

Articles

Bullying According to Gender, and Immigration Background in Spanish Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Boys are more frequent aggressors than girls, but there are no conclusive findings on gender differences in victimization. There is a relationship between immigration background and bullying, but differences between generations are still debated. Therefore, the objectives of this study were: 1) to analyze victimization according to gender and immigration background (first and second generation); 2) to compare the attitudes of students against bullying based on these variables. **Method:** a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was carried out, considering gender and immigration background as independent variables, and types of offline bullying (physical, verbal and relational) as dependent variables. The sample was made up of 6,335 Spanish students (50.1% girls; 49.9% boys; average age: 15.83, DT: 0.29). **Results:** Statistically significant differences were detected in types of bullying (considered together) and in attitudes against bullying according to gender and immigration background ($p < .001$). **Conclusions:** being a first-generation immigrant stands out as the main risk factor. Findings are discussed as to the need to address cultural victimization in schools.

Acoso Escolar Según el Género y los Antecedentes de Inmigración en Estudiantes Españoles

RESUMEN

Antecedentes: Los chicos son agresores más frecuentemente que ellas, pero no hay hallazgos concluyentes sobre diferencias de género en la victimización. Existe relación entre antecedentes de inmigración y acoso escolar, pero todavía se discuten las diferencias entre generaciones. Por ello, los objetivos de este estudio fueron: 1) analizar el acoso escolar en función del género y los antecedentes de inmigración (primera y segunda generación); 2) comparar las actitudes de los estudiantes contra el acoso escolar en función de dichas variables. **Método:** se llevó a cabo un análisis multivariado de covarianza (MANCOVA). Las variables independientes fueron el género y los antecedentes de inmigración. Las variables dependientes fueron los tipos de acoso escolar presencial (físico, verbal y relacional). La muestra fue constituida por 6335 estudiantes españoles (50.1% mujeres; 49.9% hombres; media de edad: 15.83, DT: 0.29). **Resultados:** se detectaron diferencias estadísticamente significativas en los tipos de acoso escolar considerados conjuntamente y en las actitudes contra el acoso en función del género y de los antecedentes de inmigración ($p < .001$). **Conclusiones:** el principal factor de riesgo encontrado fue ser inmigrante de primera generación. Los hallazgos se discuten en cuanto a la necesidad de abordar la victimización cultural en las escuelas.

Palabras clave:

Acoso escolar
Actitudes
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There is no universal consensus on the definition of the term “bullying”. However, the most widely used in this field of research is the one proposed by Olweus (1993). This defines bullying as a phenomenon of aggression by one or more students against another in a repeated, intentional, and sustained manner over time. In this way, an imbalance of power is produced between the aggressor/s and the victim.

There are four types of bullying according to the violence exerted (Smith et al., 2008): 1) physical violence that implies direct physical contact (punches, kicks, etc.); 2) verbal violence through the use of offensive language directly or covertly towards another person (offensive nicknames, insults, etc.); 3) relational violence that includes both social exclusion and spreading false rumours about the victim; and 4) cyberbullying, which is the extension of peer violence to the virtual space.

Currently, there has been an increase in the number of investigations focused on bullying. More specifically, research in this field has grown exponentially in the last 10 years (Smith, 2019).

One of the main causes that has affected the exponential increase in research on bullying has been the enormous interest in studying the consequences of the phenomenon on the health of the students involved. Thus, victims see their emotional, social, behavioural, and cognitive development compromised, affecting both their well-being and their quality of life (Turner et al., 2015). More specifically, being a victim is related to emotional, social, and psychological maladjustment. This can trigger symptoms such as anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and depression that could lead to poor academic performance and even suicide (Moore et al., 2017).

On the other hand, another of the main reasons that have had an impact on the notable increase in research in this field has been the growing interest in individual and family factors, both risk and protection against bullying. Among the sociodemographic risk factors associated with the phenomenon are gender and immigration background (Álvarez-García et al., 2015; Barlett & Coyne, 2014; Cook et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2019; Suárez-García et al., 2020; Zych et al., 2015).

Regarding gender, Cook et al. (2010) carried out a meta-analysis of 153 studies in order to study the possible correlations of gender with the roles of the aggressor, victim, and aggressor/victim. The results indicated correlations between the male gender and the three roles, with the correlation being more consistent with the role of the aggressor ($r=.18$).

