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School Bullying and Social Skills: An Empirical Research Study in Axarquía, Malaga in 2021

El acoso escolar y las habilidades sociales: una investigación empírica en la Axarquía malagueña en 2021

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the relationship between school bullying and social skills by means of a survey of 506 pupils at several secondary schools located in the region of Axarquía (Malaga, Spain). First, we examined the role of onlookers in a bullying scene. Likewise, we studied the potential victims, bullies, types and frequencies of this phenomenon. Second, we investigated how the likelihood of being an onlooker, victim or bully varies across the level of fourteen social skills. The conclusion was that the higher the level of social skills, the lower the likelihood of being a victim or a bully. Furthermore, onlookers were found to have a higher level of social skills than the victims and bullies, although bullies scored higher on a very significant social skill: manipulation.

KEYWORDS: bullying; interpersonal skills; onlooker; victim; bully.

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RESUMEN

Esta investigación trata de analizar la relación entre el acoso escolar y las habilidades sociales a través de una encuesta realizada a 506 alumnos de varios institutos de la Axarquía malagueña (Málaga, España). En primer lugar, se ha abordado el papel de los espectadores en una escena de acoso escolar. De manera análoga, se ha estudiado a las posibles víctimas, acosadores, tipos y frecuencias de este fenómeno. En segundo lugar, se ha estudiado cómo varía la probabilidad de ser espectador, víctima y acosador a través del nivel de catorce habilidades sociales. Como conclusión, se ha verificado que, a mayor nivel de habilidades sociales, menor probabilidad de ser víctima o acosador. Además, se ha comprobado que los espectadores tienen un nivel mayor de habilidades sociales que las víctimas y que los acosadores, aunque los acosadores puntúan mejor en una habilidad social muy importante: la manipulación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: maltrato escolar; habilidades interpersonales; espectador; víctima; acosador.

1. Introduction

School bullying is a phenomenon with multiple causes, where the intention of one or several pupils is to harm another. Furthermore, the latter is subjected to repeated aggressions over time and is unable to defend him- or herself alone, due to the imbalance of power in relation to the bullies (Olweus, 2013). It is a transverse phenomenon that occurs in all those countries where it has been studied, as well as in virtually all educational centres, irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity, social or financial standing, among others. It is important to differentiate an isolated incident of aggression between classmates from a case of bullying, given that they are two specific yet different forms of crime.

Bullying was first studied in the second half of the last century and today, the problem continues to be downplayed or justified, and in some cases, the intervention is insufficient (Díaz-Aguado et al., 2013). However, we are witnessing a stage of sensitisation and awareness-raising on this issue, in which even local, regional and national legislators in Spain are encouraging schools to implement specific bullying prevention programmes.

The victims tend to be younger than the bullies and are physically or psychologically weaker. They are shy and have negative self-perception, poor self-esteem and a low level of assertiveness (Puértolas and Montiel, 2017). In this regard, there are usually two types of victims: passive victims and provocative victims. Not responding to bullying is characteristic of passive victims, who are anxious, insecure and feel sad. Provocative victims, on the other hand, do react to bullying, as they are more impulsive and their cognitive processes enable them to respond to this phenomenon, even resorting to violence. The latter type of victim is associated with hyperactive and emotionally unstable pupils (Olweus, 2014). Authors such as González-García and Campoy-Torrente (2016) defend the idea that there is a type of victim who is an aggressor, that is, who assumes both bullying roles in their life for multiple reasons such as fitting into a friend group.

Generally speaking, bullies tend to come from a negative family environment and have little communication with their parents. Furthermore, they do not have academic goals and have difficulty concentrating and solving problems collaboratively (De la Plaza and González, 2019). They also tend to be accompanied by pupils who support them and who, directly or indirectly, help them maintain the cycle of violence in bullying (Cano-Echeverri and Vargas-González, 2018). The onlookers know the bullies, victims, scenarios in which bullying takes place and the seriousness of the aggressions. They are key figures as their presence and response to a bullying scenario can increase or decrease the intensity and frequency of said scenario (Díaz-Aguado et al., 2013). In this respect, Avilés (2004) determines three types of bullies: Indifferent bullies, who do not help the victim, guilt-ridden bullies, who do not do anything for fear of the possible consequences, and amoral bullies, who help or encourage the bully to achieve his or her aim.

