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INCIDENCE OF BULLYING IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Katherine Patricia Lecaros-Márquez

kapazl@gmail.com



ORCID: 0009-0006-0462-9852

Universidad Monter, Morelia-Michoacán, México.

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ABSTRACT

School bullying has become a significant area of analysis due to its impact on educational environments. However, research on the effects of bullying on students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is limited in Latin America, with most studies originating from developed countries. These studies often emphasize reducing risk factors that impede the inclusion of children and adolescents with ASD in educational settings, which is important for their psychosocial development. This documentary study employs a symbolic-interpretative (hermeneutic) paradigm, examining 32 sources related to bullying among children and adolescents with ASD. The goal is to identify not only the consequences of this issue but also protective factors and actionable strategies to improve the quality of life for these students.

Keyword: Bullying, School bullying, Victim, Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Diversity, Autism, ASD

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying, or harassment, is considered one of the most concerning issues for students, parents, and teachers worldwide, as highlighted in a report by the World Health Organization (WHO). This report reveals that, when analyzing school bullying among young individuals aged 14 to 28, this phenomenon is responsible for an average of 200,000 suicides annually on a global scale. This is why many places are now on alert, as bullying and the violent acts associated with it are becoming an increasingly concerning part of everyday life (García, 2022).

In this context, a segment of the student population for which statistical information remains limited consists of primary and secondary school students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to studies by the WHO, individuals with this condition are estimated to represent approximately 1% of the global population (Reaño Carranza, 2022). Similarly, in Peru, a report from the Ministry of Health for the year 2019 states that only 15,625 individuals have been reported, of which 90.6% are under the age of 11, meaning they are in the midst of their schooling years.

On this matter, Falla and Ortega-Ruiz (2019) point out that the characteristics of students with autism, who often have specific educational needs, make them targets for classmates with particular behavioral profiles. These peers perceive the special needs of students with ASD as a social vulnerability that can be exploited. Therefore, it is valid to consider this population as a high-risk group and potential victims of bullying in various educational settings.

With this in mind, it is essential to develop a clearer understanding of the concepts of aggression and violence. On the one hand, aggression is a behavior that occurs naturally and adaptively in certain contexts. Although it may cause harm or exert control over others, it does not necessarily involve malicious intent or illegitimacy, as it can serve as a means of self-defense or an expression of intense emotions. Furthermore, it is not always associated with severe destructive consequences. On the other hand, violence is defined as a deliberate form of aggression that is not related to adaptive or natural behavior, as its objective is to destroy and cause physical or psychological harm and lacks social or moral justification (Eizaguirre & Taype, 2019).

In light of the above, it is important to define the term "bullying." According to Confederación Autismo España (2016), bullying is understood as a repetitive act involving various forms of aggression, which may be physical, verbal, social, or sexual in nature. Furthermore, it is typically perpetrated by an individual or a group of aggressors with the intent to exert power, thereby creating an atmosphere of fear and dominance. The key criteria for identifying this phenomenon include its intentionality and its recurring nature over time.

To clarify the distinction between "bullying" and "harassment" in the educational context, the latter refers to any act of aggression that occurs within the school environment, which can target any member of the educational community, including staff and students. Additionally, according to the Government of Mexico, harassment is part of a broader cultural issue within society, extending beyond student interactions and involving figures such as school administrators, parents, teachers, and even administrative staff (Justicia Cotidiana, 2016).

In this respect, when analyzing the different forms of bullying, it becomes evident that they vary widely. In line with this perspective, as described by Sanchis (2024), bullying can take several forms: **physical**, which includes direct aggression such as hitting, or indirect actions like stealing; verbal, which manifests through mockery, insults, and similar behaviors; **psychological**, aimed at humiliation and belittlement, often leaving deep emotional scars on victims; **social**, which involves exclusion from a group due to perceived differences; **cyberbullying**, which utilizes technology and social media to spread attacks, often with significant reach and impact; and **dating violence**, a newer form of abuse that manipulates victims through threats of sharing intimate content (videos, photos, etc.), closely resembling what is known as gender-based violence.

