Original Research

Attitudes Towards School Violence: A Qualitative Study With Spanish Children

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Abstract

School violence is a social issue of particular interest both for intervention and research. Attitudes towards violence have been reported in the literature as relevant variables for evaluation, prevention, and intervention in this field. This study aims to examine in-depth attitudes toward school violence. The sample consists of 96 participants from Spanish Elementary Education and Compulsory Secondary Education schools. A qualitative study was conducted through focus groups and thematic analysis of the data. The results identify a habitual set of attitudes towards violence in children. These are related to violence as a way to feel better or increase self-esteem, as leisure or fun, perceived as legitimate, when violence is exercised against those who are different, when it has no consequences, to resolve conflicts, to socialize, and to attract the attention of peers. These results could serve as a basis for the creation of evaluation tools, as well as the design of prevention and intervention plans based on attitude modification.

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Introduction

According to UNESCO (2019), approximately three out of ten children experience at least one act of violence per month. This occurs in most schools worldwide, with physical violence (pushing, kicking, etc.) being more common in all countries except for Europe and North America, where nonphysical violence (insults, threats, exclusion, etc.) predominate. Many studies have examined the prevalence of such behaviors, finding that up to 50% of the children are exposed to some form of school violence (Craig et al., 2009; Leff & Feudtner, 2017). In Spain, these figures range between 10.2 and 19.6% (Zych et al., 2017) with up to 4.8 situations of violence per day in the schools (Ros-Morente et al., 2018). A recent study of Save the Children found that the region where this study is being conducted is the one with the highest incidence of bullying in Spain and, by extension, one of the highest in Europe (Calmaestra et al., 2016), although these studies should be interpreted with caution, as the data vary depending on the concept of bullying used, as well as the use of non-representative samples. In general, studies indicate that school violence is suffered both by boys and girls, with physical violence being more frequent in boys and nonphysical violence in girls. In addition, a decrease with the increase in age has been observed in the expressions of violence, with a peak approximately between 13 and 15 years. A low socioeconomic level seems more important in the case of victims (Calmaestra et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2018; Zych et al., 2017).

The importance of this social problem, both at community and research levels, stems from the multiple consequences associated with the children involved, both victims and aggressors. Some of the consequences are social exclusion, poorer performance or dropout, feelings of loneliness, sleep problems, behavioral disturbances, anxious-depressive syndromes, or even suicidal ideation (Bauman et al., 2017; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Lereya et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2019). School violence is a complex phenomenon influenced by many variables. Some of the most studied have been impulsivity, empathy, attitudes towards violence, externalizing and internalizing behavior, self-efficacy, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, or parental styles, among others (Álvarez-García et al., 2018; Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2019; Varela et al., 2018). Among them, attitudes towards violence have proven to be particularly relevant for the reduction of school violence (Fraguas et al., 2020; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2016) but not necessarily for children's involvement in violent acts (Merrell et al., 2008). This supports what has been proposed from a theoretical point of view: that attitudes are a powerful predictor of behavior, especially when the behavior is performed unintentionally. This matches the reality of the schools, where children interact with each other

without assessing the possible consequences of their actions (Anderson & Heusmann, 2003).

Although school violence and attitudes toward violence have been addressed previously in the literature, these works often adopt quantitative research methods through survey tools and/or psychometric scales. This methodology undoubtedly provides critical information about school violence and related attitudes toward it, but it can also limit the opportunities of those involved to speak out from their own particular perspective. It has been suggested that qualitative methodology could be useful for lending specificity to intervention and prevention plans and thus, improving their effectiveness (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

This is why qualitative studies are proposed as an alternative to deepen the children's vision of their own behavior and that of their peers, as well as the reasons that lead them to perform such behaviors (Thornberg et al., 2012). This information is not accessible in standardized questionnaires. In this line, more qualitative studies are needed that explore attitudes toward school violence from children's perspective (Forsberg et al., 2014; Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2020), such as those that explore violent behavior or dating violence (Edwards et al., 2015; Efevbera et al., 2017; Sanhueza & Lessard, 2018).

Theoretical Framework and Aims

The relationship between attitudes and behavior has been widely studied in the literature. Kraus (1995) carried out a meta-analysis of 88 studies, concluding that through knowledge of attitudes, it was possible to predict behavior. However, one of the moderators that modified this relationship was the specificity of these attitudes, in line with what was originally proposed by Fazio (1990).

