

# Coping Strategies and Prevention of Cyberbullying

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Cyberbullying behaviours begin at primary school, so the actions taken by pre-teachers will play a key role in achieving the goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. More specifically, active coping strategies are essential in reducing victimisation. There is great importance of designing and implementing training programmes to prevent and/or reduce cyberbullying as part of student primary school teachers' education. One promising way of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in schools is to encourage pre-service teachers to use active strategies to intervene in cyberbullying and to abandon ineffective strategies in their future professional lives. It is important that pre-service teachers' knowledge of effective coping strategies is enhanced and that any beliefs justifying cyberbullying are deconstructed.

Keywords: pre-service teachers ; cybervictimisation ; coping strategies

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## 1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development <sup>[1]</sup> includes a target to reduce all forms of violence (SDG 16.1). Among these forms of violence, research has shown that bullying is a risk factor for the wellbeing of those involved <sup>[2]</sup>.

In the 21st century, social changes have given rise to new demands in which psychological, social and educational intervention plays an increasingly central role. These new demands include intervention to address violence between peers using new technologies. Research indicates that children have access to information and communication technology and are making use of it from a young age. In Spain, the National Institute of Statistics reported in 2020 that almost 86.7% of children aged 10 years and over were internet users <sup>[3]</sup>. There is also a high level of mobile phone access among children <sup>[4]</sup>. The expansion of new technologies has led to the emergence of online victimisation or cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is "[a]n aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (<sup>[5]</sup>, p. 376). Cyberbullying represents a social and health issue for children <sup>[6][7]</sup>, with a severe impact on their schooling <sup>[8][9]</sup>. It has serious consequences for the development of a sustainable school environment and quality education (SDG 4: 'Quality Education'), undermining the health of victimised children and negatively affecting their wellbeing (SDG 3: 'Good Health and Wellbeing'). Therefore, a key objective within the education system is to reduce cybervictimisation among children.

The Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport launched the Strategic Plan for School Coexistence in 2015 in an attempt to make schools safe spaces rather than places of violence. Teacher training plays a key role in achieving this objective <sup>[10][11][12]</sup>. It is important to acknowledge the efforts made by teachers and institutions to prevent and address bullying, although their impact remains limited <sup>[13]</sup>. Understanding the degree of preparation among pre-service teachers will allow people to identify weaknesses and improve their training as in-service teachers in the future <sup>[14]</sup>. However, there has been little research into pre-service teachers to date. Existing research has pointed to the need to train pre-service teachers on cyberbullying <sup>[15][16][17][18]</sup> and increase their commitment to eradicating it <sup>[19]</sup>. The coping strategies adopted within the school environment are key to addressing victimisation <sup>[20]</sup>. Helping students to develop coping strategies has a very relevant role in reducing the prevalence and harmful consequences of bullying <sup>[21]</sup>. Responses to avoid victimisation, such as seeking support (active strategies), has been shown to be more effective against cyberbullying and contribute to reducing victim distress <sup>[22][23]</sup>. In contrast, passive strategies (e.g., blocking messages, ignoring the behaviour) do not change perpetrators' behaviours, so they have little success, and have been associated with increased victim distress <sup>[22]</sup>.

For most children, teachers are significant figures in their everyday lives <sup>[24]</sup>, so the decisions made by pre-service teachers in response to bullying and cyberbullying behaviours are highly relevant <sup>[12][21][25]</sup>. Researchers are not aware of any study analysing the influence of pre-service teachers' personal variables on their perceptions of different coping strategies that children may adopt in response to cyberbullying. Understanding the ways in which the characteristics of pre-service teachers encourage active intervention by victims in educational settings may play a fundamental part in the successful design and application of school coexistence programmes and help higher education institutions prepare

teachers for professional practice more effectively. In order to ensure that schools respond appropriately to cyberbullying in the immediate term, researchers must draw on knowledge of the coping strategies considered appropriate by pre-service teachers and the variables that can explain their support for these strategies.

## **2. Experiences of Cyberbullying among Primary School Pupils**

Most prior studies on cyberbullying have focused on adolescents. However, a number of studies have situated the emergence of cyberbullying behaviours among pre-adolescents (primary school) [26][27][28][29][30]. It has been estimated that around 10% of pupils at primary schools are cybervictimised [31]. Studies based on samples of Spanish primary school pupils place the prevalence of cybervictimisation between 6.6% [32] and 18% [33], depending on the number of items on the scale used to measure the phenomenon.

