Study of the evolution of (cyber)bullying in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

Estudio de la evolución del (cyber) bullying
en tiempos de pandemia por COVID-19

Estudo da evolução do (cyber)bullying
em tempos de pandemia de COVID-19

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Abstract

Cyberbullying and bullying are interrelated phenomena that occur in our schools, which are understood as intentional acts repeated over time and with an imbalance of power to harm one or more people to another, through digital media (cyberbullying) or face-to-face (bullying), with negative consequences for those who suffer. The pandemic and lockdowns have seen an increase in cases of bullying in the form of cyberbullying. In addition, the study of bullying is not understood without one of its most frequent forms, such as digital bullying. The present study aims to present the data obtained from the overview of bullying behaviors in a group-classroom before the pandemic and after a period of confinement to show the changes between one scenario and the other classroom before the pandemic and later after a period of confinement to show the changes originated between one scenario and the other, to investigate the factors that determine how they interrelate in a new reality and to check the extrapolation of some forms of bullying towards others that show an evolution from bullying towards cyberbullying that is amplified by occurring in the available space in which the students are articulated during the confinement without classroom attendance.

Keywords: cyberbullying, pandemic, COVID-19, lockdown, Cuve3.

Resumen

El *cyberbullying* y el *bullying* son fenómenos interrelacionados que se dan en nuestros centros escolares, que se entienden como los actos intencionales, repetidos en el tiempo y con desequilibrio de poder para hacer daño de una o varias personas a otra, a través de medios digitales (*cyberbullying*) o cara a cara (*bullying*), con consecuencias negativas para quien las sufre. La pandemia y los confinamientos han constatado un aumento de los casos de acoso escolar en forma de *cyberbullying*. Además, el estudio del acoso escolar no se entiende sin una de sus formas más frecuentes, como es el acoso digital. En el presente estudio se pretende presentar los datos obtenidos de la panorámica de conductas de acoso escolar en un grupo-aula antes de la pandemia y posteriormente, tras un periodo de confinamiento. Se busca mostrar los cambios originados entre un escenario y otro, indagando en los factores que determinan las formas en las que se interrelacionan en una nueva realidad. A su vez, comprobar la extrapolación de unas formas de acoso escolar hacia otras que muestran una evolución desde el *bullying* más convencional, cara a cara o presencial hacia el *cyberbullying*, que se amplifica por darse en el espacio disponible donde los estudiantes se articulan durante el confinamiento sin asistencia presencial a las aulas.

Resumo

Cyberbullying e bullying são fenômenos inter-relacionados que ocorrem em nossas escolas, os quais são entendidos como atos intencionais, repetidos ao longo do tempo e com desequilíbrio de poder para prejudicar uma ou mais pessoas a outra, por meio de mídias digitais (cyberbullying) ou presenciais (bullying), com consequências negativas para quem as sofre. A pandemia e os confinamentos viram um aumento nos casos de bullying na forma de cyberbullying. Além disso, o estudo do bullying não é compreendido sem uma de suas formas mais frequentes, como o bullying digital. O presente estudo tem como objetivo apresentar os dados obtidos a partir do panorama dos comportamentos de bullying em uma sala-grupo antes da pandemia e após um período de confinamento. Busca mostrar as mudanças originadas entre um cenário e outro, investigando os fatores que determinam as formas como eles se inter-relacionam em uma nova realidade. Por sua vez, verificar a extrapolação de algumas formas de bullying para outras que mostram uma evolução do bullying para o cyberbullying, que se amplia por ocorrer no espaço disponível em que os alunos se articulam durante o confinamento sem atendimento presencial nas salas de aula.

Introduction

At the time of the declaration of the pandemic, produced by the SARS-CoV2 virus that develops the COVID-19 disease (Rial, 2020), we saw, to a greater or lesser extent, radical changes in the way of living and relating. The pandemic and lockdowns have seen an increase in cases of bullying in the form of cyberbullying (Rennó & Engelman, 2022) in the case of adolescents who left the school context. This space that allowed them most of their significant interactions and is relevant to their integral development.

There has never been a global closure of face-to-face schools in humanity's history (García, 2021; Malganova *et al.,* 2021). Social distancing and lockdowns became supervening and disruptive elements that dramatically accelerated the prominence and mediation of digital technologies in schools.

