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How Different are Girls and Boys as Bullies and Victims? Comparative Perspectives on Gender and Age in the Bullying Dynamics

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Abstract

Bullying involves aggressive behaviors with the intention to harm others, including manifestations of systematic abuse of power. Two types of bullying can be considered: physical and psychological. Students may get involved in bullying dynamics as bullies, victims, or both - aggressive victims. The literature defines bullying as a global phenomenon, affecting both girls and boys. Therefore, Portuguese schools are no exception, with several studies from North to South of the country demonstrating the presence of bullying in schools, both in elementary and middle schools. The aim of this study is to elaborate the differences and experiences by both genders, boys and girls, in the current dynamics of school bullying. Thus, answering the question - how different are girls and boys as bullies and victims? In addition, it intends to impart the acquired knowledge and raise awareness of the implications of this social context in which Portuguese children are currently involved. The results obtained from a sample of 1147 students attending the 1st cycle of Portuguese education (elementary schools) were in line with previous studies. In order to enrich the literature, bullies, victims, and aggressive victims were characterized in detail. Finally, the importance of the adults' intervention, especially teachers, was highlighted.

Keywords: Bullying, aggressors, victims, aggressive victims, Portuguese schools.

¿En qué se Diferencian las Chicas y los Chicos como Acosadores y Víctimas? Perspectivas Comparativas sobre el Género y la Edad en la Dinámica del Acoso Escolar

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Resumen

El *bullying* implica comportamientos agresivos con la intención de dañar a otros, incluyendo manifestaciones de abuso de poder sistemático. Se consideran dos tipos de intimidación: física y psicológica. Estudiantes pueden involucrarse en el *bullying* como agresores, víctimas, o ambos - víctimas agresivas. Se define el *bullying* como un fenómeno mundial que afecta tanto a las niñas como a los niños. Así, las escuelas portuguesas no son una excepción, ya que varios estudios realizados en el norte y el sur del país demuestran la presencia del *bullying* en las escuelas, tanto en las primarias como en las secundarias. Nuestro objetivo fue elaborar las diferencias y vivencias de ambos géneros en la dinámica actual del *bullying*. Se responderá a la pregunta: ¿En qué se diferencian las chicas y los chicos como acosadores y víctimas? Además, crear conciencia de las repercusiones de este contexto social en el que se encuentran actualmente los niños portugueses. Los resultados obtenidos de una muestra de 1147 estudiantes que asisten al primer ciclo de escuelas primarias portuguesa, están en consonancia con estudios anteriores. Se caracterizaron detalladamente los agresores, las víctimas y las víctimas agresivas. Por último, se destacó la importancia de la intervención de los adultos, especialmente los profesores.

Palabras clave: Bullying, agresores, víctimas, víctimas agresivas, escuelas portuguesas.

In the school context, physical or emotional aggression covers a wide range of behaviors, such as bullying (Carvalhosa et al., 2009), which is the predominant form of aggression in schools (Kubiszewski et al., 2014). It involves negative behaviors which intend to harm others (e.g., a peer) and includes a manifestation of systematic abuse of power. Another characteristic of bullying is the repetitive nature of these attitudes. These behaviors may be performed by one student or a group of students (Carvalhosa et al., 2009). Moreover, it is also widely agreed in the literature that this type of aggression is intentional but not provoked (Finkelhor et al., 2012; Gladden et al., 2014; Teasley & Nevarez, 2016).

The author of this definition of bullying is Dan Olweus (1993), who was also the pioneer in the study of this type of behavior. Although there was a consensus in the literature about the definition of this essential construct (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sveinsson & Morris, 2013), the repetitive nature of this phenomenon has been questioned by some authors (Ross, 2003).

The literature highlights two types of bullying: physical bullying and psychological bullying. Physical bullying (or direct bullying) is tangible, easy to identify, and associated with visible damage - includes biting, suffocating, pulling hair, hitting, punching or kicking, pinching, pushing, scratching, spitting, chasing, locking a peer indoors, damage to each other's property, or any other form of physical attack or intimidation (Sullivan, 2011); psychological bullying (or indirect bullying) can be verbal or non-verbal, and although less visible and more difficult to detect, it is no less damaging (Sullivan, 2011). It includes gestures or rude expressions, and manipulating or damaging relationships (Leff et al., 2010; Low et al., 2010).

