

## Bullying in Portuguese Schools

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**ABSTRACT** A modified version of the Olweus school bullying questionnaire was administered to a sample of 4092 pupils, mainly aged 10–12, in ten middle schools, six in the north (Braga) and four in the south of Portugal (Lisbon). We present and discuss the results of this survey on the following topics: frequencies of being bullied and bullying others; types of bullying; places where bullying occurs and children's opinions about the playground. These variables were analysed in terms of factors such as school grades, under-achievement, social class, gender and school location (north or south of the country). Logistic regression was used to identify risk factors for bullying behaviour. For being bullied, an increased risk was found for male and low social class students. After multivariable adjustment, factors remaining significantly associated with bullying others were gender, school grade, social class and years of under-achievement. The results are compared to the results of other studies in Norway, UK, Italy and Ireland.

### Introduction

Bullying can be described as the systematic abuse of power (Smith and Sharp, 1994). Two particular aspects distinguish bullying from aggression: bullying is thought of as a repeated action and the bully is generally perceived as stronger than the victim, who is not able to defend him/herself.

The definition of bullying and other terms connected with this

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problem should be clarified to give research a similar point of view. Carney and Merrell (2001) focus on two points: one is the understanding of what bullying is and the other is how to prevent it. To understand the problem they define victims, bullies and bystanders. They have examined background and developmental aspects of bullying and tried to clarify some myths associated to bullying in schools.

Research on bullying in schools has developed since the 1970s. The main focus of these studies was the extent and characteristics of victimization and aggression in schools. Olweus (1978, 1993) pioneered these studies, reporting a survey in Norway concerning children aged 8–16. Whitney and Smith (1993), using a questionnaire adapted from Olweus, surveyed a sample of pupils in 24 schools (17 junior/middle and seven secondary schools) in Sheffield, UK. In Italy, Genta et al. (1996) used a slightly modified version of the Olweus questionnaire with pupils in 17 schools; nine primary schools with children aged 8–11 and eight middle schools with children aged 11–14, located in urban and suburban areas of Florence (Central Italy) and in Cosenza (Southern Italy). O'Moore et al. (1997) reported results from a survey in primary and post-primary schools carried out in Ireland.

Olweus (1993) and Whitney and Smith (1993) analysed rates of being bullied and bullying others in relation to social class, based on general socioeconomic characteristics of the areas where schools are located. Olweus (1993) found no significant differences for being bullied and bullying others in different social classes. In contrast, Whitney and Smith (1993), did find a modest relationship of increased bully/victim problems with lower social groups in the UK. However, there appears to be no reported investigations that study the contribution of social class, working with information about the socioeconomic characteristics of individual children's families.

Pereira (2002) developed a study with the diagnostic of bullying and developed an intervention program. This study comprised four schools (two primary schools and two second cycle) and concluded that when we compare the frequency of bullying for different places at school, the playground is the most affected place. However, when we asked if students liked the playground they said that they did.

Ferreira and Pereira (2001) in a study of children aged 5–10 years, concluded that 25 percent of them have been bullied and 17 percent bullied others. The authors developed an intervention program concentrating on play and physical activities and were able to reduce bullying at school for these very young children.

Rios-Ellis et al. (2000) studied the prevalence of different types of bullying at elementary, junior high and high school education in Japanese schools. They concluded that from 1993 to 1994 the reported behaviour for different types of bullying changed. It is clear that when



considering bullying prevalence by age, it decreases as children grow older.

There are several articles about direct bullying; however, indirect bullying is responsible for the pain of many children who suffer in silence. Owens et al. (2000) analysed the effects of indirect aggression of peers on teenage girls. They concluded that victims of indirect aggression (spreading false rumours and exclusion from the group) may be particularly vulnerable if they have few friends or lack assertiveness.

There are many investigations on bullying that utilize anonymous questionnaires to gain information about bullying at school. This can include a larger number of cases studied; however the questionnaire does not enable us to retrieve more qualitative information. In a study with naturalistic observations Craig et al. (2000) compared bullying others with victimization in the playground and in the classroom and concluded that the frequency of bullying was higher in the playground than in the classroom. Also, the type of bullying differs in these two contexts.