As for the consequences of bullying, the loss of educational quality in the school centre stands out, which may have a negative effect on pupils' academic performance (De la Plaza y González, 2019). Both the victims and the bullies and onlookers are at risk of suffering from a psychopathology, personality disorder or psychosocial imbalance (Puértolas and Montiel, 2017). These consequences can arise in both infancy and adolescence and may even extend into adulthood if intervention is not timely. In traditional face-to-face bullying, victims experience aggression during the school day and in after-school hours and may suffer from so-called Sunday-night syndrome, which involves feeling anxious or afraid on realising that it is nearly time to return to the classroom and see the bullies in person. In contrast, victims of cyberbullying have to endure abuse twenty-four hours a day (González-García and Campoy-Torrente, 2016). In relation to the victims, it is also worth highlighting the feeling of guilt, stress and anger, somatisation, nightmares, difficulty concentrating, tiredness, injuries, physical and psychological consequences, loneliness, moving school centre (Ballesteros, Pérez, Díaz and Toledano, 2018), and so on. The most extreme consequences are addictions, self-harming behaviours, ideation and suicidal behaviours (Puértolas and Montiel, 2017). On the other hand, the typical consequences for bullies may include dissociation with the educational centre, school failure, the need to feel accepted by others, as well as low self-esteem (Cañas-Pardo, 2017). In this regard, Loeber (1982) concluded that 10% of juvenile delinquents had bullying problems at school before the age of 10. The main consequences for onlookers are related to the loss of the sense of justice and understanding, as they may even normalise violence as a method to resolve interpersonal conflicts (De la Plaza and González, 2019).

Bullying may be triggered by multiple personal, family and school factors, as well as by the media (Enríquez and Garzón, 2015). One of the theories that best describes this is Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1987). According to this author, individuals acquire cognitive processes, principles and values through the interaction of four independent systems in the form of concentric circles. According to the author, the first of these is the microsystem, comprising the family, school centre and

peer group. This is nested in the mesosystem, which is where the aforementioned groups come into contact. This system is, in turn, included in the exosystem, which represents the space where the individual lives. Finally, the macrosystem encompasses the exosystem, as well as the society's cultural, normative and historic elements. According to this theory, school bullying is the result of the integration of the individual's protective and risk factors that are found in each of these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1987).

Now that we have explained the concept of bullying and the roles and consequences and outlined a relevant explanatory theory, we will now focus on social skills. McFall (1992) defines these skills as "specific behaviours that allow a person to be deemed socially competent by others in a social task" (p. 12). They are the fruit of learning (Chávez and Aragón, 2017), with assertiveness and empathy being two of the most important social skills to be acquired and improved (Smith and Low, 2013).

The initial thought may be that school bullying and social skills are not related. However, Sutton et al. (1999) uphold that bullies have more social skills than victims and onlookers, and that they can use these skills to manipulate others in order to secure their loyalty and obedience, ascertain how to inflict more harm or avoid being caught. Nevertheless, Crick and Dodge (1994) assert that victims have more social skills than bullies given that the development of these skills cannot be associated with behaviours that are not pro-social (Arsenio and Lemerise, 2001). There are authors who are in the middle ground. For example, Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) concur with Crick and Dodge (1994) in that children try to acquire social skills in order to be accepted by others; however, they also agree with Sutton et al. (1999) in that bullies leverage their social skills to achieve their objectives, even if they are not pro-social.

Lastly, some recent studies on school bullying should be mentioned. In the PISA report (Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2019), the conclusion drawn was that the mean for bullying was 23% in the seventy-nine participating countries. The countries with the highest percentage of bullying were Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, Colombia, Mexico and New Zealand, with approximately 33%. The mean for school bullying in Spain was 17%. Countries with a lower mean included the Netherlands (12%) and South Korea (9%). In Spain, the Save The Children report (2018) highlights that 82% of the sample had been an onlooker of bullying in the past year, 52% had been a victim, and 25%, a bully. In this regard, there are studies that associate bullying with social skills. For example, authors such as Mendoza and Maldonado (2017) or Gómez-Ortiz et al. (2019) have concluded that social skills are associated with bullying and that victims lack these skills, unlike bullies, who use them to do wrong. Conversely, Caravita et al. (2010) demonstrated that victimisation is not associated with social skills.

This research has a twofold objective. On the one hand, it aims to compare the level of fourteen social skills among the potential onlookers, bullies and victims of bullying of this study in order to ascertain whether there is a relationship between bullying and social skills; and, on the other, it will analyse bullying and the types and frequencies of this phenomenon, as well as the role of onlookers in a bullying scene. This study

departs from the hypothesis that onlookers have more social skills than victims and bullies, given that social skills are considered to be a protective factor in avoiding or preventing bullying.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This research includes a sample of 506 pupils, 262 boys and 244 girls from the third year of compulsory secondary education (pupils aged 14–15) to the last school year (pupils aged 17–18) in two public schools in the region of Axarquía (Málaga, Spain). The sample is non-probabilistic for convenience and the margin of error is 3.11% with a 95% confidence level, such that $p=q=0.5$.