Bullying is significantly more prevalent in elementary schools (1st to 4th school year, usually 6 to 10 years old) and middle schools (5th to 6th school year, usually 10 to 12 years old). Students may become involved in these hurtful dynamics as bullies, victims, or both, the so-called aggressive victims (Carvalhosa et al., 2009; Eslea & Rees, 2001; Jansen et al., 2012; Kubiszewski et al., 2014). Even though there is evidence that bullying tends to decline in later school years (late middle and high schools), (Carvalhosa et al., 2009; Dake et al., 2003; Nansel et al., 2001), the evidence also shows that bullying can carry negative long-term effects into an individual's adult life (Barros et al., 2009; Pereira et al., 2004). These effects may include physical, psychological, and social problems (e.g., miscellaneous pain, somatization,

anxiety, social isolation, sleep disturbance, eating disorders, and poor academic performance), (Karatas & Ozturk, 2011; Kumpulainen et al., 2001; Olweus, 2011; Wang et al., 2014; Wolke & Lereya, 2014).

Literature characterizes bullying as a globalized phenomenon (i.e., it exists in several countries) which is present in peer relationships between both girls and boys (Eriksen et al., 2014). Portuguese schools are, therefore, no exception with several studies from North to South of the country indicating the existence of bullying in middle schools (Carvalhosa et al., 2001; Carvalhosa et al., 2009; Costa et al., 2013; Martins, 2005; Pereira et al., 2004; Rosário & Duarte, 2010).

Portuguese literature also indicates that when it comes to gender differences, boys experience mostly physical bullying, while girls show a greater tendency to experience psychological bullying. This behavior most frequently occurs on the playground, but it also happens in the classroom, as well as in the school's corridors (Almeida, 2011; Espiga, 2013; Lourenço et al., 2009; Páscoa, 2013; Silva et al., 2017; Pereira et al., 2004; Raimundo & Seixas, 2009).

The harmful effects of bullying on individuals' mental health are a great concern, mainly for mental health professionals, making it important to deepen the knowledge through the exploration of the intricacies of bullying. It is essential to learn who the victims and their aggressors are, understand the prospects for this type of situation, find out if they ask for help and to whom, and more importantly, what can be done in terms of prevention and intervention.

In a study developed by Silva et al. (2013), boys are victims more often when considering different types of bullying as a whole, although the differences are not always significant. Differences were found for physical aggression and insults (name calling) when comparing boys and girls. Less open and more indirect forms of aggression seem to be more frequent among girls (talking about the other person and other forms of victimization), although the percentages are low. Boys are more involved in both forms of bullying (direct and indirect). The stereotyped participation of boys and girls in bullying situations has social roots, as traditionally the more aggressive behavior and violence of boys are reinforced, while the indirect involvement or greater victimization of girls is more consistent with traditional stereotypes of femininity. These stereotypes reveal the strategies used by different genders to ensure a prominent place in the group and in peer relationships.

Gender differences can be based on sexual roles and symbolic content transmitted throughout the socialization process, which will be reproduced at school (Silva, et al. 2013). Gender differences in bullying and victimization must be read in terms of gender socialization and normative expectations of behavior in boys and girls, this has to do with how children learned to use power in relationships.

The more physical form explains the greater risk of involvement of boys, contrary to a greater empathy in girls, which appears as a protective factor, on the other hand, a more competitive attitude in boys at puberty will be a risk factor in the perpetration of bullying (Smith et al., 2019). Gender differences in aggression arise due to socializing agents, parents encourage behaviors in boys, such as autonomy, instrumentality and goal-directed behaviors, in girls they direct them to relationship management. Girls are taught to respond to anger and hurt by acting in areas such as personal relationships and psychological well-being. Boys are socialized to deal with anger, frustration and other negative emotions through aggression and the physical dimension.

Thus, aggression among girls often involves forms of manipulation of relationships and verbal interactions, while boys tend to engage in physical violence (Semenza, 2021). Boys are more at risk of bullying others, and both genders are equally at risk of being victims, but it is important to consider age, type of bullying, country and culture (Smith et al., 2019). Studies show interesting relationships between cortisol, victimization and gender, so cortisol reactivity may mediate the link between relational victimization and internalizing and externalizing problems in boys but not in girls (Sun, et al. 2022).

Boys report more involvement in bullying behaviors associated with physical intimidation than girls. However, some studies have found no differences in victimization rates between boys and girls. In terms of negative affect, victimized girls tend to report higher levels of anxiety and depression than victimized boys, and girls who bully report higher levels of depression than boys. In this sense, boys are more likely to externalize behaviors to deal with negative affect compared to girls (Chui et al., 2022).