Why has there been so much research about bullying in recent years? Because bullying largely affects the life of many children and reflects on their adult life. Sharp et al. (2000) studied long-term bullying that needs a specific regard because it is different from short-term bullying episodes. The outcomes of this study suggested that the long-term bullied are a small group but they should have special attention with long-term solutions to solve the problem.

Berthold and Hoover (2000) examined the relationship between bullying and risk behaviors. More than one in three students reported having been bullied and one in five bullied others. Bullies spend more time at home without adult supervision than other students; they drink alcohol, smoke, cheat on tests and take weapons to school.

Kalliotis (2000) applied a questionnaire to 117 children from five urban elementary schools aged 11–12 years in Greece and concluded that there is a considerable degree of bullying among Hellenic school-children, either as bullies or victims; boys are more affected by bullying than girls; the forms of bullying are mainly kicking/hitting and teasing and bullying takes place mostly in the playground.

Children who recognize their rights are more able to defend themselves. Children should not be victims of their peers at school. They should not accept this situation as normal and as inevitable, they can do something to show that they do not like it and do not accept it. Veiga (2001) developed a study with Portuguese students where he analysed the perceptions of their rights at school. He assessed it with the 'Children's Rights Scale' (Hart, 1993) and concluded that Portuguese students identify their rights, know they exist and understand them as



important. The sample included 294 students (male and female) from seventh to ninth grade (12, 13 and 14 years old).

Previous studies about bullying do not refer to the effect of years of under-achievement and grade retention. We know that this is not very common in other educational systems, but Portugal has one of the highest levels of grade retention in Europe. Pereira et al. (2002) analysed the characteristics of the playgrounds more related with bullying episodes and developed different measures of intervention according to specific aspects of each school.

Mahdavi and Smith (2002) conducted a case study in one school to describe the operation of bully courts in order to reduce bullying and to examine how it was perceived by both staff and pupils.

In this article we present the results of a survey in Portuguese middle schools, which we will refer to as second cycle schools. During the second cycle, children complete the fifth and sixth years of education, having completed the first four years in first cycle schools (entering school around 6–7 years old). Results refer to the frequencies of bullying others and of being bullied, the kinds of bullying, the places in school where bullying occurs and children's opinions about the school playground. We will focus on a comparison of schools in the north and in the south of Portugal, and on the factors associated to the risk of being a bully or a victim, including social class and grade retention. The fact that our survey only comprises the fifth and sixth grades does not enable us to thoroughly compare the differences of age.

## **Methods**

### *Sample*

The study included ten schools, with a total of 4092 students: six middle schools in the north of the country, with 3341 students (53.1 percent boys and 46.9 percent girls), and four preparatory schools in the south, with 751 students (47.1 percent boys and 52.9 percent girls). Children were mainly aged 10–12, with a small proportion (18.2 percent) outside this range, mainly due to grade retention. The mean age was 11.6 years, and the age range was 9–16. The schools in the north (Braga) were located in industrialized urban and suburban areas and those in the south (Lisbon) were located in the highly industrialized area of the capital. School size varied from 200 to over 1000 students.

In the south of the country, Lisbon is the capital and the largest city in Portugal. Its population comprises different ethnic groups, among which the largest minority are Africans. By way of contrast, we also sampled schools in the north, in the region of Braga, comprising the two municipalities of Braga and Guimarães, each with a high popula-



tion density but located in a dispersed population area, and comprising large and small industries. The two main cities are surrounded by rural areas.

The media give particular prominence to social problems affecting children in Lisbon, such as aggression and victimization and 'street children', and various programs aiming at reducing these problems are being developed there. However, teachers in the north believe that bullying is worse than in Lisbon's schools.

