another teacher, created a case study for the students to manage and express their feelings. “Like, we happened to do a lesson with this teacher that I’m telling you we work together in the class of social citizenship education we had set this up in the lesson from when I was in sixth grade with the other girl, which was basically about a conflict within a family. It was a made-up email that one girl would send to another girl and it just described a situation in her house.” (p.3 female). Therefore, it is apparent that teachers and education workers in general cannot always change the family environment in which students live, but they can shape a safe environment to develop positive and encouraging relationships, emotional and academic support and develop healthy patterns of interaction [29].

Teacher is an important adult person in a student’s life [18] and through their role they can create trusting relationships with students, which works as a supportive factor in the disclosure of acts of domestic violence by the child [19]. Something similar was sought by a teacher, who argues that the creation of trusting relationships between teacher and student is essential in school contexts. More specifically in relation to the management of the child’s case in her classroom she stated: “and I gave her an idea that I’ve been through something similar because I think that really

helps a child to open up and so she confided things to me.” (p.3 female). Students living in a domestic violence situation experience a chaotic environment characterised by fear, stress, and insecurity. The support that teachers can provide positively impacts the students’ educational experience. In particular, the existence of a caring and supportive relationship appears to be the cornerstone of healthy individual development, while a supportive school climate is a protective factor [30]. A relevant quote is: “That is, he wanted what we call in a kind way and he also wanted affection because the teacher had told me that he lacked a lot of affection at home and especially the father did not have a good attitude towards the child, that’s about this little boy.” (p.6 female).

Theme 3. emerging difficulties

Sub-theme 3.1: The behaviours displayed by parents in the school context make the role of teachers more difficult, especially in relation to the management of students living in violent family environments. This situation acts as an inhibiting factor in case management as it was specifically stated that “sometimes when we talk to each other we feel that our hands are tied” (p.2 female). A key factor that makes it difficult for teachers is the lack of cooperation from parents in addressing students’ issues. Not only do parents not cooperate, but when a change in a student’s behaviour that may be related to an act of domestic violence is pointed out, they cover it up. “Sometimes you want to say some things to help the child when you see that they have some problems with their behaviour, with their progress in general and you see resistance from the parents... they don’t accept it, they tell you everything is alright there is no problem.” (p.2 female). Parents’ resistance to cooperation frustrates teachers to such an extent that they consider that there is no means of enabling them to act in relation to this condition, thus describing themselves as “aspirin for cancer”. “So, I just thought I was just being an aspirin to cancer and I mean I wasn’t, I just wasn’t. I wasn’t passing the time and I was doing my lesson, I mean something effective since I wasn’t cooperating there wasn’t. There wasn’t let’s say things that were resilient from home I was an aspirin to cancer.” (p.6 female).

Sub-theme 3.2: The school director plays an extremely important role in dealing with acts of domestic violence in the school environment, as according to Greek Law 3500/2006 Art. 23 and par. 1, the principal is the one who announces the criminal act to the competent prosecutor or the nearest police authority. However, the school management may prevent the report to the competent authorities in order not to get involved in such a situation and prefer to manage the case informally within the school context. “The teacher will report, but the mere reporting by the teacher does absolutely nothing if the principal does not report to the juvenile prosecutor. Halfway done, the problem is the other half.” (p.6 female). In addition to the fact that this act is illegal, when principals do not proceed with reporting after being informed by teachers of acts of domestic violence, the latter feel that there is no support, that their role is undermined, and they feel responsible for the unreported abuse [31]. A typical quote is the following quote from the teacher: “and when the principal is a little bit more afraid then you are exposed.” (p.9 female).

Sub-theme 3.3: The procedures required to manage domestic violence issues in the school context act as a barrier for teachers as they feel that “we have no means, unfortunately” (p.9 female), which prevents them from effectively managing this phenomenon. “and you will say yes you go ahead yes but you are up to a point, your own jurisdiction stops, then what can you do about it? There is not a specific structure because for me personally I should be given the freedom by the state to inform welfare for example, or to inform a different agency.” (p.8 female).

