Bullying and intellectual disability from the perspective of students

Abstract

Bullying has been a recurrent phenomenon throughout the history of education. Among those most vulnerable are those with intellectual disabilities who tend to suffer greater levels of victimisation.

The purpose of this research is to analyse the prevalence of bullying of students with intellectual disability in ordinary schools compared to special education schools. The project used a nonexperimental, descriptive and correlational methodology with a sample of 99 students who completed the validated European Bellying Intervention Project Questionnaire measurement tool.

The results show that the majority of students who were victimised by bullies left their ordinary school during secondary education. Within ordinary schools, students with disabilities are more likely to experience bullying in the role of victim while in special education schools the most frequent role is that of observer.

Key words: Bullying; Ordinary and special education school; Intellectual disability; Vulnerability

Introduction

The term "bullying" was originally coined by the Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus (1978), who used the analogy of a 'bull' to describe aggressive behaviour towards others, either physical or verbal (Enríquez, 2015). Bullying is characterised by continuous and intentional harm or aggression where there is an imbalance of power between those involved (González, 2017) and can have significant consequences such as school absenteeism, poor academic performance, physical and/or psychological harm (Salmon et al., 2018).

When speaking of the phenomenon of bullying, it is important to distinguish three different roles involved: the victim, the bully and the observer or spectator. The role of victim corresponds to the person or group of persons who are the target of aggression or abuse by the bully; they are generally characterised as appearing weak, with difficulties in socialisation, with low self-esteem, shy away from problems and thus, in the majority of cases, do not defend themselves due to insecurity or fear (Fernández, 2013). The observer or spectator is one who witnesses the aggression by the bully; they often feel guilty for not helping the victim of the abuse but may fear becoming a victim themselves, are not part of the same social group as the victim or are otherwise unable to act (González, 2017). Finally, the character of the bully is often both calculating and impulsive, with constant need to feel superior to others and, in the majority of cases, are

insecure with low self-esteem; they also have very little empathy towards their victim and do not feel remorse for their actions (Sánchez, 2019).

There are a number of factors which may lead someone to become a bully, including: personal issues related with empathy (Cañas-Pardo, 2017), school life factors associated with limited, precarious or vulnerable social relations (Enríquez, 2015), social factors associated with exposure to violence in daily life (López, et al., 2010); cultural factors, including socio-economic circumstances; and family issues, where the relationship between parents may foster these types of situations, and where there is generally a closer relationship with the mother than with the father (Patiño-Masó et al., 2021).

The possible causes for a person to become a victim of bullying may be internal or external but are nevertheless associated with some form of vulnerability. This vulnerability is understood as the risk a person may have to be emotionally or physically harmed (Tresserras, 2020).

The term vulnerable is derived from the Latin word "*vulnus*" meaning 'wound' or 'injury' and the verb "*vulnero*" meaning 'to injure' or 'to harm' (Feito, 2007). Until the 1980's, the term was used only to refer to those suffering socio-economic hardships that impacted their academic and social life. It was later extended to encompass other social groups who, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances, also suffer from disadvantages or hardships (Pérez, 2020).

There are two distinct types or notions of vulnerability: first, anthropological vulnerability, intrinsic to the individual, a characteristic they were born with and which may become more pronounced or diminish over time. The second is social vulnerability, associated with certain social circumstances or realities in which a particular group tend to suffer more, often characterised by a lack of control, vulnerability, fear, insecurity, etc. These social circumstances generally affect similar social groups, that is, those with some form of disability or suffering social exclusion, marginalisation, gender discrimination, etc. (Feito, 2007).

In fact, in many cases it is society itself which creates vulnerable groups through what is known as 'protectionist thinking', the intention to protect, even against the will of the individual, those with characteristics considered outside social norms (Campoy, 2014).

Lacámara (2016) has defined intellectual disability as "a disorder that begins during early development and involves impairments to intellectual faculties as well as adaptive behaviour in the conceptual, social and practical domains" (p. 14). It can be affirmed that these people, due to the characteristics associated with the disability, become one of the most vulnerable groups, not only educationally, but socially.

When we talk about educational vulnerability, we include those people who encounter difficulties throughout the educational stages and limit their academic development (Manzano, 2008). In this sense, people with intellectual disabilities

find themselves with limitations in their learning process due to the lack of tools, resources or the poor teachers' training in order to satisfy the needs of these students. Sometimes, the educational solution offered at schools attends to the academic sphere, but harms the social sphere because it does not favour the inclusion of the student in the group.

