

Perception of bullying among preschoolers and primary school students

Percepción del maltrato entre iguales en educación infantil y primaria

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Abstract

Bullying is one of the most important research topics in the field of education due to its negative impact on the school's general atmosphere, and therefore on the well-being of the various members of the educational community, and especially the victims. Our knowledge about various issues related to this phenomenon, such as types of aggression according to age and gender, the roles involved and intervention has increased a great deal. However, there is a lack of research, on the one hand, analysing the mental representations of those involved in this kind of peer conflict, and on the other, focusing on bullying during the preschool years and during the first two years of primary education. In this research, we used a cartoon strip depicting a classic bullying scenario to interview 120 subjects (60 girls and 60 boys) ranging in age from the third year of preschool education up to the third year of primary education, in order to analyse their meanings in relation with these peer conflicts. The results show these subjects are able to identify the key features of bullying, most think bullies feel proud of themselves, and the victims ashamed. Likewise, the majority of students interviewed believe both parties involved, bullies and victims alike, resolve their

differences and become friends. These findings are very similar to those obtained with samples of teenagers, which together with other similarities with these older samples observed, lead us to classify these early manifestations of bullying as proto-behaviours of bullying, in contrast to other terms used, such as unjustified aggression. The former term emphasises the idea that there is a continuity between the bullying behaviours identified during the preschool years and the first two years of primary education, and those observed during secondary education.

Keywords: bullying, preschoolers, proto-behaviours of bullying, unjustified aggression.

Resumen

El maltrato entre iguales constituye uno de los temas centrales en el ámbito de la educación debido al impacto que tiene sobre el clima de convivencia en los centros escolares y, por tanto, sobre el bienestar de los diferentes miembros de la comunidad educativa, especialmente sobre las víctimas. Se ha avanzado en el conocimiento sobre este fenómeno con relación a su prevalencia, tipos de agresiones según la edad y el género, figuras implicadas, intervención, etc. Sin embargo, llama la atención la escasez de investigaciones que, por un lado, analicen cualitativamente las representaciones mentales que los sujetos tienen sobre este tipo de conflictos entre iguales y, por otro, que lo investiguen durante los primeros años de la escolarización. En este trabajo se ha entrevistado, con la ayuda de una historia gráfica que representa una situación prototípica de acoso escolar, a 120 sujetos -60 niñas y 60 niños- desde 3º de educación infantil a 3º de educación primaria, con el fin de analizar sus significados con relación a este fenómeno. Los resultados indican que estos sujetos reconocen los elementos distintivos del acoso escolar de forma muy temprana, creen mayoritariamente que los agresores se sienten orgullosos y las víctimas avergonzadas, así como que víctima y agresores resuelven finalmente sus diferencias y se hacen amigos. Estos hallazgos son muy similares a los obtenidos con poblaciones adolescentes, lo que, junto a otras similitudes halladas con el acoso escolar observado a estas edades, nos lleva a denominar a estas manifestaciones tempranas de agresión como proto-conductas de maltrato entre iguales, frente a otros términos empleados como el de agresión injustificada. Con ello se pretende incidir en la continuidad existente entre estas manifestaciones tempranas de violencia entre iguales y el acoso escolar observado en la educación secundaria.

Palabras clave: acoso escolar, educación infantil, bullying, proto-conductas de maltrato, agresión injustificada.

Introduction

Bullying or abuse among peers due to an abuse of power (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson and Liefvooghe, 2002) is currently one of the most extensively researched topics in the field of education (e.g. Monks and Smith, 2010; Ortega and Mora-Merchán, 2008; Ovejero, 2013; Smith et al., 2002), due to its impact on social harmony in schools, and because it is probably the most important and most worrying type of violence that occurs at school, to the point that it can have truly dramatic consequences for the victims (Garaigordobil, Martínez-Valderrey and Aliri, 2014). Among other things, this large body of research, which has primarily been carried out with adolescents, has established that it is a complex group phenomenon, in which it is possible to distinguish different roles (Salmivalli, Lagerspezt, Björkqvist, Österman and Kaukiainen, 1996), and that about 3.5% of students are victims and 2.5% are bullies. The most common types of bullying are insults, ridicule and talking negatively about someone, and the least common types are threats with weapons and sexual assault (Díaz-Aguado Martínez and Martín, 2013; IDP-U, 2000 and 2007). This type of violence occurs especially among boys, although some research calls this into question, pointing out that bullying by girls is more indirect and therefore harder to identify (Garaigordobil et al., 2014). Specific prevention programmes have also been established (Ovejero, 2013; Salmivalli, 2010).

