

Article

Qualitative Analysis of Bullying among Adolescents: A Teacher's View

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Abstract: Bullying is a social problem that usually increases during adolescence and can have serious consequences on the wellbeing of students. One of the members of the educational community that is most present in these situations is the teachers. This qualitative research aims to know the teachers' perceptions about bullying among adolescents within the school environment. It was possible to deepen the experiences of 20 teachers by conducting semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. The results obtained indicate that education professionals have been bystanders to episodes of bullying among their students and that they opt for mediation between both parties (bully and victim) as an intervention measure. Teachers believe that bullied students tend to be young people with low self-esteem, introverted and sad. On the contrary, bullies are shown to be leaders with social support, egocentric, and with low empathy. The need to know the different perceptions and strategies used by teachers in situations of bullying among their students is discussed, with the intention of promoting resources and programs that can help them in this type of situation.

Keywords: bullying; peer relationships; student behavior; educational environment; teachers; adolescence



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1. Introduction

School violence is a social and public health problem that is present worldwide [1–3]. This problem alludes to the various disruptive behaviors that affect, both physically and psychologically, the members of the educational community [4].

There are multiple forms of violence within the educational context, although the most common tend to occur among peers, known as peer violence or peer-on-peer violence [5]. During the last two decades, most of the research on peer violence in adolescence has focused on violence occurring in schools and one of its main forms, known by the English term “bullying”, and reflects that this type of such violence presents the following characteristics: (1) it includes behaviors of diverse nature (teasing, threats, insults, physical aggression, intimidation, isolation. . .); (2) it tends to cause problems that recur and persist for some time; (3) it involves abuse of power as it is provoked by a student (the aggressor), generally supported by a group, against an unarmed victim who cannot escape the situation on his own; (4) it is maintained by the ignorance or passivity of those surrounding the aggressor and victim who do not intervene directly in such situations (observers) [6]. The first research focused on peer aggression began in the 1970s [7] and, since then, many researchers have corroborated the relevance of this problem and its importance for the psychosocial adaptation of adolescents [8]. Following the contributions of Olweus [9], it is estimated that the term peer violence can also be known as peer abuse or bullying, since all these terms refer to the same perception of violence. The researcher believes that a pupil is being bullied when another pupil or group of pupils refers to him/her with unpleasant, hurtful, or teasing words. In addition, he/she ignores him/her completely, excludes him/her from peers or intentionally keeps him/her away from certain activities. Hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, or threatening; telling lies or false rumors about the victim, as well as sending hurtful notes and trying to persuade others not to deal with

him/her, etc., are also covered. These behaviors occur frequently, and it is difficult for students who are being bullied to defend themselves. In short, bullying is characterized by the purpose to do harm repeatedly and intentionally in a context of power imbalance between the victim and the aggressor [10].

Reports such as the one carried out by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [11] corroborate this problem by pointing out that one in three students claims to have suffered bullying situations by their peers. At the national level, specifically in Spain, the ANAR Foundation [12] produced a study that argues how during the years 2020 and 2021, depriving and reducing school attendance due to the state of alarm caused by the COVID-19 health crisis has significantly reduced the incidence of bullying. However, this fact may be due to the fact that schools were closed, and the social life of adolescents moved to the online world, thus propitiating greater cyberbullying [13,14]. Research of this type has also been carried out in different communities in Spain where it is shown that more than 40% of adolescents report having been victims of bullying and about 30% have participated in this type of situation [15].

In view of the worrying results obtained by these studies, it should be noted that schools are immersed in the transformations that society is undergoing, being one of the most relevant aspects of socialization within the period of adolescence [16]. Thus, it is estimated that schools where the management of interpersonal relationships is low have greater problems of conflict and bullying among their students [17]. Some of the actions being carried out by educational centers are intervention programs that help to reduce bullying situations generated among peers [18]. The use of anti-bullying interventions can be from different methodological approaches: cognitive-behavioral programs [19], educational programs [20], or peer support [21]. Regarding the effectiveness of these programs, it is pointed out that (a) interventions focused on the whole school were found to be more significant in reducing bullying than those developed in social skills training or through classroom curricula, and (b) interventions that included combination of rules, teacher training, individual counseling, and classroom activities were more effective than those based on curricula [22]. It has been shown how these types of resources are effective with secondary school students, due to the fact that they foster positive social behaviors such as empathy, assertiveness, communication, or decision making in these participants [23,24]. An example of this is the study by Song and Kim [25], which showed that a program to improve social and emotional competence in adolescents who bully reduced this behavior and improved their social and emotional skills. On the other hand, a pilot study showed that an online psychoeducational program increased confidence and help-seeking behaviors in adolescents in the face of cyberbullying [26]. However, the problem continues to exist with a greater presence in the adolescent stage, which may be due to the fact that at that age the personality of the participants is not fully consolidated, and they are not able to understand the consequences of their actions [27]. A positive school climate, characterized by the perception of high teacher expectations and a safe environment, correlates with lower rates of school victimization and a reduction in mental health problems among students; it also fosters an atmosphere of trust and respect that benefits academic and emotional development [28].