More recently, Smith et al. (2019) developed an investigation on gender differences from five large transnational databases (PISA, TIMSS, GSHS, EUKO, and HBSC). This study shows that both genders show the same risk of being victims, but boys have a higher risk of being perpetrators of bullying compared to girls. These results have been revealed after constantly comparing all the transnational surveys indicated above from 1994 to 2018. It is worth mentioning that these generalizations are nuanced depending on age, type of bullying, country or culture, and the historical period.

Carrera-Fernández et al. (2013) carried out an investigation in Spain on gender differences in a representative sample of 1,500 Spanish adolescents. For one thing, they found that boys were involved as bullies much more often than girls. On the other hand, they showed that there were gender differences in bullying depending on the type of bullying. Thus, girls were both bullies

and victims more often than boys when referring to a type of relational bullying that involved “talking about someone behind their back”. In addition, boys were victims of physical bullying more often than girls.

Other studies also found significant gender differences depending on the type of bullying (Carrera et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2010; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Boys were more likely to use and suffer physical violence, while girls tend to be more involved in relational or verbal violence (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Likewise, Cook et al. (2010) showed that boys are more frequently involved in physical bullying and less in relational bullying.

These results may be due to cultural representations, values, and social expectations to which students are exposed (Smith, 2019). In fact, Hellström and Beckman (2020) found a highly stereotyped perception of gender differences in both girls and boys.

In relation to immigration background, these play a prominent role since they have been identified as a risk factor for bullying. Various studies support that immigrant youth experience more victimization by bullying than their non-immigrant peers (Alivernini et al., 2019; López-Castro & Priegue, 2019; Méndez et al., 2012; Pistella et al., 2020; Özdemir et al., 2016; Strohmeier et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2016).

For the study of the relationship between the phenomenon and the immigration background, you can differentiate between first and second-generation immigrant students (Rumbaut et al., 2000). First-generation students were born outside the host country just like their parents. The second generation refers to those who were born in the host country as opposed to their parents who were born in another country.

In this line, several studies (Alivernini et al., 2019; Strohmeier et al., 2011) affirm that first-generation immigrants present more victimization by bullying than second-generation immigrants. This may be since the second-generation immigrants are more proficient in the language of the receiving country than the first-generation immigrants and they present more possibilities for social and cultural integration. However, other studies (Eggers & Mitchell, 2016; Peguero & Williams, 2013) maintain that second-generation immigrants are the ones with the most victimization. This fact can be justified by the difficulty of coping with more stressors and frustration derived from low ethnic support and negative attitudes from the host population.

Before the study of attitudes toward bullying, one must clarify the roles involved in the phenomenon. So far, three roles played by students involved in bullying (aggressor, victim, aggressor/victim) have been mentioned. In addition to these, there is another role that is known as bystander which refers to the students who witness bullying among their peers. These students have a prominent role in the early detection and intervention of the phenomenon. Salmivalli et al. (1996) identified two types of bystanders based on their involvement: 1) active (they actively participate either by reinforcing or helping the aggressor or by defending or consoling the victim); and 2) passive (they do not take sides with the victim or the aggressor). Active bystanders who act as advocates contribute to increasing the victim's perception of social support, helping her cope with the negative consequences of bullying (Cohen et al., 2000).

Salmivalli and Voeten (2004), among others, found that students who have a positive attitude towards bullying and those who have negative attitudes towards victims of bullying are more

likely to engage in bullying behaviors. Depending on gender, girls more often adopt roles of defence or consolation, having attitudes against bullying.

More recently, [Gönültaş and Mulvey \(2021\)](#) found that girls are more likely than boys to participate when they witness bullying. In addition, boys more often have attitudes of acceptance of bullying and rejection of involvement as defenders compared to girls ([Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2021](#)).

These differences could be explained by cultural and family influences ([Smith, 2019](#)). In this sense, [De la Villa and Ovejero \(2021\)](#) found a positive relationship between perceived parental support and the attitudes of rejection toward bullying. In this way, the students who had a negative perception of their family climate showed more accepting attitudes towards the phenomenon.

In short, it has become clear that both gender and immigration background play a considerable role in bullying involvement and attitudes towards bullying. Although the relationship between gender and the perpetration of bullying is consistent, the study of gender differences in victimization has led to mixed results. Regarding immigration background students, there is some consensus that they are more involved than natives in the phenomenon. However, there is some variability in the results of the differences between first and second-generation immigrant students. Thus, there is still some unfinished debate about the role of gender and immigration background in bullying and attitudes towards the phenomenon. In addition, their role is influenced by cultural differences, so it is necessary to delve into their study specifically from each country. For all these reasons, we have worked on the following objectives:

1. Analyze bullying based on gender and immigration background (differentiating between first and second-generation).
2. Compare students' attitudes against bullying based on gender and immigration background.

