

Case study of a victim of bullying in school

Estudio de caso de una víctima de bullying en la escuela

Estudio de caso de uma vítima de bullying na escola

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a research that is part of a larger project, 'Breaking the silence', developed by the NGO Columbares, funded by the Ministry of Social Rights, Consumption and Agenda 2030 (Spain), although here we focus on a case study about a hate crime suffered by a student in the school environment. Qualitative research methods have been used to try to respond to the main objectives described above by trying to understand her experiences and the obstacles that this person has had to report. Thus, the reasons why the victim has not reported, such as fear of reprisals, distrust of the education system and lack of information about available resources, will be highlighted. It will also discuss how the normalisation of violence affects students' perception of reporting. Finally, conclusions and proposals will be offered to improve the institutional response and create a safer and more inclusive educational environment.

Keywords: School bullying, hate crime, fatphobia, discrimination, case study, sociology of education, violence.

Resumen

Este escrito presenta los resultados de una investigación que forma parte de un proyecto más extenso, “Rompiendo el silencio”, desarrollado por la ONG Columbares y financiado por el Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030 (España), aunque aquí nos centramos en un estudio de caso en torno a un delito de odio sufrido por un estudiante en el ámbito escolar. Para ello se han utilizado métodos cualitativos de investigación con los que se ha tratado de dar respuesta a los principales objetivos descritos tratando de entender sus experiencias y los obstáculos que esta persona ha tenido para denunciar. Así, se destacarán las razones por las que la víctima no ha denunciado, como el miedo a represalias, la desconfianza en el sistema educativo y la falta de información sobre recursos disponibles. También se discutirá cómo la normalización de la violencia afecta la percepción de los estudiantes sobre la denuncia. Finalmente, se ofrecerán conclusiones y propuestas para mejorar la respuesta institucional y crear un entorno educativo más seguro e inclusivo.

Palabras clave: Acoso escolar, delito de odio, gordofobia, discriminación, estudio de caso, sociología de la educación, violencia.

Resumo

O artigo apresenta os resultados de uma investigação que faz parte de um projeto mais vasto, “Quebrar o silêncio”, desenvolvido pela ONG Columbares e financiado pelo Ministério dos Direitos Sociais, Consumo e Agenda 2030 (Espanha), embora aqui nos concentremos num estudo de caso sobre um crime de ódio sofrido por uma aluna em ambiente escolar. Foram utilizados métodos de investigação qualitativa para tentar responder aos principais objectivos descritos acima, tentando compreender as suas experiências e os obstáculos que esta pessoa teve de denunciar. Assim, serão destacadas as razões pelas quais a vítima não denunciou, como o medo de represálias, a desconfiança em relação ao sistema educativo e a falta de informação sobre os recursos disponíveis. Será também discutida a forma como a normalização da violência afecta a percepção que os estudantes têm da denúncia. Por último, serão apresentadas conclusões e propostas para melhorar a resposta institucional e criar um ambiente educativo mais seguro e inclusivo.

Palavras-chave: Assédio moral na escola, crimes de ódio, gordofobia, discriminação, estudo de caso, sociologia da educação, violência.

Introduction

Contemporary society, increasingly lacking in ethical-moral values, in which empathy, tolerance, and understanding toward others barely exist and are replaced, in many cases, by apathy and negativity, allows hatred to spread freely. Differences are viewed with distrust and disdain, as a reason for

division rather than an opportunity for mutual personal and cultural enrichment (Pina Castillo et al., 2024). It's necessary to put the focus on risk factors, contexts where school violent episodes and in students with vulnerable backgrounds (Enríquez, 2016). In this context, education and, consequently, the competency profile of teachers, must rise to the challenge and have sufficient tools to face and counteract this situation (Montoro & Ballesteros, 2016). We must pause to reflect on what kind of education we want and how it can respond to the needs of our society (Leiva-Olivencia et al., 2017).

