

Teaching Practices, School Support and Bullying

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Abstract

Research in recent years indicates that schools, and in particular teaching practices, play an essential role in preventing bullying. This study's aim is to investigate the direct and indirect relationships between permissive and direct intervention teacher practices, school support and bullying. In a non-probabilistic way, 386 (58.1%) boys and 278 (41.9%) girls from 30 primary schools were selected in a city in the northwest of Mexico. The average age of students was 10.4 years ($SD = 1.3$ years). From the results of the calculation of a model of structural equations, it is inferred that permissive teaching practices are directly related positively to bullying, whereas direct intervention does it in a negatively. It is seen that both types of practices are indirectly related to bullying through its effects on school support. These findings confirm the role of the teacher in the prevention of bullying.

Keywords: *teacher practices; school support and bullying*

1. Introduction

Bullying involves aggressions between students that are intentional and constant in the context of relationships with power differences between aggressors and victims (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). This problem affects schools in different regions of the world (Craig et al., 2009; Piotrowski & Hoot, 2008). In Mexico, it is reported that between 30 and 60% of students are involved in bullying as both as aggressors or victims' (Castillo & Pacheco, 2008, National Institute for the Evaluation of Education [INEE], 2006, Tronco & Madrigal, 2013; Valadez, 2008). The seriousness of this situation lies in the block of the purpose of schools to ensure that students acquire quality learning and develop social skills that allow them to enter a democratic society (Valdés, Estévez, & Manig, 2014).

The effects of bullying are reflected in students who are involved directly and indirectly. In the victims, there is a decrease in commitment to the school (Iyer, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Eisenberg, & Thompson, 2010, Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers 2009), associated with emotional problems and even suicide attempts (Borowsky, Taliaferro, & McMorris, 2013; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2010). Also, aggressors report depression, personality disorders, suicidal ideation, and a greater likelihood of involvement in criminal acts during their adulthood (Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008). On the other hand, students who are spectators of bullying present stress, discomfort and insecurity within their school environment (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008).

The study of this phenomenon focuses mainly on the identification of psychological and familial characteristics related to being a victim and / or aggressor (Brendgen, Girard, Vitaro, Dionne, & Boivin, 2016; Möble, Kleimann, & Rehbein, 2008; Hanish et al., 2004; Sheng, Herbert, Kang, & Yu, 2009). However, research in recent years indicates that schools, and in particular teaching practices, play an essential role in their prevention (Barker et al., 2008, Ma, 2002; Sheng et al., 2009).

Teaching practices structure social dynamics in classrooms and the school in general (Farmer, Lines, & Hamm, 2011; Swearer & Espelage, 2001). Atria, Strohmeier and Spiel (2007) assert that the variability of reports of bullying is explained in 54% by differences in the classrooms. The students' perception of the teacher's response to bullying situations affects the behavior of victims, aggressors, and even spectators (De Wet, 2006, Kochenderfer-Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2010, Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2004). Teaching practices for the management of bullying

involve the actions taken by teachers to deal with situations of aggression among students (Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008).

Teaching practices send an implicit message to students about the extent to which teacher approves or disapproves of this behavior (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2013, Yoon, 2004). Teachers' responses that are perceived by their students as approving victimization, whether or not the teacher's intention, increase the frequency and intensity of the phenomenon (Bauman & Del Río, 2006; Byers, Caltabiano, & Caltabiano, 2011; Yoon, 2004). On the other hand, practices that disapprove of bullying demonstrate to students that teachers are interested in caring for interactions in the classroom, and school (Rodkin & Gest, 2011).

Permissive practices involve teachers' actions such as not intervening to stop the aggression, holding the victim accountable for the aggression and not punishing the aggressor (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008, Struyf, Adriaensens, & Meynen, 2011, Troop- Gordon & Ladd, 2013, Valdés, Martínez, & Carlos, 2017). Although evidence suggests that bullying increases if the aggressor succeeds in exercising his or her power over the victim without consequences, reports indicate that a large number of teachers do not intervene or do so inappropriately (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003; Song & Swearer, 2002).

