

PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT BYSTANDERS OF BULLYING SITUATIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY^{1 2}

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed to analyze the perceptions of students identified as observers of bullying situations from the perspective of health promotion. This was a qualitative research study conducted with 20 students who reported witnessing bullying situations in a school in the interior of the state of São Paulo. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The participants have a good understanding of the phenomenon, classifying it as negative or harmful, especially for the victims. However, this understanding does not translate into behaviors of helping or defending the victims. Students revealed that anti-bullying interventions should bring schools and families together to address the problem in an intersectional way. These findings align with health promotion principles, emphasizing the importance of encouraging participation, promoting empowerment, and reinforcing behaviors that maintain or enhance individual and collective well-being and self-realization. In conclusion, bystanders have the potential to prevent bullying, but this potential must be harnessed through institutional actions that increase their sense of self-efficacy and collective responsibility.

Keywords: adolescence; bystanders; bullying.

¹ Editor section: Marilda Gonçalves Dias Facci

² Support and funding: This work was carried out with the support of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel – Brazil (CAPES) – Funding Code 001. We also acknowledge the support of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), which grants Research Productivity Grants to the authors WAO, MAS, and MAIS.

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PERCEPÇÕES DE ESTUDANTES OBSERVADORES DE SITUAÇÕES DE *BULLYING*: ESTUDO QUALITATIVO

RESUMO: Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar as percepções de estudantes identificados como observadores de situações de bullying na perspectiva da promoção da saúde. Trata-se de pesquisa qualitativa realizada com 20 estudantes que referiram ter testemunhado situações de *bullying* em uma escola do interior do estado de São Paulo. A coleta de dados foi realizada por meio de questionários, entrevistas semiestruturadas e grupos focais, e analisada segundo os pressupostos da análise temática. Identificou-se que os participantes possuem bom conhecimento sobre o fenômeno, classificando-o como negativo ou prejudicial, principalmente para as vítimas. Contudo, essa compreensão não se converte em comportamentos de ajuda ou defesa das vítimas. Os estudantes revelaram que as intervenções antibullying devem reunir escola e famílias para enfrentarem o problema de forma interseccional. Os relatos coadunam-se com premissas da promoção da saúde sobre a necessidade de incentivar a participação, promover o empoderamento e reforçar comportamentos para manter ou melhorar o nível de bem-estar e autorrealização individual e de grupo. Conclui-se que observadores do *bullying* podem prevenir sua ocorrência, porém essa potência precisa ser explorada mediante ações institucionais que lhes permitam aumentar seu senso de autoeficácia e de responsabilidade coletiva.

Palavras-chave: adolescência; observadores; *bullying*.

LAS PERCEPCIONES DE LOS ESTUDIANTES ESPECTADORES DEL ACOSO ESCOLAR: ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO

RESUMEN: Este estudio tem como objetivo analizar as percepções dos estudantes identificados como observadores de situações de bullying sob a perspectiva da promoção da saúde. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa realizada con 20 estudiantes que relataron haber presenciado situaciones de acoso escolar en una escuela del interior del estado de São Paulo. Los datos se recolectaron a través de cuestionarios, entrevistas semiestruturadas y grupos focales, y se analizaron de acuerdo con los supuestos del análisis temático. Se identificó que los participantes tienen un buen conocimiento sobre el fenómeno, calificándolo como negativo o dañino, especialmente para las víctimas. Sin embargo, este entendimiento no se traduce en ayudar o defender a las víctimas. Los estudiantes revelaron que las intervenciones contra el acoso escolar deben unir a la escuela y las familias para abordar el problema de manera interseccional. Los relatos de los participantes son coherentes con las premisas de promoción de la salud sobre la necesidad de fomentar la participación, promover el empoderamiento y reforzar los comportamientos para mantener o mejorar los niveles de bienestar y autorrealización individuales y grupales. Se concluye que observadores del acoso tienen el potencial de prevenir su ocurrencia, pero este poder necesita ser explorado y actualizado a través de acciones institucionales.

Palavras-chave: adolescência; observadores; *bullying*.