Characterization of hate crime

The concept of hate originates in the Anglo-Saxon legal field. The "hate crime" concept arose from a wave of crimes committed for ethnic reasons, based on racial prejudice and also on nationalist motives (Méndez et al., 2019). There is no consensus regarding the definition of hate crime, nor unanimity among those offered in different contexts: legal and academic (Teijón, 2022). It could be defined as hostile behaviors against certain individuals or groups that include aggressive actions, threats, insults, denial of assistance or services, etc. According to Walters (2011), it includes any antisocial act aimed at intimidating and harming the victim and it is generally motivated by some type of prejudice stemming from the fear that the victim may interfere with sociocultural norms, altering the socioeconomic status and well-being of the community.

These actions entail serious consequences not only for these groups but also for society in general and the democratic system in particular. This raises the need to act before an aggression occurs. Therefore, the need arises to redefine the concept of crime, which is dogmatically justified through the concept of "hate as a crime," which, from a criminological perspective, obliges criminal action to anticipate events by establishing preventive mechanisms in response to a problem that produces negative effects at the social level (Fuentes, 2017).

These types of crimes are related to intolerance and prejudice, producing both physical and emotional harm to the victim, as they affect their dignity. Actions motivated by hate aim to intimidate victims and act against their freedom. They are crimes motivated by various reasons: ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, etc., and their objective is to dehumanize the person targeted. They constitute a form of intolerance and discrimination that violates human rights (Suárez-Martínez et al., 2023).

For some time, research in the education field has shown a high percentage of students that experience bullying (being an aggressor, victim or spectator), which highlights a social and health strong risk for the students (Méndez y Cerezo, 2020).

What causes hate? Explanatory Models

Discerning the main factors that cause hate is a complex task. It is difficult to answer this question from a single model; however, theoretical approaches focusing on psychosocial aspects related to the sociocultural identity of each group and intergroup relations—ingroup in contrast with outgroup—and their interactions hold particular interest (Teijón, 2022). Identity is a phenomenon that defines how group members see themselves and others. Cultural identity is formed from shared values, beliefs, and customs, creating a sense of belonging and differentiation between groups. This concept is linked to cultural heritage and helps maintain social cohesion, enabling community development (Rojo-Álvarez & Rueda-Silva, 2021).

The Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory suggest that individuals have multiple identities based on the groups they belong to, which help them reduce uncertainty and improve their self-esteem. Social identity is formed through group membership, and its value depends on comparisons with other groups (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987). Additionally, ingroup favoritism arises from the need to maintain a positive image that benefits individual self-esteem (Lois et al., 2012). However, such favoritism does not imply implicit hostility toward other groups; rather, hostility stems from a perceived psychological threat. Stephan et al. (2005) describe the Integrated Threat Theory, which proposes that these threats do not always align with objective danger; whereas Realistic Conflict Theory (Sherif, 1967) argues that hostility arises when groups compete for scarce resources, generating conflict that incites intergroup hate. Walters (2011) also notes that violence against minority groups often has socioeconomic components derived from unstable situations; in this context, members of the outgroup are frequently blamed. This is tied to the idea of a dominant group identity.

However, identity is a dynamic and complex process formed heterogeneously and can be reinterpreted by individuals over time. According to Coderch (2012), the feeling of identity is constructed through subjective experiences and is influenced by the sociocultural environment. Currently, increasing social diversity challenges the notion of unity and uniformity in different spheres, which may generate coexistence problems in increasingly complex and changing societies (Comboni-Salinas & Juárez-Núñez, 2016). Identity, in essence, is nourished by the particularities of each person, by their uniqueness. It is shaped through social interactions, shared experiences, and the exchange of knowledge and values. Recognition, therefore, goes beyond merely accepting a place of origin, culture, or gender. It implies being acknowledged as a full member of a community, actively participating in it, and feeling that one's voice is heard (García-Martínez, 2023).

Educating for diversity in a democratic society

Members of a community may share traits that identify them with the rest of the group, as well as others that differentiate them. However, all individuals can be educated to learn to live with others and be part of a common project (Cortina & Conill, 2001). Human beings are imperfect in our search for unattainable perfection; therefore, no one can deny the development of others. In the complex network of society, education emerges as a fundamental pillar in the construction of individual and collective identity. However, this identity is not static; it is in constant transformation, influenced by the experiences and relationships formed throughout life. Thus, education must take responsibility for reflecting on crucial concepts such as equality, diversity, and identity recognition. An educational approach that ignores these dimensions may have harmful consequences, perpetuating inequalities and hindering individuals' full development (García-Martínez, 2023).