Among the quantitative studies that address attitudes toward violence in the school setting, recent works state that they are often related to a need to increase self-esteem, considered as a form of fun, to socialize, to resolve conflicts, or when violence is legitimized (Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2020). These attitudes are often shown more strongly in boys. Regarding age, they are more present in adolescence or the secondary education stage (Ferragut et al. 2014; Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2020). Also, students who show stronger negative attitudes toward violence show a greater propensity to report physical violence, intimidation, and/or threats (McConville & Cornell, 2003). From a qualitative perspective, a study conducted with 1,057 teachers concluded that children's attitudes were related to physical and ethnic, personal, competitive, possessive, or vengeful characteristics. The children's parents stated that these conflicts arise more because of age differences, situations of

injustice, self-defense, or simply to have fun (Martín et al., 2004). Thornberg (2010) concluded that school violence was also related to the acceptance of violence by the family environment, conflicts, and the parents' negligence

In the same line, marital conflict, inadequate parenting styles, and domestic violence with abusive practices have been reported to be related to school violence. It has also been considered that the willingness to help and defend the victim, the feelings produced by observing violent situations, the participants' social status, being a friend of the victim or the bully, the perceived ability to help, and the victim's perceived role are relevant related variables (Bellmore et al., 2012; Bibou-Nakou et al., 2013; Forsberg et al., 2014; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012).

This is why this study, in response to this need identified by other authors and continuing with previous studies carried out in the same population (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2016; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2013; Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2020) aims to explore attitudes toward violence in a sample of schoolchildren in Spain and how they influence the manifestation of violent behavior. Therefore, our specific objectives are (a) to study participants' perspective of school violence at their school through focus groups, (b) group these attitudes into specific blocks using thematic analyses to facilitate comprehension and interpretation, and (c) to identify the violent behaviors associated with different attitudes.

Method

Study Design

This study addresses school violence from a qualitative paradigm. Specifically, we propose a qualitative research design that uses the grounded theory perspective with a constructivist approach (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017), through focus groups (Krueger, 1991). Qualitative research facilitates the exploration of people's experiences and how they communicate them, allowing a deepening of the meaning and comprehension of the information (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). In recent years, most published studies on school violence address the problem from a quantitative approach (e.g., Verhoef et al., 2019; Zych et al., 2019) that often cannot study the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants themselves. With these methods, researchers can delve into the specificity of the situations by collecting information from multiple channels (verbal and non-verbal) and also impulsive or unpremeditated responses, thus avoiding the response bias found in self-informed questionnaires, especially in children (Merriam, 2009; Miller et al., 2015).

Context of the Study

The socio-cultural context where the study was performed has been identified as that with the most frequent bullying in the Save the Children report (Calmaestra et al., 2016). Schools in Spain are divided into Primary Education (PE) and Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE). Within PE, the courses are divided into six grades, from 1st grade PE (7–6 years) to 6th grade PE (11–12 years). CSE is divided into four grades, from 1st grade CSE (12–13 years) to 4th grade CSE (15–16 years). Potentially selectable participants for the study were those enrolled between 4th grade of PE (9–10 years) and 4th grade of CSE (15–16 years). All the schools had a large number of students ($M = 663.33$, $SD = 458.29$, range between 240 and 1,150 students).

Participant Recruitment

The data are part of a qualitative study conducted in the southeast of Spain. It involved 3 schools with a general curriculum, selected for the study by convenience sampling: 2 schools of PE (66.7%), and 1 school of CSE (33.3%). The target sample size was 100–120 students. However, 96 participants (53.1% of girls) were recruited because one CSE school could not be included in the study due to the curricular disorganization that occurred from the emergence of COVID-19. Only 10 children refused to participate in the study.

The mean age of the participants was 11.35 ($SD = 2.09$) with an age range between 9 and 16 years. Of them, 95.8% were born in Spain, and 83.5% had a remarkable or outstanding academic performance. Most of the participants had at least one sibling (82.3%), and they lived with both parents (86.5%). Regarding the level of the parents' studies, they usually had basic or compulsory studies (35.4% and 35.4%, respectively for fathers and mothers; refer to Table 1). No additional socioeconomic information was collected due to the children's difficulties to report it (Wardle et al., 2002).

Table 1. Summary of Sociodemographic and Academic Variables of the Participants.