In addition, the study of bullying, as Avilés (2019) maintains, is incomplete if we do not relate it to one of its most recurrent manifestations, such as digital bullying: cyberbullying. In essence, the social nature of face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying behaviors allows us to consider both phenomena close to interpersonal relationships established within the school environment (García *et al.,* 2016).

In the same way that bullying occurs face-to-face at school, it has also taken place in the digital sphere, where students develop and spend many hours. This virtual space is an ally to stalkers who see it as a place to enhance their harmful actions. This situation was spurred by the confinements that have made it impossible for face-to-face relationships to become integral online.

Cyberbullying has been defined as a phenomenon of intimidation, mistreatment, and systematic abuse of power repeatedly and with the intent to harm, by an aggressor towards a victim who has difficulty defending herself, and developed through digital media and devices (Zych *et al.*, 2015). Another earlier definition that also takes into account Olweus´ definition of traditional bullying, including power imbalance, is that of Smith *et al.* (2008), who conceptualize it as "an intentional aggressive act carried out by a person or a group that is repeated over time, using electronic means of contact, against a victim who cannot easily defend himself" (p. 376). It is also described as *psychological abuse* between peers of similar age (Molina & Vecina, 2017).

This last definition emphasizes the idea that, in order to be considered cyberbullying, it must be carried out between similar ages, between equals and minors. At the same time, when the harasser is an adult, it is usually called cyber abuse to qualify it. It is also necessary to point out that before bullying occurs by digital means, there are usually face-to-face bullying actions (Garaigordobil, 2018), which is an extension or continuum of bullying, but with the particularities that define it.

The effects of bullying in all its forms are significant and concern the educational community due to the consequences for both the victims and the aggressors (Chocarro & Garaigordobil, 2019). Those harassed through traditional bullying can develop anxiety, depression, and poor educational performance. Those harassed by cyberbullying can suffer equally or even much more moral and psychological damage, and due to its characteristics, it is more dangerous and can have more severe consequences than traditional bullying (Avilés, 2019; Casas *et al.*, 2017; Ovejero, 2013; Zabay & Casado, 2018) since degrading content is available with a wide audience at all times, harassers quite often hide behind anonymity, the victimization scheme is

express, continuously, which cannot be avoided, and eliminating what is published digitally is almost impossible. Adolescents are often reluctant to communicate to adults that they are being harassed due to the emotional impact, the feeling of guilt, the fear of possible "revenge", which causes them to go further, or the concern that they are limited and prohibited from continuing using the internet or mobile phone. In its most serious consequences, cyberbullying can lead to violent acts and suicidal ideas that can be executed (Garaigordobil, 2018). In short, the continuous social changes, the growing social conflict, the impact and increase in suicides, and their impact on personal and relational attitudes have highlighted the need to contemplate cyberbullying in the educational agenda (Domínguez *et al.*, 2017).

The present study

The motivation of the study was to seek an approach to the phenomenon of bullying in a group-classroom of a Secondary Education educational center to obtain an initial overview of determining factors in different scenarios caused by the pandemic.

The purpose of the study is to analyze and understand the dynamics of bullying in a 3rd year secondary classroom from the perspective of the students, focusing on situations of bullying among peers before the pandemic, comparing the changes given in the various factors or variables after a period of confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that changed the scenario in which students developed. Specifically, the objectives were:

1. to investigate the knowledge of dynamics of mistreatment between equals in the pre-pandemic context by using an instrument;

2. the description of the particularities of the studied context;

3. to check the results obtained after confinement due to COVID-19;

4. to evaluate the changes that occurred after confinement, using the same instrument used in the previous state before the pandemic.

As specific questions posed were the following:

1. Through the Cuve3 questionnaire, will we be able to obtain data that can give us initial and approximate knowledge about the type of bullying among the components of the group to be studied? In what types of variables will they be broken down: student-student verbal violence, student-teacher verbal violence, physical violence, social exclusion, violence through technological means, classroom disruption, etc.?

2. In classroom coexistence, is the school climate negatively conditioned due to physical bullying?

3. In classroom coexistence, is the school climate negatively conditioned due to verbal bullying?

4. In classroom coexistence, is the school climate negatively affected due to social bullying?

5. In classroom coexistence, is the school climate negatively conditioned due to bullying through technological means?

6. Can we glimpse changes in the group's coexistence and its various types of aggressions (physical, verbal, social, and through digital media) before the pandemic, with presence and after a period of absence from school?