Attention should be called to the age intervals and mean age differences found in Portuguese schools. Comparing the percentages of bullying between school grades is rather complicated due to the high level of school failure and grade retention. The Portuguese educational system allows students to be retained in the grade they are attending if they do not achieve the academic requirements to pass to the following grade. As a consequence, some children can remain for several years in the same grade mixed with younger children. This system is changing and schools are now introducing support teachers for children with learning problems to reduce grade retention. Due to the above mentioned grade retention system, under-achievers contribute heavily to the large range of ages observed. No significant differences were found when comparing the proportions of students having been retained (years of under-achievement: none, one and two or more) in the northern and in the southern schools ( $X^2_2 = 0.217, p > 0.05$ ). The percentage of students being one year older than expected for the grade they attend is 14 percent (13.8 percent in the north and 13.9 percent in the south), and about ten percent of the students are two or more years older than expected (10.3 percent in the north and 10.8 percent in the south).

All the schools in this study were integrated in the public system of education, but children's socioeconomic background varied according to the area of location. Socioeconomic level was codified using a Portuguese classification scheme. This scheme takes account of the educational background of both parents, their occupation and the characteristics of family housing to give a four-point scale (1 high, 4 low). Significant differences were found in the distribution of socioeconomic levels in the two areas ( $X^2_3 = 56.6, p > 0.001$ ). In the north, slightly higher percentages were found in levels 1, 2 and 4, while in the south a relatively higher percentage is presented in level 3.

#### *Questionnaire*

We used the Olweus questionnaire (1989) modified in a pictorial form and phrased in short and simple questions. The questionnaire contained 32 single or multiple choice questions, arranged in five sections: (1) personal and socioeconomic data; (2) peer acceptance/rejection and



friendship nominations; (3) about being bullied; (4) about bullying others and (5) about recess and playgrounds. Children answered by checking one or more answers.

A clear and simple definition of bullying was stated, stressing the idea that bullying was not playful behaviour and that it causes physical or emotional harm. Questions about being bullied and bullying others referred to the current school term and to a one-week time interval.

In the questions about the frequency of being bullied and of bullying others, the response format was slightly modified to suit younger children's concrete event memory. For instance, to the question: 'How often have you been bullied at school this term?' possible responses were never, once or twice, three or four times, five times or more. The coding derived automatically from the students' answers to the questionnaire.

## **Results**

### *The extent of bullying*

The proportions of being bullied, bullying others and type of bullying are first reported in terms of the location of the school (north or south) and gender. To analyse further factors predictive of bullying behaviour, logistic regression was employed, studying the associations between each factor (gender, social class, school grade, years of 'under achievement', north/south location) and the bullying others or being bullied outcome proportions, after adjusting for all the factors in the model. The dependent variable in each logistic regression analysis was the logit of the outcome proportion, and the main effect obtained (by maximum likelihood) for each factor was adjusted for the others in the relevant linear model. Individual first-order interactions between the factors were investigated but found not to be statistically significant. Adjusted odds ratios (OR) and the 95 percent confidence intervals (CI) of the OR were estimated from the main effects logistic models.

The frequency of pupils' reports of being bullied and of bullying others at school during the current school term are presented in Table 1. For an estimate of more frequent bullying, either being bullied or bullying others, we considered only the last two response options of 'three or four times' and 'five or more'.

The results indicate a considerably high level of reports of being bullied, with around 20 percent of the children reporting that they have been bullied at least three times in the current term. Reports on bullying others are also relatively high: around 16 percent of pupils admitted having bullied others at least three times during the school term. No significant differences were found when comparing the extent

**Table 1** Percentage of children who reported being bullied and bullying others during this school term three or more times

	Overall	North Boys	Girls	Overall	South Boys	Girls
Been bullied	21.6	24.2	18.7	19.3	22.0	16.9
Bullying others	15.4	20.5	9.6	16.0	22.4	10.4

of bullying in the north and in the south, either in terms of being bullied ( $X_1^2 = 1.69, p > 0.05$ ) or in terms of bullying others ( $X_1^2 = 0.68, p > 0.05$ ).