However, despite the large number of studies, there are two major gaps in this area of research. First, few qualitative studies have analysed the meanings of this kind of submission-power relationship for students (Cerdeira, Ortega and Monks, 2012). Two studies that have done so are the work by Romera, Rodríguez-Barbero and Ortega-Ruiz (2015), which analysed the perceptions of 276 children aged between 6 and 11 years old based on an analysis of their drawings, and second, the studies carried out by Almeida, del Barrio, van der Meulen and Barrios (2001) and del Barrio, Almeida, van der Meulen, Barrios and Gutiérrez (2003), who interviewed 120 students, aged 9, 11 and 13 years old. They used a graphic story called SCAN-bullying, which narrated a prototypical scenario of bullying among adolescents, showing how a group of students attacked a classmate in various ways.

Second, there is a striking lack of research analysing this phenomenon during the early years of schooling (Monks, 2011), despite the

acknowledged importance of an understanding of the initial processes involved (Alsaker and Nägele, 2009), and of carrying out an intervention as soon as possible (Monks, Palertini, Ortega and Costabile, 2011). The fundamental reason for this paradox lies in the need to use more complex and costly research methods, such as natural observation and personal interviews, because at this age the subjects are not yet sufficiently autonomous to answer questionnaires, which is the primary method used with adolescent subjects (Alsaker and Vilén, 2010).

One of the first questions to consider is whether *bullying due to abuse of power* can really occur at such early ages. There are two schools of thought when answering this question. First, there is the school which doubts whether bullying can exist at these ages, mainly due to the instability of roles, and especially of the role of the victim. This leads its advocates to conclude that it is technically incorrect to talk about bullying in the strictest sense, and they therefore use an alternative term, *unjustified aggression* (Monks, 2011; Monks, Ortega and Torrado, 2002; Ortega and Monks, 2005;). Three additional differentiators are also mentioned in defence of this position: i) that the peripheral roles, such as those of the defenders and assistants, are more blurred (Monks and Smith, 2010); ii) that no gender differences are observed in the victims group, due to lower levels of segregation among children at these ages (Monks et al. 2011; Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996a), and finally iii) more subjects can be classified as victim-bullies, which can be interpreted as an evolutionary trend, in the sense that aggressive behaviour decreases as the child develops, as a result of better self-regulation of the individual's behaviour (Alsaker and Nägele, 2009; Alsaker and Valkanover, 2001).

By contrast, the second school of thought argues that bullying exists during the early years of schooling, due to the important and numerous similarities with the bullying observed in secondary education (Alsaker, 2014). These similarities can be classified into two main groups: a) in terms of the roles identified and their characteristics, and b) in terms of the differential pattern of aggression observed based on age and gender.

As regards the first group, i.e. the roles identified and their characteristics, *passive victims* have low status, higher levels of social withdrawal, and lower scores for sociability and assertiveness (Alsaker and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger; 2012; Monks et al., 2011). The data for *bullies* are inconclusive. Some studies have found that these individuals

enjoy some recognition in the group (Alsaker and Nagale, 2009), while others have found the opposite result (Monks et al., 2011). What has been documented with some degree of certainty is that boys are characteristically over-represented in pro-abuse roles, i.e. as aggressors, assistants or reinforcers (Monks and Smith, 2010).

Another of the figures identified is the *bully-victim* which is a role played mainly by boys; they are the most aggressive of all the roles identified, and have the highest rates of behavioural disorders. This all makes them less prosocial and therefore together with the passive victims, they have the lowest levels of acceptance (Alsaker and Nägele, 2009; Perren and Alsaker, 2006). At the opposite extreme are the *defenders*, as it is usually girls who adopt this role. They usually have good emotional understanding and are the most popular individuals among their peers (Belacchi and Farina, 2010; Monks et al. 2002; Monks and Smith, 2010), which is a determining factor in coming to the aid of the victim (Monks et al., 2001). The *witnesses* group is the largest, accounting for more than 50% of the subjects analysed (Alsaker and Nägele, 2009; Monks et al., 2002). They are usually girls (Monks and Smith, 2010), who are cooperative, enjoy some sociometric popularity among their peers (Monks, Smith and Swettenham, 2003) and tend to relate with other children who play a similar role (Perren and Alsaker, 2006).

All the roles described above and their characteristics have also been identified among subjects in secondary education (e.g. Díaz-Aguado et al., 2013; IDP-U, 2000 and 2007; Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing and Salmivalli, 2010).