Likewise, the following research hypotheses are established: H1: Gender and immigration background significantly influence bullying. H2: Gender and immigration background determine students' attitudes against bullying.

Method

Participants

17% of the participants of the total number of Spanish students (approximately 35,900 students) who participated in the PISA-2018 survey ([Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \[OECD\], 2018a](#)) were selected through random sampling, avoiding differences in size between the different sample groups to be compared in the study. Thus, the final sample was 6,335 students (50.1% girls; 49.9% boys). The mean age of the participants was 15.83 years ($SD=0.29$). 54% were native students and 46% were immigrant students (18.6% second-generation immigrant students; 27.4% first-generation immigrant students). Regarding socioeconomic status, 25% come from a low socioeconomic background, 50% from a medium socioeconomic background, and 25% from a high socioeconomic background.

Instruments

The instrument used was a questionnaire ([OECD, 2018b](#)) that has the following indicators to evaluate the variables under study:

School bullying: it is evaluated through six items in which students are asked how often they have had certain experiences of bullying at school during the last twelve months. A difference is made between experiences of verbal bullying (item example: "other students have laughed at me"), physical bullying (item example: "other students have hit or pushed me"), and relational bullying (item example: "other students have spread horrible rumors about me"). The response options are the following: "never or almost never", "several times a year", "several times a month", and "several times a week". The physical, verbal, and relational bullying variables were measured on a numerical scale from 1 (minimum value) to 4 (maximum value). Consistently, the results of this study refer to greater or lesser bullying according to the intensity of the behavior measured by the items used to evaluate it and clarified above. Therefore, it will be referring to the intensity of the behaviors.

Student attitudes against bullying: it is evaluated through five items (item example: "it bothers me when nobody defends students who are bullied") in which students are asked a series of statements in relation to bullying. They had to answer to what extent they agree or disagree with these series. High scores on this variable indicate attitudes against bullying and bullies. The response options are on a Likert-type scale with four possible alternatives (1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = totally agree).

Socioeconomic status: it is evaluated through an index (socioeconomic and cultural index) that refers to the economic, social, and cultural capital that a family has. Therefore, it characterizes the context from which the students come. This index includes information related to the professional occupation and educational level of the parents, as well as the resources available in the home (for example, the number of books, digital devices, etc.). Based on the value of this index, the PISA-2018 survey categorizes students below the first quartile of the socioeconomic and cultural index in their country as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and students above the third quartile of their country index as socioeconomically advantaged. In the specific case of this study, the low level is below the 25th percentile, the medium level is between the 25th and 75th percentile, and the high level is above the 75th percentile.

Immigration background: This variable was evaluated according to the criteria established in the PISA-2018 survey, differentiating between: 1) native students; 2) first-generation immigrant students (both the students and their parents were born in a country other than the country where they did the test); and 3) second-generation immigrant students (the students were born in the country where the evaluation is carried out, but their parents were born in another country).

The reliability of the instruments was evaluated through Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. On the one hand, a Cronbach's α value = .86 was obtained for the bullying scale (composed of the six items indicated above) and, on the other hand, a Cronbach's α value = .89 for the scale of attitudes against bullying (composed of the five items previously mentioned).

Process

The data has been collected from the PISA-2018 survey database (OECD, 2018a), specifically that corresponding to Spain. Both the databases and the questionnaires used in data collection are open access. Subsequently, a random selection was made of 17% of the total sample of Spanish students who participated in the PISA-2018 survey (OECD, 2018a).

Analysis of data

The qualitative variables of the study were expressed by means of frequencies and percentages. Regarding the quantitative variables, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was initially carried out. Gender and immigration background were the independent variables. Moreover, the three forms of bullying were the dependent variables: verbal bullying, physical bullying, and relational bullying. Subsequently, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed to analyze students' attitudes against bullying (dependent variable) based on gender and immigration background (independent variables). Socioeconomic status was introduced as a covariate in both analyses to statistically control its effect.

The partial eta-squared coefficient for nominal variables (η_p^2) was used as a measure of the effect size. The criteria established to interpret its value have been considered from the classic work of Cohen (1988): small effect ($d = 0.2$), medium effect ($d = 0.5$), and large effect ($d = 0.8$).

