



Bullying and training: the perspective of university professors in physical education and sport

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Abstract

Bullying is a social problem in sports and physical education (PE) classes. This means PE, physical activity (PA), and sports professionals need to receive specific training in order to prevent, identify, and respond when bullying occurs. With that in mind, university education should offer content that helps these professionals gain the tools and skills needed to deal with the issue. The aim of this study was to determine university professors' perceptions of education on the topic of bullying in Elementary Education with a major in Physical Education (EEPE) and in Exercise and Sports Science degrees (ESS). The study was based on a focus group (FG) with participation of researchers with expertise in bullying who teach university classes within the EEPE or ESS degree. The data were analyzed via thematic analysis using the Atlas.ti® version 9 application. The main results showed that the groups of experts reported little training on the topic of bullying among the students in the aforementioned degrees and noted a lack of training among the university professors in terms of including bullying content within the courses. In conclusion, these results may help broaden knowledge about the lack of training and the need to include bullying content in EEPE and ESS degrees.

Keywords: coaches, harassment between equals, physical activity, training, teachers, university.

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Ana Alonso and Oriol Cardona
achieve their qualification
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Introduction

Bullying is understood as a set of repetitive aggressive, negative behaviors towards an individual by another person or group with the intention of causing harm. Bullying involves an imbalance of power between the people involved (Olweus, 1993), and may involve different types of violent behavior that can be classified as physical bullying, social bullying, verbal bullying, and cyberbullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). The latter refers to aggressive actions conducted over the internet or via smart phones and social networks (Smith, 2016).

Studies on bullying in schools show this is a social problem that concerns people across the globe. A meta-analysis conducted by Modecki et al. (2014) including results from 80 studies reported victimization rates of 35% for bullying and 15% for cyberbullying. On the other hand, a recent study conducted in 325 educational centers across 17 autonomous communities in Spain reported a general prevalence of bullying victimization of 6.2% (Díaz-Aguado et al., 2023).

In recent years, various studies have analyzed this phenomenon in both sports (Nery et al., 2021; Ríos et al., 2022a) and the specific field of physical education (PE) (Castañeda-Vázquez et al., 2020; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2019). Some research has highlighted the potential of PE to promote anti-bullying attitudes and behaviors (Benítez-Sillero et al., 2021), such as sports environments, which can represent spaces for socializing and promoting values against violence (Medina & Reverte, 2019). Nevertheless, these same settings can also transform into contexts that pose a risk of violence for those who do not meet the social standards of beauty, competitiveness, and motor skills, among others (Flores et al., 2021; Ríos & Ventura, 2022). For that reason, PE teachers and sports and physical activity (PA) professionals are fundamental to the effective prevention and intervention against victimization (Peterson et al., 2012).

As regards preparing teachers to deal with bullying, the public administration has developed relevant initiatives. These include the Emotional Well-Being in Education program from the Ministry of Education and Professional Training (2023) that, as part of its course of action, aims to promote teaching training in the knowledge and implementation of action protocols in situations involving harassment between equals, cyberbullying, and other manifestations of violence. What's more, Organic Law 8/2021, of 4 June, on the Comprehensive Protection of Childhood and Adolescence Against Violence mentions that higher education centers must promote training, education, and research on the topic. Specifically, it proposes that curricula should include content dedicated to prevention, detection, and intervention to eradicate violence against childhood and adolescence. These directives are specifically aimed at professions that involve regular contact with minors,

such as graduates with degrees in Elementary Education and Exercise and Sports Science (ESS). Therefore, it is assumed that all professionals with these university degrees should have received specific training. However, some studies show that current PE teachers note a lack of bullying prevention resources and strategies (Sağın et al., 2022), and that PA and sports professionals have little knowledge about bullying (Ríos & Ventura, 2022).

According to a report from the Help for Children and Adolescents At Risk (2022), this scarce training for active teachers may result in inaction against bullying cases, so initial and ongoing teacher training is considered key to the battle against bullying (Sidera et al., 2019). In that sense, previous research has shown that including bullying content in Elementary Education degree curricula allows university students to identify its characteristics and the agents involved, providing them with strategies to respond to bullying in a more effective manner (Benítez-Muñoz et al., 2017).

On the other hand, future teachers declare an interest in bullying but report difficulties in defining the concept and a lack of knowledge about types of bullying and resources to identify its presence and scope (Mahon et al., 2023). At the same time, future PE teachers express concern about the lack of training on the topic of bullying in university education and highlight the importance of including this in PE teacher training curricula (Ríos et al., 2022a).