Meanwhile, the second group of similarities refers to the differential pattern of aggression in terms of age and gender. With regard to age, several studies indicate that aggression is most likely to be direct, such as verbal and physical assaults (Ortega and Monks, 2005; Ostrov and Keating, 2004). However, indirect or relational attacks also occur (Alsaker, 1993b, Alsaker and Vilén, 2010), but these are obviously not on the same level of elaboration as those observed among older subjects, with social exclusion being the most common. In the latter type of aggression, Crick, Ostrov, Burr, Cullerton-Sen, Jansen-Yeh and Ralston (2006) found that relational aggression was more common among girls, and was directed primarily against other girls. Meanwhile, the most common aggression among boys was physical, and other boys were the main recipients of these attacks. Furthermore, relational aggression in girls and physical

aggression in boys is stable in terms of time and context (Ostrov and Keating, 2004).

In conclusion, this study focuses on these two less investigated aspects, and as such has the following specific objectives: a) to assess whether students aged 5-9 years old recognise the distinctive characteristics of bullying, b) to determine the extent to which they attribute a number of secondary emotions among the different roles involved, c) to ascertain how they believe conflicts of this type end, d) to investigate whether differences in the variables of gender and age exist, and e) to analyse the extent to which their meanings incorporate different elements compared to adolescents.

This article is structured as follows: first, the characteristics of the sample, the material used and its adaptation to the ages analysed are presented. This is followed by a description of how the interviews were conducted, and a presentation of the results. Finally, a discussion and conclusions section with a consideration of the results is included.

Method

Participants

The sample, from three public sector schools in the Autonomous Region of Madrid, consists of 120 subjects, aged between 5 years and 5 months old and 9 years and 6 months old, and from the third year of the second cycle of preschool education to the third year of primary education. We performed stratified random sampling with simple affixation of the students allowed to participate in the study, so that there was the same number of boys and girls in each of the four year groups interviewed, i.e. 30 subjects per year group (50% girls).

Adaptation of the SCAN-bullying.

The *SCAN-Bullying* was used in order to analyse the objectives of this study, as in the studies by Almeida et al. (2001) and del Barrio et al. (2003), but it was adapted to the evolutionary characteristics of our sample. Three changes were made: a) the drawings were in colour, b)

the faces of the characters were clearly recognisable, and c) the different scenes were represented by a comic strip insisting of two images, and not by a single cartoon as in the original instrument. In addition, two sets of drawings were designed, to encourage students to identify with the story of abuse depicted, so that in one of them both the bully and the victim were boys and in the other they were girls.

The final adapted version consisted of 5 strips, with two images in each one (12 x 7.5cm), depicting different types of abuse, i.e. teasing, exclusion, blackmail, direct and indirect physical attack, as well as an initial cartoon showing the victim arriving at school, while the other characters watch.

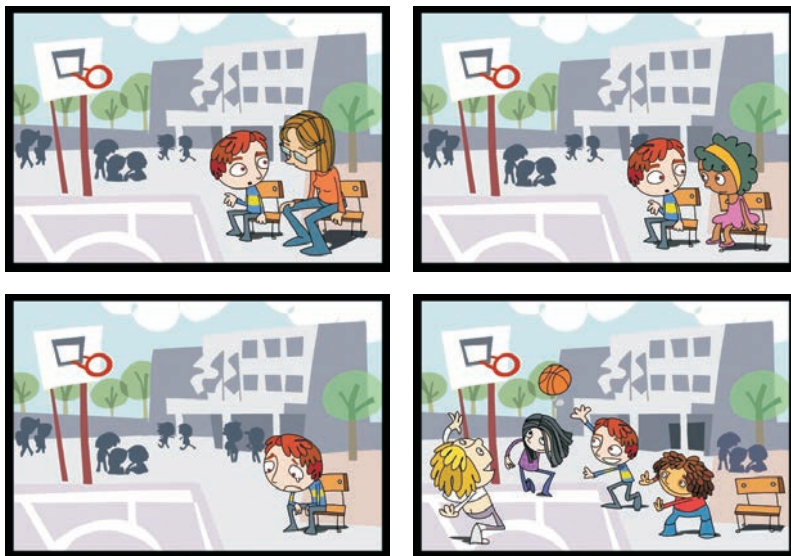
FIGURE I. Example of scenes adapted from the SCAN-Bullying



Source: Produced by the authors

After seeing all the scenes, four possible endings were presented, in order to determine how the students thought the story could end (Figures 2).

FIGURE II. Possible endings to the situation of abuse



Source: Produced by the authors

The semi-structured interview that accompanied the *SCAN-bullying* in the original study (Almeida, et al., 2001; del Barrio, et al., 2003), also had to be adapted. With the twofold objective of achieving the greatest similarity possible compared to the original, while adapting it appropriately to the participants' ages, the use of language was adjusted to the developmental characteristics of subjects aged 5-9 years old, while retaining the original meaning of the questions. Other more complex questions were eliminated.

Procedure

We contacted the principal of each school to explain the objectives of the research. They subsequently sent a circular to the families, in order to inform them and seek their consent.

