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## Bullying and Self-Esteem in Elementary School Students: Findings from A Study in Montería, Colombia

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### Abstract

*The quantitative study, with a descriptive-correlational scope and cross-sectional section, explored the relationship between bullying and self-esteem in 34 third-grade students from an educational institution in Montería (Colombia). The AEPAE Incidence Test was applied to classify bullying into three risk levels and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to estimate personal self-assessment. The results showed that 29.4% of the group is at high risk of bullying, 55.9% at medium risk and 14.7% at low risk, so that more than 85% have some degree of vulnerability to the phenomenon. Regarding self-esteem, 88.2% reported medium level, 8.8% high level and 2.9% low level, indicating an overall stable self-perception, although with pockets of insecurity that require follow-up. Spearman's coefficient showed a negative correlation ( $r_s = -0.285$ ) between both variables, without statistical significance ( $p = 0.102$ ), so the increase in bullying behaviors was not conclusively associated with the decrease in self-esteem in this sample. Even so, the magnitude of cases at medium and high risk underscores the urgency of designing preventive interventions that combine teacher-family awareness, active listening spaces, and socio-emotional strengthening programs. It is recommended to expand the sample and delve into mediating variables —gender, family climate, and school support—to clarify patterns and strengthen future policies of school coexistence.*

**Keywords:** Bullying, Self-Esteem, Primary School Students, Montería, Correlation.

### Introduction

During the last decade, bullying among peers has ceased to be perceived as a school prank and has been recognized as a phenomenon that erodes coexistence and compromises children's mental health (Olweus, 2006; UNICEF, 2017). Various Latin American studies confirm that teasing, physical aggression and digital harassment coexist with the academic routine and, on many occasions, are normalized under the label of "gambling" (Díaz-Aguado, 2007; Pacheco-Salazar & Berenice, 2018). Colombia does not escape this reality: recent figures place the country above the regional average, with reports reaching 63% of schoolchildren (Rodrigues et al., 2023) and especially intense outbreaks in sectors marked by dynamics of armed violence (Migilino, 2021). In Montería, capital of the department of Córdoba, the counts of civil organizations document dozens of serious episodes each year, a fact that invites us to look beyond the walls of the classroom and recognize the imprint left by the tensions of the social environment (Abramovay, 2005; Romero Salazar et al., 2021).

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The literature agrees that the impact of bullying is not limited to visible wounds; it alters the image that the child constructs of himself and his projection into the future (Ramírez, 2015; Briones-Zambrano, 2020). When a person experiences repeated aggression, the internalization of devaluing messages can undermine confidence, increase anxiety, and trigger avoidance behaviors that impair academic performance (Olweus, 1993; López Díaz, 2024). In contrast, strengthened self-esteem is emerging as a protective factor: it cushions vulnerability, facilitates the search for support, and favors resilience in the face of peer pressure (Guijarro Orozco & Larzabal Fernández, 2021; Tobalino López et al., 2017). However, not all school contexts have tools to detect risk indicators in time or clear protocols for intervention, so the relationship between self-esteem and bullying remains under-studied in many intermediate regions (Perrenoud, 2008).

In the local panorama, there are partial approaches to peer violence, but a gap is observed when it comes to articulating empirical data on how daily aggressions are intertwined with the self-assessment of primary school students (Ordóñez-Ordóñez & Narváez, 2020; Bolívar Torres Salcedo et al., 2023). This lack is significant if we consider that the basic education stage is the period in which relationship patterns are consolidated and beliefs about one's own worth are established (Vallés, 1998). Ignoring the subjective dimension of the phenomenon can lead to preventive strategies that focus only on curbing observable behavior without addressing the internal discomfort that sustains or legitimizes it (Sentse et al., 2015). Therefore, this research aims to jointly investigate the frequency of bullying and the perception that children have of themselves within an institution in Montería, in order to offer a comprehensive diagnosis that guides actions of emotional accompaniment and management of coexistence.