Introduction

In recent decades, researchers have increasingly focused on children and adolescents who are victims of violence at school (Fernandes et al., 2020; Giordani et al., 2017). Bullying, in particular, is a widespread phenomenon in schools that is frequently associated with academic failure, dropping out of school, and the development of behavioral, emotional, and psychological problems (Borgen et al., 2021; Thompson-Ochoa & Hodgdon, 2019). Bullying is intentional violence that occurs repeatedly among students with a power imbalance, including actors, victims, aggressors, victims, aggressors, and bystanders (Limber et al., 2018; Oliveira et al., 2020; Olweus, 2013). It can also occur in other contexts, such as the workplace, but this study focuses on the school context.

Over time, students have been identified as both victims and perpetrators of this type of violence, and their characteristics have been the focus of many investigations (Romualdo et al., 2019). However, studies have shown that most students (between 80% and 85%) witness bullying situations (Knauf et al., 2018; Mazzone, 2020). According to the scientific literature, many of these students ignore the actions of their peers, pretending not to see; others withdraw or join the group of *bullies* as a strategy to avoid becoming victims or suffering retaliation; some encourage, applaud, and enjoy the suffering of the victims (Knauf et al., 2018; Mazzone, 2020; Romualdo et al., 2019). This scenario results in a climate of insecurity, fear, lack of commitment, intolerance, and a lack of empathy and solidarity in school. It reveals that students who participate in bullying situations as witnesses also need to be considered when mapping the problem and when intervening directly with the aggressors and taking preventive action.

Due to the complex nature of bullying and its harmful consequences, this study is situated within the field of health promotion research, interfacing with psychology. Bullying is a group phenomenon marked by dysfunctional patterns of social interaction that negatively influence the healthy development of adolescents and their subjective construction process. Addressing bullying from a health promotion perspective poses a challenge due to its understanding as a phenomenon determined by sociocultural processes. This requires the adoption of a theoretical and practical framework to improve the quality of life and community health. According to the organizational model of health services, it is necessary to promote the conditions needed to implement the desired changes, with greater participation and protagonism of individuals and collectives in controlling this process, as well as an expanded conception of health as a socially constructed practice (Carvalho et al., 2017).

From this perspective, a question regarding school health arises that guides this study: What does health promotion entail in addressing school bullying? This question stems from the understanding that health promotion is a process of training individuals and communities to participate in and manage their health, disease, and care processes. More broadly, health promotion behavior is conceptually understood as a multidimensional pattern of self-initiated behaviors and perceptions that serve to maintain or improve well-being and self-realization (Butcher et al., 2018). The underlying assumption in this understanding is that protagonism in addressing bullying must come from students, especially those with the greatest potential to intervene in problematic situations. This includes students identified as bystanders, who play a central role in other intervention programs (Mazzone, 2020; Romualdo et al., 2019).

The School Health Program (SHP) can operationalize this perspective by addressing the issue of school bullying, which is one of its guiding themes (Brasil, 2009).

The SHP promotes intersectoral initiatives within elementary and high schools within the scope of primary health care teams (Vieira & Belisário, 2018). The program's development aims to promote self-care and care for others to reduce risky behaviors among children and adolescents (Vieira & Belisário, 2018). Therefore, this is the perspective of comprehensive care, which seeks to consolidate a care network that promotes autonomy, empowerment, and the assumption of responsibilities.

Students who observe bullying situations at school may adopt health-promoting behaviors to combat the violence they witness. This could potentially impact the school context, climate, and the victims' sense of security. This approach is novel, especially in the Brazilian context. A literature review revealed that students who participate in bullying dynamics are undervalued in national research (Romualdo et al., 2019). Considering these issues, this study aimed to understand the perceptions of students identified as bystanders of bullying situations from a health promotion perspective.

Method

This descriptive, exploratory, qualitative study was conducted in a private school in a city in the northeast of the state of São Paulo. In 2019, the school, the research field, had 335 students enrolled, from preschool to high school, and was staffed by 36 employees, including 29 teachers. The school was selected using convenience sampling, a qualitative research strategy considered appropriate for generating hypotheses and insights about a given phenomenon. Between April and May of 2019, data were collected using a multi-method approach that combined instruments such as a questionnaire to diagnose bullying at the school, as well as interviews and focus groups.