Exposure to bullying and experiences of violent situations at an early age make young people hypersensitive to adversity and increase their risk of developing mental, physical, and behavioral health problems during childhood throughout their lives [29,30]. Recent studies point to the negative consequences of violent situations in adolescent students [31]. It is pointed out how the tendency to bullying by high school students is related to certain dimensions of school order such as the lack of rules or social isolation [32]. Compared to adolescents who did not report bullying, adolescents who witnessed or experienced bullying during childhood or adolescence were more likely to have obesity, depression, and stress disorders [33]. Some of the other problems that may arise from bullying is school failure [34], addiction to certain harmful substances such as tobacco or alcohol [35], or low student self-esteem [36]. Recent studies on teachers' perceptions indicate that

they advocate a necessary reinforcement of emotional competencies and social skills from school, as well as express dissatisfaction with the insufficient strategies implemented to adequately address violent behaviors [37]. It can be established that there is a difference in the perception of bullying between teachers and students, since while the majority of teachers indicated that they do not see bullying or rarely see it as a justifiable reaction to a provocation, students stated that they witness or experience bullying situations on a regular basis [38].

It is estimated that adolescents who are bullied by their peers are characterized by being isolated, shy students with low self-esteem [39] who may present anxiety or depression problems [40]. On the other hand, regarding the bullying profile, it is associated with these participants presenting low empathy [41], high impulsivity [42], and certain Machiavellian behaviors [43]. One aspect to consider is that bullies may be victims of unfavorable life situations, such as having experienced domestic violence in their childhood or facing psychological problems and emotional deficiencies [44,45]. These factors can influence their behavior, since exposure to violence can normalize it and the lack of positive role models can lead to the repetition of aggressive patterns [46]. In addition, problems such as untreated mental disorders and substance abuse can aggravate the tendency to violence, while socioeconomic factors such as poverty and chronic stress can increase frustration and aggression [47].

The Current Study

Investigating the perceptions, opinions, and experiences of secondary school teachers is a significant contributor to the literature on bullying. Scientific evidence in this area has been little researched, as most studies focus on more quantitative or student-specific aspects. Gathering information from teachers is crucial because they have a unique and direct perspective on student behavior and the school environment. This information can improve intervention and prevention programs by providing more accurate and practical data, helping to design more effective and contextualized strategies. Therefore, the aim of this research is to learn about secondary school teachers' perceptions of bullying in the school context.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This work was developed through a qualitative research approach with a descriptive design that aims to analyze the topic. This design was used because it is the most appropriate to respond to the stated objective and, therefore, to explore the perceptions of teachers on bullying. This type of design allows us to know a phenomenon in detail and explore certain relevant aspects that are immersed within the educational context [48]. The COREQ (COnsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research) was followed to write the research report [49]. The authors, prior to conducting this study, had previous experience on this phenomenon through the elaboration of another study related to the topic to be addressed.

2.2. Participants and Context

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, provided they met the proposed selection criteria and had previous teaching experience.

The inclusion criteria for the participants were as follows: (a) they were currently working; (b) they were teachers belonging to the secondary education stage; (c) they wanted to participate in the study; (d) they had signed the informed consent form before starting the study. The researchers contacted different educational centers to provide them with the information pertaining to the study. The schools were scattered throughout the province of Almería, both in urban and rural areas. A total of 20 secondary school teachers agreed to participate in this study. This total was made up of 11 women and 9 men between 23 and 57 years of age ($M = 39.1$; $SD = 10.8$). Teaching experience ranged from participants who

had just started working professionally for one year to those who had been teaching for 33 years ($M = 12.0$; $SD = 10.8$). In terms of nationality, all the individuals who participated were of Spanish origin. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of each of the participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants.