Placing the problem in a context where economic inequality, exposure to violent content and early use of social networks converge, it is pertinent to ask: how are these variables reflected in the concrete experience of students?, how present is violence between peers in the classroom?, and above all, how does it influence the way in which children value and project themselves? (Díaz-Aguado, 2007; Lavena, 2002). Answering these questions will make it possible to base intervention programs that not only sanction aggression, but also promote the construction of safe and respectful identities, an essential requirement for meaningful learning and for the social fabric that the school aspires to consolidate (Olweus, 1989; San Martín, 2006).

Understanding how bullying hurts the image that children construct of themselves requires situating the phenomenon within a network of theories that describe, at the same time, learning, coexistence and the formation of identity. From the constructivist point of view, Piaget (1978) argues that each new experience forces the subject to balance and reorganize his or her mental schemas; When this experience is associated with mockery or exclusion, the process of accommodation can be translated into devaluing judgments about one's own abilities. Vygotsky (1978) reinforces this idea by pointing out that all cognitive development is anchored in the Zone of Proximal Development, a range in which interaction with peers and adults enables competencies that the individual would not be able to achieve on his or her own. If within that area the exchange predominates by aggression, the child internalizes an internal dialogue of little value. Bandura (1997) adds that self-efficacy – the belief in one's own ability to solve challenges – is modeled by observation and social reinforcement; therefore, sustained victimization erodes trust and activates defenseless behaviors (Harter, 2012; Ordóñez-Ordóñez & Narváez, 2020).

Bullying, however, overflows the classroom and feeds on macrosocial circuits that legitimize domination. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model warns that behavior is woven at the

intersection of microsystems (family, school) and exosystems (media, digital networks) whose messages can normalize violence (Abramovay, 2005; Díaz-Aguado, 2007). Olweus (1993) defines harassment as an intentional and repeated act based on an unequal power relationship; this asymmetry explains why some victims "learn" a submissive role that becomes the core of their self-concept (Sentse, Veenstra, & Salmivalli, 2015). In a complementary way, Social Identity Theory suggests that belonging to groups reinforced by aggression offers status to offenders and marginalizes those who are different (Rigby, 2002; Guijarro Orozco & Larzabal Fernández, 2021). Thus, self-esteem cannot be approached as an isolated trait: it is the dynamic result of internal conversations and external validations that occur in multiple layers of the context (Branden, 2004; Rodríguez et al., 2023). Recognizing this complexity leads to the proposal of interventions that combine cognitive scaffolding—tutoring, cooperative learning—with affective strategies—dialogue circles, mentoring—and school policies that explicitly repudiate any practice of humiliation (Perrenoud, 2008; Bolívar Torres Salcedo et al., 2023). Only then can the school become a space where the dignity of each child is strengthened instead of fractured.