Many studies on Bullying are interested in the phenomenon at various levels but ignore the involvement in terms of gender relations. It is particularly important to understand the gender differences in bullying situations and analyze the aspects that contribute to the perpetuation of this violence. The present study aims to present a detailed characterization of the Portuguese

students involved in bullying and of the bullying dynamics. The intent is to elaborate the differences experienced by both genders, boys and girls, in the current dynamics of school bullying. Thus, answering the following question - how different are girls and boys as bullies and victims? In doing so, we hope to raise awareness of the implications of this social context in our children's lives.

The purpose, more than comparing sexes, is to provide a perspective on the experiences of victims, bullies and aggressors. How to find them, what differentiates them beyond gender (age, place where episodes of aggression occur more frequently), and above all, to understand the tendency in terms of intervening behaviors and help-seeking on the part of the victim, peers and adults involved.

Methods

Participants

The present study had a total sample of 1147 students, 585 (51%) boys and 562 (49%) girls, with a combined average age of 7.96 years and an average number of 1.35 siblings (brothers and/or sisters).

Regarding the type of educational institution that participants were attending during this study, 569 (49.6%) attended public schools and 578 (50.4%) attended private schools. In terms of educational stage, all participants were attending primary/elementary school, 266 (23.3%) of whom were 1st graders, 295 (25.7%) were 2nd graders, 306 (26.7%) were 3rd graders and 280 (24.4%) were 4th graders. Additionally, 1061 students (92.5%) attended kindergarten, in contrast to 78 (6.8%) who did not. Furthermore, 59 (5.1%) of the participants failed at least one school year.

Instruments

Sociodemographic Questionnaire: compilation of variables about the participants such as: gender, age, school year, number of siblings, whether they attended kindergarten and if they ever failed a school year.

Bullying: The Portuguese version of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Pereira 2008; original English version by [Olweus, 1989](#)) evaluates different components related to bullying involvement, either as a bully or a victim. Thus, the questionnaire is organized into three blocks: the first block pertains to sociodemographic information (7 questions); the second

block refers to the aspects of being a victim (10 questions); and the third block concerns the aspects of being an aggressor (5 questions).

The answer options vary according to the question items therefore, in most cases, it is possible to select more than one answer option (for example, “How have you been harmed? Mark an X in the balls of what has happened to you this term”; “If you have hurt a peer at school during this term, tell us why you did it. You can mark more than one ball), while in other cases it is only possible to select one (Since the beginning of this term how many times have you been hurt? How many times have you hurt other peer(s) at school this term?). In our study, involvement in bullying was captured through items in which the respondents had to identify the number of times they had been bullied (Since this term began how many times did somebody hurt you?) and the number of times they had bullied others (How many times did you hurt another peer(s) at school, during this term?).

From a psychometric point of view, a Cronbach alpha of .78 was obtained by the complete original scale. In this study, a Cronbach alpha for the same complete scale was .796.

Procedures and Statistical Analysis

The data were collected through a representative sampling process, directly from students who voluntarily participated in the study and had the informed consent signed by the parents. It was explained that the collected data would be used exclusively for the purpose of scientific research and would respect the data protection rules of scientific ethics and European general law, in accordance with the terms of Law 67/98, of 26 October and EU Regulation 2016/679 of the Council of the European Union.

The statistical analysis was performed through the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. Descriptive and Frequency Analyses were performed (not only at the sociodemographic level, but also at the level of the Bullying questionnaire), in order to thoroughly characterize the subjects in the sample. After a preliminary characterization, T-Student Tests were performed throughout the Sociodemographic variables and the Bullying questionnaire.

The Sociodemographic variables were also analyzed from the perspective of three categories: aggressive victims, victims, and bullies.

Results

For statistical purposes, participants were divided into 3 categories: aggressive victims (475, 41.41%), victims who were exclusively bullied (331, 28.86%) and bullies who were exclusively aggressors (79, 6.89%). Results revealed an alarming number of 885 students (77.16%) involved in bullying dynamics.

Who are the Aggressive victims? A percentage of 53.3% (254) attended private schools, and 221 (46.5%) attended public schools. The majority (142, 29.9%) were 2nd grade male students (284, 59.8%). Only 5.5% (26) of the aggressive victims did not attend kindergarten and 5.9% (28) failed a year, at least once. Finally, this group of students had an average age of $M= 7.99$ years ($SD= 1.161$), as well as an average number of siblings of $M= 1.99$ ($SD= 1.048$).

