

# BULLYING IN YOUNG STUDENTS: PERCEPTIONS, CONCEPTUALIZATION AND EXPERIENCES

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— Abstract —

Mexico ranks first in cases of bullying in basic education, affecting more than 18 million students, both public and private institutions (OCDE, 2014). Students affected by bullying suffer repeated humiliations and acts of violence, resulting in low self-esteem, low school performance, attrition, and sleep problems. In addition to presenting severe emotional conflicts and depression, which in some cases leads to death. The current study presents results of an analysis of the construction of concepts and perceptions about bullying, harassment and intimidation by upper secondary students, which allows the possibility of reflecting that the imputation of violence to a school etiology is frequently postulated; but rarely proved.

**Keywords**

*Bullying; perceptions; concept building; teenagers.*

**B**ullying is a concept that has now been adopted by most countries where English is not necessarily the mother tongue. It can be described as a type of harassment with repeated and deliberate use of verbal, psychological or physical attacks to hurt and dominate another child, adolescent or young person without previous provocation. In this act, the victim lacks the possibility of defending himself (Gómez and López, 2011). The participants in bullying can be classified into four categories: "bully", "victim", "victim-aggressor", and the "neutral" that is the partner not involved in the bullying phenomenon (Albores, Saucedo , Ruiz and Roque, 2011).

Bullying is a concept that has now been adopted by most countries where English is not necessarily the mother tongue. It can be described as a type of harassment with repeated and deliberate use of verbal, psychological or physical attacks to hurt and dominate another child, adolescent or young person without previous provocation. In this act, the victim lacks the possibility of defending himself (Gómez and López, 2011). The participants in bullying can be classified into four categories: "bully", "victim", "victim-aggressor", and the "neutral" that is the partner not involved in the bullying phenomenon (Albores, Saucedo , Ruiz and Roque, 2011).

[the harassment is] ... repetitive, provokes physical, verbal, gestural contact, etc., with intentions of doing harm. Generally involved in this violent process the victim or person violated, victimizer (person causing the damage) and bystanders (people who observe violent acts and usually do not intervene in their prevention or during the act itself) (Velasco, Ledesma and Gómez, 2014, p.87).

Precisely, the beginning of research on this phenomenon began in Sweden in the late sixties as a result of the suicide of three teenagers. However, the studies on this violent behavior were directed in greater proportion towards the infant population of primary school age (Cabezas, 2007). It is precisely in the sixties that violence becomes visible and is analyzed as an object of study by specialists, not as a human condition but as a serious problem that is increasing (Pinhero, 2007).

In Mexico, school bullying, or *chascarrillo* is not a new phenomenon, but now has become very important due to the events mainly in schools of basic education and that has awakened the need for a social awareness for their care and eradication. This importance has also been charged by the relationship between this concept adopted from another language and culture, with concepts such as violence, intimidation and harassment.

Bullying is a phenomenon of unjustified aggressiveness that occurs with a greater or lesser level of seriousness; but it is always violent because it alters the order of social relations. In order to generalize this expression

it is necessary to consider the way in which bullying and harassment are conceptualized, moreover, when dealing with Latin American countries.

Within these social relations, the most felt implications have been in the order of education and to date have exceeded the limits to become, also, a public health problem that affects students, regardless of the level (Valadez, 2008).

Craig, Harel-Fisch, Fogel-Grinvald, Dostaler, Hetland, Simons-Morton (2009), reported that the prevalence of bullying in 40 countries with representative national samples was 8.6 to 45.2% in males and 4.8 to 35.8% in females. In Mexico, as in several countries of the world, the problem of bullying has intensified, to such a degree that the OECD (2014) places Mexico in the first place of bullying in the countries that make up this organization. However, and without appearing to be an excuse, it is necessary to carry out quantitative and qualitative measurement studies regarding the phenomenon, since quantitative measurement instruments do not detail the nature of the problem addressed.

When dealing with the violence that is registered in schools, mainly, it is necessary to carry out a detailed analysis of the actions, a careful record of the interactions and of the constant exchanges between the subjects, as well as, addressing spaces for adolescents and young people, age gap where delicate extremes such as suicides and murders have been reached.