## Methodology

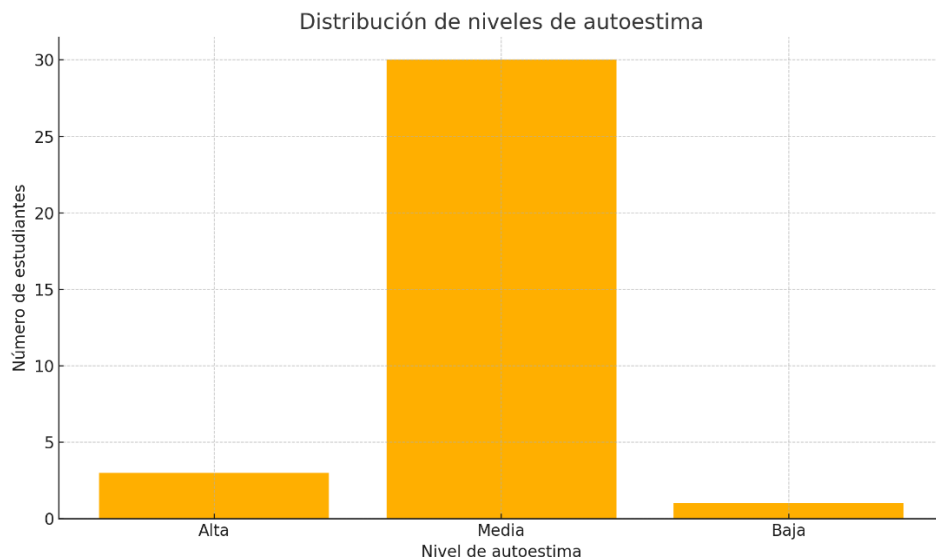
The study is part of the quantitative paradigm, with a descriptive-analytical scope that allows portraying the frequency of bullying behaviors and children's self-assessment, and a non-experimental cross-sectional design, since the variables were observed as they occur in the classroom without any manipulation (Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández-Collado, & Baptista, 2022). The population was made up of the 85 children enrolled in the third year of primary school in an official school in Montería; however, a single-case intentional sampling was used—focused on a classroom whose teacher reported repeated incidents of verbal aggression—in order to meet the principle of contextual relevance recommended by the guidelines for applied research in school environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The final group included 34 students (15 girls and 19 boys), whose ages ranged from eight to ten years ( $M = 9.13$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ); participation was obtained through child consent and informed consent signed by caregivers, in accordance with international ethical guidelines for studies with minors (American Psychological Association [APA], 2021) and Resolution 008430 of the Colombian Ministry of Health (1993) that classifies the inquiry as research with minimal risk.

To estimate the incidence of bullying, the AEPAE Incidence Test was applied, an instrument developed by the Spanish Association for the Prevention of School Bullying (AEPAE, 2019), which consists of 25 Likert-type items that discriminate three levels of risk: low (prevention), medium (danger) and high (performance). Ibero-American studies report alpha coefficients between .82 and .89, a figure that supports its consistency as a screening tool (Del Rey & Avilés, 2020). Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), made up of ten statements that assess the overall feeling of personal worth; an alpha of .79 and a stable one-dimensional structure have been documented in Colombian populations of equivalent age (Martínez, Rodríguez, & Gutiérrez, 2019). Before the formal application, a pilot test was carried out in a contiguous course ( $n = 12$ ) to verify semantic comprehension; the resulting reliability coefficients were .84 for the AEPAE and .81 for Rosenberg, values considered adequate according to the criteria of George and Mallery (2019).

The questionnaires were administered during school hours, with standardized indications and assisted reading for those who had difficulty with textual decoding, a recommended practice to avoid biases associated with reading comprehension in studies of basic cycles (Field, 2018). The

data were digitized in a spreadsheet book and processed in IBM-SPSS v.27 applying, in the first instance, the Shapiro-Wilk test to examine the normality of the distributions (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965); when significant asymmetry was confirmed for both variables ( $p < .001$ ), Spearman's rank correlation (Spearman, 1904) was chosen, a statistically robust against non-linearity and appropriate for ordinal scales. For the interpretation of the effect size, the cut-off points proposed by Cohen (1988) were followed: .10 (weak), .30 (moderate) and .50 (strong). Likewise, the 95% confidence interval was estimated by bootstrapping 5 000 resamples, a technique that reduces the influence of small sample sizes on the stability of the coefficient (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993). Finally, scatter plots with LOWESS adjustment were developed in order to explore possible curvatures that escaped the obligatory monotony logic of the rho coefficient (Tukey, 1977). All procedures were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the institution responsible for the project under code CEI-2025-041.