Practices of direct intervention are those where the teacher stops any form of aggression among students, protects the victim and punishes the aggressor. There is evidence that these practices reduce the frequency of bullying (Rigby, 2014; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014, Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Teaching practices of direct intervention are positively related to students' perceptions of support at school (Burger, Strohmeier, Sprober, Bauman, & Rigby, 2015; Marshall, Yarber, Sherwood-La, Gray, & Estell, 2015; Reinke & Herman, 2002). School support may involve emotional, instrumental, and informational aids (Demaray, Malecki, Davidson, Hodgson, & Rebus, 2005). Teaching support refers to the students' perception of academic, psychological and/or emotional support by their teachers (Alampay & Macapagal, 2011; Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001). This support is associated with improved academic and social performance of students (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, & Sink, 2009; Vedder, Boekaerts, & Seegers, 2005). The perception of teacher support decreases the risk of students being involved in bullying situations. Also decreases the risk of students being involved in bullying situations. Past and emerging studies (Di Stasio, Savage, & Burgos, 2016, Flaspohler et al., 2009, McNeely & Falci, 2004, Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnstrom, 2001) suggest that when students feel protected by teachers and can talk to them about their problems, they feel empowered. Therefore, those factors seem to decrease the probability of being victimized.

Although there is evidence about the effects of teaching practices and school support with bullying, several gaps were identified in the literature. First, few studies address the indirect effects of teaching practices through their impact on school support in bullying. Second, no studies were identified in Latin America that investigated the relationships considered in the study model (teaching practices, school social support, and bullying). Third, in Mexico, there are few studies related to school factors related to bullying.

Therefore, the present study aimed to test the direct and indirect relationships between teaching practices (permissive and direct intervention), school support and bullying (see Figure 1). Regarding the direct effects, it is expected that permissive teaching practices will be positively related to bullying, and direct teaching practices will do so negatively. Also, school support is negatively related to the frequency of bullying. As far as indirect effects are concerned, it is hypothesized that both practices will indirectly affect bullying through its relationship with school support. It is expected that permissive practices favor bullying by reducing school support and direct intervention practices will lessen it by increasing school support.

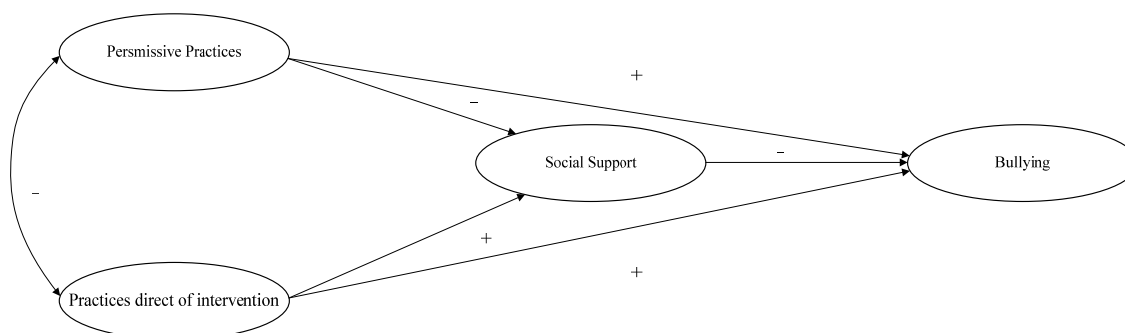


Figure 1. Theoretical Model of the Relationship between Teaching Practices, School Support and Bullying

2. Method

2.1 Participants

30 schools located in the different school zones of a city in the northwest of Mexico were selected in a non-probabilistic way, for this, the availability of the study was considered as the criterion. A sample of 664 students from 4th, 5th, and 6th grades was subsequently selected. The average age of participants was 10.4 years ($SD = 1.3$ years), of which 386 (58.1%) were boys, and 278 (41.9%) were girls.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Permissive Teaching Practices

A scale was designed specifically for the study based on the literature analysis on the subject (Conde, 2012, Ellis & Shute, 2007, Rigby, 2014, Valdés et al., 2017). The scale is composed of seven scenarios that illustrate different types of bullying. Students are asked to select how often their teachers perform four different types of behavior in the face of assaults (e.g., 'they do not intervene', 'they tell the victim to defend themselves'). The instrument was answered in a Likert format with five response options ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Its reliability measured with Cronbach's Alpha was .93.

2.2.2 Teaching Practices of Direct Intervention

The subscale was used to measure practices of direct intervention of the teacher in situations of aggression among students of the instrument developed by Valdés et al. (PDNP, 2017). It measures four items of teacher behavior aimed at stopping the aggression, protecting the victim and punishing the aggressor (e.g., 'appropriately punishes the aggressor'). The instrument was answered with a Likert scale with five response options ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Its reliability is measured with Cronbach's alpha was .86.

2.2.3 School Support

The Malecki, Demaray and Elliot (2000) scale was adapted to measure students' perception of the support they receive at school to deal with bullying situations. The instrument is composed of six items (e.g., 'is there a teacher in charge of handling bullying allegations at school?'). It is responded in a Likert format with five response options ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Cronbach's Alpha was .86.