It is important to emphasize the implications that bullying has in the areas of education and public health, and that they have come in continuous growth. In the field of education, according to data proposed by (Craig, 1992, Avilés, 2003, Morales, 2012), the rates of low performance, school dropout, and attention deficit are sensitive. In public health, the diagnosis of gastrointestinal problems, headaches, sleep disturbances, depression and anxiety have increased, and as serious consequences that bullying has on the physical and mental health of victims and victimizers, at ages ranging from childhood to adolescence and youth. The actions and repercussions, as well as the nature of the acting interactions and the legislation involved in these scenarios, are undoubtedly the basic elements for the understanding of the phenomenon, its approach and above all its prevention. For the previously described, this study presents results of a construction analysis of bullying and harassment concepts, by students of upper secondary level. The study proposed a vision and multidisciplinary approach, where scholars from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, medicine, biology and sustainable development participated. This, due to the dimension of the problem, which went from being an isolated phenomenon, to being a social problem with serious consequences, even more so when the trend is towards the naturalization of violence.

## ANALYZING CONCEPTS

Both bullying and harassment are concepts used in Mexico to refer to acts of violence against the physical, mental and social integrity of a person (Gómez, 2013). They are concepts that indicate violent and recurrent behaviors among people, usually peers, that is, they belong to groups with the same characteristics. It reflects a diversity of actions, attitudes and facts that different social actors exercise in the school space.

That is why, in the research carried out, special emphasis was placed, firstly, on the conceptualization that adolescents of upper middle level have regarding bullying and harassment. Secondly, but not least, there were elements indicating whether there are violent acts between peers or between different social actors in the educational environment. Identifying, finally, the position of victim or victimizer between actors.

The relevance of violence in educational centers, generates the need for this type of detailed analysis trying to interpret both the inter-agency framework and actions, as well as the conceptualization developed by the different actors. It is important to analyze the cultural aspects immersed in the subject, that is, to identify the existence of elements of power, force, gender, which evidences the nature of the interactions.

The analysis of these concepts leads us to the need to situate the problem temporarily, in what way, chronologically and culturally we go from "heavy jokes among schoolmates" to "violent and malicious behaviors of 'bullying and harassment' ". Unfortunately at present, a violent society can be identified, where according to some authors (Hernández, 1998, Gómez, 2005, Vizer, 2006), a new canon of appreciation has been established in the face of violent acts and the brutality, savagery and death that victims can experience.

There are several analyzes that accompany the conceptualization and acceptance of violence, within these, Moscovici (1976) mentions that, in the faculties of the process of thought and language, is the fact of converting abstract objects into an objective representation. This can be explained because the categorization of an element of reality is related to the records of human memory; achieving later, the conviction to participate in the original abstract object, resulting in the conceptualization and generation of actions coherent to it. What makes the situation more complex is that this process leads to the naturalization of actions and behaviors.

In the case of bullying and harassment, some authors, such as Hernández (1998), maintain that the concepts have been naturalized and established within the current culture, as a consequence of the continuous sending of messages through mass media. That is, media, indiscriminately and continuously, sends information related to violence, as dissemination

of a show, influencing the naturalization of violent behavior, impunity and the socialization of these events, real or fictitious.

#### AN APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF BULLYING IN SCHOOL

Most studies of bullying and school violence have been conducted in primary education, the concept refers to bullying, physical and psychological abuse between classmates (Ortega, del Rey and Mora, 2001). There are few studies carried out at the upper and higher secondary level in this regard. The concept includes a long list of actions that are considered elements of bullying: heavy jokes, taunts, beatings, exclusion, abuse, sexual connotations, physical attacks, lies or false rumors about him/her, hurtful notes are sent. Even some authors (Castillo and Pacheco, 2008) classify the types of bullying that can occur, among which we find: 1) Physical types: direct, against the body, hit, and push; indirect, against property, to steal, to break. 2) Verbal type: insults, ridicule, nicknames, slander. 3) Psychological, undermine self-esteem and foster insecurity and fear. It is important to mention that the psychological component is found in all forms of abuse. And 4) Social, which isolate the individual from the group (Castillo and Pacheco, 2008).

Culturally, there are elements that mark differences between the ways in which these violent actions are carried out. Hence the interest to explore the construction of concepts and the perception that the main actors of the educational context have regarding bullying and harassment specifically, that although these types of studies have been developed, it is also interesting to be able to explore them more in students from Latin American countries, and even more so in upper secondary educational level, where students are in an age range from approximately 15 to 18 years.