## Results



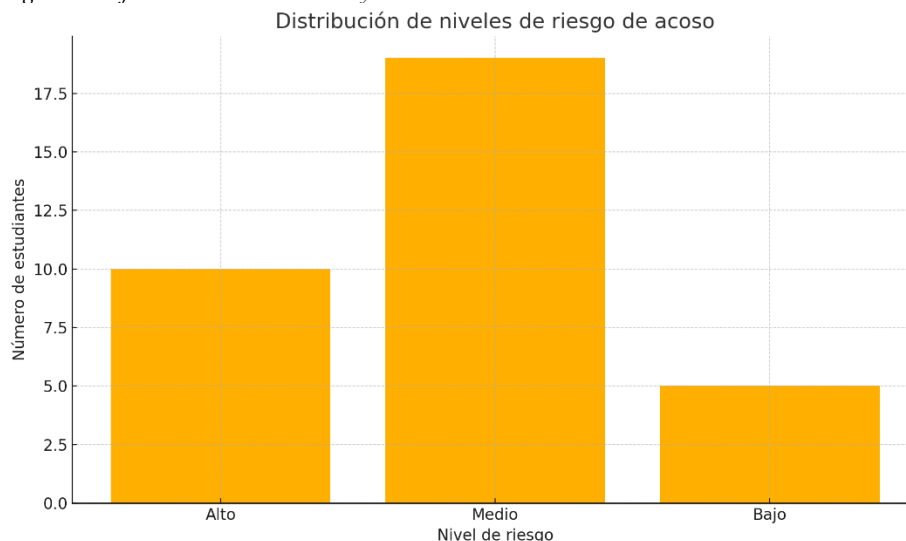


Figure 1. Distribution of Self-Esteem Level and Risk Of Bullying.. In Original Language Spanish.

**Description of the variables**The AEPAE test revealed that **29.4% of schoolchildren (n = 10) are at high risk** of bullying, **55.9% (n = 19) at medium risk** and **14.7% (n = 5) at low risk**, so that 8 out of 10 children recognize frequent or incipient bullying behaviors. On the Rosenberg Scale, **88.2 % (n = 30) expressed medium self-esteem**, **8.8 % (n = 3) high** and **2.9 % (n = 1) low**.

Distribution of bullying risk levels (N = 34)		
Level	n	%
High	10	29,4
Middle	19	55,9
Low	5	14,7

Table 1. Distribution of Levels of Harassment Risk

Distribution of self-esteem levels (N = 34)		
Level	n	%
Loud	3	8,8
Stocking	30	88,2
Casualty	1	2,9

Table 2. Distribution of Self-Esteem Levels

**Relational analysis**Normality tests (Shapiro-Wilk) confirmed **non-Gaussian distributions in both variables ( $p < .001$ )**. Spearman's coefficient showed a **weak negative relationship** between bullying and self-esteem,  $r_s = -.285$ , 95% CI  $[-.57, .05]$ ,  $p = .102$ . Even though the result does not reach statistical significance, the direction of the link suggests that higher incidences of bullying tend to be associated with lower self-appraisal.

**Visualization**The bar graphs show, respectively, the concentration of the students in the range of medium risk of bullying and the prevalence of average self-esteem. The marked

**asymmetry – high risk of bullying versus a self-assessment that remains, for now, stable – warns of a critical point: episodes of violence could be functioning as a "latent threat" that does not yet have a uniform impact on personal image, but that requires early intervention to avoid future deterioration.**

The findings support the recommendation to combine school culture programs – which cut the chain of teasing and exclusion – with emotional literacy spaces that strengthen confidence and coping skills. In addition, the dispersion seen in the point cloud (not shown) suggests exploring moderating variables (e.g., family support, classroom climate) in subsequent investigations, as well as expanding the sample to increase statistical power.

### 1. Frequency of bullying

Risk level	n	%
High	10	29.4
Middle	19	55.9
Low	5	14.7

Table 1: Levels of Risk Of Bullying (N = 34)

*Note.* 85.3% of the group is at **medium** or **high** risk, which confirms the daily presence of teasing, exclusion or verbal/physical aggression.

