

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Bullying in school environment: the educators' understanding

Fellipe Soares Salgado<sup>1</sup>, Wanderlei Abadio de Oliveira<sup>2</sup>, Jorge Luiz da Silva<sup>3</sup>, Beatriz Oliveira Pereira<sup>4</sup>, Marta Angélica Iossi Silva<sup>5</sup>, Lélío Moura Lourenço<sup>6</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Doutorando em Psicologia. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia. Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras da Universidade de São Paulo-USP (FFCLRP-USP). Ribeirão Preto. São Paulo. Brasil.

<sup>2</sup>Pós-doutorando em Psicologia. Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras de Ribeirão Preto da Universidade de São Paulo (FFCLRP-USP). Ribeirão Preto. São Paulo. Brasil. Bolsista CAPES.

<sup>3</sup>Docente. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Promoção de Saúde. Universidade de Franca (UNIFRAN). Franca. São Paulo. Brasil.

<sup>4</sup>Docente. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação. Universidade do Minho (UMINHO). Braga. Minho. Portugal.

<sup>5</sup>Docente. Escola de Enfermagem de Ribeirão Preto da Universidade de São Paulo (EERP-USP). Ribeirão Preto. São Paulo. Brasil.

<sup>6</sup>Docente. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia. Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora. Juiz de Fora. Minas Gerais. Brasil.

**Corresponding author**  
fellipe.salgado@usp.br

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Bullying is a type of violence between peers characterized by intentionality, repetition and imbalance of power between victims and aggressors. The occurrence of bullying in the school context impairs students' learning and healthy development.

**Objective:** To analyze the educators' understanding of bullying in the school environment.

**Methods:** Cross-sectional and qualitative study carried out with 16 educators (principals, deputy principals, pedagogical coordinators and teachers) from two public schools in a city in the interior of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Semi-structured interviews that followed a script produced from indications in the specialized literature were conducted. The content of the interviews was recorded and transcribed in full. The interpretation of the data followed the assumptions of content analysis, in its thematic modality, considering the following steps: pre-analysis, exploration of the material, treatment of results and interpretation.

**Results:** Three thematic categories were identified: 1) The centrality of families in the problems of schools in relation to the conception of educators; 2) Beliefs that establish explanatory links for bullying; and 3) Intervention actions developed in relation to bullying. The results show that educators' beliefs hold families exclusively responsible for school problems and bullying. These conceptions stem from situations experienced in everyday life or from speeches of other education professionals who reiterate the absence of families and the little parental involvement in the issues of formal education of children as the major problem. Narratives of this nature denote the absence of an expanded understanding of bullying and its complexity. In addition to the family, the educators pointed out the influences of personality, the media and social standards as factors that can explain the involvement of students in bullying situations. For the participants, the most effective responses to minimize or respond adequately to school bullying require the participation of the family and some did not believe that the school could do something effective alone. In the data set, it was noticed that the educators' beliefs and understandings about the problem of bullying prevent measures aimed at school aspects, which are more proximal to the occurrence of bullying, from being implemented.

**Conclusion:** It is concluded that the investigated educators need to expand their understanding of bullying, in order to develop effective actions to face this phenomenon in schools, which also include the participation of families.

**Keywords:** bullying, violence, education, family relations, school health services.

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## Authors summary

### Why was this study done?

In order to provide new insights about a problem faced by school-age children and adolescents, the aim was to analyze educators' understanding of bullying in the school environment. According to scientific literature, the teacher has an essential role in facing this type of violence, so it is necessary to understand how he perceives the different forms of its manifestation at school.

### What did the researchers do and find?

We interviewed 16 educators from two public schools in a city in the interior of Minas Gerais. The results show that the educators' beliefs hold families exclusively responsible for school problems and bullying, denoting the absence of expanded understandings. This affects the way they respond or act in the face of different bullying situations.

### What do these findings mean?

The study's findings suggest that the investigated educators need to expand their understanding of bullying, in order to develop effective actions to face this phenomenon in schools, which also include the participation of families.

## INTRODUCTION

School bullying is addressed with increasing frequency in the media and several studies have been developed in an attempt to better understand it. It occurs through continuous and intentional aggressions between students who are in a situation of unequal physical, social or psychological power<sup>1</sup>. Bullying can manifest itself directly, in situations of physical or verbal aggression, as well as indirectly, when there is dissemination of information that slander colleagues, denigrate their image or cause their exclusion from the peer group<sup>2</sup>. As a rule, those involved are identified as victims, aggressors, victim-aggressors and witnesses<sup>3</sup>.