According to UNICEF (2013), children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to exclusion from education systems due to a lack of family resources, adequate schools or low expectations about the disabled person. This lack of resources, both personal and material, may lead to a slower pace of learning compared to other students (AHEAD, 2017).

Among those with intellectual disabilities, vulnerability extends beyond the school environment into the broader social sphere; that is, impaired development of social skills may be another factor leading to situations of bullying and greater risk of victimisation (Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2020). The risk of victimisation is greatest among those who are more timid, isolated or with low self-esteem, aspects much more prevalent among those with special educational needs (González, 2017).

There are other limitations beyond those caused by the disability itself, and which are related to external agents, such as the educational center. The inclusion of a person with a disability can not depend only on specific practices or the good will of some of the teachers. It is important to create a school culture that sets the line of behaviour in the face of diversity (Ossa et al., 2014), then it will mark the vision that teachers have regarding inclusion and the relationship with the social or family environment (Priante, 2003).

As Ainscow and Miles (2008) and, later, Muntaner (2010) indicate, each culture of the school will be unique and different when it comes to inclusion. But in all cases, it will allow practices to be put into operation that allow for better management of the school in the face of diversity, and promote the student's inclusion in the class; such as resource management or the use of certain methodologies, respectively.

All these aspects that are mentioned, make people with disabilities more vulnerable to suffering bullying. Average schools, where its teachers, students and the centre itself don't have a proper vision of disability and the work that must be done to treat it, make people with disabilities more vulnerable to suffering bullying.

As our society becomes increasingly inclusive, not only socially but educationally as well, it is important to understand the real experiences of those with intellectual disabilities in ordinary schools compared to special education schools. Thus, the purpose of this research is to analyse the phenomenon of bullying of students with intellectual disabilities in ordinary schools. For an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon we have established a series of specific objectives that will guide our research:

1. Analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to type of school.
2. Analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to gender and type of school.
3. Analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to stage of education.
4. Analyse student perceptions of the situation in both ordinary schools and in special education schools.

Methodology

Design of the research

The present study used a quantitative methodology with a nonexperimental, descriptive and correlational design which allowed us to analyse the prevalence of bullying of those with intellectual disabilities within schools.

It also included qualitative analysis using a series of open questions to gain a deeper and more contextualised view of the quantitative data.

Sample

The sample for the study consisted of 99 students, all with intellectual disabilities. Of these 99 students, 46% were boys and 54% were girls, aged between 13 and 22, the average being 17 years of age.

100% of the students are currently enrolled in special needs schools. A total of 68.1% left their ordinary school for a special needs school during primary education and 31.9% did so during secondary education.

Within ordinary schools, these students were integrated most of the time in their reference class, and received specific support outside the class to improve their academic development.

The aspects which differentiate both types of school lie mainly in the training of teachers, in how flexible their curriculum is and in the ratio of students per class. Regarding teachers' training, in special education schools teachers are specialised in therapeutic pedagogy and they know what the characteristics and needs of the students are, being able to offer a more adjusted intervention. In addition, the curriculum of special education schools is more flexible than in ordinary schools, and this explains why individualised work plans are made fully adjusted to the students' possibilities. Finally, the ratios of students per class are very different, being much lower in special education schools, which allows more personalised individual and group attention.

Variables

The research took into consideration a series of variables: first, bullying in school was established as a dependent variable of the study. This was analysed considering the three roles described in the questionnaire: the victim, the bully and the observer.

The independent variables of the study were: gender (masculine or feminine), stage of education (primary or secondary) and type of school (ordinary or special education).

Instrument to collect information

The research used the validated European Bellying Intervention Project Questionnaire instrument (Brighi et al., 2012) consisting of 21 items: 7 to analyse victimization, 7 to analyse aggression and 7 regarding the observer. All items in the questionnaire use a Likert-type scale from 1 to 4, 1 being "never" and 4 being "always".

With these options, each of the roles obtain scores ranging from a minimum of 7 points to a maximum of 28 points.

The complete survey is divided into 3 parts. The first part consists of a series of socio-demographic questions about the individual taking the survey. The second part consists of the validated European Bellying Intervention Project Questionnaire instrument and the third part consisting of 7 open questions designed to allow the individual to express their feelings about the subject of the study.