A total of 62 students enrolled between the 9th grade of elementary school and the 3rd grade of high school participated in the study. These students answered a structured questionnaire identifying those who had witnessed bullying at school in the six months before data collection. The instrument was adapted and validated for the Brazilian school population (Dalosto, 2011). Students who reported witnessing bullying were then randomly selected to participate in the next stage of the study, which consisted of interviews. The researcher administered the interviews individually in a private room at the school without other people present. The script included questions such as: What is bullying to you? Have you ever witnessed any of your classmates being threatened, mistreated, humiliated, excluded, or assaulted at school? Please tell me everything you remember about this situation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In the third stage of the study, the students who were interviewed were divided into two groups: boys and girls. Four focus group sessions were held, two with each group. For the group sessions, a classroom was used, in which traditional desks were replaced with colorful, individual cushions arranged in a circle. This setup was intended to provide more comfort and create an environment conducive to involvement/interaction between the participants and the researcher responsible for moderating the groups. During the first session, the participants were asked to share their understanding of bullying, how they conceptualize it, and their perception of its occurrence at school. In the second session, vignettes were used to initiate discussion. In addition to these, a fictional situation was read aloud to serve as a thematic trigger, and the participants were asked to comment on it. This fictional situation (adapted for both genders) involved Ana/Pedro, an 8-year-old who moves to a new city and experiences bullying at their new school.

The data were analyzed according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). All the steps of this analysis were followed, namely: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report. Considering the issue of health promotion, three themes were identified that address students' explanations for the phenomenon of bullying at school, health promotion behaviors exhibited or not, and the necessary intersection between school and family in participants' perceptions. To ensure the quality of the study, the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist guidelines for reporting qualitative research were followed.

This study was developed according to the recommendations of Resolution No. 466/2012. The Research Ethics Committee of the Ribeirão Preto School of Nursing approved the research (CAAE 85461718.3.0000.5393). Participants chose fictitious names by which they were designated in the study.

Results and Discussion

As mentioned earlier, 62 students participated in the study. Of those, 40 participants (64%) reported having observed many (witnessed six or more) instances of bullying at school. Eleven boys and nine girls then participated in the subsequent qualitative stages of the study. The data generated from the interviews and focus groups were then triangulated and analyzed, leading to the development of three themes.

Theme 1: Explanations for the Occurrence of Bullying

In this study, the explanations offered by the participants regarding how bullying occurs represent a more complex category of understanding, composed of explanations about systematic intimidation. Initially, the participating students were sensitive to the negative and undesirable nature of situations involving aggression at school. Later, with the context provided by the research, they were able to reflect better on the possibilities of explaining these occurrences from a broader perspective. The participants unanimously agreed that bullying is caused by macrosocial issues and societal standards about what is *correct*, *natural*, and *normal*. Fragments illustrating this perspective are included in Table 1 (EEE 1).

Socially agreed-upon standards impose themselves on peer groups as parameters used to classify individual behaviors. This constitutes a regulatory system governed by norms reflecting society's expectations and ideals about how relationships should occur. This is a recurring theme in bullying studies, particularly those addressing the intimidation of gay students (Baruch-Dominguez et al., 2016) and immigrants (Donghi, 2016). These cases highlight the pressures exerted by stereotypes and conventions that each culture defines as acceptable. Other groups, such as students who do not conform to certain beauty standards, establish tacit norms, such as not being too fat or too thin. Students who deviate from these standards are vulnerable and generally more likely to be victimized than other students (Oliveira et al., 2015).

Some participants focused their understanding of the phenomenon on family relationships, as evidenced by the accounts in Table 1 (EEE2).

As can be seen in the EEE2 passages, students understand that a negative and disrespectful family environment, a lack of positive communication, and parental neglect can lead to bullying at school. According to the participants, the factors that trigger or enhance situations favorable to the development of aggressive behavior in students would be located

in the family environment. The following factors were identified: homes where the mother and father yell a lot; environments of discord and constant fighting; physical punishment; and other types of punishment. Conversely, when the family is welcoming, caring, supportive, and attentive to the needs of their children, there are fewer instances of aggressive behavior in students from such families.

This discussion about the supposed centrality of the family's role in a person's predisposition to engage in violent behavior at school prompted the participating students to consider what type of family or home situation could trigger bullying. Specific literature supports the idea that the family influences the occurrence of bullying at school. Variables such as communication between parents and children, family climate, relationship dynamics within the family, and the use of physical or severe punishments are considered to influence whether a student becomes an aggressor or victim of bullying at school (Oliveira et al., 2020). Family models of tolerance or intolerance are shaped by the social values to which the family adheres and later appear at school (Silva et al., 2019).

