



third international conference  
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*

# education and/for social justice

3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

# PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance



Published by



ASSOCIAZIONE “PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA”  
Via Francesco Satolli, 30  
00165 – Rome  
Italy



Published in Open Access

APA 7<sup>th</sup> citation system:

Scuola democratica (Ed.) (2025). *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola Democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 1: Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance*. Associazione “Per Scuola Democratica”.

Please cite your contribution as follows:

Smith, A. (2025). *Closing the Gender Gap in Education. Symmetrical Practices from a Didactical Laboratory in STEM Fields*. In Scuola democratica (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola Democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 1: Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance* (pp. 72-84). Associazione “Per Scuola Democratica”.

This book is digitally available at:

<https://www.scuolademocratica-conference.net/conference-proceedings-iii/>

ISBN 979-12-985016-1-4

3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference  
of the journal “Scuola Democratica”  
*Education and/or Social Justice*  
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Vol. 1  
**Inequality,  
Inclusion,  
and Governance**

Organizers and partners

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# A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON BULLYING. FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY

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Bullying represents a global issue and a fundamental violation of human rights. UNESCO estimates that one in three students is a victim of bullying. The prevalence of this phenomenon highlights the importance of continuing to study its modes of expression and strategies for counteraction. While male bullying has been extensively researched, female bullying has received less attention, possibly because it is less visible and, in some respects, more complex than male bullying, involving intricate, cross-sectional, and multidimensional interactions. To gain a better understanding of the gender dynamics underlying bullying and to deepen the knowledge of female bullying, a national project was conducted, involving multidisciplinary research units from six Italian universities and adopting a mixed-method research design. The purpose of this contribution is to present the results of the quantitative study regarding the assessment of the extent and characteristics of bullying across the national territory, with an exploration of potential gender differences in the interpretation of the phenomenon.

female bullying; gender perspective; secondary school; bully survey

## INTRODUCTION

Bullying, traditionally defined as unwanted aggressive behaviour, repeated over time and characterised by a real or perceived power imbalance between perpetrators and victims (Olweus, 1996), is both a global issue and a violation of human rights (Greene, 2006).

According to UNESCO (2019), one in three students worldwide experiences bullying. In Italy, estimates suggest that the prevalence of bullying ranges from 5% to 25%, depending on the measurement tools, population, cut-off criteria, and timeframes considered, while cyberbullying affects between 5% and 19% of the adolescent population (Menesini et al., 2017). The ISTAT survey (2015)

indicates that 50% of adolescents aged 11 to 17 report experiencing offensive or violent behaviour from their peers, with 19.8% being recurrent victims (at least once a month). The third monitoring report on bullying and cyberbullying in Italian schools (Elisa Platform, for the academic year 2022/23<sup>1</sup>) highlights an increasing trend in systematic face-to-face bullying, with 25.3% of students reporting victimisation (21% occasionally, 4.3% systematically) and 7.9% experiencing cyberbullying (6.6% occasionally, 1.3% systematically).

These figures emphasise the importance of ongoing research into the modes of expression and strategies for preventing and addressing bullying. While male bullying has been extensively examined, female bullying remains less visible and, in some aspects, more complex, involving relational, cross-sectional, and multidimensional interactions (De Vita, 2021; De Vita & Burgio, 2023; Owens et al., 2000; Varjas et al., 2008).

The literature suggests that female bullying is primarily relational (Espelage et al., 2004), predominantly intra-gender (Duncan, 1999; Mavin et al., 2014), and has significant psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety, and an increased risk of self-harm and suicidality (Baier et al., 2019; Hay & Meldrum, 2010; Kim et al., 2019).

To better understand the gender dynamics underlying bullying and to deepen the knowledge of female bullying, a national project was conducted. This paper presents the quantitative findings, focusing on the prevalence and characteristics of bullying in Italy and offering insights into gender-specific differences in the interpretation of this phenomenon.