Regarding the effects of bullying, it is important to note that there are consequences not only for the victim but also for the perpetrator, as well as for witnesses to the events. As highlighted by the Stopbullying.gov website (2021), those who assume the role of the bully are highly likely to engage in violent acts during adulthood. Studies on this topic show a correlation between this role and situations involving early sexual activity, street fights, substance abuse, and various criminal acts.

The victim of bullying not only experiences physical but also suffers emotional consequences of academic repercussions, which can lead to depression, anxiety, and school dropout. In some cases, a violent response from the bullied student has been observed, as they may develop deep resentment due to their experience. According to data from the U.S. government, 12 out of 15 school shootings recorded in the United States since 1990 were perpetrated by students with a history of school



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bullying. On the other hand, witnesses to these incidents often develop avoidance behaviors, such as substance use, including alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, as well as an increased likelihood of engaging in bullying themselves (Stopbullying.gov, 2021).

It is important to note that when these behaviors occur in educational settings, they do not only manifest in classrooms or schoolyards but, more significantly, during periods of low or no teacher presence. For example, bullying can happen when students enter or leave the school, while waiting in line to enter classes, in hallways, during schedule changes, in bathrooms, and even within the classrooms themselves, particularly when the teacher is writing on the board or is focused on other students, as highlighted by Sevilla and Sánchez Monge (2015).

When analyzing the causes that may lead to different bullying situations, Barrios (2014) points out that, on a personal level, while the victim suffers and attempts to cope with this situation with the few tools they possess, it is possible that the bully is also experiencing a personal crisis. Furthermore, in the family context, a household lacking a father or mother, or one with a violent parent, can normalize aggressive behavior, which then gets projected in the classroom. In the school environment, many educational institutions promote slogans of diversity and tolerance, yet show complete inconsistency with what truly happens in the classrooms. Finally, it is important to emphasize the role of the media, especially with the current prevalence of social media and content on various platforms. The media have a responsibility in what they disseminate and a duty to avoid promoting negative models that may be adopted as references by children and adolescents.

The assessment of ASD necessitates consideration of the WHO (2023) definition, which describes it as a group of diverse conditions characterized by specific levels of difficulty in areas such as communication and social interaction, which are likely to affect education and employment opportunities. Additionally, the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) views ASD as a single category that encompasses a range of symptoms, based on a continuum from what is considered normal to more severe developmental disorders (Daswani et al., 2019).

It should be highlighted that, to understand this situation comprehensively, it is essential to familiarize oneself with concepts such as special educational needs and disability. Regarding disability, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines it as a multidimensional phenomenon related to human functioning, which becomes visible in certain life situations. It is understood as the complex interaction between the individual and their environment (UNICEF, 2014).

In regard to Special Educational Needs (SEN), Luque and Luque-Rojas (2013) define them as difficulties that may arise for a specific number of students during the teaching-learning process, requiring specific adjustments. They further emphasize that these difficulties can be either temporary or permanent. The Open University of Catalonia (2020) clarifies that SEN does not necessarily refer to individuals with learning difficulties, as these challenges can also be present in students with sensory or physical needs, intellectual or cognitive disabilities, mental disorders, or even those from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Finally, this concept can also apply to students with intellectual giftedness, which poses a challenge for teachers who must design curricular adaptations and methodologies suited to their learning process.

When reviewing the relationship between variables related to bullying and its incidence in students with autism, Comin (2023) refers to a recent meta-analysis revealing an 84% victimization rate among students with this condition. He also highlights a study conducted in the United Kingdom in 2014, involving more than 800 children with autism, which found that school bullying affected 77% of these children that year. This alarming data sheds light on a pervasive issue that spans across different societies.

METHOD

In accordance with the aforementioned, the aim of this article is to present the results of the most recent studies that have linked the variables of bullying within schools and autism worldwide, with a particular focus on Latin America research. Additionally, it seeks to propose action alternatives that promote greater inclusion, emphasizing preventive and protective factors that foster a safer environment for the development of neurodivergent individuals.

It should be noted that this article is developed under a hermeneutic paradigm, an approach to research focused on understanding the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences. This paradigm assumes that social reality is constructed through symbolic interactions



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among individuals, where each person interprets and assigns meaning to their experiences. Based on hermeneutic theory, this approach emphasizes the interpretation of texts, discourses, and symbols in human communication, recognizing that the meanings and symbols in language influence how individuals perceive and construct their social reality. As a result, for the documentary analysis, a total of thirty-two (32) bibliographic sources that have addressed the indicated variables in recent years have been consulted.