The students were interviewed individually in a room at the school, and were asked for their permission for an audio recording of the

conversation to be made. After a brief introduction to the interviewer and a short mention of their interest in finding out their opinion on relations among their peers, the students were shown the scenes one at a time, as they were left on the table. If they had any doubts about any of them, they were given instructions which were as neutral as possible in order not to influence their interpretation. After all the pictures had been displayed and arranged on the table, the interview began. The questions were asked in an established order, but adjustments were made depending how the conversation progressed, so that it flowed as naturally as possible. After concluding this first part of the interview, all the pictures were withdrawn and the four possible endings were then shown, thereby beginning the final part of the conversation. All the interviews were transcribed for further analysis.

Analysis of the results

There were two phases in the analysis of the data. First, a pilot study was conducted in order to determine whether the adjustments made to the *SCAN-bullying*, the questions selected and their specific formulation were appropriate for eliciting the kind of mental representations that were being studied. To that end, 13 boys and girls were interviewed, who were distributed as follows: three subjects (two girls and a boy) in the third year of the second cycle of preschool education; four subjects (two boys and two girls) in the first year of primary school; four subjects (two boys and two girls) in the second year of primary school, and two subjects (two boys) in the third year of primary school. The progress of the interview, the interest shown in the images and the analysis of their answers led us to the conclusion that both the *SCAN-bullying* and questions formulated were indeed suitable for the purposes of the research.

In the second phase, after all the interviews with 120 subjects who were part of the study proper had been concluded, an initial classification of the responses was conducted, for which we used the previous study by Almeida et al. (2001) and del Barrio et al., (2003). A second review was subsequently performed in order to obtain a set of categories of exhaustive and mutually exclusive responses. After all the subjects' answers had been categorised, 20% of the interviews, chosen at random for each year group and gender, were analysed by a second judge with

high levels of agreement (Cohen and Kappa indices of between 0.63 and 1). The non-parametric chi-square test was used to test the hypotheses; p levels of less than 0.05 were considered significant.

Results

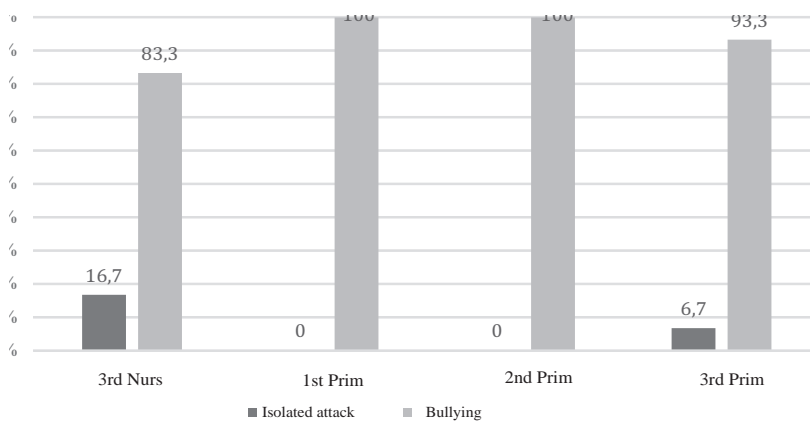
The results obtained for the following three questions are presented below: a) if students in these age groups recognise the distinctive characteristics of bullying, namely power imbalance, repetition and intentionality, b) the extent to which they attributed secondary emotions - guilt, shame, indifference and pride - among the various roles involved and c) how the participants believed that conflicts of this type end.

Type of aggression

One of the main aspects that we wanted to analyse was whether the students in the sample, and those in the third year of preschool education in particular, recognised the scenes depicted as a prototypical bullying situation. The entire interview was taken into account to that end, and the students' responses were classified based on whether the three cardinal elements that define bullying appeared in their accounts - namely, repetition, imbalance of power and intentionality. Based on these criteria, we found that 94.2% of the subjects identified the scenes as a prototypical situation of *bullying*. By contrast, the accounts of 5.8% of the students did not contain references to the three distinctive characteristics, meaning that they perceived the scenes depicted to be *isolated attacks*.

No significant differences were found when the responses were analysed according to gender ($p = 0.697$); the accounts of 93.3% of the boys and 95% of the girls identified the three characteristic features of bullying. By contrast, significant differences were obtained depending on the year group ($p = 0.017$). As can be seen in Figure 3, the subjects in the third year of preschool education provided significantly more responses which did not include the defining characteristics of bullying than the other three groups, meaning that their answers were classified in the category of *isolated attacks*.