The open questions aim to collect information about the feelings and experiences of the individual in the school environment, their relationship with teachers and classmates and if they were motivated or wanted to attend school.

The questionnaire has two duplicate parts. The first refers to the situation of the student when attending an ordinary school and, the second part, refers to the school in which the student is currently enrolled, that is, the special education school. For both parts of the questionnaire the anonymity of the data collected was ensured by assigning a code to each student.

The participants accepted the consent to participate in the research and the confidentiality and anonymity of the data.

Research procedure

After identifying the need for further research into the phenomenon of bullying of persons with intellectual disabilities, and after a review of limited number of studies on this subject, the first step was to contact various special education schools attended by students formerly enrolled in ordinary schools and who suffered some form of bullying.

From this initial contact, one special education school agreed to participate in the research project. Questionnaires were provided, in paper format, to be distributed to the students. The survey was conducted in two sessions, the first completing the data related to the students' situation and experiences in the ordinary school. In the second session students responded to questions about their current situation and experiences in the special education school.

To make sure that students could complete the questionnaires properly, they were given to the students to complete them independently in those cases in which the students were able to read and understand it. But for students who had difficulties to understand what was read, the questions were read with them in order to facilitate the comprehension. Additionally, in order to give an answer that best suited their reality, they were guided by a visual scale. In the last case, were the class teachers who offered this support.

The statistical analysis of the data was conducted using the SPSS program, version 26.

Data analysis

A descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential analysis was conducted of the results of the survey. Prior to making an inferential analysis the normality of the sample was verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and with these results ($p < 0.05$) nonparametric tests were conducted. For inferential analysis, a Wilcoxon sign-rank test was conducted on the sample and the Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples.

Results

In the following section we present the results of the study and their relation to the objectives of the research.

With regards to the first objective of the research, to *analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to type of school*, a descriptive and inferential analysis was conducted of the three roles of bullying addressed in the questionnaire (table 1) to determine if there are statistically significant differences according to the type of school.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis and Wilcoxon sign-rank test of the scores for the three roles in bullying according to type of school

Role	School Type	N	M	SD	Z	*p*
Victim	OS	86	13.76	5.94	-5.36	.000
	SES	90	9.84	3.49		
Bully	OS	83	9.13	3.08	-1.27	.202

	SES	89	8.82	2.84		
Observer	OS	83	13.66	5.95	-4.20	.000
	SES	93	11.27	4.05		

Note: SES: Special education school; OS: Ordinary school

In interpreting the results presented in Table 1 we should recall that for each of the roles, the lowest score possible is 7 points and the maximum is 28 points.

Thus, the results show that in the ordinary school students with intellectual disabilities scored highest in the role of victim (M=13.76) and lowest in the role of bully (M=9.13); while in special education schools, the predominant role was that of observer (M=13.66) and lowest the role of bully (M=8.82).

After applying a Wilcoxon sign-rank test to verify the existence of differences between schools, the data showed statistically significant differences in the roles of victim and observer; in both cases scores were higher at ordinary schools compared to special education schools.

The second objective of the research was to *analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to gender and type of school.* As shown in Table 2, descriptive and inferential analyses were carried out to evaluate the results.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis and Mann-Whitney U test for the three roles in bullying according to gender and type of school.

Role	School Type	Gender	N	Mean range	Total ranges	U	p
Victim	OS	M	39	46.49	1813.00	800.00	.310
		F	47	41.02	1928.00		
	SES	M	42	41.87	1758.50	855.50	.265
		F	47	47.80	2246.50		
Bully	OS	M	39	47.44	1850.00	646.00	.038
		F	44	37.18	1636.00		
	SES	M	42	43.55	1829.00	926.00	.716
		F	46	45.37	2087.00		
Observer	OS	M	40	45.64	1825.00	714.50	.181
		F	43	38.62	1660.50		
	SES	M	42	45.62	1916.00	1013.00	.769

	F	50	47.24	2362.00		

Note: SES: Special education school; OS: Ordinary school; M: masculine; F: feminine

According to the results shown in Table 2, the highest average scores were found in ordinary schools among male students while in special education schools scores were higher for female students.

After applying the Mann-Whitney U test, no statistically significant differences were found in terms of gender, except in the role of bully in ordinary schools, where there was a significant gender difference with higher scores seen for male students.