Participant	Sex	Age (in Years)	Teaching Experience (in Years)
1	Man	36	12
2	Woman	36	5
3	Woman	30	5
4	Woman	25	1
5	Man	56	32
6	Woman	47	25
7	Man	25	1
8	Man	26	1
9	Man	24	1
10	Man	24	1
11	Man	42	13
12	Man	50	23
13	Woman	46	2
14	Woman	57	33
15	Woman	42	13
16	Woman	33	2
17	Woman	48	17
18	Woman	49	23
19	Man	39	10
20	Woman	47	20

2.3. Data Collection

The 20 interviews were collected between February and May 2022 using a semistructured interview with open-ended questions. The duration of each individual interview was approximately 20 min. The interviews were designed by the researchers and a test was conducted before starting the interviews with the participants. Data collection was conducted online in order to make it easier for teachers to answer the questions when they had time available. In addition, this method allowed us to reach a larger number of participants, ensuring a more diverse and representative sample. By allowing flexibility and convenience of response, it promoted greater honesty and reflection in teachers' responses, improving the quality and depth of the data obtained. First, a guide was prepared with different questions focused on the experience of the researchers and the previous literature review. This question guide included a series of questions with open-ended answers about different aspects of school violence (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample of questions used during the semistructured interviews.

Stage	Subject	Content and Sample Question
Introduction	Purpose	We are conducting research on education professionals and want to learn about their experiences of bullying.
	Ethical considerations	We need to record the conversation for later analysis. No one will have access to the recordings except the researchers. The study is completely anonymous and voluntary.
Start	Introductory question	Tell me your views on bullying in the classroom.

Table 2. Cont.

Stage	Subject	Content and Sample Question
Development	Conversation guide	- Tell me about your experience with bullying in the classroom.
		- Tell me about the interventions you usually carry out in these cases of bullying.
		- How would you define students who commit bullying against their peers and those who receive it?
Closing	Final issue	Is there anything else you would like to add?
	Acknowledgments	Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study

The interview began with a section explaining the purpose of the study and its ethical considerations, followed by a series of questions focused on sociodemographic characteristics (sex, age, professional experience, and nationality) and, finally, a block of specific questions on bullying from the point of view of the teachers themselves (perception of bullying situations among students; common types of bullying; intervention in bullying situations; characteristics of students who bully their peers and who are bullied). The transcripts were given to the participants in order to observe their opinions and ideas. Data collection was terminated when no new information or themes emerged, so that data saturation was reached.

2.4. Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed as they were conducted. When two interviews had been conducted where no new information about the teachers' experience was collected, it was determined that theoretical saturation had been reached and data collection was terminated. However, all interviews were included for further analysis.

Braun and Clarke's [50] thematic analysis method was followed for data analysis: (1) Familiarization with the data: both authors read the transcripts to obtain a general idea of the content. After a second reading, the main ideas were noted down; (2) Generating initial codes: one of the authors coded the most interesting features of the data by creating codes from the quotes obtained by the participants. When a sufficiently extensive list of codes had been created, both authors analyzed the coding system, discrepancies were resolved, and the analysis was approved; (3) Search for themes: each of the codes was classified into subthemes which, once all the subthemes were obtained, were regrouped into main themes; (4) Revision of themes: the themes were reviewed so that they all fit with the codes, thus creating an analysis map; (5) Defining and naming themes: all themes were defined to provide greater clarity; (6) Report preparation: the most relevant quotes to be included with each theme and subtheme were selected to be incorporated within the research report.

The procedure of this work strategy can be seen in more detail in Table 3. This table points out different examples of the responses obtained and how, through their subject matter, they were organized into different subthemes and main themes. A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program called ATLAS.ti version 22 [51] was used to organize, extract, and code the data. Finally, a triangulation was carried out between the researchers and the participants in order to validate the analysis.

Table 3. Examples of quotations, units of meaning, subthemes, and themes.

Examples of Quotations	Examples of Units of Meaning	Subthemes	Themes
<i>"Most cases are through insults or taunts."</i>	Insults, aggressions, cyber bullying, isolation, etc.	Experiences and types of bullying.	
<i>"When I see that the situation is very complicated, I communicate it to management, but if I can, I prefer to try to get them to work it out among themselves."</i>	Mediation, educational protocols, rapprochement between the two parties.	Interventions carried out to provide solutions.	Situations of bullying.
<i>"These students don't usually participate much in class, maybe it's because of shyness."</i>	Shyness, low self-esteem, low social skills.	Traits of students who suffer bullying situations (victims).	Student Characteristics.
<i>"They think they are superior to others and have no empathy."</i>	Leaders, abuse of power, dominant, egocentric.	Traits of students who bully (bullies).	