In light of the above and the lack of research involving the opinions of university professors on education in bullying, both in general education and the specific setting of PE, PA, and sports, this study was conducted to reveal university professors' perceptions of bullying training taught in the Elementary Education with a major in PE and ESS degrees.

Methodology

This research is framed within the post-positivism paradigm, which is characterized for having a critical realist ontology. This approach defends the existence of an external and objective reality, though our understanding of it is necessarily imperfect and adopts an epistemology based on modified dualism or objectivism (Lincoln et al., 2011).

Participants

The sample included a total of 10 professionals (3 women and 7 men) who are researchers with an expertise in bullying. The participants were selected through a purposeful sampling process (Patton, 2002) since this type of sampling allows for deliberate identification and recruitment of individuals who meet specific criteria, ensuring they provide meaningful and relevant information about the topic under study. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: (1) teaches

at the university level in EEPE or ESS degrees; (2) has an academic profile related to PE, PA, and sports; (3) conducts research on bullying or cyberbullying within the context of PE, PA, and sports; (4) gave positive informed consent.

The study was approved by the Clinical Research Ethics Committee from the Catalonia Sports Administration (009/CEICGC/2021). The participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, that they could leave the study whenever they liked, and that the confidentiality and anonymity of the collected data would be guaranteed. Informed consent was obtained prior to starting the study. The participants were informed that the sessions would be audio recorded to facilitate analysis. Likewise, time was specifically set aside to allow the participants to ask the research team questions prior to the focus group. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain study confidentiality and anonymity.

Instrument

The data collection technique was a focus group (FG) (Patton, 2002) with a semi-structured script drafted following a bibliographic review of the study topic (Benavides et al., 2022) and taking as reference other studies that assessed expert opinions in an FG (Escamilla, 2016). This technique was deemed the most appropriate for its capacity to explore in-depth the perceptions, opinions, and experiences of a group of experts in a specific topic (Morgan, 1997). In accordance with Geertz (1994), the aim was to delve into the contributions and opinions of a group of experts on the specific topic of bullying and university education and training.

Procedure

The study was conducted within the context of an interuniversity symposium involving university professors, specifically in a space dedicated to discussion of bullying and the education of future PE, PA, and sports professionals. The FG was held in-person in Barcelona in September 2022. The session was coordinated by the authors of the script, who moderated and encouraged all the group members to participate by giving their opinion within a professional, respectful, and safe setting. At the beginning of the session, an introduction was given on the issue of bullying training within university education after which the debate began according to the predesigned semi-structured script.

The FG lasted two hours, offering enough time to debate the primary study topics. The descriptive validity was reinforced by the fact that all the FG data were digitally recorded to later be manually transcribed verbatim by one of the document's authors. Subsequently, the research team jointly verified the transcriptions.

Data analysis

The data interpretation technique was thematic analysis as proposed by Braun et al. (2016). The themes were identified and categorized according to the following phases: (1-2) familiarization and coding; (3-5) theme development, revision, and naming; (6) and writing up. The main themes a) "Training in the topic of bullying in EEPE and ESS degrees," b) "Personal initiative of university professors," c) "Bullying as mandatory content in EEPE and ESS degrees," and d) "Strategies and resources for implementing training" were agreed on jointly by the research team as a whole during a preliminary conversation on the theoretical framework under study. Later, the authors individually conducted a detailed data analysis, and the results were jointly discussed and validated to guarantee theoretical validity and coherence. This collaborative approach bolstered the quality of the analysis by incorporating multiple perspectives into the data interpretation. The code organization and data analysis were carried out using the Atlas.ti® application, version 9.

Results and Discussion

We present below the most notable examples of the primary themes and compare them against the main findings from the theoretical points of reference up to June 2024.

Training on the topic of bullying in EEPE and ESS degrees

A group of experts acknowledged the absence of specific training on the topic of bullying in the aforementioned university degrees. In that regard, one participant stated they had identified this lack of training during their professional experience and through research conducted in recent years: "The students don't receive any training. We've all seen it. In recent research we also found there is no specific training on the topic of bullying in EEPE and ESS degrees" (David). Another expert disclosed that bullying is a topic that concerns students, yet they are not aware of their lack of preparation to address it: "Personally, I've noticed that students are very concerned about the issue but, at the same time, they are not prepared to deal with it" (Sonia).