## 1. NATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT

The national survey was conducted between 2020 and 2022, involving multidisciplinary research units from six Italian universities<sup>2</sup>. The research had three main objectives: to achieve a more in-depth understanding of female bullying; to investigate the incidence of female bullying compared to male bullying in terms of frequency and intensity in Italy; and to develop intervention and prevention strategies in the participating schools, alongside launching an awareness campaign (Batini et al., 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.piattaformaelisa.it/risultati-monitoraggio-a-s-2022-2023>

<sup>2</sup> University of Verona (A. De Vita, F. Vittori, P. Dusi, M.G. Landuzzi, L. Ghirrotto), University of Enna "Kore" (G. Burgio, S.R. Emmanuele, S. Peroni, A. Di Lisi), University of Perugia (F. Batini, I.D.M. Scierri), University of Genoa (A. Traverso, M.G. Gibellini), University of Foggia (A.G. Lopez, R. Caso, A. Altamura, A. Disalvo), University of Milano-Bicocca (S. Magaraggia, M.G. Gambardella, B. Fiore, A. Dordoni).

The quantitative data collection aimed to achieve the following objectives: to identify the prevalence of bullying at the national level and its characteristics; to explore gender differences related to the phenomenon; to compare the various forms and specificities of bullying across different urban contexts, identifying significant differences between the cities studied; to contribute, together with the qualitative part, to understanding the perceptions and experiences of students regarding this phenomenon.

A mixed-methods research design was employed to achieve these objectives. The target population consisted of students attending the first two years of upper secondary school in the cities of Arezzo, Foggia, Palermo, Perugia, and Verona, selected as sample cities. The sampling strategy was non-probabilistic, and the sample included girls and boys who, after the schools' preliminary agreement to participate in the project, volunteered to complete the questionnaire.

For the quantitative part of the research, the *Bullying Survey* questionnaire (Swearer, 2001) was used, involving 2,481 students with a mean age of 14.8 years (SD = 0.73). Of the participants, 64.3% were *female*, 35.0% were *male*, and 0.7% identified as *other*. Of these students, 44.0% were in their first year of secondary school, while 56.0% were in their second year.

## **2. RESULTS**

### **2.1. Prevalence of School Bullying**

The first question in each of the initial three sections of the questionnaire asked participants whether they had been victims, bystanders, or perpetrators of bullying. In response to the question, *Have you been a victim of bullying in the last 12 months?*, 7.4% of participants answered Yes.

To examine gender differences in bullying, a gender-based analysis was conducted: 8.6% of girls identified as victims of bullying, compared to 4.4% of boys ( $\chi^2(1) = 15.075$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $V = 0.078$ ).

Regarding the role of bystanders, 26.6% of the sample reported witnessing another student being bullied, with no significant gender differences.

In the section focused on perpetrators of bullying, 2.8% of participants admitted to having bullied others, again with no statistically significant differences between genders. However, a slightly higher percentage of boys identified as perpetrators compared to girls (3.2% vs. 2.6%).

At the end of the questionnaire, seven additional items were included to



describe different types of bullying behaviours. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had experienced these acts over the past 12 months. These questions provided more detailed insights beyond the general query, *Have you been a victim of bullying in the last 12 months?*, and allowed for more specific responses.

A combined analysis of the responses enabled the calculation of the prevalence of systematic bullying (defined as bullying experienced frequently over a year), which was found to be 8.4% (6.1% for boys and 9.6% for girls) ( $\chi^2(1) = 9.172$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $V = 0.061$ ). Although these percentages are not substantially higher than those of participants who explicitly identified as victims, they remain notably greater.

In addition to assessing systematic bullying, the items also allowed for the calculation of occasional bullying, defined as infrequent but still present occurrences, which affected 45.3% of respondents (44.6% of boys and 45.7% of girls) ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.270$ ,  $p = 0.603$ ,  $V = 0.010$ ).

Regarding the frequency of bullying incidents, victims most commonly reported experiencing them *Once or more times a month*. Girls reported a higher frequency of victimisation compared to boys, both as victims (35.0% of girls vs. 10.5% of boys reported being bullied once or more times a week) and as bystanders (19.0% of girls vs. 9.1% of boys reported witnessing bullying incidents multiple times a day).

