

The impact of a course on bullying within the pre-service teacher training curriculum¹

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Abstract

Introduction. Although bullying is a phenomenon which directly affects teachers, they receive little preparation in how to handle it. One way to correct this situation is to include specific content about bullying within their initial university curriculum. We present a study that shows how a specific course on bullying affects trainee teachers' knowledge, perceptions and attitudes towards this problem.

Method. The participants (n=199) are trainee teachers (university students) of Pre-School, Elementary and Secondary Education, distributed between an experimental and a control group. The *School Bullying Questionnaire* (Nicolaidis, Toda & Smith, 2002) was adapted to Spanish for this research, and used for data collection. A quasi-experimental pre-post design with non-equivalent groups is used.

Results. The results indicate statistically significant improvement among members of the experimental group in terms of characterizing the phenomenon, detecting the agents involved, characterizing victims and aggressors, choosing strategies to deal with bullying, as well as improvement in perceived self-efficacy for confronting the problem effectively.

Discussion and conclusions. Results allow us to affirm that members of the experimental group have modified and improved their knowledge and perceptions about bullying, as has been seen in other studies. Specific training has a positive impact and makes clear the need to include specific content about school-related problems in the pre-service teachers' curriculum.

Keywords: bullying, teachers, intervention, university curriculum

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Introduction

When we use the term *bullying*, we refer to a physical, verbal, psychological and/or relational phenomenon, which (1) takes place with the intent to hurt another person, (2) is recurring and persistent over time, and (3) where there is an imbalance of power between victim and aggressor (Cerezo, 2006; Del Barrio, Gutiérrez, Van der Meulen, Barrios & Granizo, 2005; Olweus, 1993). Recent research on the incidence of bullying in Spain places it between 9.5% and 12.5% of children enrolled in school (Avilés & Monjas, 2005; Defensor del Pueblo, 2006; Ramírez & Justicia, 2006; Serrano & Iborra, 2005), with prevalence rates remaining stable in recent years (Defensor del Pueblo, 2006). Such studies show us that school bullying is not a new problem, on the contrary, it has long been familiar. Teachers—the professional group most closely involved with this phenomenon—are calling for information and training on this issue. Members of this group have become aware of the phenomenon and seek to prevent it, although the results are not what is hoped for (Defensor del Pueblo, 2006). Several studies have brought to light teachers' complaints about the lack of pre-service preparation (Boulton, 1997; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Yoon, 2004). In line with this premise, O'Moore (2000) and Boxer, Musher-Eizenman, Dubow, Danner and Heretick (2006) indicate the lack of preparation as a great obstacle to preventing and remedying the problem. Furthermore, it is important to consider recent findings that indicate teachers' difficulty in detecting bullying situations (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Fernández, García & Benítez, 2006; Hazler, Miller, Carney & Green, 2001) and the growing need for teachers to understand the problem, its incidence, characteristics, effects produced and how it can be countered (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005; Benítez, Berbén & Fernández, 2006; Nicolaides et al. 2002).

In order to alleviate the situation, and as one channel for intervention, there needs to be improvement in pre-service teachers' training (Benítez et al., 2006), to include specific content that helps to sensitize and inform students about the phenomenon, where they can master intervention strategies, and improve their capacity to cope with bullying (Boulton, 1997; O'Moore, 2000; Yoon, 2004). Pre-service teacher training would allow schools to incorporate personnel who are trained to deal with the problem at a more global level, teachers who understand the issue and are sensitized to it. Schools would be able to establish school policies that take on the problem as a collective challenge, and not as a problem inherent to the educational system (UK Observatory of School Violence, 2006).

Benítez, García and Fernández (2007) defend the importance of specific teacher training: (a) to avoid inappropriate teacher actions; (b) to keep the victim from feeling abandoned and defenseless, where teachers fail to diagnose or intervene; (c) so that teacher behavior can be an example to students and give them clues as to how they can intervene; and, (d) to establish methods of intervention that can be replicated by other teachers (Lawrence & Green, 2005).