In another vein, the participating students also identified group issues as a key factor in the origin of bullying. Often, group dynamics can facilitate its occurrence, as this statement suggests: "Many people go along with their friends because they find it funny or are joking around in a group, so they end up doing what their friend does" (Bianca, focus group). Participants mentioned the importance of popularity and one's status within the peer group in both the interviews and the focus groups. The EEE3 report fragments (Table 1) were extracted from the interviews, but also reflect the focus group discussions.

Student bystanders of bullying situations recognize that aggressors achieve popularity and high status within their peer group. They understand that there is a message that violence is tolerated, admired, and cultivated; therefore, there is no fear of retaliation for violent acts committed. Other studies have correlated systematic intimidation with increased student popularity or status in friendships (Pouwels et al., 2016; Romualdo et al., 2019). The students participating in this study reveal that they endorse this explanation of aggressive attitudes; that is, they understand that group relations dynamics are an important element in the analysis.

In this logic, bullying seems to reproduce the social dynamic in which the strong attack the weak. Following this line of reasoning, bullying is represented as ambivalent in that it is evaluated as wrong and inappropriate but also as beneficial to the aggressor, increasing their popularity and status within the group. Despite this understanding, students' initial inclination is not to intervene in the intimidation they witness. This contemplative behavior prevents them from confronting the bullying and reinforces an unsafe school climate. However, the participants also considered possible solutions to the problem, which will be discussed in the next topic.

Table 1

Examples of empirical evidence that substantiate the analytical findings of Theme 1

Reference in the text	Examples of empirical evidence (EEE)
EEE 1	I think society influences bullying the most. I think society created what is right and wrong, and doesn't accept anything that doesn't please them. They judge anything different as wrong and do these things because everything has to have a standard (Henrique, focus group). Within the standard, right? Beauty standard. If you don't fit in, then you're wrong. That's difficult. Then, those who don't fit the standard also think they're wrong. I think it's a very big problem too, because it's something that can be worked on at home: "Look, you don't have to be like everyone else. Nobody is perfect." If children had more of that mindset, maybe they wouldn't be so affected by it. (Vitória, focus group).
EEE 2	If an aggressor doesn't receive attention at home, they may seek it at school. Sometimes, parents drink and don't pay much attention to their children. They mistreat them, as the group colleague said (Theo, focus group). Personal problems, like family issues, can make someone a little aggressive. Personal problems with family or friends can cause them to take it out on other people (Amora, interview).
EEE 3	[...] maybe when he thinks about making fun of people, he thinks he'll feel better about himself (Carol, interview). [...] sometimes a person does this because they want to fit into a group or show that the other person is inferior. They get pleasure from it (Vitória, interview).

Source: The authors.

Theme 2: Logics for Intervention

The students viewed the management of bullying at school as an emerging issue. To them, responsibility has multiple dimensions: empowering the victim, strengthening their support network, and encouraging popular students to take action against bullying. These aspects align with the health promotion perspective in a school context. When considering the logic that could guide the intervention, they identified a phase that included the victims' individual decision-making processes — an aspect that was gradually expanded — as well as actions involving aggressors, their families, and popular students.

They identified that personal and contextual factors should be considered when planning intervention programs. Regarding personal characteristics, it is important for participating students to develop social skills and abilities. Additionally, victims should be encouraged to reconsider their positions in groups. As for environmental characteristics, there is a need to stimulate dialogue with aggressors so they recognize the seriousness of

the situation, and to deepen the intervention by including families. Within the contextual dimension, intervention initiatives should be encouraged, and popular students should be included in actions and the support network constitution. According to the participants, managing aggressive behavior should not consist only of hierarchical or authoritarian sanctions. They believe such actions are ineffective, as seen in the speech excerpts in Table 2 (EEE 4).

Educational and disciplinary measures, such as suspending or excluding aggressors from the school environment, are not considered effective. Furthermore, these measures prevent students from learning about culture and coexistence (Vinha et al., 2017). The school is permeated by affective relationships that must be addressed through interventions. Only then can the school contribute to developing concern for others in the agentic individual that is, the individual who is capable of making choices. This concern is learned and will also be important for regulating behavior and complementing the actions of teachers and the school institution (Azzi, 2014; Vinha et al., 2017).