2.2. Instrument

A questionnaire on school bullying and social skills was designed and used for the purpose of this study. This questionnaire was inspired by other very relevant and specific questionnaires on bullying such as that by Brighi et al. (2012) and Ortega et al. (1995), on the one hand, and on social skills such as that by Goldstein (1978) and Caballo et al. (2017), on the other. The questionnaire consists of the following parts:

1. Introduction: here, the definition of school bullying is given so that all the pupils have the same understanding of the concept.
2. Socio-demographic variables: gender and academic year.
3. Group of onlookers: to find out how they respond to a bullying situation, and if they know of pupils who have taken on a dual role (victim and bully).
4. Group of victims and group of bullies: to identify the types and frequencies of bullying experienced/committed.
5. Group of social skills to evaluate the level of the following social skills: active listening, communication, gratitude, initiative, asking for help, speaking in public, manipulation, apologising, assertiveness, empathy, showing interest, helping, finding collaborative solutions, and defending one's own rights. Each skill is scored from one to four. One indicates a zero level; two, a low level; three is associated with an average level; and four, with a high level.

2.3. Procedure

After designing the questionnaire, several adolescents took part in a pilot test to confirm whether they understood the questions in the questionnaire, and to ascertain the length of time taken to complete it. We then went to the two public schools in Malaga (the sampling location) so that the pupils in the third and fourth years of compulsory secondary education (pupils aged 14–15 and 15–16, respectively) and in the final two years (aged 16–17 and 17–18, respectively) could participate. Before handing out the questionnaire, we explained the definition of bullying given in the introduction of this article so that all the pupils departed from the same basis. We also informed the pupils that the questionnaire was entirely anonymous, and we asked that they be as transparent as possible.

During this procedure, we did not encounter any difficulty or resistance when accessing the educational centres. The directors of both schools were contacted by telephone and offered a brief explanation of the project's objectives and the data collection method. They took an interest in this research work from the start, as thanks to the study, they would discover the state of bullying in their centre with a view to improving their strategies to prevent the phenomenon. Subsequently, they were given more information in a face-to-face interview. During the fieldwork, both of the directors and all the teaching staff were collaborative. This helped to create a more positive atmosphere in the sampling place, enabling the active participation of the pupils who, as well as responding to the questionnaire, were very sensitised to this issue. Some of the pupils even asked questions about this phenomenon, as well as sharing their personal experiences and concerns.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data obtained through the fieldwork was included in a PSPP file to analyse the frequencies of each variable studied. Contingency tables, descriptions and a bivariate correlation analysis were also included to see how bullying is related to social skills, gender and the academic year of the sample. Table 1 shows the dependent and independent variables.

3. Results

Following the data analysis, a relationship was found between social skills and school bullying. However, before looking at this relationship in depth, we will present the study results of the potential onlookers, victims and bullies. The word “potential” must be emphasised as in order to demonstrate it, an individual, specific and multidisciplinary analysis of each pupil is required to avoid exaggerating this phenomenon.

Table 1

Dependent and independent research variables.

Dependent variables
1. Onlookers
2. Victims
3. Bullies
Independent variables
1. Active listening
2. Communication
3. Gratitude
4. Initiative
5. Asking for help
6. Speaking in public
7. Manipulation
8. Apologising
9. Assertiveness
10. Empathy
11. Showing interest
12. Helping
13. Finding collaborative solutions
14. Defending one's own rights
15. Gender
16. Academic year

Source: own research.

3.1. Onlookers

57.3% of the sample have witnessed bullying at school in the past year. Likewise, this study has ascertained how onlookers acted in the scenario: 70% helped the victim, 18.3% did nothing, while 2.4% encouraged the bully, and 1.7% of onlookers helped the bully achieve their aim, either through physical or verbal violence or isolation, becoming an accomplice.

Table 2 shows how the onlookers helped the victim. Firstly, it is worth highlighting that 41.4% spoke to the bully to mediate the situation; 39.9% removed the victim from the scene of bullying and led them to a safe place; 37.9% asked for help from a teacher and 37.4%, from a classmate; and 23.2% mentioned the case of bullying to the management team. 11.8% of onlookers, however, claim to have helped the victim by threatening the bully, and 2.5%, by physically attacking them. In other words, there are onlookers who use violence as a means to end the victim's suffering.

Table 2*Way in which onlookers helped the victim.*

Form of assistance	Percentage of onlookers who used this method
Speaking to the bully	41.4%
Taking the victim to a safe place	39.9%
Speaking to a teacher	37.9%
Speaking to a classmate about the issue	37.4%
Speaking to the management team	23.2%
Threatening the bully	11.8%
Physically assaulting the bully	2.5%

Source: own research.