Methodology

The School Violence Questionnaire -Cuve3- was administered to all the students in a group-classroom. The data was processed with the computer program of the Albor-Cohs group, which is part of the tool and its assessment.

Participants

They were the members of a group-classroom of a public Institute of Secondary Education in Malaga (Spain) made up of 31 students (16 girls and 15 boys), with the main inclusion criterion being all the members of the natural classroom group. The educational level was third and secondary education, with an age range between 14 and 16 years in the study period.

Instruments

The instrument used is the School Violence Questionnaire —Cuve3— with proven reliability and validity by Álvarez-García *et al.* (2012). Three types of school violence are described: physical, verbal, and psychological. It provides relevant information conducive to obtaining an overview of the situation to respond through educational action (Lobato, 2021), and it also includes a factor focused on cyberbullying. This is a questionnaire characterized by a fairly clarifying assessment scale (Likert with five options) organized in the evaluation of eight study factors and with 44 proposed items, of which ten items focus on the study of Cyberbullying in factor 6, being the factor with more items. These factors are verbal violence of students towards students (1); verbal violence of students towards teachers (2); direct physical violence and threats among students (3); indirect physical violence among students (4); social exclusion-rejection (5); violence through communication and information technologies (6); classroom disruption (7); and teacher violence towards students (8).

Therefore, this tool provides a general overview of the study of bullying and includes a specific and broad look at cyberbullying, which makes it suitable for this study.

Design and Procedure

The research design is a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test in a single group. The study aimed to study the situation in a group-classroom to detect the need for a subsequent intervention in the classroom. The pre-test phase was administered before the pandemic, at the beginning of February 2020. The initial plan was to

evaluate bullying dynamics and the detection of needs (dependent variable) for the subsequent design and implementation of an educational intervention in the group (independent variable) to evaluate the changes produced later. However, after the pandemic and confinement outbreak, it became impossible to put this plan into action. The implementation of any face-to-face educational intervention was impossible. Thus, the study was reformulated, and the post-test was carried out to study the changes produced in the factors of school violence after a period of confinement of two months, to detect the changes that the situation would generate in the group and, therefore, the exchange of the independent variable, which became the confinement with virtual classes.

The administration of the questionnaire in the post-test phase was carried out online, with its conversion through the Google Forms application.

In short, this study investigated the outcome of the School Violence Questionnaire`s administration, the third version for secondary education, both in the pre-test and post-test phases. According to this, the scheme for the pre-post quasi-experimental design is (León & Montero, 2015): O1 X O2. Where O1 represents the initial part in which data was collected using the selected instrument; X represents the period of confinement and non-face-to-face attendance at classes of the group-classroom, and O2 represents the comparison or changes produced by this exceptional situation through the same instrument used in the initial part.

Data analysis

In the data analysis of the information obtained, the computer program called Tipisoft of the Albor-Cohs group is used, which is part of the administered instrument. The valuation of the changes generated from one period to another is exposed.

Results

Pre-test phase: pre-pandemic

Although this questionnaire provides a great deal of information, widely broken down by each of its factors, we stop at the most general information, which provides a global view and the profile of group results, specifically of the factors-percentiles.

In the study of the percentiles of the factors, they show a high level in order from more to less (see Figure 1): verbal violence of students against students (88), verbal violence of students towards teachers (84), direct physical violence and threats between students (84), classroom disruption (82), social exclusion (78) and with a medium level are indirect physical violence by students (68), violence through ICT (62) and violence by teachers towards students (54).