A recent World Health Organization (WHO) document identifies seven strategies for preventing and addressing violence against children. These strategies include supporting parents and caregivers and providing life skills education (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016). These strategies are implemented from a health promotion perspective, focusing on the participation and social empowerment of those involved. This enables the development of assertive social skills and positive parenting skills when dealing with bullying.

Participants frequently mentioned that the correct approach to the intervention would be to empower the victims. This idea stemmed from an understanding of the negative impact of victimization and represents low expectations for organizational or school interventions (EEE 5). Indeed, interventions with victims often aim to enhance their social skills and interactions with peers. However, these actions alone are insufficient to solve the problem (Silva et al., 2019).

The victims' more active and agentic attitude could be facilitated by popular students. Just as bullying is explained as an attempt to gain status or popularity within the peer group, participating students identify student popularity as a possible solution to the problem (EEE 6).

In this vein, it is important to consider the assumptions of a health-promoting school. This type of school is constituted by the promotion of health through a comprehensive approach. It provides health education and focuses on developing life skills in a contextualized, critical, and reflective way. It also creates and maintains healthy physical and psychosocial environments. Health promotion in schools presupposes actions that stimulate the sustainable human development of the entire school community, based on a specific framework (e.g., letters and declarations of health promotion) aligned intersectorally with the context and experiences of students, professionals, and other individuals involved in schools (Silva et al., 2019).

Table 2

Examples of empirical evidence that substantiate the analytical findings of Theme 2

Reference in the text	Examples of empirical evidence (EEE)
EEE 4	Punishment, no! But a certain assessment with treatment and follow-up to see what the person needs is necessary. Sometimes they need psychological help. It's important to know if they need support or if they are feeling lonely because I think those who don't experience it don't understand. We should do a general follow-up with these people to help them (Pedro, interview). I don't think giving a strong punishment will help because the person may get angry. Since they can't take it out on the principal, for example, they will start to make fun of that person even more. You have to notice and talk to the person. Tell them how wrong it is. Talking to the person is the best thing to do (Yuri, interview).
EEE 5	It's no use if the colleagues include the victims, who don't want to be near the boys (Alice, focus group).
EEE 6	For example, our high school friends [more popular than elementary school students] are also talking to us [from elementary school] (Bruna, focus group).

Source: The authors.

Theme 3: School-Family Intersection

As previously discussed, families and schools should work together to develop strategies to address bullying. Nevertheless, it is recognized that school is a place of encounters, as well as conflicts and other forms of violence, which seem to be common experiences in daily school life, as evidenced by the participants' experience. A student highlighted this perspective, which can be seen in Table 3 (EEE 7).

According to the students who participated in the study, situations in which students clash or conflict are common in school life, including in the classroom. The frequent use of derogatory nicknames is also common. In some cases, teachers and other professionals witness these situations. Often, the experience of reality fosters competition among students and their desire for recognition from their peers or adults. This recognition is important because it fuels the feeling of existence in those who are seen or recognized.

Indeed, violence in schools has gained notoriety due to an increase in registered cases and greater access to information disseminating realities such as those reported by students. Society generally perceives school as an unsafe place where students are subject to violence. This perception can demotivate students from attending classes and believing in education as a means of improving their quality of life (Tavares & Pietrobon, 2016). A study of students' and teachers' perceptions of violence in the school environment in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, found that it is polysemous, that is, it manifests as aggression

among students and between teachers and students. This violence extends beyond the school walls (Giordani et al., 2017).

This scenario reveals problems of coexistence at school, which, according to the literature (Vinha et al., 2017), are characterized as follows: *hard violence* (directed at the school institution, intentional, and attacks norms and rules); *soft violence* (acts of violence with less severity directed at the institution, intentional, and attack norms and rules); *aggression* (are direct, indirect, and harmful intentional actions); *reactive aggression* (is characterized by the imposition of power by some over others); *bullying* (are aggressive acts based on the aggressor's dominance over the victim); *curricular indiscipline* (is the rupture of the social contract of learning); social indiscipline (is the adoption of actions that violate codes of good manners); *regimental indiscipline* (are transgressions of institutional rules and norms) and *passive indiscipline* (is the lack of motivation, student disinterest).