Finally, it is a pressing need for teachers to know how to detect bullying among the students, since without a diagnosis there is no possible assessment or intervention for preventing and/or reducing bullying. This is emphasized by various studies which indicate that teachers underestimate the incidence rates of the phenomenon (O'Moore, 2000) and that they are likely to not detect certain types of bullying such as relational (Benítez, Berbén & Fernández, 2005; Yoon, 2004).

The purpose of the present study is to evaluate the impact of specific training about bullying in a group of teacher trainees. Thus, we hypothesize that there will be significant changes in aspects of the experimental group, as compared to the control group.

Method

Participants

The sample is made up of students from the University of Granada who are enrolled in teacher training programs for pre-school, primary and compulsory secondary education (N=199). The experimental group (n=106) and control group (n=93) share the common characteristic of having to select one of two elective courses: one of the electives presents content about Bullying (Experimental Group) and the other does not deal with this topic area (Control Group). Students in the control group who had previously taken the course about Bullying were eliminated from the sample. Gender distribution in the two groups is similar: 20.8% men and 79.2% women in the control group, and 20.7% men and 79.3% women in the experimental group. The mean age for members of the control group is 20.2 years, for the experimental group it is 20.6 years.

Instrument

The instrument used for data collection is the *School Bullying Questionnaire* (Nicolaidis et al., 2002), translated and adapted for this investigation (Benítez et. al, 2006) (Cronbach Alpha = 0.941). The questionnaire is anonymous and comprises 45 items pertaining to different sections which collect information about:

- (a) personal experiences with bullying at school;
- (b) knowledge about the bullying phenomenon;
- (c) knowledge about victims' and aggressors' characteristics;
- (d) prior beliefs about bullying;
- (e) perceived self-capacity to confront the problem;
- (f) strategies one would use as a future teacher in dealing with the problem;
- (g) evaluation of the content of one's specific training.

Design and procedure

The research design is quasi-experimental, pretest and posttest with two non-equivalent groups, where one groups acts as the experimental group and the other as the control group. The study is quasi-experimental in that subjects are not assigned randomly to the two groups. The groups are pre-formed since the grouping variable is whether they enrolled in a certain elective course.

The questionnaire is administered to the group as a whole during regular class time, after receiving permission from the professor responsible for the group. Two times for data collection are established: at the beginning of the course (pre-treatment measurement) and at the end (post-treatment measurement). The time required to apply the instrument is 30 minutes.

The elective course about bullying, for members of the experimental group, has a 60-hour duration distributed in two weekly sessions of two hours each. The course content seeks to contextualize school violence and to provide an introduction to the bullying phenomenon: problem definition and characteristics, etiological factors, analysis of the agents involved, effects of bullying, evaluation of the phenomenon, and knowledge and practices for interventions that prevent or address bullying.

After collecting the questionnaire, the data is analyzed using the statistical package SPSS v. 14.0, performing descriptive analyses, parametric tests (ANOVA, Bonferroni) and correlational analyses as a function of the nature of the variables being analyzed.