2.2.4 Bullying

The scale developed by Valdés and Carlos (2014) was adapted. This version is composed of four items that evaluate the frequency of bullying perceived by the peers during the last month (example, "I am insulted by other students", "I am threatened by other students"). Likert scale was answered with five options of response 0 (*never*), 1 (*almost never, 0-2 assaults*), 2 (*sometimes, 3-5 assaults*), 3 (*almost always, 5-7 assaults*) and 4 (*always, more than 7 assaults*). The reliability measured with Cronbach's Alpha was .91.

2.3 Procedure

Initially, the principals were informed of the purpose of the study and their authorization to access the students was requested. In a second moment, an informed consent letter was sent to the parents of the students where approval was requested for their children to participate in the study. Finally, students whose parents signed the informed consent were invited to participate voluntarily, guaranteeing the confidentiality of the information.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

The lost data were treated using the regression imputation method. First, a descriptive and correlation analysis were performed between the variables involved in the study with SPSS .23 support. Subsequently, a model of structural equations was calculated. To support the multivariate normality of the data, the AMOS bootstrap method (2,000 replicates with a 95% confidence interval) was used (Byrne, 2010). The maximum likelihood estimation (ML) method was used. As acceptable adjustment indices were considered: χ^2 , p (chi-square and associated probability) $> .001$, SRMR (square root of standardized residual) $\leq .05$, AGFI (adjusted goodness index), CFI (comparative adjustment index) $\geq .95$, RMSEA IC 90 (square root mean error approximation with its confidence interval) $\leq .05$ (Brown, 2015). Indirect effects were determined using the AMOS bootstrap method with a 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2009).

3. Results

3.1 Correlations

The correlations between permissive teaching practices, direct intervention practices and school support with bullying were significant and behaved in the sense proposed in the model (see Table 1).

Table 1. Measures, Standard Deviations and Correlations between Bullying and Variables Involved in the Study

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|----------------------------------|------|------|---------|---------|--------|---|
| 1. Bullying | .73 | .23 | - | | | |
| 2. Permissive practices | 1.56 | .75 | .32*** | - | | |
| 3. Direct Intervention Practices | 1.77 | .88 | -.18** | -.40*** | - | |
| 4. School support | 2.84 | 1.09 | -.34*** | -.24** | .35*** | - |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Bullying was negatively correlated with teaching practices of direct intervention and school support, while with permissive practices it had a positive correlation. Social support was positively correlated with practices of direct intervention and negatively with permissive practices

3.2 Structural model

The model explains 25% of the variance of bullying scores. The probability value associated with X^2 was significant ($X^2 = 211, gl = 111, p < .000$), which can be explained due to the vulnerability of this test to the sample size. However, the values of the adjustment indices were adequate, suggesting that the model is empirically sustainable (SRMR = .05; AGFI = .95; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .036, IC 90 [.02 - .05]) (see Figure 2).

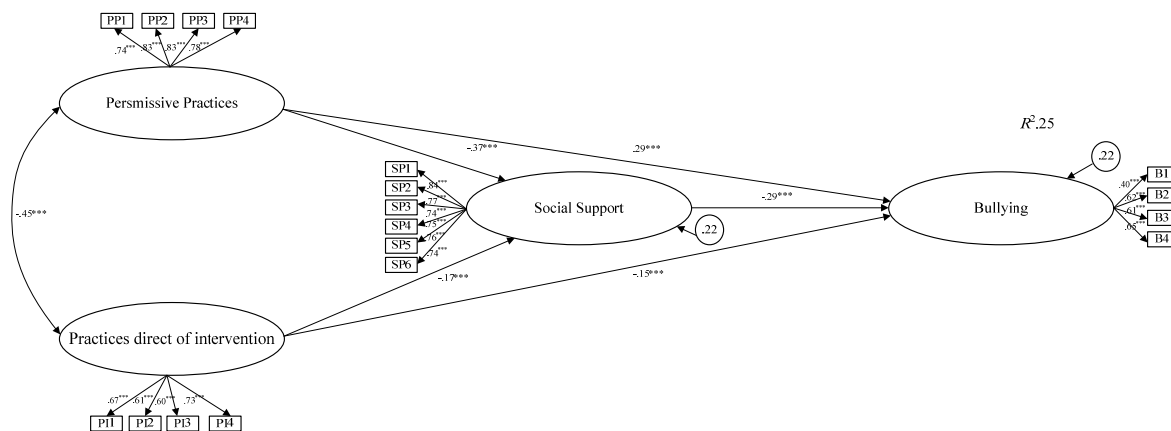


Figure 2. Standardized Coefficients of the Relationship Model between Teaching Practices, School Support and Bullying. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