Lastly, the onlookers were asked whether they knew of any classmate who had taken on a dual role in school bullying (victim and bully). 34.8% answered yes. Of this group of onlookers, it is worth noting that 37.5% believe that their classmate took on this role to take revenge for the harm inflicted on them; 31.3%, to belong to a friend group; 17.7%, as a means for the bullies to not bully them again; 5.2%, that they were forced by the bullies; and 3.1%, that the parents of the classmate forced them to take on that role.

3.2. Victims

50.4% of the sample may have been a victim of school bullying in the past year. First, it must be highlighted that, independently of the frequency of victimisation, 69.4% of these potential victims have had rumours spread about them; 69.2%, have experienced verbal bullying; 52.5%, isolation; 47.4%, physical bullying; 37.2%, threats; and 33.7%, attacks on property.

Table 3 details the types and frequencies of bullying experienced by the victims. The most relevant data are as follows: 35.2% have had rumours spread about them at some point; 15.4%, on more than one occasion; and 19.4%, often. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that 46.2% have experienced verbal bullying at some point; 11.5%, on more than one occasion; and 11.5%, often. Accordingly, 28.6% have experienced isolation at some point; 10.9%, on more than one occasion; and 14.5%, often. Emphasis must be placed on the fact that the majority of the types of bullying are not repeated frequently, particularly the most serious kinds, such as physical bullying. In other words, the types of bullying that victims experience most frequently are verbal bullying, isolation and the spreading of rumours.

Table 3

Types and frequencies of bullying from the victims' point of view.

Type of school bullying	Never	Once	Twice or more	Often
Physical bullying	52.6%	37.2%	4.7%	5.5%
Verbal bullying	30.8%	46.2%	11.5%	11.5%
Isolation	46.0%	28.6%	10.9%	14.5%
Spreading of rumours	30.0%	35.2%	15.4%	19.4%
Threats	62.5%	26.1%	4.7%	6.7%
Attacks against property	65.5%	25.7%	5.2%	3.6%

Source: own research.

3.3. Bullies

20% of the sample may have been a bully in the past year given that these young people claim to have behaved in various ways that are typical of bullying. They revealed their behaviour in the questionnaire: 76.2% verbally bullied; 54.4% isolated the victim; 52% physically bullied; 43% threatened a classmate; 20% attacked the victim's property; and 17.8% spread rumours about the victim.

Table 4 shows the types and frequencies of bullying carried out by the bullies. 60.6% have verbally bullied at some point and 12.1% have done so often; 33% have made threats at some point and 8% have done so often; while the majority of types of school bullying have occurred occasionally, at some point. For example, 47.5% have isolated the victim with this frequency. This is followed by: 42.4% who have committed physically bullying; 14% who have attacked the victim's property in some way; and 12.1% who have spread rumours with this frequency. In other words, the most common types of bullying that the bullies resorted to were verbal bullying, isolation and physical bullying. However, the majority of these types of bullying have taken place occasionally, except for verbal bullying and threats.

Table 4

Types and frequencies of bullying from the bullies' point of view.

Type of school bullying	Never	Once	Twice or more	Often
Physical bullying	48.0%	42.2%	6.9%	2.9%
Verbal bullying	22.2%	60.6%	5.1%	12.1%
Isolation	44.4%	47.5%	2.0%	6.1%
Spreading of rumours	81.8%	12.1%	2.1%	4.0%
Threats	57.0%	33.0%	2.0%	8.0%
Attacks against property	81.0%	14.0%	0.0%	5.0%

Source: own research.

3.4. School Bullying and Gender

Girls have been found to be onlookers and victims more frequently than boys, and that they bully less than their male counterparts. 59.8% of girls in the sample have been onlookers compared to 55% of boys. Furthermore, 55.3% of girls were found to be potential victims of bullying compared to 45.8% of boys. In this regard, it is important to highlight the statistically significant relationship between the variables bully and gender, with 24.4% of boys being shown to be potential bullies compared to 15.2% of girls.

3.5. School Bullying and Academic Year

The higher the academic year, the higher the percentage of onlookers and the lower the percentage of both potential victims and bullies. Firstly, the percentage of onlookers is 49.7% among pupils aged 14–15, increasing to 69.6% among pupils aged 17–18. In contrast, the percentage of victims is 53% among pupils aged 14–15, decreasing to 41.8% among pupils aged 17–18. Furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was found between the academic year and bullies. This ranges from 21.2% among pupils aged 14–15 to 12.7% among those aged 17–18.

3.6. Social Skills and School Bullying

A relationship was found between the level of social skills and bullying, with minor exceptions. In general, the higher the level of social skills, the less likely the pupil is to be either a victim or a bully. Likewise, it proves relevant that onlookers have a higher level of social skills, followed by victims; however, there are some exceptions that will be analysed in detail in this section.