Table 1 shows the differences in the frequency of bullying behaviour between boys and girls. Boys are more likely to be involved in bullying problems. Gender differences in reports of bullying others are significant both in the north ( $X_1^2 = 73.2, p > 0.001$ ) and in the south ( $X_1^2 = 19.2, p > 0.001$ ), where more than twice as many boys than girls admitted to bullying others. Although the gender differences in being bullied reports are not so marked, results indicate a lower percentage of girls being bullied than boys.

To investigate the predictors of bullying/victims problems, logit models were fitted to the proportion of children reporting having been bullied or bullying others, including as factors gender, social class, school grade, years of under-achievement and north/south location.

For being bullied, only two variables remained significantly associated after multivariable adjustment, namely gender ( $p < 0.001$ ) and social class ( $p < 0.02$ ) (Table 2). The adjusted rates of being bullied indicate significant decrease in risk for female students compared to males (adjusted OR = 0.73) and that children from the low social class have the highest risk of being bullied. There are no significant variations across north/south location, school grade and years of under-achievement in the proportion of children being bullied.

The significant factors associated with bullying others were gender ( $p < 0.001$ ), school grade ( $p < 0.02$ ), years of under-achievement ( $p < 0.001$ ) and social class ( $p < 0.01$ ). Referring to Table 3, the analysis of model coefficients shows that the proportion of bullying others was significantly lower for girls: (adjusted OR = 0.46). Furthermore, this occurrence is higher in the 6th grade, increases with increasing years of under-achievement and with lower social class. No significant variation was found in terms of north/south location.



**Table 2** *Being bullied and socio-demographic factors – results of the logistic model*

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Term</i>	<i>Coefficient (standard error)</i>	<i>Adjusted odds ratio (95% CI)</i>
Gender (a)	Females	-0.319 (0.08)	0.73 (0.62–0.85)
Social class (b)	Middle – high	0.172 (0.24)	1.19 (0.74–1.91)
	Middle – low	0.152 (0.23)	1.16 (0.74–1.84)
	Low	0.403 (0.22)	1.50 (0.97–2.31)
Constant		-1.471 (0.22)	

(a) reference group – males; (b) reference group – high social level

**Table 3** *Bullying others and socio-demographic factors – results of the logistic model*

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Term</i>	<i>Coefficient (standard error)</i>	<i>Adjusted odds ratio (95% CI)</i>
Gender (a)	Females	-0.786 (0.09)	0.46 (0.38–0.55)
School grade (b)	6th	0.221 (0.09)	1.25 (1.04–1.49)
Years of under-achievement (c)	1	0.224 (0.13)	1.25 (0.97–1.61)
	2 or more	0.575 (0.14)	1.78 (1.37–2.31)
Social class (d)	Middle – high	0.133 (0.31)	1.14 (0.62–2.09)
	Middle – low	0.328 (0.29)	1.39 (0.78–2.47)
	Low	0.572 (0.28)	1.77 (1.02–3.07)
Constant		-2.074 (0.28)	

(a) reference group – males; (b) reference group – 5th grade;  
(c) reference group – 0 years; (d) reference group – high social level

### *Types of bullying*

Differences in the type of bullying experienced by preparatory school pupils in the north and in the south are shown in Table 4. Most of the bullying took the form of general nasty name calling in both areas. Having rumours spread about one was the next most frequent form of bullying; no one would talk to me was less frequent.

We can see that calling names is more frequent in the north ( $p < 0.001$ ). Certain forms of aggression are similar both in the north and in the south, namely 'steal', 'threaten' and 'spread rumours'. 'No one talks to me' is more frequent in the south ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Children were asked how often they were left alone at playtime because nobody wanted to play with them. When comparing the extent of being alone in the north and in the south, significant differences were found ( $X^2_2 = 10.3, p < 0.01$ ). The results presented in Table 5 indi-



**Table 4** Types of bullying behaviour in the North and in the South (%)

Types of bullying	North 2323	South 522	p
Physical hurt, hitting	34.3	26.7	***
Steal, taken belongings	31.6	29.1	ns
Threatened	22.6	23.6	ns
Calling nasty names	54.2	44.6	***
Rumours spread	36.4	32.1	ns
No one talks to me	10.7	17.0	***
Other types	10.2	9.8	ns

Note: Figures are percentages of those children who were ever bullied (for Tables 4 and 5 total percentages exceed 100, since children could check more than one response).