Who are the Victims? There were more victims in public education (188, 56.8%) than in private education (143, 43.2%). There was also a higher number of victims in 1st grade, compared to 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades (113, 34.1%), most of them being female students (201, 60.7%). The percentage of victims who did not attend kindergarten was 8.5% (28), slightly higher than the aggressive victims, while the percentage of victims who failed at least one year was lower (16, 4.8%). The average age of the victims was $M= 7.64$ ($PD= 1.194$) and the average number of siblings was $M= 1.38$ ($SD= 1.399$).

Who are the Bullies? The distribution of bullies between private and public education was quite balanced (private schools: 40, 50.6%; public schools: 39, 49.4%). There was a higher percentage of bullies attending 4th grade (28, 35.4%), and most of them were boys (51, 64.6%). Only 7.7% of bullies did not attend kindergarten, and 8.9% (7) failed a year, at least once. This group had a slightly higher average age ($M= 8.39$, $SD= 1.255$) than the victims, and an average number of siblings of $M= 1.61$ ($SD= 1.418$).

The victims' perspective. In terms of victimization frequency (since the beginning of the school term during which this investigation was conducted), 29.7% (341) responded that they had not been victims of any such event, and another 29.7% (341) said that it had happened twice. However, the most noteworthy is that 27.5% (315) responded that they were bullied 5 or more times.

Equally serious, 43.6% (500) of the students reported that they were called mean names; 42.2% (484) said they were beaten, punched and kicked; 24.5%

(291) stated they *were talking about me, and telling secrets*; 15.3% (175) were threatened and/or scared; 10.6% (112) affirmed they were robbed; and 3.1% (35) revealed that they were asked for money and it was not returned do them.

Additionally, 9.9% (114) felt that they were ignored by their peers, expressing it through the statement *they did not talk to me*. More specifically, 16.7% (192) of students shared that their peers did not play with them and that they had been left alone.

When it comes to cyberbullying, 1% (12) of the students affirmed that they received hurtful text messages (via mobile phone or over the internet) Moreover, when asked about instances of racism, 4.2% (48) of the students said that they had been insulted because of their race.

Finally, 6.3% (72) of the students mentioned they had been involved in other types of bullying behaviors (besides those mentioned above), and only 29.25% (335) considered that they had not been involved in any bullying behavior since the beginning of the school term.

With respect to “**Where, with whom and how do bullying moments occur?**” the different ways of victimization may be represented as follows in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequencies and percentages of the multiple ways of victimization

	Frequencies	Percentages	Valid Percentages	Cumulative Percentages
No one hurt me this term	339	29,6	29,6	29,6
From my class	396	34,5	34,5	64,1
From other class	207	18,0	18,0	82,1
From mine and other class	205	17,9	17,9	100,0
Total	1147	100,0	100,0	

Regarding the **place where these bullying dynamics occurred**, only 29.5% (338) of students responded *nowhere* showing that they were not involved in bullying behaviors. However, 61.4% (704) explained that they were involved in some type of bullying behavior on the playground; 15.8% (181) declared that they were victimized in the school corridors and stairs; 11.2% (128) stated that it occurred in the classroom; 9.1% (104) mentioned the canteen; 6% (69) pointed out the bathrooms; 2.5% (29) said it happened in the changing rooms; 2.4% (27) were bullied on their way to school; and 1.4% (16) evoked events associated to cyberbullying (mobile phone and

internet), which is in accordance with the results presented above. Finally, 2% (23) of the students stated that they were victimized in other places that were not mentioned in the questionnaire. Table 2 includes who are the bullies, according to the victims.

Table 2

“In which class(es) are the boys or girls who bullied you?”

	Frequencies	Percentages	Valid Percentages	Cumulative Percentages
No one hurt me this term	339	29,6	29,6	29,6
From my class	396	34,5	34,5	64,1
From other class	207	18,0	18,0	82,1
From mine and other class	205	17,9	17,9	100,0
Total	1147	100,0	100,0	

In respect to the **bullies’ age**, only 29.4% (337) students said that no one had harmed them; 43.7% (501) stated that they were harmed by peers of the same age; and 34.1% (391) identified the bullies as older peers. However, only 14.2% (163) said they were victims of younger students. Table 3 explores the results regarding the bullies’ gender, the victims reported the following.

Table 3

Bullies’ gender according to the victims.

	Frequencies	Percentages	Valid Percentages	Cumulative Percentages
No one hurt me	337	29,4	29,4	29,4
It was a boy	223	19,4	19,4	48,8
It was a girl	77	6,7	6,7	55,5
Several boys	238	20,7	20,7	76,3
Several girls	78	6,8	6,8	83,1
Both boys and girls	194	16,9	16,9	100,0
Total	1147	100,0	100,0	

Regarding the intervention of teachers (Table 4) and other school personnel (Table 5). It should be noted that students feel that the latter is more present than the former and it may be illustrated as follows.