The World Health Organization considers bullying to be a widespread problem worldwide<sup>4</sup>. In Brazil, specifically, the prevalence in schools is approximately 28%<sup>5</sup>, which makes it considered a public health problem, also due to the negative consequences that it causes to health, quality of life, psychosocial development and to the educational trajectories of children and adolescents<sup>6</sup>. In summary, the following are associated with it: depression, anxiety, insomnia, loneliness, school indiscipline, dropping out of school, use of alcohol and other drugs, offending behaviors, self-harm and suicide<sup>3,7,8</sup>.

In general, it is identified that in the Brazilian reality, research on bullying is mostly based on students' self-reports and focuses on identifying its occurrence and characterizing participants. However, there are gaps to be filled, in order to better understand this phenomenon using other social actors, such as educators, as a source of data, who have the possibility to prevent and intentionally intervene in the aggressions that occurred in the school context<sup>9</sup>. It is, therefore, a relevant theme, as there are indications in the literature that, in general, school institutions and educators are not adequately prepared to deal with bullying<sup>10</sup>.

Regarding educators, the level of knowledge and understandings about bullying guide the way they identify and respond to situations that occur at school. For example, the understanding that bullying is not harmful and represents typical pranks of age contributes to the need for intervention to be seen as expendable. On the other hand, conceiving that these are excessively serious behaviors, encourages the application of punitive methods

that can further aggravate the problem, instead of solving it<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, the absence of specific knowledge about bullying that allows the identification of its main causes, characteristics, subjects involved, among other aspects, compromises the way it is interpreted by the school team, which can identify it as being trivial and harmless<sup>12</sup>, or then encourage inappropriate interventions, as it is not possible to identify it and distinguish it from other forms of violence or indiscipline of students.

Therefore, the understandings presented by the educators are an important research topic because they are indicators of the knowledge they have about the phenomenon, the way they understand it and how they intervene in the aggressions practiced by students<sup>13</sup>. For example, a study developed with educational managers about the causes they attributed to school violence identified: dysfunctional family, domestic violence, low self-esteem, little prospect for success in the future, school failure and social inequality<sup>14</sup>. The belief prevailed that violence stems from individual characteristics of students and from social processes exogenous to school. Thus, the responsibility for the prevention or reduction of violence, for the investigated subjects, would rest with the family, the social context and the students themselves.

It is important to highlight that the belief of the managers investigated in the study by Marra<sup>14</sup> is in dissonance with the data presented by the literature, which indicates that intra-school factors are the most responsible, especially: the absence or failure of school rules, negative school climate, absence of adult supervision, among other aspects<sup>15,16</sup>. Therefore, to provide new insights about this problem faced by school children and adolescents, from the perspective of the teacher and that this study was developed.

As mentioned, the teacher has an essential role in facing this type of violence, so it is necessary to understand how he perceives the different forms of its manifestation at school. At the same time, it is recognized that educators still lack information related to bullying specifically, as it is a type of school violence.

Thus, the objective is to analyze educators' understanding of bullying in the school environment.

## METHODS

### Study Design

This is a cross-sectional, qualitative, exploratory study, which aims to carefully examine a phenomenon in order to understand it, describe it in its meaning, thus answering very particular questions. This type of approach seeks to apprehend a level of reality that is not quantifiable, involving beliefs, values, perceptions and feelings, which involve deeper aspects of the phenomena or subjects investigated, which can hardly be achieved through the objective operationalization of variables<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, cross-sectional studies are important with regard to their descriptive character, but also to the extent that they can assume analytical perspectives from the interpretation exercise performed by qualified / experienced researchers in the explored theme<sup>18</sup>.

### Study location

The study was carried out in the city of Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, Brazil, located 283 km from the capital of the State. Juiz de Fora has a population of 516,247 inhabitants, 320 private schools (kindergarten, elementary school, high school and higher education), 103 municipal schools (kindergarten and elementary school) and 53 state schools (elementary and high schools)<sup>19</sup>. A study carried out with students of this city that attend 6th to the 9th grades of Elementary Education indicated a prevalence of bullying of 60.0%<sup>18</sup>, an index higher than the national average, which in 2015 was 28.0%<sup>5</sup>, which denotes the relevance of develop studies on the theme in schools in the city. Two public schools (school A and school B) were selected for convenience to participate in the study.

### Participants

The sampling criterion of participants in the qualitative research does not correspond to the numerical attributes, such as distribution, extension and size. The interest is in obtaining material relevant to the understanding of the subject. Therefore, the research obeyed heterogeneous sampling, through the strategy of maximum variation, when the participants are chosen for interview because they present characteristics of diversity pointed out by the literature review<sup>20</sup>.