Consequently, the results showed that future PE teachers and PA and sports professionals lack specific preparation to identify and prevent situations involving bullying in schools or sports environments. In this same vein, Ríos et al. (2022b) noted the importance of incorporating bullying into the educational curricula within the context of PE, PA, and sports. Similarly, the perception that university students are concerned about this social problem is associated with the importance of the attitude that teachers adopt in light of bullying situations. Jiménez-Barbero et al. (2019) point

out that both teacher behavior and actions can be decisive in preventing bullying. On the contrary, teachers' failure to act can contribute to these problems spreading.

Likewise, according to the experts, this problem of lack of student training is compounded by a lack of training of the actual professors teaching the university classes, as stated by one of the participants:

We also have to consider the lack of training of the university professors. Even the professors who are most knowledgeable about and aware of bullying can run into difficulty when preparing a workshop on bullying due to a lack of specific training on the topic. (Ricardo)

Therefore, merely researching the problem is not sufficient to be able to provide specific training to future teachers or professionals. It is evident that teachers are also aware of their lack of training in bullying, which falls in line with the results from a study by Napoleão & Calland (2013), in which teachers described not having received any specific training on the topic of bullying, despite believing it to be an important and necessary topic in continuing professional development.

The experts warned that this lack of training among university professors not only means this content is not included in course syllabi, but it could also impact how bullying is dealt with should it occur among university students in university classes:

We know that one of the problems is that teachers and coaches don't identify bullying in schools, yet university professors don't have solid tools for this either (...). I remember there were issues with bullying last year in the Education Department and they weren't taken as seriously as they should have been. (Ricardo)

In this case, the results are in line with previous research that highlights bullying as a social problem that has grown within the university setting (Tight, 2023), even among athletes in university leagues (Jewett et al., 2019). One recent study on bullying in Spanish universities showed that this problem is fairly frequent, and the numbers of victims and aggressors in education- and psychology-related degrees have increased in recent years (Royo-García et al., 2020).

Personal initiative of university professors

Based on the uncovered results, we must highlight that the experts who reported including bullying-related content in their coursework did so due to personal interest, concern, or awareness of the issue:

In our Psychology class for Physical Activity and Sports, we did include bullying-related content over the course of one week. We dedicated two theoretical sessions and two practical sessions to it (...). I have to admit that five or six years ago we didn't teach these sessions on

bullying. We do now thanks to concerns and questions that have arisen among the faculty. We believe that students should graduate from their ESS degree with at least the minimum knowledge about bullying. (David)

In another case, one expert mentioned that bullying is discussed as content within a topic that also deals with other types of violence:

In the Sports Psychology class in the Sports Science curriculum, which is a required course at our university, an entire block is dedicated to children's development in sports. I don't just include the topic of bullying, I include a general topic on violence, abuse, and discrimination. (Manuel)

Similarly, one of the experts mentioned work practicums as an opportunity to bring up topics surrounding bullying with the students:

Last year we proposed bullying topics during the work practicum (...). For example, one could research the protocols at the school, the protocols at the level of the autonomous community, or prepare interventional practicum sessions with activities aimed at bullying prevention. (Marta)

Based on these examples, we were able to confirm that bullying content is included mainly due to the personal initiative of professors who are aware of the issue and who decide to include the topic in university education. However, this does not guarantee that all students have access to this training. These results align with studies that reference educational experiences on the topic of bullying, such as the studies from Benítez-Muñoz et al. (2009) and Napoleão & Calland (2013), who state the topic of bullying is discussed thanks to the initiative of the teaching staff and university researchers.

Bullying as required content in EEPE and ESS degrees

One of the study results that stood out was the recurring theme that bullying should be required content in EEPE and ESS curricula. One solution for addressing this issue in university education that was discussed was as follows:

The only way to truly ensure that bullying content is studied is to ensure it is included in the curriculum, with a specific course or class that defines the required content. That's the only way to ensure it is truly studied in all universities. (Miguel)

However, evidence shows that bullying content is not systematically included in education, despite studies that indicate otherwise, such as a study by Ventura et al. (2016), in which the authors found the presence, though negligible, of bullying content in teacher training university curricula in various public universities in Spain and Portugal.

The experts also emphasized the importance that education in bullying delve deep into theoretical content, prevention and detection strategies, and action protocols:

Any training program should include a theoretical portion that covers the definition, roles, behavior (...) and should also discuss resources to prevent and detect the signs or indications that appear in children or in group dynamics that signal that something is going on (...) and knowing the protocols too. (Sonia)

One recent study on student well-being at elementary schools underlined the importance of teachers being aware of and able to implement actions protocols against bullying and cyberbullying, as this largely contributed to proper functioning of the school's rules for social harmony and getting along (Torrego et al., 2023). Likewise, according to administrative obligations, every school must have an action protocol to aid students who experience harassment or mistreatment. As such, the Departments of Education in each autonomous community must define their own action protocol (*Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional*, 2023).