Table 4

“How many times have teachers tried to stop the boys or girls who have hurt others?”

	Frequencies	Percentages	Valid Percentages	Cumulative Percentages
I don't know	415	36,2	36,2	36,2
Never or rarely	225	19,6	19,6	55,8
Sometimes	281	24,5	24,5	80,3
Very often	226	19,7	19,7	100,0
Total	1147	100,0	100,0	

Table 5

“How many times have other school personnel tried to stop boys or girls from hurting others?”

	Frequencies	Percentages	Valid Percentages	Cumulative Percentages
I don't know	304	26,5	26,5	26,5
Never or rarely	185	16,1	16,1	42,6
Sometimes	313	27,3	27,3	69,9
Very often	345	30,1	30,1	100,0
Total	1147	100,0	100,0	

On the matter of **behaviors of telling someone and/or seeking help**, 330 (28.8%) of the students mentioned that nobody had hurt them; 10.5% (120) said that they did not tell anyone what was happening. In contrast, 16.1% (185) and 14% (161) confessed that they told one or two friends, or their friends, respectively; 23% (264) asked the class leading teacher or another teacher for help; 11.5% (132) spoke to a sibling; and 26.9% (309) spoke to another member of the school personnel. Only 2.6% talked about this subject with the school psychologist.

The gender distribution of peers who helped the victims in a bullying situation is presented in Table 6.

Table 6*“Are there boys or girls who defended you when others tried to hurt you?”*

	Frequencies	Percentages	Valid Percentages	Cumulative Percentages
No one hurt me	325	28,3	28,3	28,3
No one helped me	207	18,0	18,0	46,4
A boy helped	133	11,6	11,6	58,0
A girl helped	108	9,4	9,4	67,4
Two or more boys	128	11,2	11,2	78,6
Two or more girls	106	9,2	9,2	87,8
A boy and girl	17	1,5	1,5	89,3
Both boys and girls	123	10,7	10,7	100,0
Total	1147	100,0	100,0	

What students say about their own intervention when they witness bullying dynamic? A percentage of 47.3 (542) students expressed that they helped their peer the way they could, and 45.4% (521) explained that they called someone to help. However, 12.5% (143) confessed that they only helped when a friend was involved. In a positive note, 42.3% (485) shared that they would help, even if they did not know the victim. In contrast, 7.1% (82) said that they did nothing because it had nothing to do with them. Despite this, 11.7% (136) said they did nothing, but recognized that they should have helped; and finally, 4.4% (51) stated they chose to do nothing for fear of revenge and repercussions from the bullies.

The bullies' perspective. Most students affirmed they had been involved in bullying dynamics as bullies. Nevertheless, when asked to consider the last school term, 50.9% (584) revealed that it did not happen again, and 32.2% (369) admitted that it happened at least once or twice. Additionally, 7.8% (90) of the students assumed they had been aggressive to other peers 3 to 4 times, and 9% (103) displayed aggressive behaviors towards their peers 5 times or more.

In contrast to the victims' perspective, 50.1% (575) of the bullies considered that they had done nothing to their peers. Regarding the motives, 33.2% (381) explained that they had been aggressive in order to defend themselves; 27.8% (319) said they were irritated, provoked or teased; 11% (121) meant to avoid being harmed; and 7% (80) wanted to take revenge. Besides that, 3.5% (40) of the bullies confessed that they did it to feel stronger;

21 (1.8%) explained that it was their way to show that they were stronger than others; 1.7% (209) said it made them feel good; and 1.4% (16) wanted to be admired and popular. Finally, 2.3% (26) stated it was for other reasons than those previously mentioned.

In this last term 80.9% (928) students mentioned they had not been involved in aggressive behaviors towards their peers in school. However, 15.3% (176) admitted they had abetted the bully at least 1 to 2 times; 1.3% (17) 3 or 4 times; and % 2.3% (26) 5 or more times. When asked about contexts outside of school (e.g. on the way to school or back home), the number of such negative moments tended to decrease, since 96.7% (1098) reported they had not witnessed or been involved in bullying behaviors outside school. When asked **if they would join in bullying a peer whom they did not like**, the students responded as it shows in Table 7.

Table 7

“Would you join in bullying a peer whom you did not like?”