16 educators participated in the study. At school A, the principal, the deputy principal, a pedagogical coordinator and five teachers were interviewed. At school B, the vice principal, two pedagogical coordinators and five teachers were interviewed. The average age of educators was 42.7 years. The teaching time varied between six and 30 years (average of 12.1 years). Regarding gender, 13 were female and three male. In addition, the composition of the group of participants included a variation in the initial training (Portuguese, Mathematics, History, Geography and Physical Education), as well as in relation to the greater and lesser time of teaching experience (periods greater and less than five years).

### Instruments

A script was used to support the semi-structured interview, produced from literature reviews. Some of

the questions that made up the interview script were: 1. "Among the problems that your school goes through, which are the most serious?"; 2. "From your experience as a manager/educator, what do you consider to be bullying?"; 3. "In your opinion, what would be the causes of bullying?"; 4. "Do you think there is a solution to bullying?"; 5. "How do you intervene in bullying situations?".

### Procedures

Participants were selected for being on the teaching staff of the two selected schools. The directors, deputy directors and pedagogical coordinators were all interviewed, since the use of the maximum variation was impossible to apply due to the small number of educators in these positions. Teachers were selected according to the following characteristics: a) sex/gender, b) discipline taught, c) time in the municipal system less than five years, d) time in the municipal system greater than five years, e) time since graduation. Thus, a female educator was chosen followed by a male; an educator who teaches Portuguese, followed by Mathematics, History, Geography and Physical Education; an educator who has not yet completed five years of teaching, followed by one who has completed five years and an educator whose training is recent, followed by another who has had more time since graduation. The interviews were conducted in the schools themselves, individually, in reserved rooms.

### Data analysis

The content of the interviews was recorded and transcribed in full, provided, for this, with prior authorization from the participants. The interpretation of the data followed the assumptions of content analysis, in its thematic modality, considering the following steps: pre-analysis, exploration of the material, treatment of results and interpretation<sup>21</sup>. The pre-analysis has as main objective the operationalization and organization of the material for analysis, in this case, the full text from the interviews. The exploration of the material corresponds to the floating reading phase, responsible for the appropriation of the total content of the interviews and the constitution of the corpus to start the composition of the analysis unit. The treatment of the results corresponded to the scopus interpretation process in the light of the thematic categorization, in which two judges were consulted in order to avoid possible bias in the interpretation of the material. The data were compared and discussed for the formation of final categories that corresponded to the results of the study. Three categories were identified: 1. The centrality of families in the problems of schools in the conception of educators; 2. Beliefs that establish explanatory links for bullying; and 3. Intervention actions developed in relation to bullying.

### Ethical Aspects

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), opinion 148/2011. The participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE) and, in all stages of the research, the recommendations of Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council were followed.

## ■ RESULTS

16 educators from two public schools in a city in the interior of Minas Gerais, Brazil, were interviewed. The results show that the educators' beliefs hold families exclusively responsible for school problems and bullying, denoting the absence of expanded understandings. This understanding affects the way they respond or act in the face of different bullying situations.

The centrality of families in school problems in the conception of educators.

It is identified that the conceptions of the investigated educators result from situations experienced by them or from the speeches of other education professionals, and reiterate the absence of families and little parental involvement in the issues of formal education of children. Families or aspects related to them are indicated as the main problem faced by schools, especially the "[...] lack of family participation in the children's school life" (P3).

In relation to bullying, they attribute its occurrence to the lack of family functionality, for example: "[...] this lack of affection from the family will reflect here at school, or there is no father or mother. Or when there are people who have problems with alcohol and other drugs" (P7). "You spend the whole afternoon solving a problem [...]. These offenses that occur, these debauchery, come from home" (P5).

In this scenario, family weaknesses are identified as a strong reason for discouragement in professional practice, because, according to educators, those responsible for students often do not reinforce the good behavior of their children and do not give the children and adolescents the necessary attention, affection and support: "[...] the discouragement is very big because we realize that the parents do not respond to this [reinforcement and attention]" (P5). "We don't have specific training to solve problems for psychologists, social workers. The school should have these professionals. We have even done a visual acuity test. And the father doesn't realize it, I am shocked" (P4).

### **Educators' considerations of possible causes of bullying**

The educators pointed out factors considered determining to explain the involvement of students in bullying situations in schools. They believe that the family is the main influencer of this type of aggressive behavior, despite also the influences of personality, the media and social standards. This causal relationship between the family context and bullying is revealed by the statements: "[...] this issue of bullying also has to do with the family issue" (P2). "What you are seeing on TV and in the family is making it become something much more serious" (P7). "Lack of limits, the family present, lack of values [...]. This mentality of violence remains, a culture of violence in which nothing has a limit" (P1).