Statistical analysis was performed with the IBM SPSS program (version 26), considering that a relationship is statistically significant when $p \leq .05$.

Results

The results showed statistically significant differences in the three types of bullying considered jointly according to gender [$\lambda_{Wilks} = .979$, $F(3,6346) = 44.79$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .021$, power=1.00] and immigration background [$\lambda_{Wilks} = .993$, $F(6,12692) = 7.04$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, power=1.00]. Furthermore, the interaction between gender and immigration background was also statistically significant for the three dependent variables studied jointly [$\lambda_{Wilks} = .998$, $F(6,12692) = 2.45$; $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .023$, power=0.83]. According to Cohen (1988), the effect sizes can be considered small. In addition, there is insufficient evidence that socioeconomic status is significantly associated with the three types of bullying analyzed together [$\lambda_{Wilks} = .999$, $F(3,6346) = 1.43$; $p = .231$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, power=0.38].

Analyzing the variables individually, statistically significant differences were detected between boys and girls in physical bullying [$F(1,6348) = 76.25$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .012$, power=1.00] and in verbal bullying [$F(1,6348) = 48.08$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .008$, power=1.00]. Boys presented significantly higher scores than girls in both cases (see Table 1). The effect sizes obtained can be considered small (Cohen, 1988). On the other hand, it was not possible to detect statistically significant differences between boys and girls in relational bullying [$F(1,6348) = 0.33$; $p = .565$; $\eta_p^2 = .000$, power=0.09].

Regarding immigration background, statistically significant differences were detected between the three types of bullying. In physical bullying, first-generation immigrant students had higher scores than natives and second-generation students [$F(2,6348) = 9.40$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .003$, power=0.98]. Regarding verbal bullying and relational bullying, both first and second-generation immigrant students had significantly higher scores than natives [$F(2,6348) = 17.46$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .005$, power=1.00 y $F(2,6348) = 15.91$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .005$, power=1.00, respectively] (see Table 1). However, there is insufficient evidence to differentiate verbal and relational bullying between both groups of immigrant students.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Types of Bullying and Attitudes Against Bullying by Gender and Immigration Background.

Gender		Physical bullying	Verbal bullying	Relational bullying	Attitudes against bullying
Natives					
Girls	\bar{X}	1.15	1.23	1.25	3.56
	SD	0.47	0.48	0.54	0.56
Boys	\bar{X}	1.25	1.29	1.24	3.35
	SD	0.54	0.54	0.53	0.64
Total	\bar{X}	1.20	1.26	1.25	3.45
	SD	0.49	0.51	0.54	0.61
Second-generation immigrants					
Girls	\bar{X}	1.16	1.28	1.31	3.61
	SD	0.44	0.50	0.56	0.54
Boys	\bar{X}	1.29	1.38	1.33	3.31
	SD	0.59	0.61	0.62	0.67
Total	\bar{X}	1.23	1.33	1.32	3.46
	SD	0.50	0.56	0.59	0.63
First-generation immigrants					
Girls	\bar{X}	1.20	1.29	1.34	3.54
	SD	0.49	0.53	0.63	0.59
Boys	\bar{X}	1.35	1.45	1.36	3.25
	SD	0.68	0.68	0.65	0.67
Total	\bar{X}	1.27	1.37	1.35	3.39
	SD	0.60	0.62	0.64	0.63
Total					
Girls	\bar{X}	1.17	1.26	1.29	3.56
	SD	0.45	0.50	0.57	0.57
Boys	\bar{X}	1.28	1.30	1.29	3.44
	SD	0.59	0.55	0.59	0.63

Regarding the interaction between gender and immigration background, a statistically significant effect was only found in the case of verbal bullying [$F(2,6348) = 4.82$; $p < .01$; $\eta_p^2 = .002$, power=0.80]. The differences between first and second-generation immigrant students were greater in this type of bullying in boys than in girls, although the effect size is small (see Figure 1).

The results showed statistically significant differences, the effect size is moderate (see Table 1), between boys and girls in attitudes against bullying. Girls more frequently had attitudes of rejection of bullying compared to boys [$F(1,6124) = 236.38$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .037$, power=1.00].

In addition, statistically significant differences were recorded in attitudes against bullying based on the immigration background of the students [$F(2,6123) = 4.19$; $p < .01$; $\eta_p^2 = .001$, power=0.74].