The experts also overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of ensuring compliance with the legislation. They referenced Organic Law 8/2021, of 4 June, on the Comprehensive Protection of Childhood and Adolescence against Violence, which dedicates a full chapter to leisure activities and sport: "We have to talk about the childhood protection law, as well as the requirement to have a childhood and well-being protection delegate" (Marta).

That said, despite the existence of this law, it is understood that the proposed measures are not being implemented. Therefore, action must be taken in this area to guarantee that all sports and education centers have this delegate role in place.

Strategies and resources for implementing training

In terms of the strategies and resources for providing training, the group of experts mentioned multiple aspects. First, one of the participants highlighted the need to complement the motor skills focus of PE classes with a conceptual and reflective approach, and suggested discussing the topic of bullying through cooperative play, body language, role play, and movement stories:

Sometimes it seems like the aim is to provide purely motor skills-based content in PE classes, yet the conceptual aspect and reflection is also important. In this case the conceptual portion can be related to anti-bullying content. Cooperative play, body language, role play, and movement stories are strategies that can guide this topic. (Marta)

In this same vein, in one study Benítez-Sillero et al. (2021) implemented an anti-bullying intervention program in a PE class using psychosocial content and motor skills. The program included activities such as movement stories, cooperative challenges, body language, motor skills challenges with symbolic roles (victim and aggressor), and team games with implementation strategies to connect the PE curriculum content with social and emotional skills.

On the other hand, the experts suggested strategies for university level education, such as the use of audiovisual material to pique student interest, or presentations on news and media and real cases to raise awareness and impress upon students the impact of bullying: "These days, short videos are what grab the students' attention, documentaries, TV shows (...) that discuss the key information and that show real cases of bullying" (Ricardo). According to another expert: "One way of broaching this topic is to present real cases that have been reported in the news (...) cases of suicide. This grabs the students' attention, as we're talking about a very, very serious issue" (Sonia).

Another suggestion was to seek out alternatives to complement this lack of training, including organizing educational conferences or symposia on the issue: "To approach these social issues that are so profound, we could organize workshops or sessions for educating and raising awareness about bullying" (Felipe).

Another expert presented a methodology that, in their experience, was most effective at addressing the topic in the university environment:

I've found that an intensive workshop is most effective for me. At the start, we discuss the potential of sports for childhood development and then, in groups, the students make a list of all the types of abuse that they know can occur in sports, and then we hold a final discussion. In general, we discuss each topic and those who participate share their thoughts. (Manuel)

The goal is to adopt provisional training measures or programs until the new curricula can address and encompass content regarding bullying in certain classes that would be required coursework. Only in this way do we believe all students will be sure to receive education on the topic of bullying in the future. Based on the results, the group of experts gave concrete suggestions on content and strategies that should be included in bullying training. The group's proposals were aligned with other educational initiatives for bullying prevention promoted by actual PE teachers in schools, such as the use of cooperative learning (Faus & García, 2020) and working on social and emotional skills (Aguilar et al., 2021).

Additionally, in this situation, we must consider that the people participating in the FG were experts and were

knowledgeable about strategies for organizing specific training programs. Nevertheless, it must be said that this characteristic is not transferable to the vast majority of professionals in PE, PA, and sports settings since, as certain studies indicate, PE teachers do not have bullying prevention strategies (Sagín et al., 2022), and youth sports coaches do not have sufficient knowledge of the topic (Ríos & Ventura, 2022).

Conclusions

As stated by the group of experts in bullying in PE, PA, and sports, we can confirm there is no training in the topic of bullying in EEPE or ESS degrees. Likewise, in the case of bullying in the university setting, we recognize the need to educate university professors to recognize and confront situations of bullying. In terms of practical implications, we must urgently and necessarily incorporate bullying training into EEPE and ESS degrees pursuant to the legislation in force. The proposals should consider conceptualization of the phenomenon, legislation, prevention and detection resources, and action protocols. In terms of strategies for implementing said training, the advice is to use materials that help raise awareness among students, such as videos that tell stories of real cases, as these capture student interest and make students aware of the seriousness of the issue. Other suggestions included using practical activities, such as cooperative games, body language, symbolic role play, and movement stories to connect motor skills development with social and emotional skills. Likewise, holding specific educational/reflective conferences and workshops was also proposed. Lastly, these results must also contribute to a greater understanding of the responsibility that universities bear in terms of the importance of providing training in bullying in the PE, PA, and sports setting.

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