2.5. Rigor

The rigor of the study was ensured through the criteria of credibility, confirmability, reliability, and transferability [52]. Regarding credibility, this is achieved when the interpretations of the observations collected on the actions are presented to the participants. For this purpose, two researchers with expertise in qualitative research analyzed the data obtained and each of the participants obtained a copy of their responses to each of the questions asked. Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the study, ensuring that the results are not influenced by the researcher's biases, guaranteeing this by not having a relationship between the researcher and the participants. Reliability relates to the consistency and reproducibility of the study results. Reliability is achieved through the analysis and discussion of all the data collected by the two researchers, ensuring that the interpretations and conclusions are consistent and can be replicated by other researchers. Finally, transferability refers to the applicability of the study findings to other similar contexts. Transferability in the manuscript is supported by data saturation, that is, when a point is reached at which the participants' responses do not contribute new information, suggesting that the results may be applicable to similar situations in other contexts.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the Bioethics Committee of Human Research belonging to the University of Almería with reference UALBIO2021/025. This study is consistent with the essential ethical values in human research and adheres to the fundamental principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent updates [53]. Participants at all times were informed of the purpose of the study and the voluntary capacity of the study. During data analysis, the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the results obtained were maintained.

3. Results

The results obtained were elaborated from the analysis of the transcripts extracted from the participants' responses.

This analysis focused on the perceptions that secondary school teachers have about bullying. From this analysis, two main themes and four subthemes emerged (Table 4) that allowed us to achieve the objective of the study.

Table 4. Categorization of the analysis performed.

Main Theme	Related Subtopic
1. Situations of bullying	1.1 Experiences and types of bullying
	1.2 Interventions carried out to resolve the problem
2. Student characteristics	2.1 Traits of students who suffer bullying situations (victims)
	2.2 Traits of students who bully (bullies)

3.1. Theme 1: Situations of Bullying

The first theme that has emerged is to know the experiences and feelings that teachers have about bullying among their students. The results related to this topic are related to the experience of bullying, the types of bullying that emerge in the classroom, and what interventions or resources are taken into account to reduce or limit these situations.

3.1.1. Experiences and Types of Bullying

In order to know the perception of secondary education professionals on bullying, first of all, we wanted to know if these teachers had ever experienced situations of bullying among their students. It is noteworthy that women are the ones who admit to having witnessed more bullying situations among their students than men. In the case of education professionals who have experienced some type of violent situation among their students, it is worth highlighting the type of attitudes that the students have adopted.

The most frequent behaviors among secondary school students, according to teachers, is the use of insults or certain words to denigrate other classmates.

“Habitually what students do is insult or lash out at other classmates’ abilities in order to hurt”. (Participant 17)

The teachers state that adolescents sometimes misuse social networks and use them to harass their classmates.

“We have had cases of students who have been harassed through social networks by their classmates because of their physique”. (Participant 2)

Although the most common forms of harassment used by students are insults and the media, teachers point out that another type of bullying that sometimes occurs is through physical aggression or isolating classmates.

“I have seen how the most problematic students have even come to blows, I mean hitting each other in some class changes or in the school playground”. (Participant 11)

“In addition to derogatory comments I have also seen how they isolate other classmates and do not choose them for certain activities”. (Participant 20)

3.1.2. Interventions Carried Out to Provide Solutions

Once the teachers’ perceptions of the types of bullying are interpreted, we examine how educational professionals intervene in the face of such disruptive behavior on the part of adolescents. The interventions that teachers indicate that they usually use is mediation between both affected parties. Through mediation, they try to make the bully reflect on his or her actions and, thus, reduce cases of bullying. Teachers refer to mediation as a process of open communication that takes place between the people involved in a conflict, specifically the aggressor and the victim. This strategy seeks to deepen the understanding of the situation that has generated the conflict, creating a space where both parties can express their feelings, perspectives, and needs. This approach is not about applying a rigid protocol or following a standardized school program, but focuses on facilitating a genuine and constructive dialogue.

“Especially when the attitude is taken by several elements of the group about the same person at the same time. I try to make them empathize so that the situation is reflected upon, to seek rapprochement among other like-minded people. . .”. (Participant 15)

“I have talked to them to try to get the person harassing to put themselves in the place of the person being harassed”. (Participant 14)

Some of the other procedures used by teachers to deal with this type of problem is to communicate what has happened to management so that the corresponding educational protocols can be carried out.