Other studies have shown that violence is established in intra-school social relations and that schools can help students and staff recognize it and find solutions (Giordani et al., 2017). Students also expressed the feeling that the institution does nothing or very little to reduce bullying attitudes and that it adopts insufficient actions, including failing to propose reflection on behavior and evaluation of its consequences. The account presented in EEE 8 (Table 3) illustrates this perception.

This reflection on the limits and ineffectiveness of the school was reinforced in the context of the focus groups. Students revealed a collective discourse about how they perceive and evaluate the school's actions in response to bullying cases (EEE 9 in Table 3).

Table 3

Examples of empirical evidence that substantiate the analytical findings of Theme 3

Reference in the text	Examples of empirical evidence (EEE)
EEE 7	[...] whether we like it or not, school is where we meet the most people, including our friends and teachers. So, a lot happens within the school environment, such as bullying and other issues (Bruna, focus group).
EEE 8	I never stopped to think about how much the school can do in this regard because I don't see an instant solution; it's something that needs to be worked on. Sometimes there were classes or activities that brought people together more. I think there were ethics classes and other classes that brought people together more. They were more practical and involved experiences [...] (Eduardo, interview).
EEE 9	No, I think the school is partly to blame for this. The school is the one that has to help. They see the situation happening and do nothing. They even say things like they understood the aggressions as jokes – case used in a vignette in the focus group] (Marcelo, focus group). Normally, the bullies don't care about the coordination. The coordinators will come, talk, and they say: "It's not my mother, so it's not my problem. They won't do anything" (Bruna, focus group).

Source: The authors.

However, participating students expect the school to fulfill only its pedagogical role in educational formation. In other words, they expect the school to focus solely on content and how to work with it, as well as help students progress through the levels of schooling. The socializing function of the school is unclear and not recognized. This lack of clarity prevents identification of how the institution can help students break the cycle of violence that perpetuates itself in their daily lives. This social perception of the school is further reinforced by the lack of awareness that effective solutions have been implemented. In this context, adults often appear negligent because they do nothing.

In addition, this social perception of school is reinforced by the lack of perceived effective solutions to the problem. In this context, adults often appear negligent because they *do nothing*.

This interpretation does little to promote health through the implementation of the SHP or the prevention of violence and bullying. This requires interprofessional integration and cooperation from an intersectoral perspective that promotes youth involvement in healthcare (Brasil et al., 2017). Thus, the participants in this study revealed that the family should be included in the anti-bullying debate to promote a broader understanding of the problem. The EEE 10 reports presented in Table 4 illustrate this perception.

As can be seen, families play a key role in the upbringing of participating students, so problems in family upbringing can explain bullying in schools. In fact, studies such as those by Oliveira et al. (2020) have identified family-related factors that contribute to the occurrence or persistence of bullying in schools. These studies concluded that positive communication, clear rules, and family monitoring can protect students' mental health. Poor communication and physical punishment, on the other hand, increase the likelihood that sons and daughters will become involved in systematic intimidation at school. After all, the family context is where the first learning experiences of formal education take place, particularly regarding human and moral values, as the authors argue.

In addition, studies such as that of Melo-Dias and Silva (2019) have demonstrated an association between aggressive student behavior at school and various family factors. According to Bandura's social learning theory, this association can be explained by how attitudes and behaviors are learned or reinforced by parents in their relationships with children and adolescents. This model emphasizes the development of behavioral patterns that extend beyond the family environment and are applied to other contexts, such as among peers at school (Melo-Dias & Silva, 2019). Therefore, studies recommend that anti-bullying programs be based on the active participation of parents.

Indeed, the prospect of including students' parents/guardians in anti-bullying strategies is a relevant approach, considering what participating students indicated about their families. Sometimes, parents do not realize that their child is a victim of systematic intimidation at school. Therefore, it can be inferred that there are communication difficulties between bystanders since most students never reported to their parents that they had witnessed bullying at school. Thus, parents or family members could encourage this group to defend victims more actively or seek solutions to the problem proactively.

On the other hand, when reflecting on the families of the aggressors, the participating students realize that they are often negligent. For example, they may not teach values such as respect for others. At the same time, families reproduce a logic of the social order that encourages aggressive behavior and intolerance toward diversity. The EEE 11 report in Table 4 reflects this perception.