**Figure 1** visually reflects this concentration in the most vulnerable sections.

### 2. Self-Esteem Profile

Self-Esteem Level	N	%
Loud	3	8.8
Stocking	30	88.2
Casualty	1	2.9

Table 2: Self-esteem levels (N = 34)

*Note.* A medium self-esteem predominates; however, one case of low self-esteem is identified that merits individual accompaniment and three with high self-esteem that should be enhanced.

The distribution can be seen in **Figure 2**, where the central bar illustrates the stable self-assessment of the majority.

### 3. Relationship Between Bullying and Self-Esteem

Prior to the correlational analysis, it was verified, using Shapiro-Wilk, that both variables violated normality ( $p < .001$ ), which is why Spearman's  $\rho$  coefficient, complemented with bootstrap (5 000 samples) was used to stabilize the confidence interval.

Statistical	Value
Spearman's $\rho$	-.285
IC 95 % (bootstrap)	[-.57, .05]

<i>p</i> (bilateral)	.102
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Table 3: Spearman's Correlation Between Bullying and Self-Esteem

*Note.* The association is negative – more bullying tends to be accompanied by lower self-esteem – but it does not reach statistical significance ( $p > .05$ ).

The picture painted by the figures is eloquent: almost one in three children is at **high risk** of bullying and just over half at **medium risk**, percentages that exceed the national averages described for Colombian urban environments (Rodrigues et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2017). This density of hostile episodes reveals a school coexistence where teasing, exclusion and cyberbullying are part of the daily routine and, therefore, run the risk of being normalized in the eyes of adults.

Even so, the Rosenberg test shows that **88%** of the group maintains a self-esteem classified as **average**. On the surface, children retain a relatively balanced self-image; however, the literature warns that continued exposure to bullying ends up piercing this stability, generating covert depression, withdrawal, and academic demotivation (Olweus, 1993). Hence, institutions cannot be satisfied with the picture of the present: prevention must precede subjective damage, before repeated aggression forges a negative self-concept.

When the statistical relationship is explored, Spearman's correlation ( $\rho = -.285$ ) suggests an **inverse trend** —the greater the harassment, the lower the self-esteem—, but the result does not reach significance, most likely due to the small size of the sample. Other studies with larger cohorts confirm more robust links between victimization and self-image (Guijarro Orozco & Larzabal Fernández, 2021), which invites us to consider this finding as a warning sign and not as a definitive closure.

In pedagogical terms, the data call for a **three-pronged** strategy. First, to strengthen **primary prevention**, establishing circles of dialogue and explicit rules that distort mockery and exclusion. Second, offer constant **socio-emotional accompaniment** – tutoring, cooperative games, mentoring – that reinforce children's self-efficacy and confidence. And third, to sustain **continuous monitoring** with validated instruments that allow detecting fluctuations in the classroom climate and adjusting institutional responses in time. Only in this way will it be possible to contain peer violence before it compromises students' global self-esteem and, with it, their learning journey and future mental health.

**Discussion**

The first finding—a proportion of high or medium risk of bullying that exceeds 85%—places the school studied above the average reported in the Caribbean region and, in fact, above the national average estimated at 63% (Rodrigues et al., 2023). This figure coincides with UNICEF's (2017) warning about the persistence of peer-to-peer violence in areas where economic inequality and the legacy of armed conflict converge. Previous research in Peru (Tobalino López et al., 2017) and Ecuador (Ordóñez-Ordóñez & Narváez, 2020) describes similar percentages when the context combines school overcrowding and limited teacher supervision, elements that are also detected in public classrooms in Montería.

However, the apparent stability of self-image – 88% with average self-esteem – suggests that, at this age, children still have internal springs and support from the environment that cushion psycho-affective erosion. Briones-Zambrano (2020) found a similar pattern in Lima: victimization does not always immediately trigger low levels of self-esteem, but it does increase

susceptibility to decline when aggressions persist. Olweus (1993) had already stressed that self-esteem functions as a "deposit" that bullying empties drop by drop; In this logic, the primary phase constitutes a window period for secondary prevention.