Regarding the pioneering research on the subject, they have approached the problem from different perspectives; some of the main orientations are:

1. Discovery and conceptualization of the phenomenon (Olweus, 1978, Ronald, 2010).
2. Frequency with which it occurs in institutions (Ortega, 2010).
3. Description of victims and victimizers (Debarbieux, Garnier, Montoya and Tichit, 1999).
4. Plot of relationships (Abramovay and Rua, 2003).
5. Consequences and psychological repercussions (Miller, 2010).
6. Alternative solutions (Ortega, 1996).

However, specifically for Mexico, although several studies have been carried out in this regard, many of them have adopted analysis models from countries different from ours, and the results have been generalized in an alarming

way, without stopping to evaluate contextual aspects such as culture, ages, ethnic groups, gender and even perceptions related to violence. In this regard, several authors refer to this contextual need and the particularities (Gómez, 2005; Valadez, 2007; Prieto Quezada, 2008).

Everyday violence is part of a prevailing reality, unfortunately normalizing it is even more delicate. It then becomes a process originated by several factors, in different dimensions and that are loaded with subjectivity immersed in social relationships. In this reality with the sum of objective, subjective and even trans-subjective elements, violence takes different concepts and is expressed in different ways.

In the educational context, it is convenient to have a detailed diagnosis of this phenomenon in the different levels, among the different actors that comprise the educational environment, analyzed to be able to indicate the ways by which to influence the search for change of attitudes, violent actions towards healthy attitudes and actions, both for individuals and for groups.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research carried out addresses the measurement and characterization of bullying. The study is of a cross-sectional nature, and the analysis of the inter-agency structure and relationships that keep the processes of violence in upper secondary educational institutions is considered.

The study was conducted in the Región Altos of the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Specifically, the research focused on high school students of the Colegio de Bachilleres, campus 58 (justification of the unit of analysis), located in the municipality of San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, which contains a total population of 953 students, during the 2016-2017 school year. For the study, a random sample consisting of 225 students of upper secondary level was defined, in equal proportions for men and women: 24% of indigenous origin (Tzeltal and Tzotzil) and 76% mestizo; with an average age of 16 years, whose average school performance is 8.3 (0-10 scale). The participants were selected under the following requirements: students enrolled in an educational institution selected for the study and who agreed to participate, with informed consent considering the ethical principles of rigor for studies with human population.

In order to collect the information, the Survey was used and a specific questionnaire was applied to the upper secondary level, prepared according to the context of the indigenous and urban zone, in a state with a low level of human development. The questionnaire addresses the conceptualization that students have about respect on the one hand and bullying, harassment and intimidation on the other. It also retrieves information about experiences of teasing, exclusion and harassment on more than one occasion.

Information was processed using the Windows ACCES 2013 package, which allowed the analysis of the study variables, taking into account the qualitative and quantitative information collected.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### 1. Concepts:

**Respect:** Students consider respecting the fact of treating people well, providing understanding and maintaining a relationship without blows and insults, interacting without problems or exclusions.

**Bullying:** this concept is referred to as school abuse through verbal and physical aggression, discriminating, harassing, and making a person feel bad.

**Harassment:** they define it as the act of annoying a person by telling those profanities, obscenities, forcing them to do something they do not want, sexually violating.

**Intimidation:** when someone threatens you, humiliates, instills fear in order to demonstrate superiority.

### 2. Violence experience

The experiences mostly reported are 58% insults, shouting, beatings, threats and intimidation. Despite this, only 36% of the young people interviewed have ever been defended, 66% give notice, mainly to school authorities, followed by family and friends.

Now, when asked specifically about experiences in one or more of the following situations, statistics show that:

- They experience bullying (associating the concept): 18%
- Pushing and hitting (physical violence): 47%
- Teasing (verbal violence): 29%
- Exclusion (discrimination): 16%
- Robbery (announced by removing or snatching their belongings): 15%
- They consider themselves harassed and intimidated: 31%

Regarding ethnic origin, there is no statistically representative difference in any of the cases described above.