From the analysis of the standardized beta coefficients of direct relationships, we infer that permissive teaching practices are negatively related to school support ($\beta = -.37, p < .000$) ($\beta = -.37, p < .000$) and positively to bullying ($\beta = .29, p < .000$). On the other hand, direct intervention practices are positively associated with school support ($\beta = .17, p < .000$) and negatively with bullying ($\beta = -.15***, p < .000$). Likewise, school support has a negative effect on the frequency of bullying ($\beta = -.29, p < .000$). Regarding indirect relationships, the results show that both teaching practices are indirectly related to bullying through its effects on school support. Direct intervention practices indirectly reduce bullying because of its positive relationship with school ($\beta = -.17, IC 95 [.09 -15], p < .000$) and permissive practices do so positively through its negative effect in school support ($\beta = .13, IC 95 [.09 -15], p < .000$).

4. Discussion

The study analyzes the direct and indirect relationships between permissive teaching practices, direct intervention, school support, and bullying in primary school students. It was expected that permissive teaching practices would be positively related both, directly and indirectly, through its negative effect on social support with bullying. Likewise, direct intervention practices would directly and indirectly reduce bullying, this last one by its positive action in school support.

Regarding the direct effects, results confirm what we expected from literature. It was found that permissive teaching practices have a positive effect on the frequency of bullying (Bauman & Del Río, 2006; Byers et al., 2011; Yoon, 2004). Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that direct intervention practices decrease the manifestation of this problem (Olweus, 1993; Rodkin & Gest, 2011). Finally, results showed that social support teachers are related to lower bullying reports (Furlong & Chung, 1995; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Perren & Hornung, 2005).

Findings suggest that teaching practices may favor or impair bullying reports in schools. While permissiveness favors the empowerment of the aggressor, increasing the vulnerability of victims. Direct intervention practices have the opposite effect, reducing the instrumental and affective gains of the aggressors and empowering the victims (James et al., 2008; Troop -Gordon & Ladd, 2013).

Regarding indirect effects, teaching practices affect the frequency of bullying through its relationship with school support. The use of permissive practices in the face of bullying causes a lower perception of the students' support to face these problems on the part of the school (Hyman et al., 2004; Wei, Williams, Chen, & Chang, 2010). There is evidence that lack of school support increases students' vulnerability, empowers perpetrators, and promotes non-committal behavior of viewers with victim advocacy (Choy & Cho, 2001) 2012; De Wet, 2007; Hong & Espelage, 2012).

On the contrary, the use of direct intervention practices is related to students' experiences of support by the school to handle bullying situations (Burger et al., 2015; Marshall, Yarber, Sherwood-Laughlin, Gray, & Estell, 2015; Reinke & Herman, 2002). These findings show that teachers should directly stop situations of aggression between peers, protecting the victim and / or punishing the perpetrator (Dupper, 2003).

In previous studies, the relationship between school support and bullying prevention is highlighted (Díaz & Bartolomé, 2016; Demaray & Malecki, 2003). However, the present study demonstrates that school support goes hand in hand with the practices used by teachers to deal with bullying. Insofar as teacher practices favor or weaken the student's perception of school support to handle these situations, will increase or decrease the frequency of the phenomenon in school. School support for victims is a key element in bullying prevention since it triggers an environment that discourages aggressive behavior and favors pro-social behavior towards victims (Boulton et al., 2013; Flaspohler et al., 2013).

5. Conclusions

In summary, the results show that students' behavior towards their peers is related to the quality of relationships within the classroom, which is influenced by teachers' practices in the face of bullying (Deault & Savage, 2013; Woolfolk-Hoy & Weinstein, 2006); second, it is demonstrated that teaching practices also affect the quality of the support the student perceives in the school to handle situations of aggression by peers; in third place, it is evident that teaching practices, depending on their type, directly and indirectly, favor or discourage aggression among students (Goldstein, Arnold, Rosenberg, Stowe, & Ortiz, 2001; Roland & Galloway, 2002).

6. Limitations

Although the present study presents data that contribute to the development of bullying prevention programs, it also presents some limitations that suggest the use of the results with caution. In the first place, its cross-sectional design does not allow causal relations to be established between the variables, so future research with longitudinal and / or experimental designs is recommended to elucidate these effects. Second, the study analyzes only two forms of teaching practices; this shows the need to examine other possible bullying teaching practices, such as that of restorative discipline and inductive reasoning.

Finally, despite their limitations, the results show the role of teaching practices in the consolidation of an adequate school environment and the understanding and prevention of bullying in primary schools in Mexico.

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