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; ns  $p > 0.05$

**Table 5** Being alone in the playground (%)

Being alone	North	South	p
Never	82.1	83.3	
Once or twice this term	13.6	10.4	
Once or twice this week	4.3	6.3	**

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

cate that the great majority of the children reported never being alone, but that a significantly higher percentage of northern school children referred to being sporadically alone (only once or twice during the term), while more children in the south reported being alone more persistently.

#### *Places where bullying happens*

For most of the bullied children, bullying was reported to have occurred mainly in the playground (Table 6). The second and third most frequent places of bullying were the corridors and the classroom, respectively.

Although these trends in the places where bullying occurs are quite similar in the north and in the south, children in northern schools seem to show slightly more incidents of bullying in all the above mentioned places except the canteen ( $p < 0.05$ ).

It appears that few children were bullied at the canteen, during lunch break. Both districts present small and similar percentages



**Table 6** *Places where children were bullied according to North / South location (North / South) (%)*

<i>Where it happens</i>	<i>North</i> 2170	<i>South</i> 470	<i>p</i>
Playgrounds	78.2	73.6	*
Classroom	23.0	16.6	**
Corridors	31.3	24.0	**
Canteen	6.6	7.7	ns
Others	16.4	7.2	***

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

\*  $p < 0.5$

ns  $p < 0.05$

(under eight percent). This may be the result of the fact that few children have lunch in schools; the anonymous questionnaire did not distinguish between the children who have lunch in school and the remainder.

*Do children like the playground?*

It is in playgrounds that bullying is more frequent, both for northern and for southern schools. This can be explained by the lack of attention given to these spaces revealed by their bad structure and maintenance. These places are not very attractive and there is a lack of organization of free time activities. There is also a lack of materials to play with such as balls, rope games, etc. However, the playground is highly appreciated by children, although forgotten by adults (Table 7).

The great majority of children (around 87 percent) reported that they liked the playground very much, and only a very small percentage (two percent) mentioned not liking it. No significant differences in this pattern were found between northern and southern schools ( $X^2_2 = 0.26$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 7** *Children's opinion about the playground according to the location of the school (North / South) (%)*

<i>Views on playground</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>p</i>
Hate it and do not like it	2.3	2.4	
Neutral	10.6	11.2	
Like it and love it	87.0	86.3	
			ns



### **Discussion and conclusions**

The results indicate a considerably high level of reports of being bullied and of bullying others: 20 percent and 16 percent, respectively. Olweus (1978, 1993) found that in Norway nine percent of the children were bullied and seven percent took part in bullying others. According to the survey by Whitney and Smith (1993), 27 percent of the children in UK junior/middle schools reported they were bullied and 12 percent admitted that they were bullies.

In our study, gender was found to play a significant part in identifying victims and bullies (the percentage of bullies and of victims is larger for boys). These results for gender are in accordance with other studies (Olweus, 1993; Whitney and Smith, 1993). We also found significant differences according to social class (percentages of bullies and of victims are larger in the lower social classes). The results for social class may derive from the great disparity among social classes in Portuguese society. Moreover, in our study we work with individual social class for each children and family and not with whether the school is located in a poor area or not; neither do we work with a global group. Whitney and Smith (1993) did find a modest relationship of bully/victim problems with lower social class groups in the UK. O'Moore et al. (1997) found a significantly higher percentage of bullying in primary and post-primary schools in areas where there was a higher concentration of pupils from low socioeconomic groups. One implication of this is clearly that schools with many children from low social classes need special attention: intervention could be made by improving playgrounds and organizing clubs to involve children in interesting activities.

No significant differences were found between the percentages of bullied children in the North and South of Portugal nor between the percentages of bullying children. These results are in line with those of Olweus (1991) which revealed no differences concerning the location of schools in terms of rural and urban areas. Olweus (1993) suggests that it has been commonly accepted that bullying occurs primarily in big-city schools, but results from the nation-wide Norwegian surveys do not bear this out. The percentage of students in Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim (with populations varying from 450,000 to 150,000 inhabitants) who were bullied or who bullied others was approximately the same as, or even somewhat lower than, corresponding figures from the rest of the country.