Moreover, being a victim has been shown to be a risk factor for subsequent victimisation [34][35][36][37]. Some children are unable to escape bullying and remain victims throughout the different stages of their education [38][39], becoming chronic victims [34]. Recent research has identified the percentage of chronic victims from primary to secondary school as 24% [40]. Chronic bullying victims display more frequent health problems, higher levels of anxiety, loneliness, stress and poorer performance than sporadic victims [34][41][42].

The vulnerable situation in which some children find themselves starting at the primary school level jeopardises achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The severity of cyberbullying and its consequences over time make it very important to prevent its emergence from the early stages of education.

## **3. The Role of Teachers in Combating Cyberbullying**

The socioecological approach to bullying is based on the premise that bullying behaviours are influenced by interactions with classmates and adults [43]. Primary schools are characterised by small groups of pupils who are taught by very few teachers with whom they spend a lot of time and have a very close relationship [44], making the teacher a very important adult figure for their pupils in this setting [24]. As a result, teachers are in an optimal position to observe and intervene in school bullying [45]. Moreover, pupils expect their teachers to take action against bullying [44]. Teachers are more likely to intervene if they witness bullying [46], but less likely to intervene if the victim ignores the bullying [47]. A longitudinal study by Troop-Gordon and Ladd concluded that the incidence of bullying declined when teachers took consistent action against it [48]. By contrast, higher levels of victimisation are documented in classrooms where teachers do not intervene [49][50]. In addition to this, pupils interpret their teachers' failure to intervene as a form of implicit consent for bullying [51] and a consequence of higher levels of teachers' pro-bullying attitudes [52]. When teachers' response to bullying is adequate, they strengthen bonds with students, creating an appropriate learning and development environment [53].

Pre-service teachers think they can play a central role in bullying intervention [54], but are not confident about their knowledge of coping strategies to handle it [55]. They feel prepared to support victims and their parents, but do not feel confident to intervene with bullies or their parents [56]. Research into the role of teachers in tackling cyberbullying is more limited [57]. The results of existing studies suggest that in order to reduce the risk of cyberbullying, a social environment with clear rules against violence is needed [52], with a person who stops the bullying behaviour and provides support to victims [58]. The coping strategy of asking a teacher for help is the most frequently selected among primary school pupils, with up to 57% of pupils backing this strategy among those in fourth year. Only 11.1% of secondary school pupils supported this strategy [59]. It is vital that children have teachers that they trust to support them against cyberbullying [60]. Since cyberbullying begins at primary level, action from teachers is key in successfully tackling cybervictimisation.

## **4. Coping Strategies against Cyberbullying**

Coping strategies have been defined as the response that individuals employ to manage the stress caused by their environment (e.g., peer relationships) and the resulting emotions [61]. The coping strategies adopted by the people around them play a part in helping victims overcome the negative consequences of bullying [36] and reduce victimisation [20]. Coping strategies are expressed through the victim's response to aggression and encompass behaviour by bystanders [62].

Teachers' responses to victimisation can influence whether or not the victimisation continues and affect the wellbeing of the pupils involved [63][64]. These responses may play an active or passive role in preventing victimisation. Active responses consist of adopting measures to avoid victimisation, while passive responses leave the victim to face the situation alone [65]. Active strategies are the most effective in the case of cyberbullying [10][21][22][23]. Among these

strategies, seeking support from peers and adults has proven to be the most effective [22][23][66]. Dialogue between the victim and the bully has also been shown to be successful [67][68]. Passive avoidance strategies are the least effective [69][70]. Moreover, ignoring the incident increases the negative impact of cyberbullying [22][71]. Failure to intervene contributes to cyberperpetration [36][72].

## **5. Personal Variables Related to Coping Strategies against Bullying**

The characteristics of teachers have been identified as explanatory variables for the use of different strategies [73]. Ettekal et al. [74] pointed out that teachers' interventions against bullying were associated with different personal variables. Research has highlighted the influence of mainly three variables: self-efficacy (or the ability to cope with a bullying situation), perceived seriousness (or how unacceptable a bullying situation is thought to be), and empathy or feelings for the victim [15][25][54]. One of the priorities identified in prevention programmes is to understand the personal characteristics that predict effective responses to bullying among teachers [11].