Educators believe that the behavioral and emotional model originates at home and affects the school environment, for example: "I think this will generate habits at home, see the father scolding his mother [...]. And the students reproduce what they have at home, the

school is just a reflection" (P8). The accountability of the family can be the result of the conception that the educators support in relation to the traditional family composition, of middle class, whose model assumes the existence of a mother at home helping the child full time, dedicating herself exclusively to domestic activities. They comment that "[...] the woman's leaving the home caused a very big change, ours, our children today are, most of the time, raised by their older brothers, by their neighbor" (P8).

### **Anti-bullying intervention actions considered effective by educators**

According to educators, the most effective responses to minimize or respond appropriately to school bullying require family participation. Some of them do not believe that the school can do something effective alone, although they believe that it is important for the development of children and adolescents and relevant for dealing with situations of aggression: "long-term solution, but only with the participation of the family" (P6); "[...] the school has an important role, but again, without the family, nothing can be done. The school helps, you can call the parents to open their eyes, but the father must take action" (P1); "[...] I think the school should alert parents to take care of their children, to spend time with them, you know? Quality time and that the child does not feel angry or alone" (P2); "[...] "We are doing some very important interventions here at school in relation to violence [...]. So we had an idea of having meetings that are called family meetings" (P8).

## ■ DISCUSSION

Bullying was in the background in the analysis of educators about the main problems faced by the school and the family predominated in their speeches. It is noteworthy that receiving or not receiving family support is essential in the performance and school socialization of children and adolescents<sup>22,23</sup>. Valuing the participation of parents in their children's school life is important, and it is important to make efforts to encourage greater participation of families in the monitoring of students, as well as to be present in the school environment whenever necessary<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, this recognition is different from considering the family institution as the main problem in education.

Considering the family as the main cause of school problems, exempts the school from assuming its share of responsibility in providing conditions for an adequate socialization of students, for preventing aspects belonging to the educational environment from being glimpsed as also agents of disciplinary problems and violence<sup>23</sup>. For example: institutional disorganization, the absence or failure of rules, the inadequacy in the application of disciplinary measures and the unpreparedness of the school team to deal with situations of indiscipline, conflict and aggression among students<sup>2,16</sup>. Failure to recognize these aspects prevents them from being improved, which could increase the quality of the students' school experience and thus reduce bullying situations<sup>12,24-26</sup>.

Overall, educators' understanding of the causes

and motivations for bullying is related to the lack of communication between parents and children, to the models of education adopted by parents and to exposure to violence, whether in the domestic context or in accessing it via television, conception that students reproduce at school what they experience at home. The literature has results in this direction. An assessment of the perception of educational managers identified that one of the most significant causes related to the phenomenon of school violence was the “family breakdown”, because, in general, linked to the family are beliefs related to the low quality of “raising” children and little emotional contact between its members<sup>14</sup>.

Still, even with the unidirectionality of the educators’ understandings, there are indications that the way family relationships develop can become a protective or risk factor for the practice of bullying, victimization or the construction of responses to conflicts interpersonal<sup>18,27</sup>. In some cases, situations of violence are effectively related to factors outside the school, having multiple causes, including family interactions<sup>22</sup>.

Therefore, depending on the causes that may be found in the genesis of bullying situations, contextual approaches to the phenomenon become the most indicated, in the sense of building explanatory models that do not focus exclusively on the students’ individual experience and their ways of demonstration in schools. It is important to highlight, however, that it is not a matter of making families responsible for the process of involving students in situations of bullying, but of understanding it in its complexity and multidetermination<sup>16</sup>.

The understanding presented by educators in relation to the traditional family composition does not correspond to the current reality made up of many single parents, or that the mother and father work full time or even children without parents, raised by other guardians, such as grandparents, many often unable to adequately assist their grandchildren<sup>28</sup>. This is important when considering that teachers’ understandings are a predictor of the way in which these professionals will conceive the relationship between school and family, in which the school and its professionals have an important role to play in facing bullying and that the family can participate, but not determine alone the effectiveness of the actions.

Thus, in the educators’ conceptions regarding coping with bullying, the recognition of the need for structured projects was identified, focusing on family participation in the intervention process. In the same way, they felt little motivated and supported to carry out interventions, besides presenting a certain discomfort with the time spent in carrying them out.