Discussion

with natives and second-generation immigrants presenting the highest scores. In this case, the effect size was small according to the criteria established by Cohen (1988).

The interaction between gender and immigration background was also statistically significant. There were greater differences in attitudes against bullying in boys than in girls between native students and first-generation immigrants (see Figure 2), although the size of the effect was small [$F(2,6123) = 3.38; p < .05; \eta_p^2 = .001$, power=0.64].

Finally, socioeconomic status had a significant effect on attitudes against bullying, although the effect size turned out to be small [$F(1,6123) = 6.19; p < .01; \eta_p^2 = .001$, power=0.70]. In this case, students with a lower socioeconomic status presented worse attitudes against bullying.

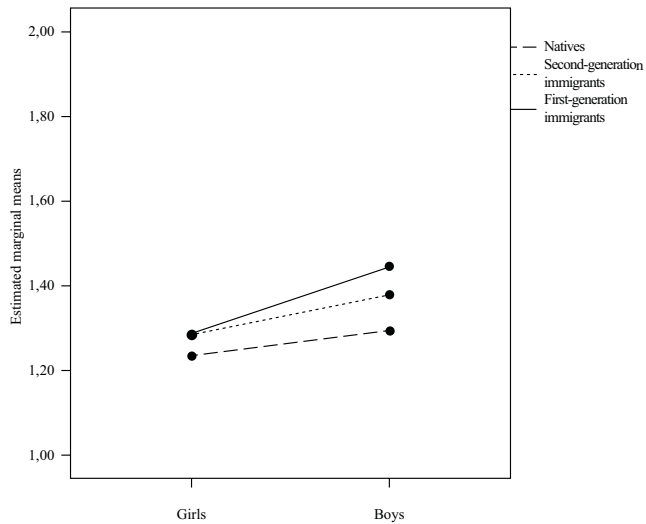


Figure 1. Effect of gender/immigration background interaction on verbal bullying.

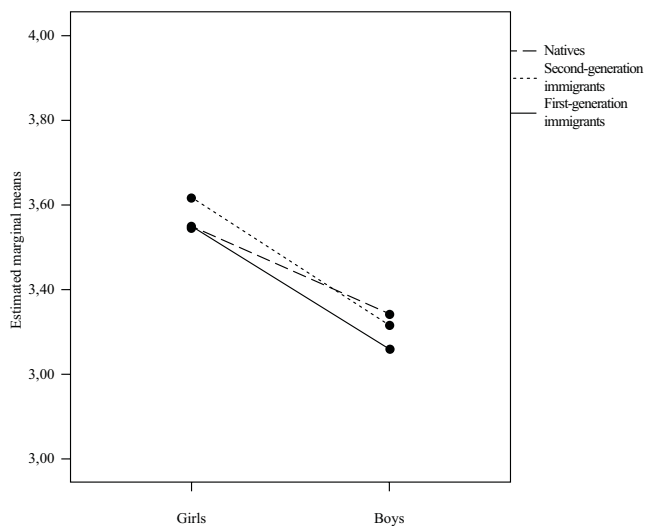


Figure 2. Effect of gender/immigration background interaction on attitudes against bullying.

The results of this study refer to greater or lesser bullying to indicate the intensity of the behavior measured by the items used to evaluate it. Therefore, they refer to the intensity of the behaviors indicated, which were previously clarified.

These results can contribute to the recognition of predictive factors of bullying (gender, immigration background, and attitudes against bullying). These findings may be of interest for educational intervention since it enables preventive action in any situation of bullying.

The first research hypothesis is partially evidenced (H1: Gender and research background significantly influence bullying). Significant differences have been detected between boys and girls. Boys had significantly higher scores than girls on both physical and verbal bullying. In reference to relational bullying, our results did not show statistically significant differences between boys and girls.

These findings on bullying based on gender partially agree with those reported in other studies. In general, Smith et al. (2019) indicated that both genders show the same risk of being victims, but boys have a higher risk of being aggressors than girls. In contrast, our results indicated that boys have significantly higher scores of being victims of bullying than girls.

Considering the type of bullying, both Cook et al. (2010) as well as Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) indicated that boys achieved higher scores in physical harassment while girls obtained higher scores in verbal bullying. Regarding relational bullying, the results agree with those found in the study by Putallaz et al. (2007) since it did not indicate the existence of gender differences either.