For the third objective, to *analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to stage of education* of the students when they left their ordinary school (Table 3), to determine if bullying is more prevalent during primary or secondary education.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis and Mann-Whitney U test for the three roles in bullying according to stage of education

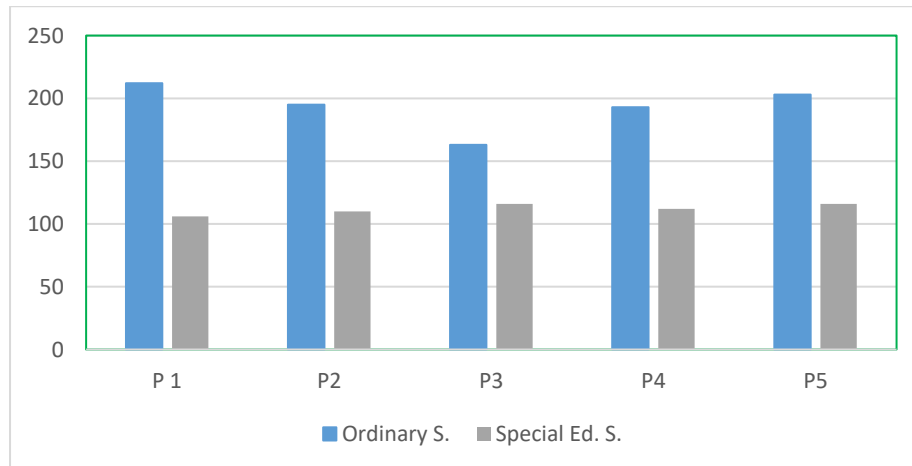| Role	School Type	Education Stage	N	Mean range	Total ranges	U	p
Victim	OS	Primary	55	37.76	2077.00	537.00	.188
		Secondary	24	45.13	1083.00		
Bully	OS	Primary	55	37.16	2044.00	504.00	.361
		Secondary	21	42.00	882.00		
Observer	OS	Primary	55	37.91	2085.00	545.00	.704
		Secondary	21	40.05	841.00		

Note: OS: Ordinary school

Table 3 refer only to ordinary schools as it shows the stage at which students left the school to attend a special education school due to the difficulties they were experiencing.

The table shows that the highest scores for all roles are in the secondary education stage but the results of the U de Mann-Whitney U test showed no significant differences between stages (p>0.05).

Finally, regarding the fourth objective of the research, to *analyse student perceptions of the situation in both ordinary schools and in special education schools*, the responses of students to the open questions were analysed. For this the responses were coded using a scale of 1 to 3, where 1 is "good", 2 is "regular" and 3 is "bad".

The following graph shows the difference between the types of schools (ordinary and special education) based on the responses of participants.

Graph 1. Analysis of the open questions for ordinary and special education schools

As can be seen in Graph 1, for all questions the highest scores were consistently found in ordinary schools. Based on the assigned valuation scale, the results show that responses were more negative for ordinary schools compared to special education schools.

In addition to these five questions, coded according to the responses by students, we also posed two additional questions about the most positive and negative aspects of both types of school. An analysis of the responses shows that, for ordinary schools, the most positive aspects were motivation for learning and free play; negative aspects were the treatment received by teachers, specifically they did not receive help when experiencing situation of bullying and abuse and isolation from their classmates both in class and during recreation times.

For special education schools, the most positive aspects were the quantity and quality of friendships and the positive, close relationships with teachers; no significant negative aspects were mentioned by the students as the majority of responses were "nothing" or "getting up early in the morning".

The following are a selection of some of the literal answers of students to these final questions:

- Participants 2 and 7: for the question *"What's the most negative thing about this (special) school?"*, both students answered: "*that it's a special education school*".
- Participant 10: for the question *"How did you feel when you were at your previous (ordinary) school?"*, the student answered: "*I felt bad, no one loved me, people insulted me and left me alone*"; the same student, in

response to the question *"Did you want to go to (ordinary) school?"* answered: "*No. I wanted to die because two of my friends left*".
- Participant 35: for the question *"How did you feel when you were at your previous (ordinary) school?"* answered: "*I felt terrible. People were always mean to me; they threatened me, bullied me and made fun of me*".
- Participant 58: for the question *"What was the most positive thing about that (ordinary) school?"*, referring to the ordinary school, answered: "*leaving that school*".
- Participant 075: for the question: *"What is the most positive thing about this (special) school?,* referring to the special school, answered: "*here I have friends and in the other school I didn't".*

Conclusions and discussion

In the following section we will discuss the study and the principal conclusions which can be drawn based on the four objectives of the research.