Education, in its integral vision, must consider both the community as a whole in which all the individualities that compose it participate. It must recognize that each person is unique, with their own needs, aspirations, and potential. Diversity and equality stand as fundamental pillars for building a complex and harmonious social structure. A society that values diversity and promotes equality is one that embraces the richness of human experience and allows each individual to flourish to their full potential (Sierra-Nieto et al., 2017). From the principles of inclusion, schools, together with other socio-educational institutions in the community, must work on a joint project to understand diversity and respond to a plural and complex world (Lozano et al., 2015), where hate messages against those who are different are increasingly frequent (Hernández-Prados et al., 2024).

The analysis of discrimination and prejudice-based violence is crucial today, as they continue to affect new generations. This situation is also observed in the school environment, where violence appears increasingly normalized. Despite advances in human rights, schools are places where young people face hostility due to their gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, religion, disability, among others. These experiences of hate negatively impact their emotional well-being, academic performance, and self-esteem. Additionally, there is an underreporting problem, as victims often do not report these crimes due to fear of reprisals, distrust in authorities, or lack of knowledge about reporting mechanisms, which hinders victim recognition. Therefore, citizen participation must be encouraged, as well as dialogue as a tool for participation and conflict resolution (Lozano et al., 2017). In this way, the main objectives described are:

- Understand the personal experiences of the victims.
- Find out how these attacks affect them on a personal level.
- Identify the main obstacles they face when reporting.
- Explore the knowledge victims have about the resources available for reporting.

Methodology

A qualitative approach based on the Interview with Victims of Hate Crimes (EVDO) (Hernández-Prados & Pina, 2023) allows the discovery of previously unknown aspects and a deeper understanding of the relationships between the researcher and the participants (Espinoza, 2020), unlike quantitative methods that are limited to statistical data. This approach is useful for exploring victims' motivations and perceptions regarding the underreporting of hate crimes, especially given the lack of literature on this topic. Here, we will focus on a case study, a research method that can be applied to a specific case or a small sample of cases (Canta & Quesada, 2021). This approach allows for a thorough and detailed analysis of a specific phenomenon, providing a richer and more contextualized understanding of the situation under investigation.

We focus on Pedro, a young man who suffered an episode of fatphobia at school, where his classmates harassed him with insults and threw food at him, while the teachers ignored the situation. Although he found support from his family, the emotional damage persisted and affected his relationship with food and with sports (which became obsessive for him), and with the way he interacted socially with others.

A semi-structured interview organized into five key dimensions was used: The first dimension (Table 1) includes questions on sociodemographic variables, such as age, gender, gender identity, ethnic origin and educational level, to contextualize the responses and detect patterns in the underreporting experience.

Table 1.

Sociodemographic variables (Dimension I).

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES
Age
Sex
Gender
Study level
Parents study level

Birth country

Parents birth country

Time of residence in Spain

Employment status (what do you do, legal status or not...)

Who do you live with (family type)

Source: Own creation

The second dimension (Table 2) focuses on identifying the crime, exploring the victim's direct experience, the type of crime suffered, the school context, and the frequency of similar situations, which helps to understand how the victim perceives and classifies their experience as a hate crime.

Table 2.

Hate crime type, place and context (Dimension II).

HATE CRIME IDENTIFICATION

What crime did you experience?

Where did it take place?

What do you think caused this situation?

How did it affect you and how do you feel now?

Source: Own creation

The third dimension (Table 3) consists of five questions that revolve around temporality, the period in which the crime occurred, and whether it persists.

Table 3.

Hate crime temporality (Dimension III).

HATE CRIME IDENTIFICATION

What crime did you experience?

Where did it take place?

What do you think caused this situation?

How did it affect you and how do you feel now?

Source: Own creation

The questions posed in the fourth dimension (Table 4) seek to answer why victims report incidents or, conversely, whether they have encountered obstacles that have prevented them from doing so. They also seek to explore the consequences of the assaults on the victims and whether they are aware of the resources available to them when reporting, as well as their assessment of these resources if the victim has reported the assault.

Table 4.