“When the situation is untenable, I communicate it to tutoring and the head of studies so that they are informed and do something about it”. (Participant 19)

3.2. Theme 2: Characteristics of the Student

One topic of interest is to know what personality and physical traits teachers consider their students to have that can be a mitigating factor in bullying. To this end, teachers were asked what traits they consider to be the most characteristic of both the students who are victims of episodes of bullying and the bullying students who perpetrate this type of situation against their peers.

3.2.1. Traits of Students Who Suffer Bullying Situations (Victims)

Pointing to the characteristics of student victims, teachers report that these students tend not to socialize much with their peers, so their friendship circle is very small. Therefore, as teachers point out, these students tend not to have many friends, are introverted, are often lonely and may have social anxiety.

“Students who, for whatever reason, find it difficult to interact with others, so they distance themselves”. (Participant 9)

Not being able to socialize with their peers may be attenuated by the low self-esteem that teachers comment that these students have. It is estimated that they have a low level of social skills, often present a face of unhappiness or sadness, and avoid the social world.

“They tend to be students with a profile of low self-esteem or weak character who lack self-confidence”. (Participant 3)

Figure 1 visually represents the different codes that have been extracted from the data analysis.

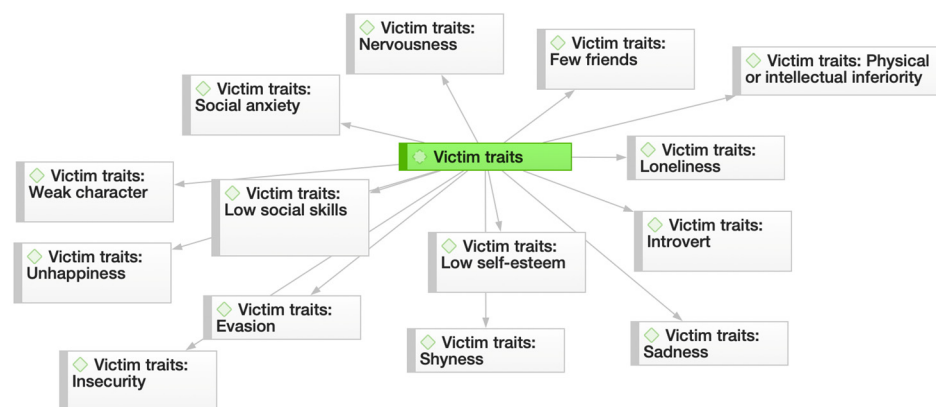


Figure 1. Conceptual map: victim traits.

3.2.2. Traits of Students Who Bully (Bullies)

Referring to bullying students, teachers indicate that they are aggressive adolescents with a strong character who consider themselves superior to others and, therefore, are dominant, egocentric, and arrogant.

“They stand out for having a lot of self-confidence, so they don’t understand that what they do is wrong and there are many who follow them”. (Participant 9)

The teachers of these students believe that these youngsters engage in these disruptive behaviors towards their peers to feel better about themselves. They try to hide their weaknesses and frustrations through bullying.

“They must have some kind of trauma generated at home. They intend to invalidate others through bullying thus reinforcing their dominant and superior position, so they manage to put aside their own shortcomings”. (Participant 8)

Another aspect to highlight is how this type of student is characterized by being extroverted, having a high level of self-esteem and social skills. Thus, they can sometimes be considered as “leaders” and have the support of other peers.

“They usually have social skills in the large group and express their opinions towards someone without remorse. They easily get others to join in their behavior, so it feeds back into the situation”. (Participant 20)

Figure 2 shows the codings that were made from the analysis of the interviews of secondary education teachers.