Figure 1

Graph of the Profileogram of group results (Factors-percentiles) in the pre-test

CUVE 3 - School Violence Questionnaire
Group results profile (Factors - percentiles)
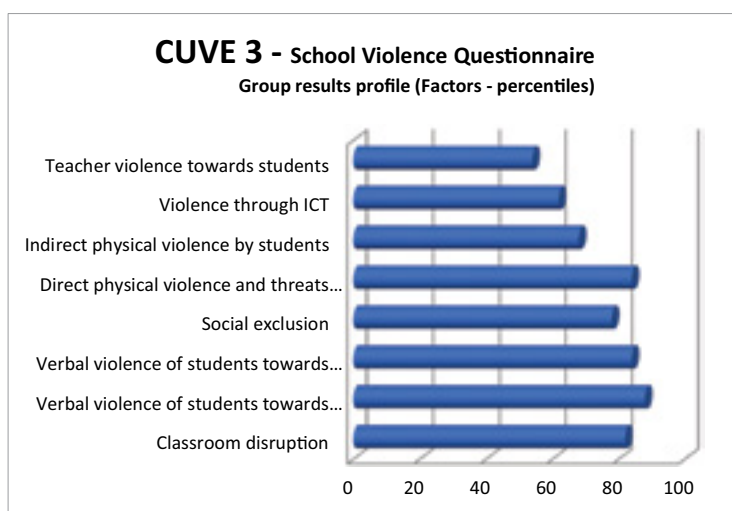
The most common aggressions are firstly insults and threats (verbal), followed by direct physical violence and threats between students. In third place, disruptiveness and social exclusion have a relevant percentage that we cannot ignore. These data show deficits in affective-emotional development. In the first instance, the group presents the need for the development of affective competence to encourage communication more healthily and to help regulate emotions such as guilt, anger, and sadness. These are emotions that characterize aggressive acts.

The results show that the school climate is negatively conditioned by the coexistence of the classroom in which aggression occurs in its various typologies.

Post-test phase: in pandemic

In the study of the percentiles of the factors, after two months of confinement and online classes, it shows a high level in order from more to less (see Figure 2): violence through ICT (88), a medium level of social exclusion (68), verbal violence by students towards teachers (58), violence by teachers towards students (54), and verbal violence by students against students (52). With a low level appear direct physical violence and threats between students (26), classroom disruption (26), and indirect physical violence by students (18).

Figure 2

Graph of the Profileogram of group results (Factors-percentiles) in post-test

CUVE 3 - **School Violence Questionnaire**

Group results profile (Factors - percentiles)
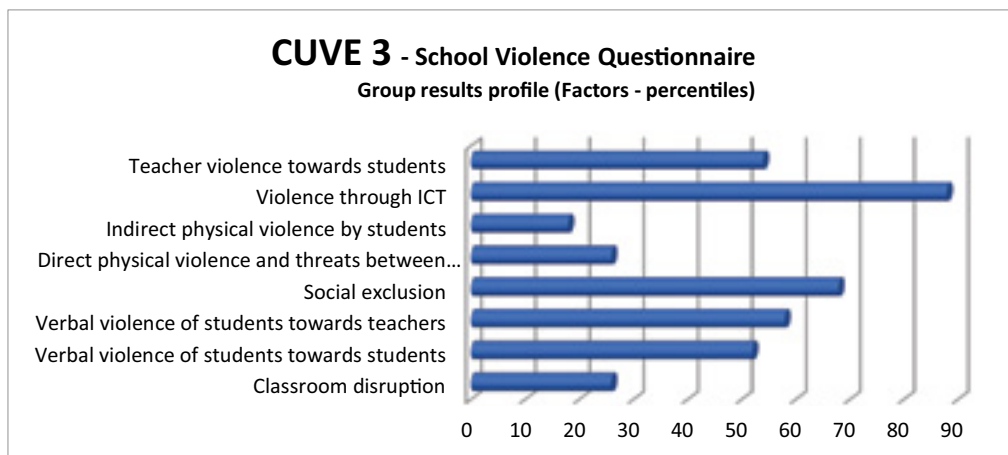
After a period without school attendance, the most common aggression, in the first place, is ICT violence, followed by social exclusion, still with a significant percentage. These data show a deficit in affective competence and the need to develop specific educational actions focused on the good use of social networks and the digital world.

These results show that after the period of digital classes, the group's climate continues to be negative due to aggression, especially through ICT and social exclusion.

Discussion and Conclusions

Next, we turn to the analysis of the most significant differences and the changes that emerge from each indicator provided by Cuve3.

We focus on the study of the percentiles of the element factors that show changes in all except in the violence of teachers towards students (54), which remains at a medium level. The major change in the form of an increase is in the violence factor through ICT, which goes from a medium to a high level (from 62 to 88). The most significant changes in the form of decline are in direct physical violence and threats between students (from 84 to 26), indirect physical violence by students (from the average level 68 to 18), and classroom disruption (from 82 to 26). From high to medium levels, students' verbal violence towards students (from 88 to 52) and students' verbal violence towards teachers (from 84 to 58) decreases. Lastly, from high to medium level, with less drop, is social exclusion (from 78 to 68).