## **2.2. Characteristics of Bullying and Gender Differences**

Regarding the locations where bullying incidents occur, it is noteworthy that the most frequently mentioned physical space for such episodes is the classroom (67.4%). However, virtual spaces (cyberbullying) surpass physical spaces, with 76.6% of respondents reporting online bullying. No significant gender differences were found in relation to the locations of bullying.

Concerning the perpetrators, bullying is predominantly carried out by peers from the same school year (Fig. 1).

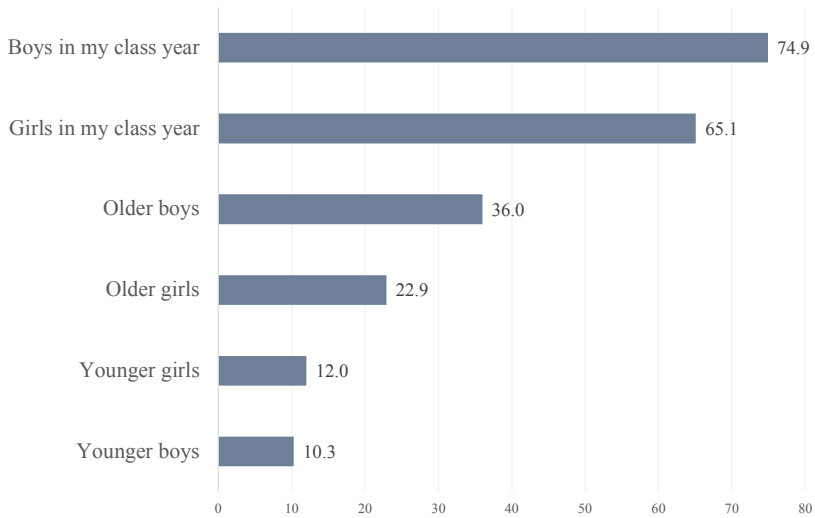
A gender-based analysis reveals that bullying is primarily an intra-gender phenomenon: boys tend to bully male peers, while girls are mostly victimised by other girls. However, a substantial proportion of girls also report being targeted by boys (Fig. 2).

Verbal and relational bullying are the most common forms, whereas physical bullying is the least frequent (Fig. 3).

Verbal and relational forms are more prevalent among girls (Fig. 4). The only

form reported more frequently by boys is pranking (40.7% vs. 7.2% among girls).

Fig. 1. Perpetrators of Bullying (Aggregate Responses from Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators;



Percentage Data; n = 911)

Fig. 2. Comparison Between Genders in Identifying Perpetrators of Bullying (Percentage Data; Female, n = 137; Male, n = 38; \*p <.05, \*\*p <.01, \*\*\*p <.001)

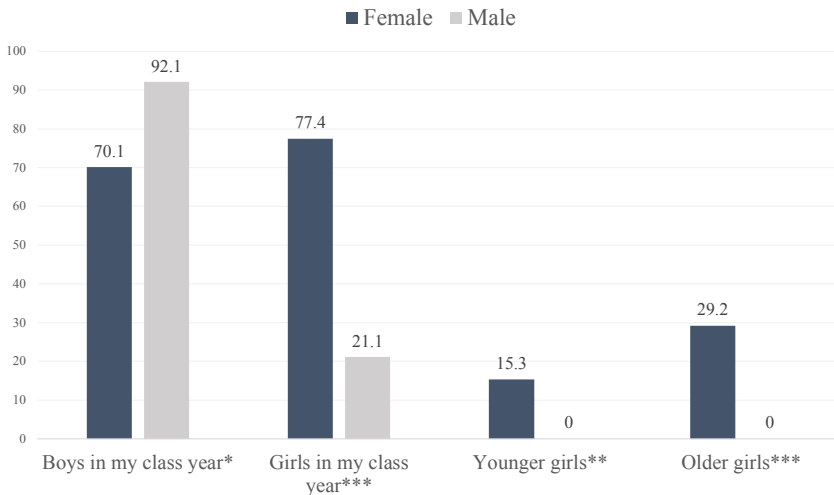


Fig. 3. Forms of Bullying Experienced as Victims (Percentage Data; n = 180)