GRAPH I. Type of attack by year group



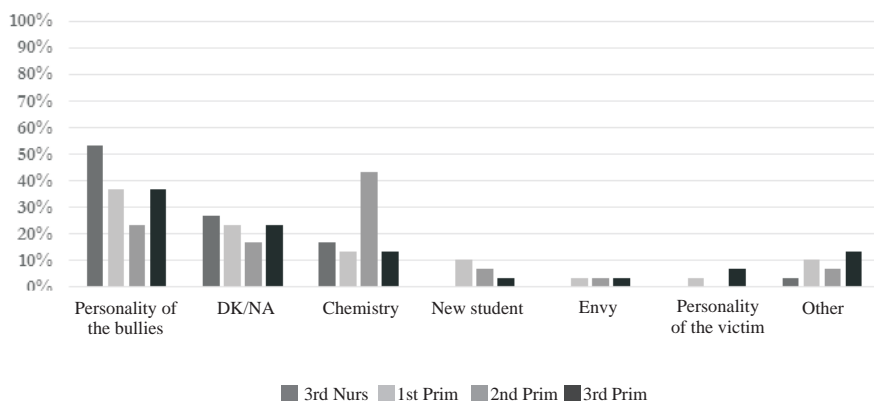
Source: Compiled by the authors

The second question examined the possible reasons that trigger this type of conflict, i.e. causal explanations for the phenomenon; 37.5% of the subjects attributed them to the bullies' characteristics, such as *being poor students who amused themselves by hitting their classmates*; these responses were included under the category called *bullies' personality*. Meanwhile, 21.7% said that the bullies *did not like the victim* - a category called «*chemistry*» - and 22.5% gave vague answers that were not informative or openly acknowledged that they did not know the reasons. Other responses alluded to reasons such as the victim being *new to the school* (5%), the bullies feeling *envy towards the victim* (2.5%) or the victim having low self-esteem (2.5%). This latter type of response was included in the category of *personality of the victim*.

No statistically significant differences were found when the responses were analysed by gender (0.399), or by year group ($p = 0.119$). However, some other trends were observed in the latter case; more than half of the students in the third year of preschool education, i.e. the youngest children in the sample, explained these conflicts by referring to what we called the *personality of the bullies*. This reason gradually becomes less

common as the students become older, with a slight rise in the third year of primary school. Meanwhile, the reason mentioned most often by students in the second year of primary school was what we called *chemistry*, i.e. the victim is attacked because the bullies do not like them.

GRAPH II. Reasons given by year group



Source: Compiled by the authors

TABLE I. Reasons for attacks by year group as a percentage

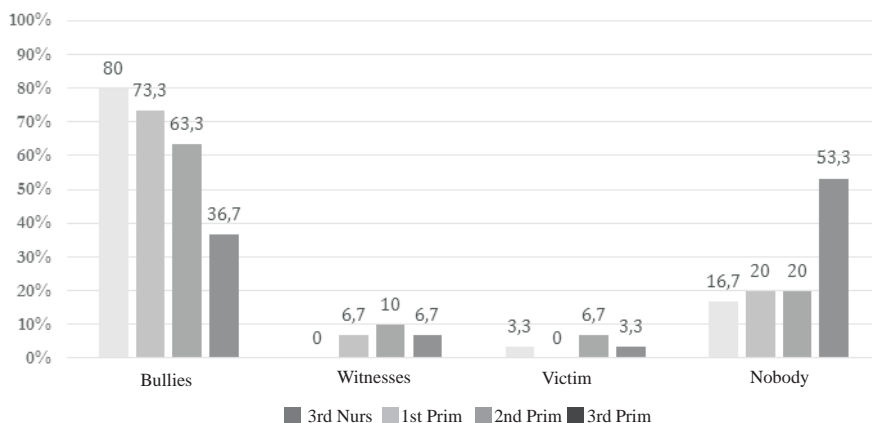
	3rd Nurs	1st Prim	2nd Prim	3rd Prim
Personality of the bullies	53.3	36.7	23.3	36.7
DK/NA	26.6	23.3	16.7	23.3
Chemistry	16.7	13.3	43.3	13.3
New student	0	10	6.7	3.3
Envy	0	3.3	3.3	3.3
Personality of the victim	0	3.3	0	6.7
Other	3.4	10.1	6.7	13.4

Source: Compiled by the authors

Secondary emotions: guilt, shame, indifference and pride

63.3% of students believe that the pro-abuse figures, i.e., the leader and the reinforcers, felt *guilty* about their treatment of the victim. The second most often cited response option, with 27.5% of responses, was that *nobody* felt that way. Only a small proportion of the students mentioned the *witnesses* or the *victim*, with percentages of 5.8% and 3.3% respectively. No statistically significant differences based on gender were observed ($p = 0.223$), but some differences were observed depending on the year group ($p = 0.020$), in that third year primary school students were those that most really mentioned the *pro-abuse* figures as having this emotion, and most said that *nobody* feels this way. By contrast, students in the third year of preschool education mostly state that the *bullies* feel guilty.