	Frequencies	Percentages	Valid Percentages	Cumulative Percentages
No	786	68,5	68,5	68,5
Yes	64	5,6	5,6	74,1
Maybe	41	3,6	3,6	77,7
Only if she/he bothers me	158	13,8	13,8	91,5
I don't think so	98	8,5	8,5	100,0
Total	1147	100,0	100,0	

Testing age differences

Victims showed a tendency to be younger (were victimized once or several times: $M=7.85$ years, $SD=1.187$, did not happen, $M=8.22$, $SD=1.237$, $t(1145)=-4.76$, $p=.000$), when compared to older peers, and to have fewer siblings (happened once or several times: $M=1.27$ siblings, $SD=1.207$, did not happen, $M=1.55$ siblings, $SD=1.396$, $t(1145)= -3.238$, $p=.001$).

A significantly lower age was also found in more visible and specific domains of bullying, such as:

- “I was hit” (happened: $M=7.76$, $SD=1.219$, did not happen, $M=8.1$, $SD=1.178$, $t(1145)=4.741$, $p=.000$).
- “I was robbed” (happened: $M=7.59$, $SD=1.225$, did not happen, $M=8$, $SD=1.205$; $t(1145)=3.553$, $p=.000$).

- “I was Threatened” (happened: $M=7.73$, $SD=1.019$, did not happen, $M=8$, $SD=1.241$, $t(1145)=3.151$, $p=.002$).
- “I was called mean names” (happened: $M=7.46$, $SD=1.174$, did not happen, $M=8.04$, $SD=1.238$; $t(1145)=2.491$, $p=.013$).
- Episodes of cyberbullying (happened: $M=7.17$, $SD=.718$, did not happen, $M=7.97$, $SD=1.215$, $t(1145)=3.799$, $p=.003$).

Regarding less visible domains of bullying: “They told secrets about me” (happened: $M=7.86$, $SD=1.126$, did not happen, $M=7.99$, $SD=1.24$, $t(1145)=1.665$, $p=.098$), “They do not talk to me” (happened: $M=7.79$, $SD=1.117$, did not happen, $M=7.98$, $SD=1.223$, $t(1145)=1.557$, $p=.12$), not significant. The same happened for episodes of racism (happened: $M=7.69$, $SD=1.401$, did not happen, $M=7.97$, $SD=1.204$; $t(1145)=1.575$, $p=.116$).

In these more specific areas of bullying, the number of siblings did not show significant differences. It was also found that the victims who needed more help were the ones who sought it more often among the school personnel and family:

- To the teacher or class director (asked for help: $M=7.75$ years, $SD=1.249$, did not ask, $M=8.02$ years, $SD=1.196$, $t(1145)=3.161$, $p=.002$; asked for help: $M=1.17$, $SD=1.114$, did not ask, $M=1.41$, $SD=1.311$; $t(1145)=2.983$, $p=.003$).
- To a parent/guardian (asked for help: $M=7.83$ years, $SD=1.17$, did not ask, $M=8.03$ years, $SD=1.233$; $t(1145)=2.63$, $p=.009$; asked for help: $M=1.17$ siblings, $SD=1.042$, did not ask, $M=1.46$ siblings, $SD=1.378$, $t(1145)=4.078$, $p=.000$).
- To another member of the school personnel (asked for help: $M=7.78$ years, $SD=1.159$, did not ask, $M=8.02$ years, $SD=1.227$, $t(1145)=3.154$, $p=.002$; asked for help: $M=1.2$ siblings, $SD=1.153$, did not ask, $M=1.41$ siblings, $SD=1.309$; $t(1145)=2.634$, $p=.009$). The possible intervention of the brothers is also worth mentioning (asked for help): $M=7.69$ years, $SD=1.092$, did not ask, $M=7.99$ years, $SD=1.224$; $t(1145)=2.704$, $p=.007$; asked for help: $M=1.57$ siblings, $SD=.967$, did not ask: $M=1.33$ siblings, $SD=1.304$; $t(1145)=-.206$, $p=.04$).

In contrast, requests for help made to the school psychologist (asked for help: $M=8.07$, $SD=.868$, did not ask, $M=7.95$, $SD=1.221$; $t(1145)=-.69$, $p=.495$), did not show significant differences, probably because they were less frequent.

Discussion

Results were consistent with previous portuguese studies (Almeida, 2011; Espiga, 2013; Lourenço et al., 2009; Páscoa, 2013; Silva et al., 2017; Pereira et al., 2004; Raimundo & Seixas, 2009). The students pointed out the playground, classroom and corridors as the places where bullying frequently occurred.