3.6.1. *Active Listening*

A higher level of active listening is associated with a lower likelihood of being an onlooker, victim or bully. First, 66.7% of the pupils who lack this skill have been an onlooker, compared to 58.7% who have a high level of active listening. In this respect, 77.8% of victims lack this skill, a percentage that decreases to 49.6% among those with a high level. Lastly, a statistically significant relationship was identified between active listening and being a bully, and in reference to the above, this percentage of bullies ranges from 66.7% who lack this skill to 19.9% of pupils who have a high level of active listening.

3.6.2. *Communication*

A pupil with a higher level of communication is more likely to be a victim. On the contrary, there is an inverse relationship between communication and bullies, while onlookers remain more or less constant in all levels of this social skill. That said, the group with the highest percentage of onlookers is the group with an average level

(57.5%). Furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was found between communication and being both a victim and a bully. The percentage of victims ranges from 45.2% who lack this skill to 65.8% who have a high level of communication. In contrast, the percentage of bullies ranges from 35.5% who lack these skills to 21.1% who have a high level.

3.6.3. *Gratitude*

Young people with a low level of gratitude are more likely to be victims and bullies, while onlookers remain constant in all levels of gratitude. In this vein, a statistically significant relationship was found between gratitude and being both a victim and a bully. 60.7% of victims score a low level in this skill, a percentage that falls to approximately 50% in the remaining levels, with the percentage remaining more or less constant. In terms of the bullies, 18.8% who lack this skill have bullied. This percentage of bullies increases to 42.9% among those with a low level, while in the higher levels, the percentage once again falls to 23.7% in the average level and to 16.1% in the high level of gratitude.

3.6.4. *Initiative*

A higher level of initiative is associated with a higher percentage of onlookers and victims. However, there is a lower percentage of bullies. Likewise, a statistically significant relationship was identified between initiative and being an onlooker, a victim and a bully, respectively. Firstly, the percentage of onlookers increases from 53.43% who lack this skill to 63.8% among those who have a high level. Similarly, the percentage of victims ranges from 46.5% who lack this skill to 51% who have a high level of initiative. The opposite occurs with the percentage of bullies, which decreases from 30.2% in the group who lack this skill to 19.8% among those with a high level.

3.6.5. *Asking for help*

The more skilled pupils are at asking for help, the less likely they are to be a victim of school bullying, while not possessing this skill and having a high level are associated with a higher likelihood of being a bully. The level of this skill, however, does not appear to be associated with being an onlooker. However, the group with a higher percentage of onlookers has a low level in terms of asking for help (63.9%). On the other hand, a statistically significant relationship was found between asking for help and being both a victim and a bully. The percentage of victims is 66.7% in the group that lacks this skill, decreasing to 46% in the group with a high skill level in terms of asking for help. Lastly, 26.2% of the pupils who lack this skill have bullied in the last year. This is followed by 18.8% who have a low level and 18.2% who have an average level. This percentage of bullies once again increases to 24.1% in the high level.

3.6.6. *Speaking in public*

A pupil who is more skilled at speaking in public is more likely to be an onlooker or bully, and less likely to be a victim. Likewise, a statistically significant relationship was found between speaking in public and being an onlooker, a victim and a bully, respectively. The percentage of onlookers ranges from 52.8% who lack this skill to 68.8% of pupils who have a high level. On the other hand, the percentage of victims ranges from 53.6% who lack this skill to 47.1% who have a high level. In contrast, the percentage of bullies increases from 17.9% who lack this skill to 25% who have a high level.

3.6.7. *Manipulation*

A higher level of manipulation is associated with a higher percentage of bullies and not possessing this skill or having a high level is associated with a higher percentage of victims, while the percentage of onlookers remains constant in all levels of manipulation. Average and high levels, however, have a higher percentage of onlookers (approximately 58%). A statistically significant relationship has been found between manipulation and being both a victim and a bully. 53.6% who lack this skill have been a victim of school bullying in the past year. This percentage decreases slightly in the low and average groups, but increases considerably to 64% among the group of young people who have a high level of manipulation. Furthermore, the percentage of bullies increases from 15.5% who lack manipulation skills to 30% in the group with a high level and who have bullied.

3.6.8. *Apologising*

Being more skilled at apologising was found to be associated with a lower percentage of victims and bullies, although none of the bullies admit to lacking this skill, while the percentage of onlookers remains constant across the different levels, with the zero level having the highest percentage of onlookers (60%). Furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was found between apologising and being both a victim and a bully. 80% of the sample who lack this social skill has experienced bullying in the past year. This percentage falls to 47% in the group of young people who score highly in apologising. Lastly, the percentage of bullies ranges from 44.8% of pupils who have a low level to 16.8% of young people with a high level.