Results

Definition of the phenomenon

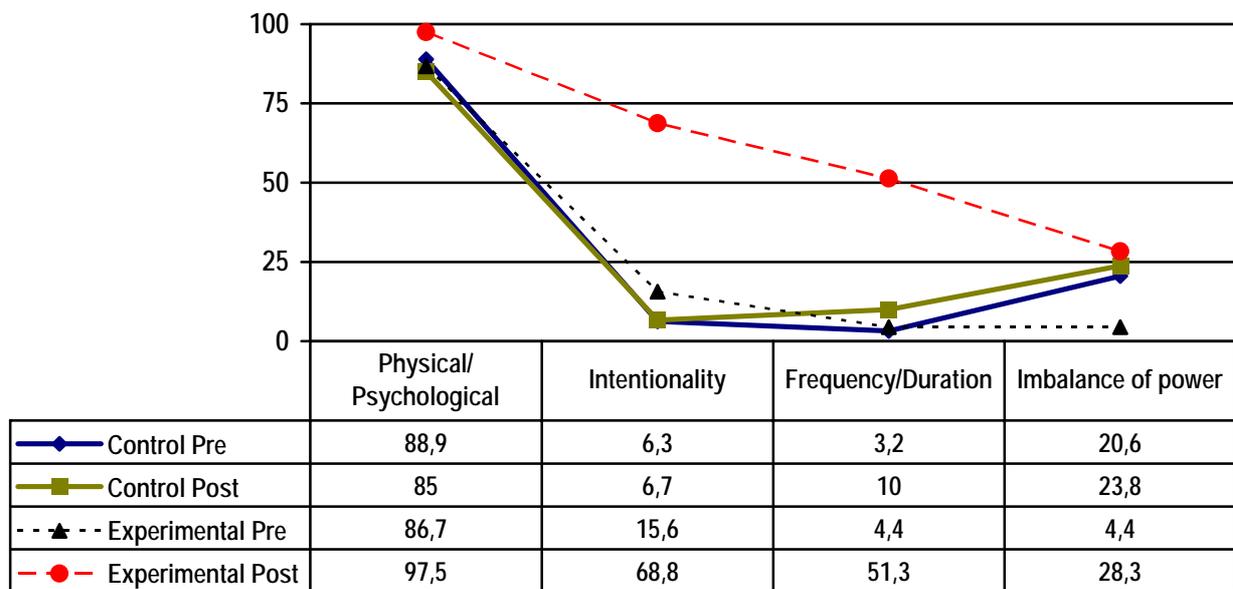
According to the instrument used, bullying is defined by observing the following characteristics: (a) it must be an intentional behavior; (b) it has a physical and/or psychological nature; (c) it is recurring and persistent over time; and, (d) there is an imbalance of power between victims and aggressors.

Participants' characterization of bullying (Table 1) is uneven between the two groups. In the post-intervention measurement, members of the experimental group characterize the phenomenon by addressing a greater number of its characteristics [$F(3)=79.416$, $p<.001$] (post-hoc Bonferroni test) than they did previously, whereas significant pretest-posttest differences were not observed in members of the control group. 41.5% of members of the experimental group define bullying by referring to at least three characteristics, as compared to 1.2% who did so in the initial assessment. There is a drop in the percentage of participants in the experimental group who characterize the phenomenon by referring to one or none of its defining characteristics (from 95.1% to 21.8%).

Table 1. Percentages of each group indicating a certain number of valid characteristics in defining bullying

Group	Number of characteristics indicated				
	None	One	Two	Three	Four
Control Pre	40.6	48.1	11.3	.0	.0
Control Post	38.1	46.4	13.4	1.0	1.0
Experimental Pre	43.2	51.9	3.7	1.2	.0
Experimental Post	8.0	13.8	35.6	33.3	9.2

The physical and/or psychological nature of bullying is the characteristic most often identified by participants, regardless of the group and time of assessment. For the remaining characteristics there are percentage differences which appear according to the group analyzed (Graph 1). After performing the ANOVA (Bonferroni), differences are observed between members of the experimental group in the post-intervention phase, as compared to the other assessments, since they more frequently indicate: (a) the physical/psychological aspect [F(3)=15.294, p<.001]; (b) intentionality [F(3)=80.167, p<.001]; and, (c) the frequency and duration [F(3)=50.036, p<.001].



Graph 1. Characteristics most often indicated (%), by group

Incidence of the phenomenon

In order to access participants’ understanding of the incidence of bullying, they are asked to estimate the percentages of student aggressors, victims and spectators during school years (Table 2). Scales from 0 to 100 are used, distributed in 5-point intervals.