Hate crime management (Dimension IV).

HATE CRIME MANAGEMENT

Have you ever reported a hate crime?

Have you taken any other measures apart from reporting it?

If you do not report it, REASONS FOR NOT DOING SO:

OBSTACLES

What difficulties did you encounter in not reporting the incident?

Of all of them, what was the main impediment/obstacle/barrier to reporting the incident?

RESOURCES

Are you aware of any measures being taken to encourage/promote/raise awareness of reporting?

Are you aware of any campaigns, programmes, regional or national action plans, European measures, etc.? Which ones?

Do you think they are useful?

CONSEQUENCES

Has not reporting it affected you in any way?

In what way?

EVALUATION

If you were in the same situation now, would you report it?

What would you need/what would motivate you to report it?

What triggers or aspects do you think would encourage you to file a formal complaint?

What would you need to repair the damage?

Source: Own creation

For their part, the questions in the last dimension (Table 5) seek to ascertain whether the victim in question is willing to make a commitment to report the crime in order to help others in the same situation, and what they consider to be the most effective way of encouraging victims to report any type of hate crime they have suffered.

Table 5.

Hate crime temporality (Dimension V).

COMPROMISE

Do you think your experience could serve as an example for others?

To what extent could you contribute to encouraging other victims of hate crimes to report them?

Would you encourage or advise someone else to report a crime? Why?

How would you do so?

Would you be willing to collaborate with the 'Está en tu mano' (It's in your hands) project to encourage the reporting of hate crimes and share your experience?

Source: Own creation

Results

To facilitate the reading of the results, answers will be given to each of the questions posed, which seek to respond to the objectives described. First, the answers obtained in the first block (Dimension I) describe the socio-economic variables of the subject under study (RSOE). The participant is Pedro, a 22-year-old man who was finishing his university degree. He is the son of a family of Spanish origin, his parents completed secondary education, and he is currently unemployed and lives with them. After freely agreeing to participate in this study, he was informed about the definition of what is considered a 'hate crime': verbal or physical aggression towards a person or their property, motivated by their belonging to a specific group, whether due to their origin, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, or for physical, economic, sexual, or other reasons.

In the second (Dimension II) and third section (Dimension III), the questions are asked to help us understand Pedro's personal experiences as a victim of a hate crime:

What hate crime did you suffer?

"Mainly a hate crime due to fatphobia. They discriminated me for being fat, which was something that stood out about me. Every day I heard "fat", "obese"... They chased me around the school playground, threw things at me (food, drinks...) while insulting me..." (RSOE).

Where did it take place?

"At school" (RSOE).

What do you think caused this situation?

"I was very innocent, very kind, I wanted to be friends with everyone... they saw me as a weak person and said "let's go get him" (RSOE).

The questions posed in the following section (Dimension III) seek to answer the second objective described: to find out how these attacks affect us on a personal level, and also to place ourselves in the context and time frame in which the events occurred.

How did it affect you and how do you feel now?

"At first it didn't affect me because I didn't understand it. Over time it affected me more, I didn't like going out, I ended up shutting myself away at home, playing video games, watching anime series... that's how I created a much bigger gap. Now, I think I may have certain flaws, such as not liking to overeat, but I honestly believe that I have almost completely overcome them, as I no longer set myself many of the limits I used to, such as not eating dinner, for example... I am

gradually eliminating all those things. It has left me with flaws and insecurities, but I think I am doing well" (RSOE).

When did the offence take place?

"It started at the end of fourth year of primary school and lasted until the second year of secondary school" (RSOE).

How old were you?

"I was about 10 years old. This happened from when I was 10 years old until I was 18 years old" (RSOE).

How long did the crime go on for?

For 8 years (RSOE).

Does the hate crime persist or continue today? (If so) How often does it occur?

"No, and if it did continue, I don't think it would affect me in the same way as before" (RSOE).

The set of questions that make up Dimension IV seeks to identify the main obstacles that victims often face when reporting hate crimes. They describe how they dealt with the events, as well as the difficulties and motivations that led them to report the crime or not.

Have you ever reported a hate crime? (YES/NO)

"I reported it to my parents because I didn't want to remember it" (RSOE)..

Have you taken any other measures apart from reporting it?