There are also significant differences for bullying others in relation to school grade and years of under-achievement. School failure (years of under-achievement) has not been an object of study in other researches on bullying. Children retained in the same class for a year (or more) have a special status; usually they become part of a new class



where the students already know each other. They may find it difficult to be accepted in this already established peer network; in addition, they are older and often stronger and in a good position to bully others. They seem to lack motivation and interest in school and bullying others may be a way of calling attention to themselves or attempting to gain status in the new peer group. They may also lack self-esteem in academic ways and seek it by bullying others. The problem is often exacerbated because teachers usually do not want to teach classes with a large number of students retained for a year, and such classes tend to be given to younger and less experienced teachers. Support teachers can be helpful in this matter.

Name calling is the most usual bullying practice in the north and in the south of Portugal, although more frequent in the north. However, the use of insults does not have the same meaning in the north it has in the south. Insulting words used in daily language, especially by lower social classes, do seem to be more common generally in the north than in the south of the country. These cultural differences may also help to explain the prominence of the 'physical hurt and hitting' kind of bullying in the north ( $p < 0.001$ ). The second most frequent practice in the north as in the south is 'having rumours spread', but in the south 'no one talks to me' attains higher proportions than in the north. This is a more elaborate form of aggression.

The playground comes out as the place with the highest incidence of bullying, but still is a place highly appreciated by the students, a fact that should lead us to adopt playground supervision and to improve playground quality. Data from the UK survey by Whitney and Smith (1993) also showed that the playground is the place in junior/middle school where bullying reaches the highest levels, while less bullying happens in the classroom. O'Moore et al. (1997) confirmed the previous study for primary study and second levels. The Italian study shows a somewhat different pattern from the English study and ours; in primary schools, children reported that bullying takes place in the playground and in the classroom, at very similar rates, and in middle schools bullying is slightly more frequent in the classroom than in the playground. The bullying in primary school playgrounds could be explained by the poor areas with no playing equipment accessible to children during recess, to enable a variety of play and informal or traditional games.

Though most of the bullying occurs in the playground, incidents are relatively infrequent, and most children enjoy playtime because of the opportunities for free play, games, talk with friends, etc. So, the occurrence of bullying in the playgrounds should not be a reason for abandoning playtime but for improving provision and supervision. In fact, Olweus (1993: 25), found a clear negative association between low



teacher density during break time and the amount of bully/victim problems. The greater the number of teachers (ratio teachers/pupils) supervising during break periods, the lower the level of bully/victim problems in school.

School recess is an area of interest for researchers and, as Pellegrini and Smith (1993) point out, behaviour in the playground is a positive predictor of social and cognitive development, particularly for boys. In Australian primary schools, teachers are diligently supervising the playgrounds and, in some cases, supervision is extended half an hour before and after classes (Evans, 1990) in an attempt at reducing problems of safety in the playground.

In conclusion, our data show that bullying is a problem both in the north and in the south of Portugal, with unexpectedly similar rates. In line with results from other countries, we concluded that there are significant differences for victims and for bullies according to gender. Moreover, our study suggested that besides gender and school grade, factors such as children's social class and years of under-achievement, not examined in previous research, are important risk factors for bullying others which remain significant after multivariable adjustment. In addition, we found that though most of the bullying occurs in the playground most of the children enjoy their playtime. Programs aiming at reducing these problems need to be developed in schools and global policies of education should be implemented to improve provision and supervision in playgrounds (Smith and Sharp, 1994). In Portugal specifically, national policies have been introducing support teachers for children with learning problems to improve their skills, motivation and interest in school, with the aim of preventing and reducing the rates of grade retention. These and other policies need to be reinforced, taking into account the needs of particular children, those who are bullied and those who bully others, to prevent the involvement in the bully/victim problems this study has revealed.

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