Sub-theme 3.4: The lack of knowledge and training in relation to recognising and reporting acts of domestic violence that students are subjected to makes it difficult to manage such cases [20]. “Because okay we as much as we want, we can’t say that we are totally experts on these issues and how to manage them in the best, in the most ideal way.” (p.5 male). “I might say something wrong; I might not handle it well out of ignorance not to do it on purpose, out of ignorance and only because it doesn’t concern my subjects, I am being completely honest about it.” (p.8 female). Education workers need to be properly trained in how to manage children experiencing violence effectively and appropriately. They need to be trained in relation to the phenomenon of domestic violence, i.e. the abuse of power and control, the manipulative patterns, threats and terror used by the perpetrator to cover up their actions, and the coping strategies used by women and children to survive. Without knowledge of the above, it is difficult to recognise and assess the real risks faced by some children and their mothers. As a result, they may blame abused women for the children’s difficulties [32]. A typical quote is:

“I think the parent who is the victim has a lot of the blame, and of course the one who is the perpetrator, right? But you must at some point. [blank - silence] do something. So, what I’m saying to you, I heard that at the last minute the victims back off and don’t proceed with a complaint what else can I say?” (p.1 female).

Theme 4. The reluctance of report to relevant authorities

Sub-theme 4.1: The reporting process is not an easy task. There are many difficulties which act as barriers to reporting an incident to the competent authorities. Three factors emerged from the interviews of the research participants: a) the reaction of the parents, b) personal acquaintance with the parents and c) doubt about the existence of domestic violence. Parental reaction is perhaps the most common deterrent. Emotional weight and fear of parental reaction acts as a deterrent, as well as fear of potential threats and parental anger towards them (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2003). “Parent first, the parent will react badly. Not every parent wants for x reasons to go to the prosecutor’s office and be questioned. So, the parent will then be reactive to the school to the point of being vindictive. It’s a delicate situation.” (p.7 female).

While getting to know the student’s parents makes reporting even more difficult (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2003), as it may exacerbate the relationship between both the school and the family and the complainant and parents [20]. “Well, in small places the principal will fight with the local community and a lot of times...I mean if the child is known to be subject to domestic

violence how do you go and report to the juvenile prosecutor? If you know the child’s parents. You know in small communities now, when you know the children’s parents, how do you go to report to that principal? Who has the guts to do that?” (p.6 female)

In addition, teachers’ doubts about the existence of domestic violence in the pupil’s family environment make reporting more difficult, as they may not be able to substantiate it. Another consideration is that their action may lead to the removal of the child from the family, a responsibility that is not easy to take on. Thus, due to the fear and anxiety caused by the possibility of reporting, teachers often handle the incident informally within the school unit, as there is a view that this is more beneficial to the child than reporting to the relevant authorities [19].

Conclusion

In conclusion, school is perhaps the only context in which acts of domestic violence, a particularly dark phenomenon, can be recognised. The role of schools and teachers is crucial in recognising and dealing with such incidents, but it requires special attention, knowledge, and appropriate handling in a climate of trust, genuine concern and non-judgmental attitudes. The role of teachers is particularly difficult and that dealing with such cases is fraught with risks, but the partnership of teachers and school social services is necessary to ensure a more comprehensive response by school units to the phenomenon of domestic violence. Furthermore, understanding how teachers and the wider school context can be supportive of students living in a domestic violence situation is crucial and beneficial as it can act as a resilience-building factor for students with traumatic experiences by creating a supportive and positive classroom environment. Creating a supportive environment for children living in a violent domestic environment is empowering as the school can provide a context where students can explore and share their experiences, acknowledge and express their feelings, improve their social skills, develop individual safety plans, cultivate coping skills for difficult situations, and internalise experiences of success, competence and acceptance [29].

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