Analysis of the results (ANOVA, post-hoc Bonferroni test) shows statistically significant differences in the case of the experimental group, while no significant changes are seen in the control group. Differences are produced in the perception of the percentage of aggressors [F(3)=16.062, p=.000] and of victims [F(3)=39.594, p=.000]. As for the estimated percentage of spectators, we find statistically significant differences between the members of the experimental and control groups on the post-treatment measurement [F(3)=3.378, p<.05].

Table 2. Estimates of agents involved in bullying, by group

Group	Aggressors	Victims	Spectators
Control Pre	30.86	38.03	65.00
Control Post	31.80	41.53	63.92
Experimental Pre	34.88	44.00	70.37
Experimental Post	12.95	16.15	73.05

Personal characteristics of aggressors and victims

The questionnaire analyzes personal characteristics of aggressors and victims as they are perceived by the future teachers, who rate each item on a Likert scale where 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, and 2 = yes, often. The participants in the study, regardless of their group and the time of measurement, indicate similar characteristics for the aggressive students (Table 3). Characteristics most often indicated are irritability, popularity, trouble learning, doing poorly on homework and physical strength.

Table 3. Personal characteristics of aggressors as reported by group, and statistical differences

Characteristics of aggressors	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	Sig.
	CG Pre	CG Post	EG Pre	EG Post	
Easily irritated	1.75	1.72	1.45	1.84	.001
Popular	1.62	1.72	1.74	1.80	-
Trouble learning	1.47	1.53	1.57	1.57	-
Do poorly on homework	1.39	1.47	1.63	1.63	.007
Physically strong	1.34	1.36	1.37	1.62	.001
Lacking social skills	1.00	1.10	1.15	1.34	.007
Always worried and anxious	.98	.99	.80	.72	.003
Having low self-esteem	.95	.98	1.10	.91	-
Having few friends	.85	.80	.83	.45	.000
Passive or unassertive	.80	.74	.90	.82	-
Physically weak	.38	.36	.29	.28	-
Having physical disability	.18	.29	.10	.06	.000

In the post-treatment assessment by members of the experimental group, they add the lack of social skills, the support of friends, and finally, lack of anxiety or worry as additional characteristics often seen in aggressors. An analysis of variance (post-hoc Bonferroni test) indicates statistically significant differences when characterizing aggressors in terms of irritability [$F(3)=5.264, p<.005$], physical strength [$F(3)=5.435, p=.005$], and having friends that support them [$F(3)=7.128, p=.000$]. Statistically significant differences are also observed in members of the experimental and control group (post-treatment measurement) regarding aggressors doing poorly on their homework, their levels of anxiety and stress, and the absence of physical disability.

The personal characteristics most often indicated by participants for victims of bullying are: physical weakness, low self-esteem, having few friends, passiveness, anxiety, lack of social skills and low popularity (Table 4). In the post measurements, no significant differences are found in members of the control group, whereas they are observed in members of the experimental group. The post-treatment data obtained in the experimental group confers greater importance to characteristics such as: (a) low self-esteem [$F(3)=5.066, p<.005$]; (b) having few friends [$F(3)=3.190, p<.05$]; (c) worry/anxiety [$F(3)=22.023, p=.000$]; and, (d) lack of social skills [$F(3)=3.338, <.05$].

Table 4. Personal characteristics of victims as reported by group, and statistical differences

Characteristics of victims	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	Sig.
	CG Pre	CG Post	EG Pre	EG Post	
Physically weak	1.65	1.65	1.74	1.78	-
Having low self-esteem	1.55	1.45	1.48	1.77	.002
Having few friends	1.38	1.29	1.29	1.52	.024
Having physical disability	1.31	1.26	1.37	1.38	-
Passive or unassertive	1.22	1.21	1.30	1.29	-
Lacking social skills	1.19	1.20	1.30	1.66	.025
Always worried and anxious	1.06	1.05	1.38	1.66	.000
Trouble learning	.97	.87	.86	.76	-
Do poorly on homework	.76	.66	.72	.64	-
Easily irritated	.45	.46	.72	.61	-
Physically strong	.39	.39	.32	.25	-
Popular	.25	.22	.22	.13	-

Family characteristics of aggressors and victims

Another aspect addressed by the questionnaires relates to family characteristics of aggressors and victims. Participants rated each item on a Likert scale where 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, and 2 = yes, often.