Generally, the changes observed derive from or are closely related to the possibility that the specific context allows. It was expected that those that require spatial and physical contact that is not available in confinement, such as direct and indirect physical violence and classroom disruption, and that the one generated in the new action space, such as the virtual one, rise considerably, increasing the factor of violence through ICT.

The previously mentioned shows that the change of scenery from face-to-face classes with the possibility of interacting face-to-face with one in confinement with

virtual classes without the possibility of interacting in person changes the forms and dynamics of bullying in school groups, being fundamental to the study at each moment and situation for a greater knowledge of reality and group radiography in order to propose educational actions that favor school coexistence.

Limitations

The main limitations of this research are, on the one hand, the small, simple size (a total of 31, fifteen boys and sixteen girls). The smaller the sample, the less generalizability of the results is obvious. Nevertheless, the study aimed to understand the problem in the context investigated in a group, but not a universally generalizable validity; there are multiple realities, not a single one, and therefore, there may be differences between them. Therefore, the procedure's usefulness is defended as an example for advancing research into the realities of classroom-groups and educational centers. On the other hand, these limitations would be to carry out a study on a complex and highly subjective problem merely with an instrument (questionnaire), which offers a synthesis of initial information on various factors but does not go into the students' subjective responses and appraisals in depth.

Also, the administered instrument Cuve3 could be qualified as a limitation in data collection since it presents few studies that show information to contrast them comparatively. However, it has proven reliability and validity since it has had many updates due to previous problems. Likewise, although none of the total number of students refused to answer the questionnaires, it was noted that they were tired and that some students did not answer several questions, increasing the number of unanswered items in the online post-test. For this reason, the voluntarist of completing the questionnaires, influenced by the administration environment, is established as a limitation of this research: the class in the pre-test and the virtual space in the post-test.

Another limitation has been the focus solely on students as study participants, without having obtained information from other agents of the educational community: teachers, family members, etc. However, within the research framework, it seeks to expand and continue studies related to this phenomenon.

In short, even with these limitations, however, this study has provided an approach to the knowledge of reality in a group-classroom that can be extrapolated to other educational centers through an effective instrument for detecting emotional, social, and psychological needs, which derived in the genesis of behaviors associated with aggression and school victimization and that is integrated as a stimulus for future research, confronting and comparing from various perspectives, with the purpose to generate better knowledge and a complete understanding of bullying.

Study proposals

After analyzing and reflecting on the limitations, we present some potential research lines that could be followed in future studies, giving continuity to the present investigation.

A proposal for future research would be to expand the sample sizes, thus increasing its representativeness and possibilities for improving educational practice and preventing (cyber)bullying dynamics in a larger group of students, increasing the number of beneficiaries.

It would be interesting to suggest that it is significant to carry out a more in-depth study with an increase in the instruments and methods used, in which a more personalized organization of research is applied to explore the information more qualitatively in order to delve into the responses, appreciations and subjectivization of the pupils. It would be relevant, especially in educational contexts, to use sociometry to investigate the affective-social links developed between the group components and observation supported by a field diary to record the student´s events, behaviors, reflections, and any relevant information.

In addition, it would be helpful to carry out random semi-structured interviews with a limited but significant proportion of the sample in order to obtain more precise information on what motivates boys and girls to be part of this phenomenon, in addition to obtaining data on the factors related to their personalities and try to understand how this influences said problem.

This research would also be optimized from longitudinal studies, which could show the causes of becoming a victim of bullying or an aggressor. A longitudinal investigation of a period during a time to support the students in future studies could be developed to evaluate the different behaviors of aggressors, victims, and spectators.

To conclude, bullying and cyberbullying are framed within an ecological and multidimensional approach since it depends on the good or bad functioning of the contexts close to the student, such as the family, the educational center, and the neighborhood, among others (López & Sabater, 2018). Naturally, the greater the commitment to data collection, the better and richer the information generated will be, which is why it is vital, on the one hand, to systematically collect data at the family level and from the general environment, and at the educational level, and, on the other hand, offer a new line of research that emphasizes specific training to manage conflicts and the development of socio-emotional skills.

In short, the last proposal is to include the entire socio-educational community as a whole, which will make any future research on the subject more complete.

Notes:

Final approval of the article:
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The author was responsible for the conception of the work, research design, data collection, processing, analysis, elaboration and correction of the document.

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