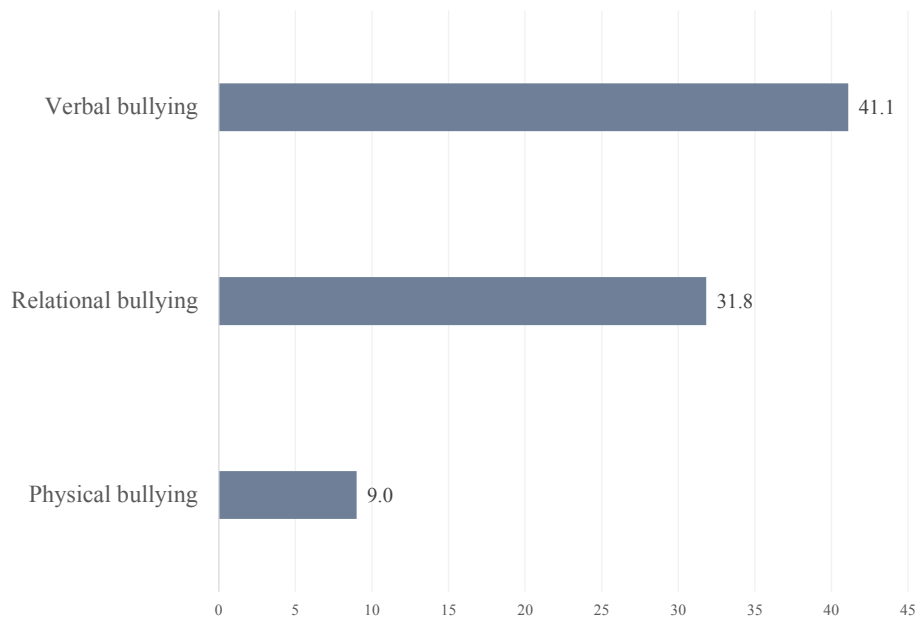
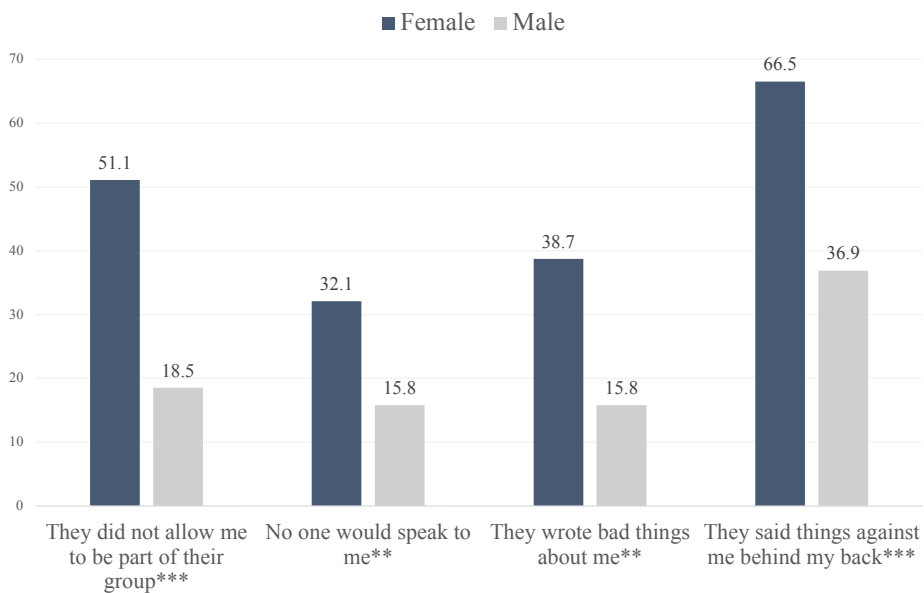


Fig. 4. Comparison Between Genders in Verbal and Relational Form of Bullying Experienced as Victims (Percentage Data; Female, n = 137; Male, n = 38; \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001)



In terms of the reasons attributed to bullying, as reported by victims, bystanders, and perpetrators, the three most frequently cited reasons are: *Being clumsy*, *The way of dressing*, and *The way of speaking*. Certain reasons are reported more frequently by girls, specifically: *They think I am fat* (48.2% vs. 23.7% for boys), *Because of the clothes I wear* (51.1% vs. 28.9%), and *Because I am different* (48.9% vs. 23.7%).