3.6.9. *Assertiveness*

Pupils with a higher level of assertiveness are less likely to be a victim or bully. A pupil with a low level of assertiveness is more likely to be an onlooker (53.4%) compared to 48% of the group who lack this skill; 53.8% who had an average level; and 58.3% who had a high level of assertiveness. On the other hand, a statistically significant relationship was found between assertiveness and being a victim and

this social skill and being a bully. 64% of the non-assertive respondents have been a victim of school bullying in the past year. This percentage decreases to 48% in the group of young people with a high level of assertiveness. In this respect, the percentage of bullies ranges from 32% who lack this skill to 16.7% who have a high level of assertiveness.

3.6.10. Empathy

As the level of empathy increases, the likelihood of being either a victim or bully decreases, while the percentage of onlookers is approximately 60% in the different levels of this social skill. However, this percentage decreases to 49.5% in the average level. Furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was found between empathy and being both a victim and a bully. The percentage of victims ranges from 60% of pupils who lack empathy to 48.2% who have a high level. In line with the above, the percentage of bullies decreases from 42.9% with a low level to 17.3% of pupils with a high level of empathy.

3.6.11. Showing Interest

The higher the level of this skill, the less likely pupils are to be a bully and the more likely they are to be an onlooker. In contrast, those young people who lack the skills to show interest and those who have a high level are more likely to be victims. The percentage of onlookers ranges from 53% who lack this skill to 60.5% who score highly. In this respect, a statistically significant relationship was found between this skill and being a victim and showing interest and being a bully. The percentage of victims is higher in the group that lacks this skill (53.8%) and in the group that scores highly (52.4%). On the other hand, the percentage of bullies ranges from 46.2% who lack this skill to 19.8% who score highly.

3.6.12. Helping

A higher level of this skill was found to be associated with a lower likelihood of being a victim and school bully, while those pupils who lack this skill and those with a high level are more likely to be onlookers. Specifically, we are talking about 62.5% and 60.3%, respectively, compared to 52.6% with a low level or 50.7% with an average level. A statistically significant relationship was found between this skill and being a victim and helping and being a bully. Interestingly, 73.7% of pupils who are not very skilled at helping others have been a victim of school bullying in the past year, while in the remaining levels, the percentage of victims has stayed constant, at around 50%. Lastly, the percentage of bullies decreases from 50% who lack this skill to 18.9% who score highly.

3.6.13. Finding Collaborative Solutions

As the ability to find collaborative solutions increases, the likelihood of being a victim and bully decreases. However, the percentage of onlookers remains constant at all levels, although it increases slightly in the high level, reaching 59%. A statistically significant relationship was found between finding collaborative solutions and being a victim and between this skill and being a bully. The percentage of pupils who are not as skilled at finding collaborative solutions and who have been a victim is 72.3% compared to 47% of the group that scored highly on this skill. Likewise, the percentage of bullies decreases from 29.4% who lack this skill to 14.5% who scored highly.

3.6.14. Defending One's Own Rights

Young people who have not developed this skill are more likely to be onlookers and bullies, while a higher level of this skill is associated with a lower likelihood of being a victim of school bullying. Likewise, a statistically significant relationship was found between defending rights and being both a victim and a bully. 46% of the sample who are not very skilled at defending their rights have been an onlooker, compared to 57% and 60% of the remaining groups. In contrast, 60% of pupils who are incapable of defending their rights have been a victim of school bullying compared to 50.2% who have a high capacity level to defend their rights. Lastly, 27% who have a low level of this skill have been a bully with respect to the rest of the groups that have a percentage of approximately 20%.

Table 5 shows the mean of each social skill of the potential onlookers, victims and bullies of this study. In general, the onlookers score more highly across all the social skills, except for manipulation, which is the skill that bullies score most highly on. The only social skill where victims stand out with respect to onlookers and bullies is associated with communication. However, victims score higher than bullies across all the social skills, except for manipulation as stated previously and other skills such as asking for help and speaking in public. Furthermore, Table 5 also shows the standard deviation of the onlookers, victims and bullies in each social skill. The data are not very disperse, with the largest dispersion seen in skills relating to initiative, asking for help, speaking in public and manipulation, which, in turn, are some of the skills that both the onlookers and the victims and bullies scored worse on.

Table 5

Mean and standard deviation of the social skills of onlookers, victims and bullies.