Participants indicated the same family characteristics for aggressors (Table 5) at both measurement times, pre- and post-treatment, namely: inconsistent discipline, emotional or physical abuse, distant relationships and physical punishment. Statistically significant differences appear in post-treatment measurements of the experimental group, who at this time confer greater importance to distant interpersonal relationships [F(3)=9.656, p=.000] and inconsistent discipline [F(3)=3.276, p=.05].

Table 5. Family characteristics of aggressors as reported by group, and statistical differences.

Family Characteristics of aggressors	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	Sig.
	CG Pre	CG Post	EG Pre	EG Post	
Inconsistent discipline	1.36	1.33	1.49	1.58	.015
Emotional or physical abuse	1.29	1.37	1.36	1.40	-
Distant interpersonal relations	1.28	1.30	1.34	1.67	.000
Physical punishment	1.26	1.33	1.39	1.42	-
Overprotected	.84	.99	.78	.78	-
Normal home	.81	.81	.73	.74	-
Positive interpersonal relations	.46	.52	.41	.36	-

Analysis of the victims' supposed family characteristics (Table 6) shows how both groups indicate the same characteristics at both the initial and final assessment times.

Nonetheless, statistically significant differences are observed in responses from the experimental group, who, at the post-intervention assessment, indicate higher frequency for overprotection [F(3)=6.768, p=.000], distant relationships [F(3)=12.606, p=.000], and positive relationships [F(3)=4.173, p<.01].

Table 6. Family characteristics of victims as reported by group, and statistical differences.

Family Characteristics of victims	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	Sig.
	CG Pre	CG Post	EG Pre	EG Post	
Overprotected	1.45	1.46	1.52	1.77	.000
Normal home	1.23	1.27	1.30	1.19	-
Distant interpersonal relations	0.79	1.04	.69	1.17	.000
Positive interpersonal relations	1.04	1.10	1.26	1.32	.006
Emotional or physical abuse	.98	.87	.75	.98	-
Inconsistent discipline	.74	.75	.57	.55	-
Physical punishment	.57	.54	.47	.53	-

Self-efficacy in confronting bullying

The final section of the assessments relates to the participant's perception of his or her own capacity to take action to address the problem. Perceived self-efficacy in the control group does not present significant changes, whereas the experimental group presents statistically significant changes with regard to dealing directly with the agents involved and in dealing with the families (Table 7).

Table 7. Statistical differences and perceptions of one's own capacity

	d.f.	F	Sig.	Dif. \bar{X} EG Post / Pre	Std. Error	Sig.
Speaking with bullies w/o blaming	3	142.324	.000	1.410(*)	.135	<.001
Making aggressors stop	3	293.724	.000	.880(*)	.104	<.001
Speaking with victims w/o blaming	3	683.356	.000	1.107(*)	.078	<.001
Supporting the victims	3	1210.467	.000	1.032(*)	.062	<.001
Speaking with spectators	3	867.353	.000	.980(*)	.073	<.001
Teaching spectators how to help	3	618.846	.000	1.093(*)	.086	<.001
Working with the parents of victims	3	577.084	.000	.974(*)	.088	<.001
Working with the parents of aggressors	3	501.768	.000	.952(*)	.090	<.001

* The difference of means is significant at a level of .05

Discussion and conclusions

A review of the results shows the positive impact which the training course on bullying has had on subjects in the experimental group. For example, statistically significant differences are found relating to participants' understanding of the phenomenon.