GRAPH III. Who feels guilty according to each year group

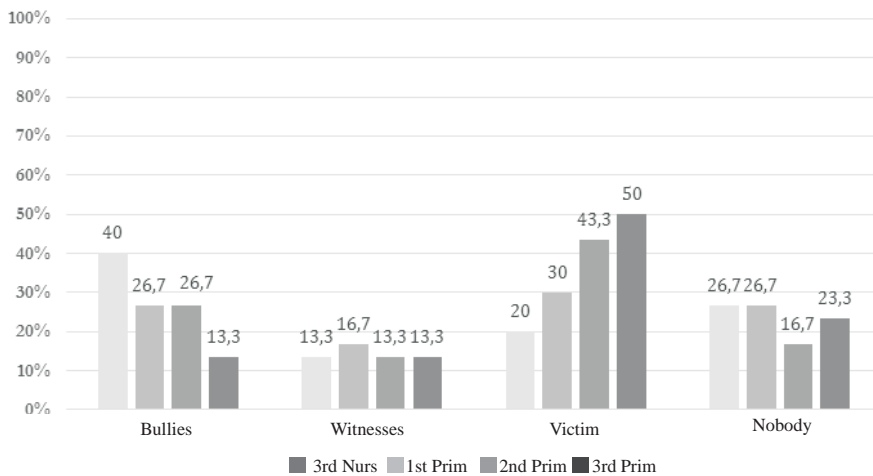


Source: Compiled by the authors

Meanwhile, when they were asked about the feeling of *shame*, 35.8% of the students mentioned the *victim because of the treatment received*, followed by 26.7% who mention the *bullies because of their treatment of*

the victim. 23.3% of the students answered *nobody*, and finally 14.2% mentioned the *witnesses*. No statistically significant differences were observed in the responses either in terms of gender ($p = 0.823$), or according to the year group ($p = 0.387$). However, interesting trends in the responses are once again apparent; most students in the third year of preschool education mention the bullies as having this feeling. Moreover, the older the year group, the more students mention the victim as the person who is ashamed.

GRAPH IV. Who feels ashamed according to each year group

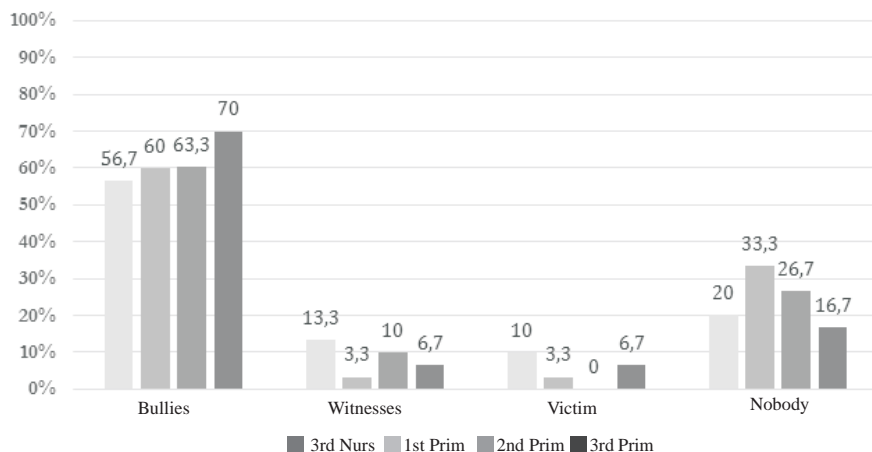


Source: Compiled by the authors

As regards *indifference*, 70.8% of students said that the *bullies* felt this emotion, compared to 20% who thought that *nobody* felt that way. The next most frequently mentioned group were the *witnesses*, mentioned by 4.2% of subjects. No statistically significant differences were observed for the distribution of responses according to gender ($p = 0.567$) or the year group ($p = 0.161$); we also observed no trends, as the percentages found were distributed homogeneously according to both variables.

The last emotion analysed was *pride*; 62.5% of the students said the *bullies* felt this emotion after the attack on the victim, followed by 24.2% who said that *nobody* felt this emotion. Finally, only 8.3% and 5% mentioned the *witnesses* and the *victim*, respectively. No significant differences were found according to gender ($p = 0.607$) or year group (0.551). However, we observed that as the year group got older, the percentage of subjects mentioning the bullies as having this emotion increased, while those answering that *nobody* felt this emotion decreased, except for the third year students in preschool education, since they mentioned the witnesses and the victim more frequently.