Additionally, although results are mixed, prior research has found sex differences in the tendency to intervene and strategies employed. Regarding coping strategies, the main difference is that women attach more importance to social support [21][75]. Girls are more likely to talk about the incident of cyberbullying [21], also with the teacher [76]. In relation to the tendency to help, several studies found that male teachers reported that they tended to ignore bullying incidents, while female teachers considered important to intervene [51][77][78][79]. However, other studies found no differences by sex [80][81]. Research on pre-service teachers reported similar differences by sex [15][18]. Meanwhile, factors influencing bystander intervention in cyberbullying showed that the results on sex are contradictory [82]. Studies have shown that women display a greater tendency to help than men [83][84], while others found no differences between the two groups [15][85]. These results suggest that possible differences by sex in the teachers' personal variables and their relationship with coping strategies should be analysed.

Teachers' beliefs about bullying and cyberbullying are linked to the strategies they use to coping with it [86]. Teacher perceiving bullying as a serious problem are more prone to intervene to stop it [46][73][87]. Teachers who perceive bullying as a normative phenomenon are less inclined to intervene [40]. Troop-Gordon and Ladd observed that teachers who believed that bullying is a normal part of adolescence were more likely to recommend avoidance strategies [48]. Moral disengagement is also related to the bystander response, although few studies have focused on this area and the results of existing studies are inconsistent [88]. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory [89] defines moral disengagement as a cognitive process through which people justify their aggressive behaviour or distort its potential impact on victims. A high level of moral disengagement is negatively associated with behaviours defending the victim and positively associated with passive behaviours [88][90], although other studies found no significant relationship [91][92][93]. Based on these results, moral disengagement could be expected to correlate with approval of the use of passive strategies against cyberbullying victimisation.

Some pre-service teachers have acknowledged difficulties in managing bullying when they have been bullied in the past [94]. Pre-service teachers' own experiences of bullying are related to their subsequent responses to bullying incidents [95]. However, the direction of the relationship is unclear. In the study by Cleemput et al., teachers were more likely to help victims when they had experienced bullying themselves [96]. Other studies reported the opposite: the less involvement they had had in perpetration and victimisation, the more teachers were inclined to help bullying victims [97][98]. Among school aged students, victims mainly employ passive strategies. For example, victims of traditional bullying ignore the bully; victims of cyberbullying are more likely to ignore the aggression and take technological measures such as changing their mobile phone number or email [21][99]. Among adults, previous victimisation can also lead to difficulties in employing effective coping strategies [100]. In young adult victims of cyberstalking, women had a tendency to use avoidance coping strategies [101].

Teachers' beliefs about the seriousness of bullying differs according to the types of bullying [80][102]. They perceived physical bullying as more serious than verbal bullying and verbal bullying as more serious than relational bullying [87][103]. Additionally, Domínguez-Hernández et al. [82] review showed that perceived feelings influenced the seriousness attributed to cyberbullying. For example, adolescents viewed cyberbullying as more serious when they perceived the victim to be distressed [104]. Research indicates that teachers who had been bullied in the past were more likely to feel empathy towards the victim [105], therefore, presumably they can recognise the negative emotions generated by victimisation to a greater extent. In fact, perceived severity of bullying was associated with greater empathy towards victims [54]. Moreover, previous studies suggest that bystanders who experience pleasant emotions in response to bullying tend to side with the bully [106], while experiencing unpleasant emotions in response to bullying increases support for the victim [107].

Meanwhile, moral emotions (such as guilt and shame) are important regulators of helping behaviours <sup>[108]</sup>, as they are closely correlated with a sense of responsibility towards others <sup>[109][110]</sup>.

The results of the study by Bjärehed et al. pointed to the importance of considering the relationship between gender stereotypical traits and bystander behaviour <sup>[91]</sup>. The gender stereotypical traits refer to “the beliefs people hold about members of the categories man or woman” (<sup>[111]</sup>, p. 19). Girls tend to have been socialised to be more submissive, subordinate and pleasant, whereas boys are socialised to be more dominant, competitive and aggressive <sup>[112]</sup>. However, it is important to bear in mind that there is more than one kind of masculinity <sup>[113]</sup>. Choi et al. presented a three-factor model of gender stereotypes comprising one feminine factor and two masculine factors, one with personality dimensions and another with social dimensions representing control over others <sup>[114]</sup>. A study by Morales et al. showed that social masculinity is a factor related to bullying among boys and girls <sup>[115]</sup>.

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