Similarly, both direct and indirect research on the issue of bullying was identified, including websites from internationally recognized institutions such as the Spanish Confederation of Autism, the U.S. government-sponsored website stopbullying.gov, and reports published by the WHO (World Health Organization), UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), among others. Additionally, scientific articles published between 2019 and 2024 were identified, focusing on the latest trends and intervention strategies at the international level. These articles address the topic from medical, psychological, and educational perspectives. The experiences of first-world countries, which have focused their efforts on reducing existing figures and the impact of bullying on the key actors involved, are particularly relevant for this study.

For the present article, sources in both English and Spanish were considered to achieve a broader scope and greater diversity in the selection, ensuring that they provide more elements for analysis in this study. Recognized academic databases were also used to search for information sources, such as Google Scholar, Dialnet, Scielo, and PubMed, as well as specialized publications in the fields of autism and bullying, including Autism Research, the International Bullying Prevention Association, and scientific articles from renowned academic institutions, such as the University of Valladolid, among others.

Finally, it is important to note that in terms of the quality of the selected studies, criteria of rigor and relevance were applied, identifying those that, in addition to being recent, were authored by individuals with extensive experience and authority in the field in their countries of origin. On the other hand, it is worth highlighting that this article serves as a representative sample of research generated when linking the variables of bullying and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); however, due to difficulties accessing languages other than English or Spanish, it is possible that other complementary approaches, which do not diminish the value of the information cited in this study, may have been overlooked.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

One of the limited studies addressing school bullying among students with ASD in Peru was conducted by Uranga (2021), who concludes that children with ASD face a significantly higher risk of being bullied. Key contributing factors include maladaptive behaviors, difficulties with attention, hyperactivity, and underdeveloped social skills, underscoring the urgent need for effective prevention strategies, thorough assessment, and targeted interventions to address these challenges and improve the quality of data available on the issue.

Within the Peruvian context, the issue of bullying in educational settings has been described as an "invisible reality" by the Ombudsman's Office. In this framework, the findings from the SíseVe portal (2022), managed by the Ministry of Education and designed to track reported cases nationwide, are particularly noteworthy. During the first months of 2022, a total of 32 cases of violence against students with disabilities (including physical, intellectual, or sensory disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and other educational needs such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, stuttering, among others) were recorded. The majority of these cases were linked to discrimination (7%), followed by verbal aggression (6%), physical violence resulting in injuries (5%), physical violence without injuries (5%), physical punishment (4%), humiliating treatment (2%), sexual violence and inappropriate touching (1%), harassment (1%), and social isolation (1%).

In this context, according to *La República* (2020), the budget allocated to Program 106—a government initiative aimed at promoting the inclusion of children and youth with disabilities in basic and technical-vocational education—still represents less than 1% of the total budget assigned to Peru's Education Sector. Meanwhile, only 5% of monitored schools reported having the necessary resources to support students with disabilities, underscoring the significant gaps that persist in addressing these critical needs.



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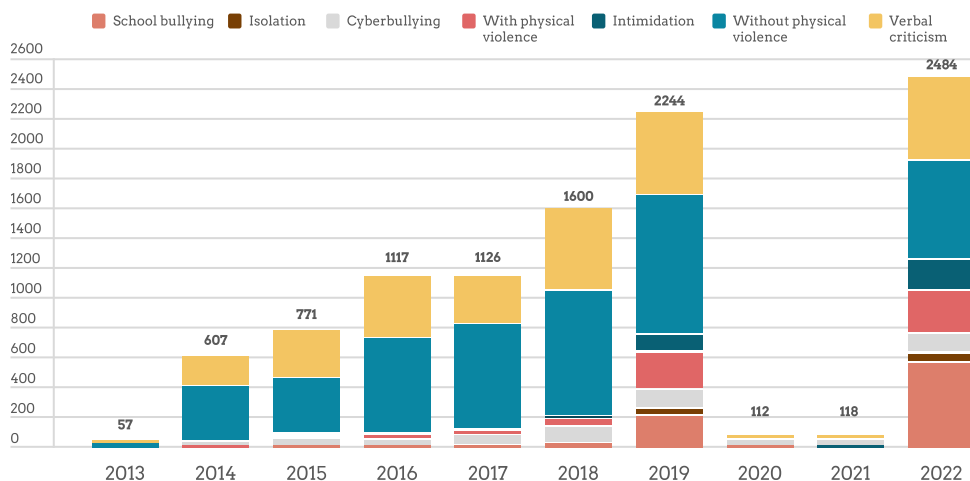
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It is important to note that when seeking information on bullying in Peru, it is evident that, according to the Ministry of Education (MINEDU) and reported by various media outlets, there are an increasing number of school violence or bullying cases being reported by parents, although there still persists an underreporting regarding the actual information.