Social skill	Onlookers		Victims		Bullies	
	\bar{x}	S	\bar{x}	S	\bar{x}	S
Active listening	3.78	0.67	3.72	0.72	3.55	0.88
Communication	2.86	0.91	2.87	0.88	2.63	0.92
Gratitude	3.62	0.82	3.58	0.83	3.40	0.87
Initiative	3.03	1.00	2.99	1.00	2.82	1.05
Asking for help	2.81	0.98	2.74	1.01	2.78	1.00
Speaking in public	2.77	1.06	2.62	1.06	2.70	1.02
Manipulation	2.49	1.05	2.48	1.06	2.60	1.01
Apologising	3.62	0.75	3.51	0.82	3.45	0.74
Assertiveness	3.42	0.87	3.32	0.93	3.17	0.96
Empathy	3.76	0.67	3.69	0.71	3.57	0.73
Showing interest	3.47	0.82	3.44	0.82	3.31	0.94
Helping	3.66	0.70	3.62	0.72	3.49	0.83
Finding collaborative solutions	3.38	0.82	3.27	0.86	3.14	0.84
Defending rights	3.35	0.89	3.26	0.90	3.19	0.89

Source: own research.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that the Pearson correlation test was used in this research study to ascertain whether there are significant relationships between the variables. In general, it should be highlighted that despite there being statistically significant relationships, the correlations, in general, are low, as the values range between 0.10 and 0.20.

First, the social skills that predict being a bully are communication, own initiative and the capacity to speak in public, underscoring a negative correlation between communication and being an onlooker. In terms of the victims, there was an association with assertiveness, apologising and finding collaborative solutions. Lastly, social skills such as assertiveness, empathy, finding collaborative solutions, active listening, apologising, showing gratitude, helping, communication, showing interest, defending rights and initiative are correlated with being an onlooker.

4. Discussion

On the basis of the analysis and the presentation of the study results, it is evident that school bullying is more than a merely descriptive social phenomenon given that social skills have been confirmed to be an influential factor. The most relevant results are those that explain how the likelihood of being a potential onlooker, victim and

bully varies across the level of social skills, and those that compare the level of social skills of each role in bullying. Emphasis must be placed on the term “potential” as stated previously so as not to exaggerate this phenomenon.

However, the aim of this study also consisted of explaining bullying in a more comprehensive way in order to hear the versions of all the participants given that this study departs from the basis that the role of onlookers is very important, as their action or inaction may have an impact on bullying. 57.3% of the sample was shown to be an onlooker in the past year. 70% of onlookers tried to help the victim, while 18% did nothing and approximately 4% cooperated with the bullies in some way. These results partly coincide with the three types of onlookers described by Avilés (2004). The percentage of onlookers who did not help the victim is significant, as it is comprised of pupils who took part in bullying in a negative way, exposing the victim even more. With regard to this aspect, the code of silence should be noted. This is an unwritten code whereby onlookers decide not to speak out for fear of the possible reprisals in a case of bullying or isolated violence, causing these phenomena to continue and/or propagate (Díaz-Aguado et al., 2013). In this sense, the age of the sample cannot be disregarded: adolescents who need the support of their peers to build their self-esteem and who, therefore, decide not to speak out or to support the bullies so as to feel accepted by others or to avoid being socially pressured by the bullies and their accomplices, and to avoid being isolated or victimised. Nevertheless, this study has revealed a new type of onlooker: the helper. This role enables victims to be removed from those environments in which they are unable to defend themselves and can be empowered so that they learn to avoid potential revictimisation, while leaving the bully alone, not giving them reason or incentives to continue pursuing their aim. In future research, it would be interesting to compare the level of social skills of those onlookers who helped the victim with those who did not in order to establish whether those onlookers who helped score higher than those who watched from the sidelines or cooperated with the bully.

The most common types of help given by the onlookers were taking the victim to a safe place and speaking to the bully, to a teacher or to a classmate. However, the percentage of onlookers who have used violence as a mechanism to help the victim is worrying, bringing to mind some neutralisation techniques, such as the denial of responsibility (Sykes and Matza, 1957).

Similarly, in line with González-García and Campoy-Torrente (2016), this study confirmed the existence of pupils, in this case, 34.8%, who know of a classmate who has taken on a dual role with regard to bullying, that is, who has been both a victim and aggressor. From the point of view of the onlookers, the main reason for their classmates changing role was mainly to take revenge for the damage inflicted on them or to belong to a friend group. In future research, potential victims and bullies could be asked directly if they have taken on this dual role in life, and the possible consequences and precipitating factors could be studied.

50.4% of the sample have been a potential victim of school bullying in the past year. The most frequent types of bullying were the spreading of rumours, verbal bullying and isolation. In terms of the frequency of victimisation, the majority of the types of bullying happened “on occasion”, except for the three aforementioned types that were experienced more frequently. From another angle, 20% of the sample have been shown to be a potential bully in the past year. The most common types of bullying were verbal bullying, isolation and physical bullying. The first two types are most frequent, and as is the case with the victims, the rest of the types usually happen from time to time, on occasion. Girls are also found to be onlookers and victims more frequently than boys, while boys are found to bully more. Likewise, the percentage of potential victims and bullies is found to decrease as the academic year increases, while the percentage of onlookers increases. In this vein, statistically significant relationships have been identified between bullies and both gender and the academic year. In future research, the range of types of school bullying could be broadened, and behaviours typical of cyberbullying could be included, such as posting content on social media without consent or identity theft, in order to get a clearer snapshot of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the way in which the socio-demographic and socio-economic variables affect school bullying should also be studied to detect possible risk and protective factors.