The participants of bullying behaviors were divided into 3 groups: aggressive victims (475, 41.41%), victims who suffered bullying (331, 28.86%) and exclusively bullies (79, 6.89%). The results revealed an alarming number of 885 students (77.16%) involved in bullying dynamics.

Aggressive victims are the actors who dominate the sample as they complete 41.41% of the sample (275). The majority (142, 29.9%) are male 2nd year pupils (284, 59.8%) with a mean age of $M=7.99$. These results show that school children who have been bullied are more likely to develop aggressive bullying behavior in the future, as shown by Falla et al. (2022). Experiencing hostile contexts, can lead young children to learn that aggression is an effective behavioral approach, and they incorporate it into their own cognitive and motivational schemas arising similarly aggressive responses among peers.

About the victims, there was a higher number in grade 1 compared to grades 2, 3 and 4 (113, 34.1%), with the majority being female students (201, 60.7%). The mean age of the victims was $M=7.64$ ($SD=1.194$).

About the offenders, there is a higher percentage of offenders in the 4th grade (28, 35.4%), with the majority being boys (51, 64.6%). This group had a slightly higher average age ($M=8.39$, $SD=1.255$) than the victims.

From our data it is important to highlight that 27.5% (315) responded that they had suffered bullying 5 or more times, of these 43.6% (500) of students reported that they had been insulted 42.2% (484) said they had been beaten, punched and kicked; 24.5% (291) said that they had been talked about, telling secrets; 15.3% (175) had been threatened and/or frightened; 10.6% (112) said they had been robbed; and 3.1% (35) revealed that they had been asked for money and it was not returned. Still 9.9% (114) felt ignored by their peers, expressing themselves through the statement that they did not talk to me. More specifically, 16.7% (192) of students shared that their peers did not play with them and that they were excluded. On cyberbullying, 1% (12) of students stated that they had received offensive text messages (via mobile phones or the internet) and had been insulted because of their race. Only 29.25% (335)

considered that they had not been involved in any bullying behavior since the beginning of the school term. It is noteworthy that the most frequent bullying behavior is insulting (indirect bullying) followed by hitting (direct bullying).

In relation to the gender of the aggressors, there was also consistency with the literature in that boys tended to be more associated with the role of aggressors. This is due to the fact that physical bullying is more visible and detectable by others. To understand how boys and girls differ in the different behaviors encompassed by bullying, it should be noted that boys were found to have more instigators in percentage terms than girls, which is in line with the literature (Silva et al. 2013; Smith et al., 2019; Semenza, 2021; Sun, et al. 2022; Chui et al. 2022; Falla, et al., 2022). Therefore, boys are more prone to externalizing aggressive behaviors compared to girls but they also revealed the highest percentages of intervention/defending behaviors towards victims (Table 3 and 6).

Regarding the gender of the aggressors, according to the victims, several boys dominated with 20.7% of the total, followed by a boy with 19.4% and both genders with 16.9%. This result is in line with the study of Falla et al. (2022), which considers the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between victimization and aggression, with boys being the most likely to become aggressors. This may be due to the social trend that assigns more dominant and aggressive roles to men and more passive and understanding roles to women.

The presence of bullies in public and private schools proved to be equivalent. The possibility that private education offers a more protective social environment in terms of bullying is, thus, demystified. In fact, there was a slightly higher number of victimized students in private schools (53.5%).

A slightly higher percentage of both victims and bullies who did not attend kindergarten (8.5% and 7.7% respectively). It may be assumed that these students lack social skills, which could have been acquired and developed through previous peer relationships.

It was possible to demonstrate that the victims tend to be students of younger ages and with fewer siblings. In addition, this more vulnerable population appears to be the same one asking for help from teachers, parents, educators, and it is important to give value and credibility to their voice.

Regarding the intervention of teachers as role models and authority figures, it should be noted that only 19.6% of students felt that their teachers intervened at all. More protection was felt from other school personnel

(30.1%) rather than from teachers (19.7%). Although the presence of the school personnel on the playground may be predominant, especially since it is so frequently indicated as a bullying occurring place by the victims (61.4%), the importance of this personnel intervention in terms of student' behavior on the playgrounds should be highlighted.

While approaching the question of how we can protect students from these toxic dynamics, the results have pointed out an important role carried out by siblings, both in terms of quantity and quality. That is, the greater the number of siblings, the more likely the victim is to turn to one of them for help. In addition, in terms of quality, siblings were the ones who intervened more often. The results also indicate that in the absence of siblings, students turn to other possible intervenient already mentioned (school personnel, teachers, friends, parents, among others).