According to a logic of reproduction and social learning of prejudice through observation, the participating students revisit points related to social patterns and how these can influence or determine student behavior. In this sense, it is worth reiterating that Social Cognitive Theory helps us understand that some family problems stem from parents' low self-efficacy in communicating with their children, for example, when it comes to talking about bullying, and from their failure to facilitate more effective and frequent communication (Azzi, 2014; laochite, 2017). Following this logic, increasing self-efficacy levels and the frequency of intra-family communication would improve behavioral and social outcomes in childhood and adolescence. This can be achieved through actions at the intersection of school and family (Azzi & Vieira, 2014; laochite, 2017).

Table 4

Examples of empirical evidence that substantiate the analytical findings of Theme 3

Reference in the text	Examples of empirical evidence (EEE)
EEE 10	<p>I think it's more about how they're raised. For example, if they receive an education at home and learn to respect others and the elderly, as well as how to behave in a classroom, I think that will greatly influence their development, especially as adults. But if you take a boy who grew up and learned all the principles, and compare him to a boy who was more neglected, the neglected boy will try to attract more attention from people, which can often lead him to bully other children (Bruna, interview).</p> <p>I think it involves a lot of home education and also mixes bullying a bit because, like, I think that the father of this child shouldn't be, in my opinion, a person who, like, respects the mother very much (Bianca, focus group).</p>
EEE 11	<p>If parents follow a pattern and have a racist child, they probably accept it because if the child is born with darker or lighter skin, it's because of the parents, right? Genetics determines skin color, so children are born with it. For example, it's the father who doesn't let his daughter wear short shorts outside because he thinks she's a slut, or who doesn't accept his son being homosexual. Parents who follow a pattern of how society functions. (Theo, focus group).</p>

Source: *The authors.*

Although the present study did not intend to include the macrosocial reality that produces bullying in schools, the occurrence of the phenomenon should not be attributed solely to students' personal characteristics or families. The scientific literature recognizes that school bullying is related to macrosocial factors such as a culture that values aggression and violence, socioeconomic inequality, and political and social instability (Qiu, 2021). These macrosocial aspects contribute ecologically to the occurrence of bullying in schools, but also

prevent families from functioning physically and emotionally for human development. According to Bronfenbrenner (2011), ecological situations often prevent families from positively contributing to the development of children and adolescents. This discussion aims to shift the blame away from individuals and families for problems that occur within schools, such as bullying. This aspect should be explored in greater depth in future studies.

Final considerations

This study aimed to analyze how bystander students perceive bullying situations from a health promotion perspective. Our analysis revealed that bystander students perceive this phenomenon according to a logic that aligns with the principles of health promotion and preventive interventions. They value the participation of the school and the inclusion of families in planning an effective strategy to address the problem. They also perceive changes in practice and in the relationships established inside and outside the school as necessary.

On the other hand, students attribute additional meanings to bullying, viewing it as more than just a manifestation of violence. This perception supports education and health professionals in carrying out anti-bullying initiatives at school. These initiatives cannot merely be informative, as students are sensitive and able to understand the factors that potentiate aggression and victimization in schools. Practical implications related to health promotion can be made explicit in this direction. Health promotion behavior presupposes individual responsibility, including that of the collective. Anti-bullying initiatives should increase students' sense of self-efficacy so they can intervene or seek help from school authorities when they witness aggression. Further studies could expand on this idea and apply the framework of health promotion to combat bullying, encouraging the development of nonviolent school cultures, as outlined in documents promoting these actions.

The intervention should foster a sense of self-efficacy and collective accountability for the aggressions witnessed. Therefore, the findings of this study can contribute to the development of intervention programs and be useful for such preparation. This study is expected to expand our understanding of how bullying manifests in schools.

It should be noted, however, that the results of this study are subject to limitations. Disregarding environmental and contextual variables limited the number of participant attributes, as information about family type, sociodemographic conditions, and other factors can influence students' perceptions and conceptions of the problem. Other studies can control for these variables to some extent. In addition, the qualitative approach limits the generalization of the research findings. Since the results are derived from a private school, they cannot be generalized to public schools or other private schools. Further studies with different designs and the inclusion of more schools and/or categories of informants may advance knowledge.

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Data Availability Statement: The dataset supporting the results of this study is available within the article.

Received: 22/09/2021
Approved: 10/02/2023