Another element as a result of the study was to consider the variables of violent relationships between the different actors in the educational center, from teachers to students, from students to teachers, from men to women. The statistics indicate that, of the interviewees:

- Considers that the teacher makes fun of him or her: 22%
- Identify as bullying the violence from teachers towards students: 35%
- Identify as bullying the violence from students towards teachers: 48%
- Identify bullying mostly from men towards women: 60%
- Have been involved in harassment towards a partner or companion: 16%

In order to find some relationship between the school environment and the family, we inquired about family relationships:

- Tranquility prevails at home: 93%
- Your opinion is taken into account: 93%
- Problems are solved by talking: 93%
- Your parents punish you with blows: 7%
- Your parents shout at you: 7%
- In your house you hear many obscenities and cuss words: 9%

## DISCUSSION

In the school environment and in the popular voice, there are complications regarding the conceptualization of bullying, harassment, intimidation and any other type of violence. Bullying as a concept, is relatively recent in our country and apparently still cannot be clearly defined in terms of the use that gives the population in general to this concept against another type of violence and the participation of different actors in it.

To authors such as Trianes (2000) and SanMartín (2006), school violence encompasses all those actions and negative behaviors carried out by any type of actor in the school environment and its surroundings, including fights between students, gangs, antisocial behavior, or vandalism, among others. Bullying occurs exclusively among peers, that is, among students, being one of the multiple expressions of violence in the school environment. In the present study, it is clear that the confusion between concepts exists; but this does not stop the high rates of school violence and bullying.

However, based on Taylor and Bogdan (2000) social phenomena are understood from the perception of the actors and the ways in which they experience the world, therefore, the present study throws the analysis of

the experiences lived about violence and the conceptualization of bullying, harassment and intimidation, by a sample of high school students.

Several studies on climate, conflicts and violence in schools confirm that the analytical construction of the concepts of violence and bullying is extremely complex; mainly due to the social and historical nature of these terms and even to the idiomatic origin (UNICEF and FLACSO, 2011). However, conducting studies on conceptualization allows us the possibility of reflecting that the imputation of violence to a school etiology is frequently postulated; but rarely demonstrated.

As an initial part of the discussion it is relevant to mention that the conceptualization that the interviewees make about bullying, strictly concerns the school environment: "School mistreatment by verbal and physical aggression, discriminate, harass, and make a person feel bad". It can even be tacitly differentiated from what they perceive in their homes, where tranquility prevails, their opinions are taken into account and problems are solved by talking (93%).

Conceptualizing is the way to represent and simplify what a person knows about a topic or the way they are perceiving their environment (Fauconnier and Turner, 1994). As an important result of this research, it is precisely the perception of the school (upper middle school) as a violent environment, identifying mainly physical violence (47%) and verbal violence (29%). Specifically men to women (60%) and even more interesting is that the violence from students towards teachers is considered higher (48%).

Now, with regard to the violent behavior of teachers towards students, this study shows that the interviewees identify teasing (22%) and bullying (35%), as violent behavior of their teachers towards them; unfortunately, the percentages are not minimal and are manifested as important elements when considering that the function of the teacher is to train students; but this teaching process should not be considered with examples of violence. This becomes even more complex when considering that school violence is the product of institutional mechanisms that constitute violent practices and/or accentuate situations of social violence (UNICEF and FLACSO, 2011). It is at this point that we specifically discuss that processes of social violence are being accentuated in the educational sphere.

Among the violent acts that are manifested in the school, physical violence is recognized (pushing and shoving), harassment, ridicule, exclusion and theft (100%); but only 18% of them report it using the bullying concept.

Education is a fundamental tool for changing cultural patterns that perpetuate or condone violence against children (UNICEF, 2011); so, in this study we found that far from reducing violence, behavioral patterns are perpetuating it. The foregoing, we can analyze from its context to mention that, at a basic level and above, in Mexico, and Chiapas specifically, there

are historical structures that mark violent events of the teaching profession to claim their rights before governmental structures, having repercussions, unfortunately, in the loss of social peace, free transit and the right to receive classes. That although, these acts take place outside the schools, we can also affirm that they directly affect the image of the teacher before their students. It is not an isolated event that the students interviewed conceptualize bullying, harassment and intimidation and relate it directly to the school setting, contrary to what happens in their homes, where they perceive a peaceful family environment.