"No. I only told it to my parents, I didn't know how big the problem was either. I didn't tell the teachers. When they threw food at me and insulted me during break time and I went to the teachers, they looked at me and turned away. They were aware, but they ignored it" (RSOE).

Did you ever think about reporting it?

"No, I didn't feel capable of confronting 50 people, and I felt inferior to everyone else" (RSOE).

What difficulties did you encounter in not reporting it? Of all of them, what was the main impediment/obstacle/barrier to reporting it?

"I had a very strong feeling of inferiority, I was afraid, that was my biggest obstacle. The main thing is inferiority... to the point that it still affects me, even now when interacting with others I am insecure" (RSOE).

The last set of questions (Dimension V) seeks to answer the last objective described: to explore victims' knowledge of the resources available to them for reporting abuse, as well as the consequences of not doing so and their willingness to commit to reporting and informing about their case, thereby helping others in the same situation.

Are you aware of any measures being taken to encourage/promote/raise awareness of reporting: campaigns, programmes, regional or national action plans, European measures, etc.? (Yes/No), which ones? Do you think they are useful?

"No, apart from Columbares' Está en tu mano project (It's in your hands), I don't know of any organisation that helps people in situations like this, and bullying and harassment continue to happen and nobody does anything... I think the ones that exist are useful, so that people see that someone is fighting for them. I think it's essential" (RSOE).

Has not reporting it affected you in any way? (YES/NO). How?

"I don't know what to say. If I had reported it, I would be a different person, but I like how I have developed with an open mind and a critical attitude towards other people. So I don't think so. I think I would have suffered the bullying anyway and it wouldn't have changed anything" (RSOE).

If you were in the same situation now, would you report it?

"Maybe not, but for different reasons. Now I'm not affected by what other people say. I think it's very sad that someone says something and other people follow them at our age. If I saw it happening to someone else, I think I would report it, but if it happened to me, I don't think I would" (RSOE).

If you haven't done so, what would you need/what would motivate you to report it? What triggers or aspects do you think would encourage you to file a formal complaint?

"If they did something very serious to me or if they did that on someone else. If they attack someone that's not me, another person, it would make me file a formal complaint. I wouldn't mind going to the police and filing a formal complaint" (RSOE).

What would you need to repair the damage caused?

"The perpetrators couldn't repair the damage, because asking for forgiveness wouldn't make me feel better; these are things I have to work by myself. It would repair me to know that the people who did it have changed and are no longer the way they were before; that would make me feel quite good, happy" (RSOE).

Do you think your experience can be an example for others?

"In a way, an example of what not to do: you don't have to stay silent, watch them bully you for eight years and then try to rebuild yourself after all that... I don't think I'm a good example" (RSOE).

To what extent could you contribute to encouraging other victims of hate crimes to report them?

"Support them, listen to them, be there for them, offer them help from different resources, train yourself to offer them resources" (RSOE).

Would you encourage or advise someone else to report it? Why? How would you do it?

"Yes, my case is not an example, I know that reporting is the right thing to do, so that they suffer less, so that if they are suffering for two years, it's two years, not four. I would try to approach them in a horizontal relationship, tell them that I am here if they need to talk, give them the tools in case they want to listen to me until they make a decision, I would tell them that they can go to the police, that there are some measures..." (RSOE).

Would you be willing to collaborate with the Está en tu mano project to encourage the reporting of hate crimes and share your experience?

"Yes" (RSOE).

Conclusions and discussion

From the discussion of the results, the main conclusions reached in this study will now be presented. In relation to the first objective described, understanding the personal experiences of the victims, we observe in the research how society exerts strong pressure on individuals by imposing unrealistic beauty ideals, which leads many to believe that their personal worth is tied to their physical appearance. The discrimination and bullying that Pedro experienced had a lasting impact on his self-esteem, generating insecurity and feelings of inferiority in his social interactions. Social pressures regarding how we should look and thinness can negatively affect the mental health of young people. By studying how bullying and weight-related stigma impact people, it is suggested that Comprehensive

sexuality education can be an useful tool. This education should inclusively and critically address the different body types that have been ignored and mistreated throughout history (Adelardi, 2022).