GRAPH V. Who feels proud by year group



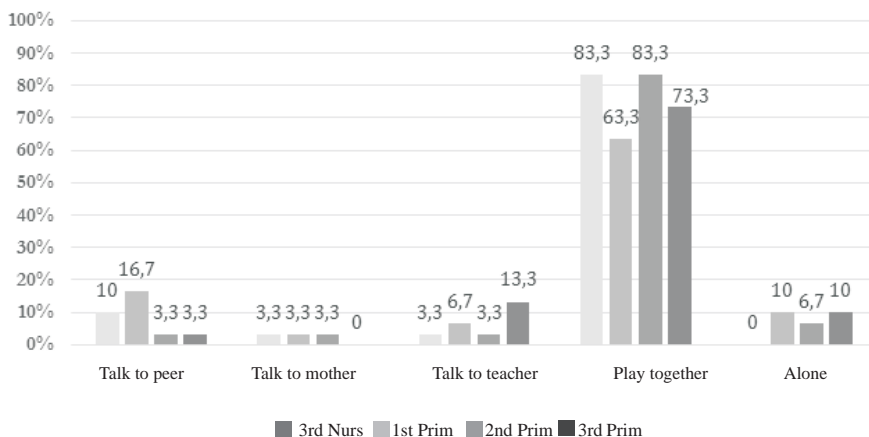
Source: Compiled by the authors

How this type of conflict ends

As regards the question of how the story will end, 75.8% of the subjects believe that *all the students play together* in the end. This response was followed at some distance by other response options, such as *talking to another peer*, selected by 8.3% of the sample, *talking to an adult*

(interpreted as meaning the teacher) by 6.7%, and another 6.7% who believe that in the end the victim *remains sitting alone on a bench*.

GRAPH VI. Final by year group



Source: Compiled by the authors

No statistically significant differences were observed for the distribution of responses according to gender, ($p = 0.477$) or the year group ($p = 0.407$). However, in the latter variable this *happy ending* was chosen by the majority of all the students in all age groups, and particularly by those in the third year of preschool education and the second year of primary school. Meanwhile, students in the first year of primary school mentioned this possibility least often; the second most common option in this age group is *talking to a peer*.

Discussion and conclusions

One of the first conclusions that can be drawn is that the use of a narrative instrument like the SCAN-*bullying* is not only appropriate for eliciting the meanings that adolescents have about bullying (del Barrio et. al 2003), but also that after making the appropriate adjustments, it is

equally appropriate for students in the final year of preschool education and first year primary school students. Most of the subjects in this study recognised a prototypical bullying situation in the scenes depicted; this response pattern occurs in all the year groups, and third year preschool education students have the most difficulties in the three levels analysed. The latter result is to be expected, taking into account children's level of cognitive and emotional development in this period of their education. However, notwithstanding this factor, it must be remembered that the vast majority of these subjects also perceived the scenes as bullying scenarios. This result is consistent with the research conducted in the field of evolutionary psychology, according to which children at the early age of three years old can identify when someone has been hurt, and those aged four and five years old can distinguish between the breaking of moral and conventional norms (Clemente, Villanueva and Cuervo, 2013).

In addition, subjects do not recognise the situation in a «cold» manner. Instead, their emotional attributions at least point to recognition of the feelings of the various characters involved, and especially the victims and their bullies. While the victims are mostly perceived as being ashamed because of the treatment they receive, bullies are identified as proud and indifferent. This latter result, which was also obtained by Almeida et al. (2001) in an older sample, is consistent with the results obtained by Paulino, Avilés and Sales (2016), who in a large sample consisting of 2,600 adolescents found that compared with witnesses and victims, bullies had more individualistic self-representations, which in turn resulted in the development of a greater moral disconnect, which ultimately led them to not empathize with the suffering of the victim. We also know that bullies are often strongly motivated by immaterial goals such as protagonism, status and admiration by the group, and use the subjugation of the most vulnerable members as a tool to achieve this (Junoven and Galvan, 2008).

The second conclusion to be drawn, which is consistent with the work of most intervention programmes (Salmivalli, 2010), is therefore that intervention should take place before adolescence, since this early recognition of both the abuse and the emotions of those involved means that it can be addressed at an early stage. This can be done by raising awareness of the feelings of the victims, emphasising the idea of the decisive role of witnesses in stopping bullying (Salmivalli, 2010), outlining

appropriate coping strategies for both victims and witnesses (Pöyhönen and Salmivalli, 2009) and encouraging the students' early involvement in the decision-making process that takes place in the classroom, since as documented by De la Caba-Collado, López-Atxurra and Bobowik (2016), this increased involvement is related to positive attitudes for coping with situations of aggression.