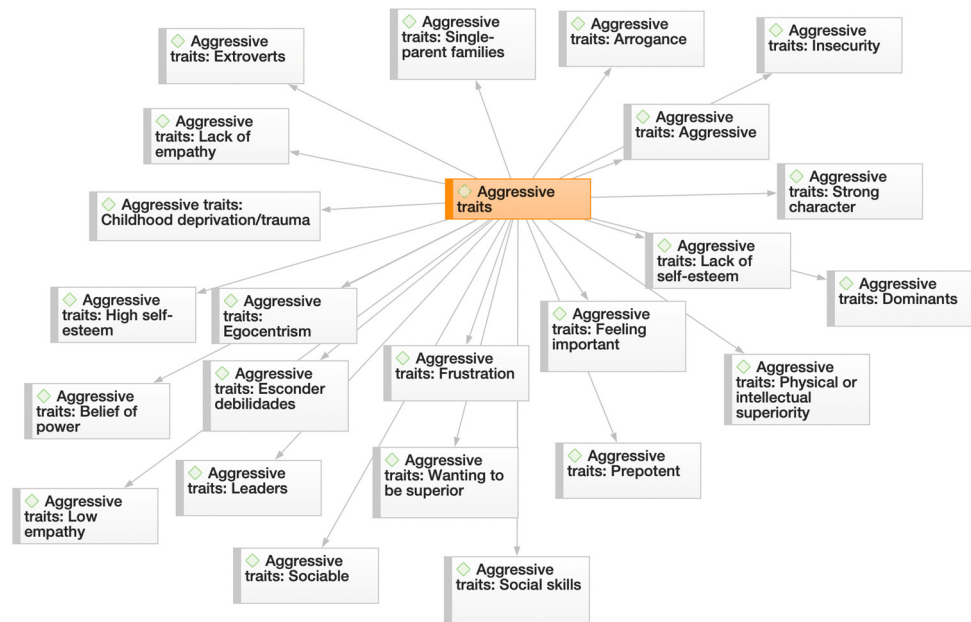


Figure 2. Conceptual map: bullying traits.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has made it possible to investigate the thinking, ideas, and conceptions that secondary education teachers have about bullying among classmates. This topic is important to work on from different perspectives, since it is a social problem that affects all members of the educational community [1–4].

Although the concept of school violence is very broad, one of the most frequent types of violence is bullying [5]. The term bullying began in the 1970s in the research of Olweus [7] and, since then, numerous studies have been carried out periodically with the aim of learning about this phenomenon [8]. Current studies conducted worldwide and nationally corroborate the problem of bullying in the classroom [11,12], although it should be noted that not all participants in this research claim to have witnessed bullying situations among their students. This contradiction between the reports and the perception of teachers may indicate that teachers are not fully involved in the school context and, therefore, are not aware of the different experiences suffered by their students.

Due to the alarming data on school violence among adolescents, special attention is paid to the implementation of various educational activities, such as intervention programs aimed at increasing socially supportive behaviors and thereby reducing destructive behav-

iors [18,23,24]. Regarding the interventions carried out by teachers to reduce this type of situation among their students, they stand out for mediating between victims and bullies by means of reflection or rapprochement between both parties. This type of intervention has had positive results, since the companionship approach is fundamental to helping the student body and promotes a sense of protection, belonging, and satisfaction [21]. This resource can be effective, as there are studies that indicate that low management of interpersonal relationships can lead to coexistence problems among the student body [17]. However, teachers also indicate that when the situation is serious, repetitive, or does not have an easy solution, they opt to communicate what happened to the tutors or management and that the corresponding educational measures are implemented. One aspect to highlight is how teachers at no time have talked about intervention programs or educational strategies that they carry out at school, although previous research points out the significant results of these interventions regarding the reduction in bullying [19–22].

Regarding the types of bullying, the participants indicate that insults, teasing, and certain words intended to denigrate peers are the most frequent in situations of bullying among peers. The students who execute this type of action against their peers, according to teachers' perceptions, are young people with a high level of self-esteem, dominant, aggressive, and have little empathy, ideas that are associated with other previous studies [27,41–43]. It would be interesting to address the different causes that may have caused these students to become aggressors, since it is estimated that the fact of having lived through different unfavorable circumstances may influence these young people to repeat aggressive patterns [44–47]. On the other hand, teachers indicate that students who are victims of bullying are characterized by not having many friends, presenting poor social skills, low self-esteem, and possessing anxiety problems, aspects that are also reflected in other research [39,40]. Thus, experiencing bullying in adolescence can generate certain problems in the proper development of students both individually and socially [29–31,33–36].

Finally, in conclusion, it is necessary to point out how the realization of this research allowed us to respond to the proposed objective. It was possible to verify the different opinions that secondary education teachers have about the bullying that occurs among students, the most frequent types of bullying, the interventions they usually carry out in these situations, and to know the most outstanding characteristics or features of the bullying students and victims. One of the limitations of this research is the lack of time available to the participants when conducting the interviews. In some cases, the topic could have been explored in greater depth. As for future lines of research, it may be interesting to know the perception that professionals from other educational stages, such as kindergarten, primary school, or higher education, such as university, have of bullying, since situations of bullying may be different depending on the age of the students. Referring to the practical implications of this research, it is important to know the different opinions of all members of the educational community on this social problem of bullying. We suggest the need to make society aware of this problem and to adopt the necessary measures to reduce this type of situation among students.

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Data Availability Statement: The data are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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