Regarding gender differences, these could be due to cultural representations, values, and social expectations to which students are subjected (Smith, 2019). In this line, Hellström and Beckman (2020) found a highly stereotyped perception of gender differences in both girls and boys. Thus, the cultural values of a country could explain the influence of stereotypical traits on bullying. In this sense, the dimensions of cultural values proposed by Hofstede and Minkov (2010) in relation to bullying have been investigated. One of the most studied dimensions was individualism-collectivism (IDV) which, in general terms, indicated lower bullying victimization in individualistic societies compared to collectivist ones (Smith & Robinson, 2019).

Our research has also indicated that there are statistically significant differences in the three types of bullying based on the immigration background of the students. It has been found that immigrant students are more frequently victims of bullying compared to native students. Similar differences were also detected in other studies where a higher prevalence of bullying in immigrant students was found (Alivernini et al., 2019; Álvarez-García et al., 2015; Özdemir et al., 2016; Strohmeier et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2016).

Various authors such as Méndez et al. (2012) and Carrera-Fernández et al. (2018) argue that these differences, in terms of the level of bullying between immigrants and natives, could be since people of foreign origin are perceived as possible targets. This may have its origin in the differences detected in terms of their appearance, clothing, language, precarious support networks

and, generally, a low social position due to prejudice towards the social groups to which they belong.

In relation to the generation of immigrant students, those first-generation students have significantly higher scores in physical bullying than second-generation immigrant students and natives. These results coincide with those found by Alivernini et al. (2019) and Strohmeier et al. (2011) who indicated that first-generation immigrant students were more involved in bullying.

Likewise, our second hypothesis (H2: Gender and immigration background determine students' attitudes against bullying) is also partially confirmed. Regarding attitudes against bullying, our findings indicate that girls more often have an attitude of rejection of bullying situations compared to boys.

These findings coincide with those of other authors such as Duffy et al. (2017) who also noted that girls have more often than boys an attitude against the phenomenon. This fact could be since girls tend to prioritize prosocial behaviors and present higher rates of empathy than boys (Del Rey et al., 2016; Llorent, et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2017).

In addition, the results obtained indicate that it is the first-generation students and the students with a lower socioeconomic status who present attitudes of conformity, acceptance, and indifference to this situation. This may be due to the normalization of violence throughout life because they witness and/or experience it both in the family and in the community (García & Ochotorena, 2017).

In view of the results, the need to develop a preventive educational intervention in schools and high schools that addresses cultural victimization is evident. In particular, the inclusion of first-generation immigrant students should be promoted. This intervention should have at least the following objectives: 1) promote the prosocial behavior of the students, 2) sensitize the students about the consequences of the phenomenon, and 3) inform the students about the action protocol in case of being involved. In addition, teacher training should be strengthened to guarantee their knowledge of individual risk factors of bullying and train them in detecting symptoms linked to the phenomenon to facilitate early intervention. Finally, it would be positive to develop strategies that favour family involvement, as well as train families in a proactive attitude to denormalize situations of bullying. Finally, the school should implement an inclusive school approach that encourages the participation of the entire school community.

Limitations and future lines of research

This study analyzes the relationship and attitudes towards bullying according to gender and immigration background in Spanish students. There are two main limitations to consider. The first is due to the use of a self-administered instrument and the second because the size of the effect is, in general, small, so these results should be contrasted in future research.

However, it has been possible to partially confirm H1 (gender and research background significantly influence bullying). More specifically, significant differences have been detected between boys and girls in two types of bullying (physical and verbal). Statistically significant differences have also been indicated in the three types of bullying depending on the immigration

background of the students. Immigrant students are more frequently victims of bullying compared to native students. In addition, first-generation immigrant students are victims more often than second-generation and native students.

On the other hand, this study has partially confirmed the second hypothesis (H2: Gender and immigration background determine students' attitudes against bullying). We have shown that girls have an attitude of rejection towards school bullying more often than boys. In addition, the results obtained indicate that it is the first-generation students and the students with a lower socioeconomic status who present attitudes of conformity, acceptance, and indifference towards the phenomenon.

For all these reasons, the importance of gender and immigration background in the study of bullying is highlighted. Future research may consider the study of gender and immigration background in bullying through longitudinal and qualitative research that may provide complementary information. Likewise, this study could be replicated in other countries to establish comparisons based on cultural differences. Finally, a cross-sectional study could be carried out by country, using the femininity/masculinity indicator developed by Hofstede and Minkov (2010) to know if there is a relationship between gender differences in bullying and this cultural indicator depending on each country.

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