Statistically significant relationships have been found between all the social skills and the independent variables related to being victims and bullies, and between onlookers and initiative and speaking in public. A higher level of social skills has been linked to an increase or decrease in the percentage of onlookers, victims and bullies. It should be highlighted that a higher level of social skills, such as active listening and assertiveness, is associated with a lower likelihood of being an onlooker, victim and bully. Along the same lines, a higher level of gratitude, empathy, help, apologising, finding collaborative solutions and defending one’s own rights is associated with a lower likelihood of being a victim and bully. However, a higher level of communication and initiative is associated with a higher likelihood of being a victim and a lower likelihood of being a bully. This brings to mind the provocative victim (Olweus, 2014). It is a very contradictory result with respect to that of speaking in public given that a higher level of this skill was found to be associated with a higher likelihood of being an onlooker and bully, while the likelihood of being a victim decreases. In contrast, it is interesting that at a higher level of the sample of interest, the percentage of onlookers increases and the percentage of bullies decreases, and that at a higher level in terms of asking for help, the pupil is less likely to be a victim. In future research, questions could be included to discover the characteristics of victims and bullies and to see whether they are associated with the level of social skills.

The research hypothesis has been verified as, generally speaking, the onlookers have a higher level of social skills than victims and bullies. Furthermore, the victims score higher than the bullies, except in speaking in public and in asking for help, where the bullies scored higher. Lastly, it should be highlighted that there is a social skill that bullies score higher on than onlookers and victims: manipulation. The results show that bullies and victims have a low level of social skills. This may result in the victims

not being able to defend themselves against the aggressions of their classmates, meaning that bullying in school is prolonged or that this lack of skills may lead to the bullies being incapable of realising the wrong in their actions, putting themselves in the victim's shoes and bringing an end to the situation. As for the onlookers, a low level of these skills may be associated with the onlookers not listening to the victim, not showing interest, or not helping or understanding them. Thus, this partially demonstrates the theory of Sutton et al. (1999); although bullies do not have a higher level of social skills than onlookers and victims, it has been proven that, overall, they score more highly on a key skill: manipulation, given that this skill is the perfect mechanism to gain the loyalty and obedience of their classmates and onlookers. However, the results of this study also partially demonstrate the theory of Crick and Dodge (1994), the basis of which lies in the fact that victims have a higher level of social skills than bullies given that those skills are associated with pro-social behaviours. However, it has been shown that there are social skills that bullies scored more highly on in comparison to victims and onlookers. In this sense, the intermediate theory developed by Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) has been confirmed, which coincides with Crick and Dodge (1994) in that people try to improve their social skills in order to be socially accepted. However, it also picks up on the idea in the theory by Sutton et al. (1999) that bullies make use of their social skills to achieve their objectives, irrespectively of whether or not these skills are socially accepted. For future research, it would be interesting to see the influence that other social skills, such as respect, have, and school bullying programmes based on social skills should be designed and evaluated to see whether they are effective in preventing and intervening in bullying.

5. Conclusions

This research has confirmed the relationship between school bullying and social skills by means of a sample of 506 pupils between the third year of compulsory Spanish secondary education (pupils aged 14–15) and the final year of school (pupils aged 17–18). Emphasis must be placed on the fact that this study mentions potential onlookers, victims and bullies, as in order to verify this, more complete, individual and specific studies would be needed that require more exhaustive research techniques.

This study has demonstrated that school bullying is associated with social skills. A lack of these social skills may be a potential risk factor for being a victim or bully, except in the case of communication and initiative, associated with a higher likelihood of being a victim, and manipulation, related to a higher likelihood of being a bully. Onlookers have been shown to have a higher level of social skills, followed by victims and bullies, with the exception of manipulation, which the latter scored highest on.

With the results we are seeing, we must insist on learning social skills from a young age, so that children and adolescents acquire cognitive processes that enable them to display fewer antisocial and crime problems, and so that they can tackle daily conflicts in a positive manner. However, we cannot make the mistake of thinking that social skills are the only factor that influences school bullying. We must not forget that

we are faced with a social phenomenon with multiple causes in which both intra- and interpersonal variables come into play. Therefore, school bullying and its causes and consequences must be studied, both transversally and longitudinally, with representative samples. At the same time, school bullying prevention programmes based on social skills must be developed, implemented and evaluated periodically from a multidisciplinary approach.

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