In light of data published by SiseVe, the Peruvian Ministry of Education's (MINEDU) platform against school violence, 48,247 cases were reported between September 2013 and September 2022. In October 2022 alone, the platform documented 1,730 instances of bullying and 97 cases of cyberbullying nationwide (Chinchay, 2022). According to a report by the Peruvian newspaper *La República* (Morales, 2022), by the end of last year, this figure rose to 2,484 complaints—the highest number recorded in the past nine years, as illustrated in the following table:

Figure 1
Reported Cases of School Bullying in Peru (2013–2022)



Source: SiSeVe • Graphic: LR Data

It is noteworthy that, when analyzing the data, Peru's capital, Lima, accounts for the highest number of reported cases with 786 incidents, followed by regions such as Arequipa, Piura, and Callao. This pattern underscores that bullying is a pervasive and urgent issue across the country, demanding immediate attention from policymakers and educational authorities.

Within this framework, Crispin (2018) examines manifestations of bullying across three 5th-grade classrooms at a private educational institution in Lima, Peru. The study identifies key indicators for recognizing potential bullies, as well as direct bullying behaviors observed in the classrooms, such as mocking physical appearance, assigning derogatory nicknames, engaging in unjust verbal criticism, and physical aggression (kicking, pinching, tripping, etc.). Additionally, the research highlights indirect bullying tactics, which include encouraging others to ridicule a peer, promoting the use of demeaning labels, intentionally ignoring the targeted individual, and excluding classmates based on physical traits.

Furthermore, within the broader South American context, Espada et al. (2020) conducted studies in rural areas of Ecuador. Their findings emphasize a troubling lack of awareness and institutional protocols for addressing bullying in private educational settings, and they also reveal that incidents are rarely communicated to families, and even a tendency to conceal the issue.

In a related study, Teodoro and Schmidt (2023) explore the experiences of students with ASD in Brazil through autobiographical interviews, distinguishing between direct and indirect bullying. Direct bullying, as observed, often involves the use of derogatory labels, physical intimidation, and overt aggression. Indirect bullying, conversely, relies on social exclusion—colloquially termed the "silent treatment"—which fosters profound loneliness in victims and may escalate to deliberate self-harm, depression, or even suicidal thoughts.

This review reveals that developed nations have spearheaded detailed investigations into the correlation between these two variables. A notable example is the longitudinal study by Holden et al. (2020) in England, which examines the link between bullying and suicidal tendencies among students with ASD. The research establishes a significant association between bullying and heightened suicide risk during the study period, identifying contributing factors such as higher cognitive ability, psychosis, affective disorders, and gender. Notably, autistic females were found to



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be disproportionately impacted, underscoring the urgent need for gender-sensitive interventions in addressing this critical public health issue.

Similarly, regarding the incidence of school bullying in relation to autism severity, González et al. (2019), in their study involving individuals with autism and their families in Málaga province (Spain), found that the highest rates of bullying were predominantly observed among males with Asperger's Syndrome (now classified as Level 1 Autism). Their research also emphasizes the critical role of family support systems in managing such adversities and providing stability amid vulnerability. Notably, these findings align with the work of Gkatsa and Antoniou (2024), who investigated victimization levels among elementary school children with high-functioning autism (Level 1 Autism) and its correlation with teachers' inclusive practices. Their study revealed that 34.3% of educators perceived this group as being at significantly higher risk of victimization compared to neurotypically developing peers, underscoring systemic gaps in safeguarding students with autism despite inclusive education frameworks.

