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Systematic Review of the Prevalence of School Violence in Spain

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Abstract

School violence, or bullying, in its different forms, is a generalized phenomenon that has been detected in every country where it has been studied. However, prevalence rates differ considerably from country to country. The objective of this study was to do a systematic review of all published studies concerning bullying at school where a Spanish sample is used, in order to make an evidence-based estimation of the prevalence of bullying in Spain. The results obtained, based on data from the 32 studies that were included, indicate a prevalence rate of 11.45% for bullying overall, and when broken down by type, a higher rate for “traditional” bullying than for cyberbullying. These data are comparable to the most recent national and international studies.

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Keywords: bullying; school violence; cyberbullying; systematic review

1. Introduction

Based on D. Olweusen’s pioneering work on bullying in the 1970s, bullying has been defined as a category of violence among minors that is characterized by three core aspects: the bully’s intentionality in causing harm, repetition of the bullying behaviors over time, and an imbalance of power (physical, psychological or social) between the bully and the victim. This imbalance and abuse of power has been proposed in the literature as the distinctive factor that distinguishes bullying from other forms of violence among minors (Rodkin, Espelage & Hanish, 2015; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003).

From the point of view of consequences, bullying has been characterized as a form of violence practiced between peers, where individuals in a dominant position cause psychological and/or physical harm to others; this behavior then

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leads to significant, long-term psychological, physical and emotional effects in the victims, but also in the bullies (Liu & Graves, 2011).

From the first studies on bullying until today, different ways of practicing bullying behaviors have been detected, enabling us to categorize them into four general groups: physical, verbal, relational/social and cyberbullying. Physical bullying, usually the easiest type of bullying to observe, is characterized by producing direct physical harm, including behaviors like hitting, pushing, etc. Verbal bullying includes verbal actions in the form of insults and threats that are actively directed toward the victim, with the objective of slandering, humiliating or intimidating. Relational or social bullying involves spreading rumors with the intent of socially excluding the victim; this type of bullying is less typical and more subtle, it is carried out with the intent of damaging the victim's social relations with the other classmates. Finally, the type known as cyberbullying is a relatively new kind of bullying, using computer technology and Internet, over smartphones and social networks, to spread rumors, directly intimidate, or damage the victim's "cyber-visual" image.

These different ways that bullying is practiced are directly related to the contexts in which it takes place. On most occasions, bullying takes place within school facilities, but also in the neighboring area or during after-school activities; or, it can take place from home or elsewhere using a mobile device, and almost always as a consequence of social relationships formed within the school context (Calmaestra et al., 2016).

Regarding the prevalence of bullying, documented prevalence rates of bullying vary greatly among studies carried out in different countries. In a broad-ranging study performed by the World Health Organization (WHO, Currie et al., 2012), evaluating bullying and victimization in boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 15, in 43 countries (Europe, USA and Canada), the rates for bullying varied from 1% to 36%, and rates for victimization between 2% and 32%, depending on the country. These between-country differences in the prevalence rates may indicate cultural factors that influence the acceptability of bullying within society, but also differences in the way that it is assessed, as well as intervention from other modulating variables, such as gender and age, that may not be included in all the studies (Hymel & Swearer, 2015).

The objective of this study was to do a systematic review of the studies on bullying that were carried out with Spanish samples, in order to make an evidence-based estimate of the prevalence of bullying in Spain.

2. Method

2.1. Sources of information and search criteria

The systematic review was carried out according to the recommendations of the PRISMA declaration (Moher et al., 2015). The search was performed on the following documentary sources: (a) Databases (ISOC, Compludoc, Dialnet, Psycodoc, Proquest Psychology Journal, PsycARTICLES, PsycInfo, Scopus); (b) Meta search engines (ISI Web of Knowledge); (c) Doctoral dissertations database (TESEO); (d) Direct, complete review of specialized journals; (e) Review of contributions from recent specialized conferences; and (f) Review of references from the studies that were included in the systematic review.

The search criteria used were: in Spanish, "violencia/acoso escolar y España" and "bullying y España" and "ciberbullying y España"; and in English, "school violence AND Spain", "bullying AND Spain" and "cyberbullying AND Spain". In order to minimize a possible publication bias, the search was limited neither by type of publication nor by sample size, and the databases queried included access to the so-called gray literature.

The search was carried out in October 2015 and updated in May 2016; there were 197 results that met the inclusion criteria for the study, subsequently reduced to 157 after titles and abstracts were read. After reading the full text, a total of 32 studies were finally included in this study. The complete, detailed process is shown in Fig. 1.

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