According to the information issued by the Ministry of Public Education (SEP), on Friday, May 30, 2014, the SEP announced 15 actions to combat bullying, these were released 10 days after the death of Hector Alejandro Méndez, a 12-year-old teenager who died in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, due to beatings he received from his classmates in the classroom, including:

1. Strengthen early warning mechanisms to timely identify manifestations of school violence, know their causes, their scope and consequences, and design strategies to contribute to their prevention and containment.
2. Incorporate in the institutional electronic pages links for the reception and channeling of the denunciations.
3. Encourage the creation of inter-institutional collaborative networks to assist in the prevention and care of school violence.
4. Develop action protocols for principals, teachers, and students; to assist parents with the purpose of preventing, and where appropriate, adequately channeling situations of violence in the school environment and encouraging the immediate provision of support that is required in each case.
5. Enrich the curricula of basic education, higher education and teacher training with instruments that allow the prevention and attention of cases of school violence.
6. Organize consultation forums on topics related to school violence.
7. Reinforce the management and school organization strategies, the promotion and daily supervision of the exercise and protection of human rights, democratic life and appreciation of diversity, as elements of school coexistence, so that in all, respect for the principle of the best interests of children is ensured.
8. Provide materials to strengthen the work of school technical councils so that in the month of June, the discussion will focus on the issues of improving the school environment and encourage the holding of workshops with the same theme for parents.

9. Establish in the federative entity an official instance, dependent on the local educational authority, for the attention of cases of school violence.
10. Recognize and strengthen the role of teachers and managers providing them with tools that allow them to understand the culture of children and youth, the promotion of a culture of inclusion, peace and tolerance, as well as the establishment of relationships based on mutual respect and the resolution of conflicts in a framework of healthy coexistence.
11. Incorporate in the programs of "schools for parents" the elements that allow attention to violence in the school environment and in the family.
12. Promote that the national council, the state council, the municipal and school children of social participation in education, carry out activities for the prevention and attention of violence.
13. Encourage the participation of parents and other social actors in the daily life of schools, to develop a continuous and effective communication that promotes the prevention and attention of school violence and accompany the educational trajectories of the students.
14. Develop systematic and permanent social communication campaigns to disseminate the actions undertaken for the prevention of school violence, and the means available to receive advice or make complaints.
15. Elaborate studies at national, state and regional level regarding the problem of school violence; identify the schools with the highest incidence of problems, in order to have elements that allow designing a map and implement solutions, as well as raising awareness among parents, students and teachers (SEP, 2014).

Unfortunately, after three years, many of these actions have not been followed up in elementary schools.

## CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, a reality is undeniable where children and adolescents are exposed to different forms of violence, in their homes, at school, on the street. Importantly, this research shows us how these adolescents conceptualize violent actions, how they live them and also where they live them. Although the violence that takes place in schools reflects, commonly, the universe around the child in the community and the family (UNICEF, 2011) for this study, it is the school setting where they experience violence and does not coincide with what they live in their homes, or at least not for 93 percent of the interviewees.

Violence in schools does not constitute a world isolated from the rest of society, and has a serious impact on the training of its users, being children,

adolescents, young people or adults. Historically we have generated a socially violent environment; where, apparently, the rights of some are over the rights of others, leaving us in a completely distant position to equity. Equity that in the discourses is reflected as a politically correct and necessary concept; while in the academy they are studied as adequate forms of reasoning and progress in human development.

The teaching task should not only focus on the curricular advancement of its students, but on the necessary integral formation that will allow them to carry out practices of social relationship and these based on the full exercise of Human Rights, in the example for the normalization of healthy behaviors, proactive, participatory, inclusive and respectful. Although, we cannot generalize by its honorable exceptions, it seems that the teacher's view has become politicized, and much remains to be done to dignify again the teacher's formative image, which the memorial of grievances to citizens has distorted in recent times.

Specifically on bullying, harassment and intimidation, violent acts that occur in the school setting registered in this study, which is aggravated by the violent practices of teachers. In this regard, Zurita (2010) states that within the definition of violent personalities, these have their origin in actions occurring in extra-family contexts, a coinciding element in this study.

Therefore, it is urgent to improve the climate of educational institutions, focusing on what the same parents suggest in the study conducted by Ruiz, Riuró and Tesouro (2015): sensitize teachers and, we would like to add, work in a coordinated manner to heal inter-agency relations in educational spaces.

Finally, it is important to promote coherent care mechanisms, mainly in relation to basic protocols of attention in case of bullying, destined to the educational and family intervention; as well as preventive actions that humanize the relations of coexistence between peers, teachers, parents and the community in general.

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