Additionally, Ochi et al. (2020) underscore findings from prior studies conducted in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and England, which reveal a prevalence rate of 7–75% for individuals with ASD as bully victims and 19–46% as perpetrators. The authors attribute this dual vulnerability to challenges in developing Theory of Mind (ToM)—a cognitive skill critical for understanding and interpreting others' mental states, emotions, or intentions. This aligns with the research by Liu et al. (2018), which demonstrated that ToM, focused training in control groups not only enhanced self-awareness and social perception among high-functioning autistic students but also equipped them with strategies to anticipate others' behaviors and distance themselves from potential aggressors.

Hernández (2017), in the guide *Bullying and Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Framework for Educators and Families*, emphasizes the critical need to establish a school climate committee composed of educational counselors and teachers trained in conflict resolution and social dynamics. This committee would systematically analyze reported incidents, conduct thorough assessments, classify cases appropriately, and develop tailored intervention strategies. The guide further stresses the importance of collaborative efforts between educators and families to foster safe, inclusive environments for students, valuing their neurodiversity.

Notably, in the context of mitigating risk factors for school bullying, Vallejo (2021) introduces the concept of Emotional Education—a dynamic, student-centered process that integrates emotional awareness into daily life through practical, actionable strategies. This approach helps prevent situations like bullying and should be an integral part of any intervention plan, also including actions aimed at raising awareness within the community.

In the same vein, Aranda (2023) highlights that protective factors against bullying extend beyond merely mitigating risk factors, pointing to understudied areas requiring deeper exploration. Among these is the role of specialized educational schools, which, though serving a minority of students, exhibit lower bullying prevalence due to enhanced teacher attention, targeted training in addressing behavioral challenges, and generally smaller class sizes. Similarly, strengthening positive relationships through the support of a friend or a group of classmates can become a protective factor. This is often associated with raising awareness on the topic, creating a culture where bullying situations are reported and support is available to resolve them.

Finally, the authors emphasize that a critical protective factor lies in parental engagement and trust. Parents' ability to detect potential bullying through changes in their child's behavior enables timely reporting and intervention. Equally vital is immediate, decisive action by educators to implement protective strategies for the affected student and halt ongoing victimization. However, proactive prevention is far more effective than reactive measures.

CONCLUSION

The most comprehensive global literature review on the incidence of bullying among students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) underscores a consensus: there is a positive correlation between victimization and the inherent social communication challenges faced by this student population. Restricted

social interaction skills, a hallmark of ASD, heighten vulnerability to aggression, taunting, and exclusion in its varied forms. Concurrently, the review reveals a growing emphasis within the educational community on designing evidence-based interventions to promote effective inclusion.



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Similarly, multiple studies reviewed indicate that, among identified bullying cases, high-functioning autistic students (classified as Level 1 Autism Spectrum Disorder under the DSM-5 framework) are the most affected by acts of harassment. This is related to their communication difficulties, often marked by rigid interaction patterns and literal interpretations of language, which hinder their ability to discern others' social cues or intentions. Developed nations are increasingly prioritizing Theory of Mind (ToM) training programs aimed at enhancing social cognition and adaptive communication skills and replying them in various environments where such incidents occur will be necessary.

In this context, and considering Peru's regulatory mandate to reserve a minimum of two classroom vacancies for inclusive students—specifically addressing the inclusion of autistic children and adolescents—it is critical to interrogate the validity of current inclusive policies. These policies, as Reaño (2023) argues, risk perpetuating marginalization by framing inclusion through a lens of difference that inherently distances neurodivergent students from societal norms of acceptability and equity.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the cited researchers, school education should not be reduced to a mere conduit for academic instruction. Instead, it must challenge all stakeholders—educators, policymakers, families, and students—to reimagine learning as a holistic development process. An inclusive educational environment, grounded in consciousness-raising and authentic emotional education, can cultivate values of empathy, mutual respect, and social cohesion. Such an approach not only equips students to coexist with peers whose neurodiversity or identities differ from their own but also affirms the inherent dignity of every individual.

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