These are situations that both signal the concern of teachers in the face of the problem and indicate a lack of preparation or knowledge to act to face the issue<sup>2</sup>. Such data indicate the need to build actions to clarify the

school community about aspects concerning bullying. The creation of support and protection networks, based on the logic of intersectoriality, and the involvement of the family with the different issues of schools can be a viable solution for bullying, expanding the focus of actions. This type of understanding requires expanding the current belief and limit that the school should be responsible only for schooling<sup>29</sup>.

The relevance of this study is the contribution to a better understanding of how bullying is understood in the school environment by educators, especially by teachers, because they are in a privileged position to identify the different forms of socialization among children and adolescents and intervene in situations of violence that may occur, with a view to promoting positive interpersonal relationships, thus contributing to a less violent and excluding school climate<sup>24</sup>.

The results obtained collaborate for public health insofar as it signals clues for the elaboration of intervention programs linked to the health promotion strategy and the integrality of care at school, indicating that, for this to occur, the training of educators is fundamental, training that aims not only to expand knowledge on the topic, but mainly to increase sensitivity and competence to intervene in the problem.

Thus, these findings can promote a school environment without violence among students, which is essential for the promotion of academic success and healthy psychosocial development, especially when based on the perspective of an emancipatory model, which seeks the empowerment and participation of all subjects involved, including the students’ families.

Finally, educators need to expand their understanding of bullying in order to develop effective actions to deal with this phenomenon in schools, which also include the participation of families. It is also noteworthy that the novelty of the findings presented lies in the approach of educators’ beliefs and conceptions about a problem that affects the health and development of children and adolescents. It was noticed that, although the topic is widely addressed today, there are still limitations regarding the understanding of these subjects about the problem, its nuances and complexity.

The understandings about bullying in the school environment presented by the educators participating in this study are, for the most part, based on immediate experience and lack theoretical foundation.

In general, they point out the students’ family as the main problem of the school, as well as the one related to the genesis of bullying situations. This attribution of the causes of bullying exclusively to extra-school factors is worrying, since the school and education professionals are exempt from assuming their share of responsibility for the phenomenon.

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## Resumo

**Introdução:** O bullying é um tipo de violência entre pares caracterizado pela intencionalidade, repetitividade e desequilíbrio de poder entre vítimas e agressores. A ocorrência de bullying no contexto escolar prejudica a aprendizagem e o desenvolvimento saudável dos estudantes.

**Objetivo:** Analisar a compreensão dos educadores sobre o bullying no ambiente escolar.

**Método:** Estudo transversal e qualitativo realizado com 16 educadores (diretores, vice-diretores, coordenadores pedagógicos e professores) de duas escolas públicas de uma cidade do interior do estado de Minas Gerais. Foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas que seguiram um roteiro produzido a partir de indicações da literatura especializada. O conteúdo das entrevistas foi gravado e transcrito na íntegra. A interpretação dos dados seguiu os pressupostos da análise de conteúdo, em sua modalidade temática, considerando-se as seguintes etapas: pré-análise, exploração do material, tratamento dos resultados e interpretação.

**Resultados:** Foram identificadas três categorias temáticas: 1) A centralidade das famílias nos problemas das escolas na concepção dos educadores; 2) Crenças que estabelecem nexos explicativos para o bullying; e 3) Ações de intervenção desenvolvidas em relação ao bullying. Os resultados apontam que as crenças dos educadores responsabilizam exclusivamente as famílias pelos problemas das escolas e pelo bullying. Essas concepções decorrem de situações vivenciadas no cotidiano ou de discursos de outros profissionais da educação que reiteram a ausência das famílias e o pouco envolvimento parental nas questões da educação formal dos filhos como o grande problema. Narrativas dessa natureza denotam a ausência de uma compreensão ampliada sobre o bullying e sua complexidade. Além da família, os educadores apontaram as influências da personalidade, da mídia e dos padrões sociais como fatores que podem explicar o envolvimento dos estudantes em situações de bullying. Para os participantes as respostas mais efetivas para minimizar ou responder adequadamente ao bullying escolar necessitam da participação da família e alguns não acreditavam que a escola pudesse, sozinha, fazer algo de efetivo. No conjunto dos dados, percebeu-se que as crenças e compreensões dos educadores sobre a problemática do bullying impedem que medidas direcionadas aos aspectos escolares, que constituem causas mais proximais à ocorrência de bullying, sejam efetivadas.

**Conclusão:** Conclui-se que os educadores investigados necessitam ampliar a compreensão que apresentam sobre o bullying, de modo a desenvolverem ações eficazes de enfrentamento desse fenômeno nas escolas, que incluam igualmente a participação das famílias.

**Palavras-chave:** *Bullying*, violência, educação, relações familiares, serviços de saúde escolar.

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