Regarding the first objective of the research, to *analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to type of school,* the results show that those with intellectual disability are primarily in the role of victim in ordinary schools and observer in special education schools. It is in these roles that statistically significant differences are observed depending on the type of school.

Considering that the scores for each of the roles range between 7 and 28, the data shows that the prevalence of bullying is not higher than the mean. This may be due to the greater awareness of this type of student and the greater training teacher receive to promote strategies which favour social integration through specific actions in which students from special schools share experiences with students without disabilities or in real environments, and the development of skills and competences that empower students experiencing greater difficulties which let them know how to act in different scenarios. Although the mean scores are not particularly striking, it should be noted that, in analysing cases individually, we find students with the highest scores in the role of victim, which points to the importance of continuing to work to raise awareness on this issue.

These results are in line with the findings of González (2017) who found that those with intellectual disabilities are at greater risk of bullying in ordinary schools generally because they are more likely to be socially marginalised, with learning difficulties, low self-esteem, appear weak and socially isolated. These aspects are precisely those which are most common among victims of bullies who find it easier to abuse those who are most different. In this sense, it is important to know that persistent bullying situations are still happening in ordinary schools and it is essential to eradicate them.

For the second objective of the research, to *analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to gender and type of school,* the data shows no statistically significant differences except in the case of scores for the role of bully in ordinary schools, predominantly male students. However, while the highest scores for the role of bully in ordinary schools correspond to male students, the opposite is the case in special education schools, where bullies are predominantly female.

Pérez (2020) has noted that, in addition to the vulnerability produced by the disability itself, there are additional factors which may have an impact, such as poverty, ethnicity, age or gender. The author suggests that female students are more vulnerable to bullying given this dual identity: gender and disability; however, our findings do not support this contention since no significant gender differences were found in the role of victim.

The third objective of the research project was to *analyse scores for bullying in all roles according to stage of education*. The aim was to determine if there is a greater prevalence of bullying in the primary or secondary stage of education. The scores for the three roles (victim, bully and observer) are higher in secondary education than primary, although the difference in scores is not statistically significant.

Two important factors coincide in secondary education: the onset of adolescence and all it entails, and the lesser degree of both teacher supervision of students and teacher professionalisation than in primary education. This may result in a lack of awareness of procedures to prevent bullying or experience in techniques or programs to foster the inclusion of students with special educational needs.

During secondary education friendships and social relationships are particularly important. Within this context there may occur two extremes, firstly, those who are most vulnerable or disadvantaged are at greater risk of being victimised; and secondly, as noted by Enríquez (2015), the possibility of violent and aggressive behaviour on the part of those seeking to feel more powerful and accepted, assuming the role of bully (Enríquez, 2015).

The final objective of the research was to *analyse student perceptions of the situation in both ordinary schools and in special education schools*. The results show that students had more positive experiences in special education schools compared to ordinary schools, both with regards to their relationships with fellow students and with teachers. It should be noted that in special education schools all teachers have training in diversity, which favours their understanding of both different student learning processes as well as the need to foster social relations, something which is not always the case in ordinary schools often due to lack of training in this area.

These results are in line with the findings of Núñez and Jódar (2010) which showed that students consider their social relations to be more positive in special education schools and that sharing similar experiences help built and develop friendships. Students also noted that for this to occur in ordinary schools, more actions should be taken to foment participation in social activities.

Considering the findings of the study, and recent Spanish legislation which aims to favour the inclusion of the majority of special education students in ordinary schools, we believe it is important to continue research into the real situation of those with disabilities. The aim is raise awareness of the need to address the difficulties faced by those with disabilities not only through specific interventions but above all through prevention. For this it is important to provide greater teacher training in this area in order for them to feel competent to conduct interventions with these students.

This research project has a number of limitations, such as the fact the questionnaires were completed while students were attending the special education school, which may condition their responses in comparing their more positive current circumstances with the memory of their situation in the ordinary school. Thus, it would be productive to conduct a longitudinal study that permits a better understanding of the circumstances of students in the moment they are in. Additionally, we suggest that future studies could expand the sample to include students without disabilities, including other variables such as social skills or self-esteem, which could offer a better understanding of whether it is disability itself which leads to a greater possibility of being the victim of bullying or if the absence of social skills and competences is the determining factor. This would allow us to be more aware of where classroom interventions should be aimed.

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