Another critical aspect to highlight is the impact of bullying. Overall, the most frequently reported consequence is *Feeling sad*, with female victims and bystanders perceiving the negative consequences more intensely than their male counterparts. For instance, 75.1% of female victims reported *Feeling sad*, compared to 31.6% of male victims.

With regard to the school's response, only 26.5% of victims reported that teachers and school staff were aware of the bullying incidents, and 25.4% believed that the school staff handled the situation inadequately.

Finally, regarding attitudes towards bullying, the majority of respondents condemn bullying. However, this attitude is more pronounced among girls. Specifically, girls show a greater capacity for empathy towards bullying victims compared to boys (e.g., *I feel sorry for the victims of bullying*, 96.4% vs 92.8%; *Bullies harm others*, 92.1% vs 89.2%). Girls are also more likely to recognise bullying as a problem (88.8% vs 82.8%) and tend to disapprove of bullies more than boys (93.7% vs 90.9%). On the other hand, boys demonstrate a greater understanding of the motivations behind bullying behaviour compared to girls (31.6% vs 24.7%).

### 3. DISCUSSIONS

The data collected allow for the achievement of the study's objectives and contribute to expanding knowledge on the prevalence and characteristics of bullying phenomena in the national context. First, the analysis reveals an incidence of 8.4% for systematic bullying (6.1% among boys and 9.6% among girls) and 45.3% for occasional bullying (44.6% among boys and 45.7% among girls). The characteristics of bullying acts confirm findings established in the literature, particularly with regard to bullying:

- It primarily occurs in classrooms and online;
- It takes place within peer groups;
- It is predominantly an intra-gender phenomenon;
- It manifests mainly verbally and in relational dynamics;
- It remains a phenomenon that is still "invisible" to the adults involved.

Regarding gender differences in bullying, the research has revealed several notable disparities, including:

- Girls more frequently identify as victims of bullying;
- Girls report a higher frequency of bullying acts, both as victims and as bystanders;
- Girls report experiencing verbal and relational bullying to a greater extent than boys;
- “Pranking” is the only form of bullying more commonly reported among boys;
- Reasons linked to aesthetic aspects are more prevalent among girls (e.g., being overweight or clothing);
- Girls, both as victims and as bystanders, perceive the negative consequences of bullying more strongly than boys;
- Girls show greater empathy and concern for victims of bullying and are more disapproving of bullies. Boys, on the other hand, tend to understand and tolerate bullies to a greater extent than girls.

When interpreting the results, the self-report nature of the questionnaire must be considered, highlighting the perceptual nature of the bullying acts examined here. In this regard, particularly among boys, there may be a lower tendency to recognise themselves as victims, rather than a lower incidence of the phenomenon. Conversely, girls may have a greater ability to “see” and recognise bullying in its various forms, while boys may tend to minimise the acts as simple “pranks” and recognise bullying primarily as physical dominance.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Despite certain limitations, primarily stemming from the non-probabilistic nature of the sample, the study offers significant contributions to bullying research, with a particular focus on the gendered aspects of the phenomenon. It reaffirms the relevance of bullying and underscores the distinct perspectives of girls, highlighting the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive approach in both studying and addressing the issue. In light of these insights into the dynamics of bullying, including a gendered perspective, the development of co-constructed, shared prevention and intervention strategies is recommended. These strategies should incorporate the viewpoints of all stakeholders and foster a safer, more inclusive school environment for everyone.

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