With regard to the second objective, finding out how these attacks affect them on a personal level, Pedro feels that the harm he suffered is irreparable, even by his aggressors, and that forgiveness would not improve his situation. After several years, he has learned to cope with the consequences of what happened. However, he would find some reparation if he knew that his aggressors have changed and now accept diversity, just as he does. This would make him feel better. This research reveals that the power disparity and the frequency with which violent acts are observed, experienced, or participated in are crucial for understanding school bullying. By identifying the similarities and differences in how teachers and students relate to bullying, the need to design effective intervention programs becomes clear. These programs will seek to create safe and violence-free school environments for the entire educational community (Antonio et al., 2023).

In relation to the third objective, deciphering the main obstacles they face to reporting, students like Pedro often feel great shame and fear about reporting. He only dared to share his experience with his parents, since although he tried to approach the teachers who witnessed hate episodes from his classmates, they were indifferent. In line with the results presented by other studies such as the one carried out by Abad San Martín and García Martínez (2025), this study reveals that break periods are the most common settings for these conflicts, indicating a clear violation of school coexistence norms.

With regard to the final objective, Pedro considers that having lived through discrimination and hate crimes has changed the way he views them. He recommends others to report these situations, as he regrets not having done so, thinking that it could have changed his situation and his character. However, he prefers to hold on to the positive lessons learned and values how these experiences helped him develop an open and critical mind. Despite these emotional consequences, Pedro shows resilience and is determined to overcome the consequences of these acts of hatred. He focuses on the lessons learned from his negative experiences to build a full and happy life (Pina et al., 2024). The serious long-term consequences of school bullying underline that victims face a higher risk of developing emotional and behavioral problems, including the possibility of suicide. In other words, school bullying is not a passing problem but leaves deep scars in the lives of those who suffer it. It is crucial that schools take preventive and intervention measures, especially during break time and also in the classroom, to ensure a safe and respectful environment for all students (Abad San Martín and García Martínez, 2025).

This study offers deep insight into the experiences of victims of school bullying, particularly through Pedro's case. It shows how social pressures related to beauty ideals and thinness affect the self-esteem and mental health of young people, which is a significant social issue.

However, it is important to question whether the conclusions are based on a single case or on a representative sample, as this may limit the generalization of the results. On the other hand, the relationship between bullying and the lasting emotional impact experienced by victims like Pedro highlights the need for effective interventions in schools. The perception that the harm is irreparable and that only social acceptance can ease the suffering underscores the importance of promoting inclusive and supportive environments. However, it would also be valuable to explore what types of specific programs or resources can facilitate that reparation and acceptance, instead of focusing only on the perception of harm.

Regarding the obstacles to reporting, the results show that fear, shame, and teacher indifference make it difficult for victims to share their experiences. This highlights a problem in school culture and in the training of educational staff, who must be more sensitive and proactive in detecting and addressing bullying. However, it would also be useful to delve into which resources or strategies could improve students' confidence to report, and how institutions can create a safer and more responsive environment.

Finally, the aspect of Pedro's resilience and his appreciation for the lessons learned is positive but also raises a critical reflection: to what extent is it healthy for victims to have to learn to live with the harm instead of institutions preventing and eradicating bullying? The idea that victims can transform their experience into personal growth is valuable, but it should not be an excuse to minimize the responsibility of schools in creating safe environments.

In summary, these results highlight the severity of school bullying and its lasting effects, as well as the need to strengthen preventive policies, staff training, and the resources available to victims. Also, it highlights the relevance of evaluating the violence in schools, specially in relation with bullying (Cerezo et al., 2015). It is essential that educational institutions take an active role in the protection and support of their students, promoting a culture of respect and diversity. So, as a conclusion, hate crimes are not isolated events but occur increasingly and in a generalized manner. These cases also do not happen in a specific environment; they occur in both urban and rural contexts. In line with research by authors such as Hernández Prados and Pina Castillo (2024) and Pina Castillo et al. (2024), it is observed that while children of a certain age, and especially young people, can identify hate messages directed at various groups and are aware of the legal consequences and negative impact of hate crimes, they often show indifference, or their reactions to these events tend to be impulsive or violent, in an attempt to block or ignore the situation.

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