We can see a first data point of change when we look at the participants' ability to define the problem. Several studies have revealed teachers' inability to adequately define the phenomenon (Bauman & Del Río, 2006; Fernández, et al., 2006; Hazler et al., 2001; Yoon 2004). This is also reflected in our study, if we review the values from the initial assessment of the experimental and control groups for this aspect. However, after the training course, the ability to define the problem has significantly improved among members of the experimental group. The latter are able to define bullying more accurately, based on the delimiting characteristics of the phenomenon.

When defining bullying, we observe that participants can easily define the phenomenon as a set of physical and/or psychological behaviors. However, characteristics such as the imbalance of power, intentionality, frequency and duration are not taken into consideration. These results from the initial measurement are similar to those found in other studies which point in the same direction (Benítez et al., 2006; Boulton, 1997; Hazler et al., 2001; O'Moore, 2000; Siann, Callaghan, Lockhart & Rawson, 1993). However, the data differ when we look at the final results from the experimental group. Subjects from the experimental group consider not only the physical-psychological characteristic, but they also include the intentionality of the abusive behavior in their definition, the recurrence and duration of the phenomenon and the difference in power between victim and bully.

We find the same situation if we analyze the estimates of the numbers of bullies, victims and spectators proposed by members of the two groups. Nicolaidis et al. (2002) and Benítez et al. (2006) indicate that teachers tend to overestimate the number of agents involved in bullying. In the present study, this data is confirmed in the pre-treatment assessment, while in the post-treatment assessment we observe significant changes in the members of the experimental group. The latter slightly overestimate the percentages of agents involved (12.95% bullies, 16.15% victims and 73.05% spectators), although they come closer to real data ob-

tained from research on incidence (Avilés & Monjas, 2005; Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalana & Slee; 1999) and the estimates are significantly different from what was obtained in the initial measurement.

A review of the research on bullying allows us to characterize the aggressor as having a strong temperament and irritability, normal self-esteem (Smith et al., 1999; Smith, 2004), physical strength (Card, 2003), and poor social skills (Kaukiainen, Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, Österman, Salmivalli, Forsblom & Ahlbom, 1999). Participants in this study, as in other studies (Benítez et al., 2006), indicate irritability, popularity, trouble learning, trouble doing homework, and physical strength as the most frequent characteristics of bullies. However, only in the case of the experimental group in its post-treatment assessment do we observe other characteristics such as the lack of social skills, having friends that support them, and finally, the bully's lack of anxiety or worry. Once again, we find significant changes given that the subjects who receive the training more accurately specify the characteristics of bullies.

We reach similar conclusions when we review the data on personal characteristics of the victims. They initially characterize the victim by his or her physical weakness (Smith et al., 1999), low self-esteem (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt & Caspi, 2005), having few friends and little popularity (Laukkanen, Shemeikka, Notkola, Koivumaa-Honkanen & Nissinen, 2002), passiveness, a state of anxiety and lack of social skills (Fox & Boulton, 2005). However, after the specific training, more of the subjects in the experimental group indicate such characteristics for the victimized pupil, with significantly greater importance conferred to low self-esteem, having few friends, the state of worry/anxiety and the lack of social skills, as the most frequent characteristics observed in victims.

When we analyze family characteristics of bullies and victims, results fall in the same direction as in the previous cases: that is, after the training, members of the experimental group show more precise knowledge, in contrast to their initial beliefs and to members of the control group.

In closing, we must underscore the change produced in subjects from the experimental group in their perceived capacity to confront bullying. The change is significant for each and every option. They perceive themselves as more capable of dealing directly with victims and

bullies, as well as dealing with their parents, or working with spectators in order to prevent and/or address the bullying issue.

Results allows us to affirm that members of the experimental group have modified and improved their knowledge and perceptions about bullying, as well as now perceiving themselves as more capable of confronting the problem. We observe how specific training on bullying has a positive impact and makes possible a deeper understanding of the problem. These results prompt us to consider the need for including specific content in the study plans for teacher trainees, not only as it pertains to bullying, but also to other educational issues, making it possible for students to understand real educational problems that they will have to face in the future, and with what better backing than knowing how to counter them.

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