However, despite this apparent early identification and emotional recognition, some inconsistencies and contradictions in the students' responses must not be overlooked. First, a significant percentage of the subjects (almost 27%) said that the bullies felt the emotion of *shame*. Meanwhile, when discussing the emotion of *guilt*, most of the subjects (almost 65%) mentioned the bullies. The question is *can the same person can feel guilty, or ashamed, and proud of the same behaviour: assaulting a classmate?* This inconsistency can be interpreted as a sign of the limited capacity for decentering among subjects at these ages (Martí, 1997). As a result, when they answer questions about the emotions of the characters, they are in fact projecting their own emotions, explaining how they would feel in this situation.

This response pattern leads us to draw at least two additional conclusions. First, this projection of feelings by the subjects shows that their emotional attributions go beyond mere *labelling*, and it may therefore be more appropriate to speak in terms of the existence of some degree of *sympathy* with the victim and *antipathy* to the bullies. This is an excellent starting point for any programme for the early prevention of bullying, since anticipating the feeling of guilt is known to act as a strong inhibitor on morally transgressive behaviour (Clement et al., 2013). Second, this response pattern decreases with age, meaning that as the students get older, there is a gradual decline in the number of subjects who think that bullies feel guilty, and conversely, an increase in the number of subjects who believe that the victim feels ashamed. This trend shows that the inconsistencies observed are more common among younger subjects. This result is to be expected bearing in mind their level of cognitive and emotional development. As a result, when early intervention in order to promote a better emotional understanding of the victim was discussed above, one of the objectives would be to explain these contradictions, in order to achieve a better understanding of both the victim and of the bullies. Otherwise, younger subjects may mistakenly think that bullies feel guilty about their actions, when in fact the opposite is true.

In short, taking into account a wide range of studies and the results of this study, it can be concluded that there are indeed differences between the aggressive behaviour shown by the subjects during the first years of school and adolescents. These include the absence of gender differences among the victims, their instability (Monks et al., 2011; Monks et al. 2003) and the difficulty in identifying peripheral roles (Monks and Smith, 2010). However, there are also important similarities, including the fact that at this age they can already distinguish the four macro roles (Belachi and Farina, 2010), the characteristics of the victims, (Alsaker and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Monks et al., 2011), those of the bully (Monks and Smith, 2010), those of the victim-bully (Alsaker and Nägele, 200), those of the defenders and of the witnesses (Belacchi and Farina, 2010; Monks et al., 2003; Monks et al). Furthermore, a differential pattern of aggression based on gender appears at these early ages, with girls showing more relationship aggression and boys more direct aggression (Crick et al., 2006).

In addition, based on this study, it is also possible to state that students are able to identify this type of aggression among their peers from an early age, and that their meanings are very similar to those of adolescents, as can be seen by the fact that the results described in this paper are similar to those found in studies of adolescent subjects (Almeida et al., 2001; del Barrio, 2003). Moreover, one of the key findings of the study of bullying among subjects in secondary education is that it has an instrumental component, i.e. it is used to achieve status in the group and thereby obtain better access to resources in the environment (Salmivalli, Peets and Hodges, 2011). This aspect appears to be already present among children in preschool education (Ostrov and Keating, 2004).

This paper therefore advocates an intermediate position between the two schools presented in other works: *bullying* vs. *unjustified aggression* (Alsaker 2014; Ortega and Monks, 2005), which leads us to call this type of behaviour *proto-bullying behaviours*. The positioning and terminology used are justified by two fundamental reasons. This first reason is the current trend in research, which analyses common factors in abusive behaviours observed in different contexts, in order to draw theoretical and practical conclusions that can be extrapolated to their various manifestations (Monks and Coyne, 2011). Second, and even more importantly, from an evolutionary perspective, how any behaviour modifies its manifestation during its ontogenesis is analysed, without

these changes presupposing the presence of different entities and therefore deserving a different nomenclature. To take an example, it is as if a 24-month-old child's statement «*daddy red car*» while pointing to it is not considered a manifestation of adult language, because it does not contain all the necessary elements of code; «*daddy red car*» and «*daddy has a red car like that one*» are undoubtedly manifestations of the same underlying ability - language - although they incorporate differential elements as a result of the evolutionary point in time at which they are made. This continuity between early *unjustified aggression* and adolescent *bullying* is accepted even by those who advocate the use of a differential terminology (Cerda, Ortega and Claire, 2012).

Finally, the limitations of this study include the size of the sample. A sample with a larger population would undoubtedly have reinforced the results obtained. Furthermore, if subjects from the second year of preschool education, i.e. aged 4 years old, had been included, a broader overview of the evolution of these representations during these early years of schooling would have been obtained. It would also be enriching to examine whether there is any relationship between the accounts of each participant and their sociometric status, and in turn, to relate these two items with their social reasoning, and their moral reasoning in particular. More research is undoubtedly needed to for more in-depth knowledge of the first manifestations of *bullying*.

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