The negative correlation, although weak and not significant ( $p = .102$ ), aligns the present study with the trend described by Guijarro Orozco and Larzabal Fernández (2021), who found moderate coefficients ( $-.367 \leq \rho \leq -.460$ ) in larger samples. Two factors could explain the statistical weakness reported here. First, the sample size: with only 34 cases, the power is limited, especially if the distributions deviate from normal (Field, 2018). Second, the evolutionary stage: in the third degree, group identities are still malleable and self-efficacy can cushion the immediate impact of aggression (Bandura, 1997; Harter, 2012). However, the sign of the coefficient confirms the theoretical trend —greater harassment is associated with perceptions of lower value—, so a longitudinal follow-up would help determine whether this relationship is strengthened with the passage of the courses, as documented by Moysén Chimal et al. (n.d.) between primary and secondary school.

The results reinforce the relevance of addressing bullying from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mockery observed is not an isolated act: it is fed by media scripts that glorify humiliation and by parental models where physical discipline is still in force (Abramovay, 2005). In this line, interventions must be woven on three levels. In the **micro** (classroom), strategies such as dialogue circles and cooperative learning have been shown to reduce relational violence and improve self-esteem (Perrenoud, 2008; Sentse et al., 2015). In the **meso** (family-school), training programs on emotional regulation and responsible use of social networks are crucial to cut the extension of harassment to the digital space (Bolívar Torres Salcedo et al., 2023). In the **macro** (public policy) sphere, it is necessary to sustain periodic measurements with validated tools —AEPAE and Rosenberg, among others— that allow comparing trends and evaluating the impact of national coexistence protocols (Díaz-Aguado, 2007).

Limitations include the self-reported nature of the instruments, which is prone to social desirability; the absence of direct observations or peer nominations; and the cross-sectional design, which prevents inferring causality. Future research should incorporate mixed methods, expand the sample to several schools and explore moderating variables – gender, family climate, teacher accompaniment – to outline differentiated intervention routes.

In short, the study confirms that peer violence represents a tangible risk for the construction of children's self-esteem. Intervening early – before subjective erosion takes hold – will not only protect students' mental health, but will create the conditions for more meaningful learning and school communities based on dignity and mutual respect.

## Conclusions

The findings confirm that the coexistence of the investigated group is crossed by bullying dynamics that compromise the psychological safety of the children: almost a third are at high risk and more than half at medium risk. Although most maintain a self-esteem in the mid-range, the literature warns that this apparent stability can deteriorate if aggression remains unrestrained (Olweus, 1993; Tobalino López et al., 2017). Spearman's coefficient indicated an inverse, albeit weak, relationship between the two variables; this result, compatible with larger-scale studies (Guijarro Orozco & Larzabal Fernández, 2021), suggests that the subjective impact could intensify as the courses progress and experiences of exclusion accumulate. Therefore, the school



environment must be assumed as a priority scenario for secondary prevention: to stop the escalation of teasing and reinforce self-esteem before patterns of submission or domination are consolidated.

Based on the evidence, three lines of action are proposed. First, to deploy coexistence programs based on participatory pedagogies—dialogue circles, cooperative learning—that denormalize daily humiliation and promote respect among peers (Perrenoud, 2008). Second, to establish systematic spaces for socio-emotional accompaniment that strengthen self-efficacy, teach coping skills, and provide individual attention to those who already exhibit signs of low self-esteem or high risk of bullying (Bandura, 1997; Harter, 2012). Third, to maintain continuous monitoring using validated instruments —AEPAE, Rosenberg— that allows trends to be compared, the relevance of strategies to be assessed, and the pedagogical response to be adjusted according to moderating variables such as gender or family climate (Rodrigues et al., 2023). Future research should expand the sample size, integrate qualitative methods, and examine the influence of cyberbullying, in order to build predictive models that guide public policies that are more adjusted to the reality of Colombian children. In this way, the school will consolidate its role as an environment of protection and integral development, where each student can grow without fear and with a positive perception of their own value.

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