As an example of an implication of our study, we propose a reflection on the role of the Educational Psychologist in bullying situations. According to our results, school psychologists are figures of little impact. Few students talked about this subject with the school psychologist. Is it because these professionals have an ineffective role in terms of prevention? Are psychologists a last resource to the students who need help?

We should be very attentive to the actors who are aggressive victims, these being the actors who dominate our sample. It may be important to intervene particularly in this group to prevent the cycle of violence from escalating progressively. Our results suggest that young children when they are victimized may organize aggressive behavior as something normal by framing it as a normative characteristic in peer relationships. Therefore, boys are the most likely to become aggressors after being victimized, with a tendency to maintain the cycle of violence.

Hostile behavior among children, characterized by cruelty and the assertion of power over others, goes against what would be desirable at the level of interpersonal relationships in a school context. The phenomenon of bullying involves complex relational, emotional and cognitive factors, it is a dynamic process marked by the personal characteristics of the protagonists and the immediate social context, which basically consists of explicit and implicit ethical norms. It is in this context that a victim of bullying can become, months later, a bully (Falla, et al. 2022).

Schools should strengthen anti-bullying education, properly understand school bullying, cultivate students' positive attitudes towards life and good peer relations, help students use non-violent means to solve problems, and

prevent inappropriate jokes or minor conflicts from escalating. The results obtained here coincide with previous work highlighting the importance of working with victims, since they can easily become bullies, and more boys than girls fall into this group. It would be interesting to make it possible to teach schools to reduce the tendencies to externalize emotional responses, allowing them to release and manage their emotions in a healthy way, thus avoiding the escalation of violence from the start.

Limitations and Implications of this Study

Some limitations of this study must be addressed, such as data collection, which was cross-sectional, so we cannot draw causal conclusions from our findings. More studies are needed to examine longitudinal associations between gender factors and patterns of bullying victimization and aggression. We also use a non-probabilistic convenience sample design that has limitations regarding how generalizable the results can be.

It should be noted that the questionnaires in this study were completed anonymously by the children and some biases are inevitable, such as the possibility of abusively identifying bullying behaviors or the risk of bias due to social desirability. Another limitation of this study is the subjectivity of the questionnaire, since the answers tend to be based on students' intersubjective experience and their memories, and such memories are vulnerable to emotional filters and defensive mechanisms. In short, the Bullying Questionnaire is not a measure based on observation or objectivity. Thus, future research is encouraged to consider multiple reporting sources, such as parents and teachers.

Further research could focus on bullying behaviors involving students with a different cultural heritage. Since Portugal has many emigrants from the former Portuguese colonies, it would be interesting to consider how bullying behaviors affect this population. In our study, it was not possible to deepen this question associated with students' ethnicity because the results regarding episodes of racism were inconclusive. For this reason, it would be enriching to expand our knowledge on this subject. This study only investigated individual factors and did not consider school, community and cultural factors. Other studies could expand the present study by examining these factors.

It would be interesting to understand how the relational style that students maintain with their parental figure and/or attachment figure, as well the

environment and family context, possibly affect the attitudes of the younger ones in the school context. This is especially pertinent today, as the family context is increasingly changing (nuclear families, extended families, single-parent families, same-sex couples, etc.). It would also be pertinent to find out how the presence (or absence) of siblings influence this type of dynamics in the school context.

Future research may also include qualitative data to further investigate gender differences. It would be interesting to investigate the phenomenon of poly-victimization in the involvement in bullying behaviors and psychosocial skills such as assertiveness, self-esteem and resilience.

Conclusions

Our study makes several contributions, firstly it allowed an analysis of involvement in bullying situations at a very early age in primary schools. Since the vast majority of studies on bullying focus on adolescence or preadolescence. We investigated the gender dynamics among participants which opens the door to the formation of conceptions of gender differentiated intervention practices in schools, also having a multidisciplinary focus. The results of our study indicate that bullying is a growing phenomenon that deserves great attention from researchers, teachers, school psychologists, school boards, health education professionals and families.

Our results are in line with previous work and allow us to advance some important reflections such as characteristics of violence at school age, gender relations with different forms of aggression among peers. It allows reflecting on the consequences of victimization and poly-victimizations, as well as the role of aggressors in school settings. What are the risk factors for aggression and what contributes to a possible escalation of violence?

This study reinforces the importance of working with victims and aggressors in a differentiated way in order to find more constructive coping responses. Seeking to reduce the tendency to externalize emotional responses. The way forward will be to prevent bullying as early as possible by integrating programmes aimed at promoting good relations between peers, with the defense of protective values as the essential element of the school climate.

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