Variable	*n*	%
Sex		
Boy	45	46.9
Girl	51	53.1
Place of birth		
Spain	92	95.8
Other	4	4.2

Table 1. continued

Variable	*n*	%
School		
PE 1 (School 1)	48	50
PE 2 (School 2)	16	16.7
CSE (School 3)	32	33.3
Grade		
Fourth grade PE	17	17.7
Fifth grade PE	26	27.1
Sixth grade PE	22	21.9
First grade CSE	9	9.3
Second grade CSE	8	8.4
Third grade CSE	9	9.4
Fourth grade CSE	5	6.2
Average academic performance		
Failed (<5)	2	2.1
Passed (between 5 and 6)	12	12.5
Notable (between 7 and 8)	40	41.6
Outstanding (>9)	42	43.8
Number of siblings		
None	17	17.7
One	56	58.3
Two	19	19.8
Three	4	4.2
Family coexistence		
Lives w. both parents	83	86.5
Lives w. mother	8	8.3
Lives w. father	4	4.2
Does not live w. either parent	1	1
Father's educational level		
No studies	16	16.7
Basic studies	34	35.3
Middle studies (high school)	23	24
Higher education (university)	23	24

Table 1. continued

Variable	n	%
Mother's educational level		
No studies	12	12.5
Basic studies	34	35.4
Middle studies (high school)	20	20.8
Higher education (university)	30	31.3

Procedure

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' University (ID: 2317/2019) and followed the recommendations of the COREQ guide for focus groups (Tong et al., 2007). The selection of schools was incidental, excluding those with exceptionally high or low rates of school violence according to data from the Observatory of School Co-existence in the Autonomous Community. All the schools were provided with a fact sheet for the team of teachers and parents. Informed consent was also provided to all the students, requesting the parents' and child's explicit acceptance of inclusion in the focus group and the audio recording of the group. A maximum of four students from each classroom was randomly selected for each focus group. All the participants in a group were from the same academic year. A total of 12 focus groups were conducted, with a duration between 41.5 and 54.47 minutes ($M = 48.85$, $SD = 4.89$) and an average number of 8 participants ($SD = 1.08$). The groups were held during school hours. A representative of the school management team accompanied the children from their classroom to a room prepared for the focus groups. Only the children and the interviewers were present in these rooms. The children were again asked to give their verbal consent before starting the audio recording. They were also reminded that the audio recording would be destroyed after its transcription. In the text file, any data that could identify the participant or another person was replaced by a code.

The inclusion criteria used for the selection of participants were: (a) to be enrolled in one of the selected schools, (b) to be between 9 and 16 years of age, (c) to speak and understand Spanish. The exclusion criteria were: (a) to be enrolled in a course lower than 4th grade of PE or higher than 4th grade of CSE, (b) the parents and/or the child did not complete the informed consent, (c) showing some kind of cognitive limitation that would prevent the child from participating in the study, and (d) not going to school on the day of the focus groups.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted between November 2019 and February 2020. Discussion focus groups were conducted to explore school violence following the methodology described by Krueger (1991). Discussion groups constitute a qualitative data collection technique that has been widely used in research (e.g., Edwards et al., 2017; Miranda et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). It brings together people with common characteristics, who are related to the topic or research question. Groups of between 6 and 10 people were formed. Before forming these groups, we wrote a script, generating statements related to the theoretical dimensions extracted from the bibliographic review of attitudes towards violence. The study of attitudes was chosen given the poor qualitative research published using this approach and its proven relationship to school coexistence and the prevention of violence (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2016). The script was complemented with conceptual maps made by a group of experts (third, fourth, and fifth author) and interviews with key informants (performed by the second author) to adapt it as much as possible to the reality and language of the schools. Finally, the script was tested with a group of students who were not included in the results of this study (Morales, 2016).

The interviewees were encouraged to provide all the information they knew, whether it was their own or that of a classmate or acquaintance, and to avoid focusing exclusively on their own experiences.

Interview content.
The script covered a series of variables related to attitudes towards school violence, following the structure of other studies (Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2020). All participants were asked questions related to school violence in general. Additional questions were used to favor the participants' accounts. Some examples of the questions asked can be found in Table 2.

Data analysis.
The data were analyzed with an inductive and constructionist approach through thematic analysis, following the proposal of Braun and Clarke (2006). This method aims to recognize and describe patterns in the data provided by the focus groups. Following this method, the analysis was carried out in six phases. In the first phase, the recordings of the focus groups were transcribed, forming the basis of the analysis, and the authors familiarized themselves with the data. Each of these transcripts was composed and supervised by at least two of the authors of this study. At this stage, the researchers took notes or observed ideas that could help in later phases.

Table 2. Examples of Questions Asked to the Focus Groups.

Block	Question
Violence at a general level	Do you think there are problems between classmates at your school? Why? What's going on? When does this happen?
Example of extension question	Do you know of a situation at school where, to feel better than others, someone does or says something that makes others feel worse?
Example of extension question	Do you know of any occasion when fights, insults, nicknames, and things like that have been used for fun?
Example of extension question	Do you think that there is any situation where it's fair or okay to hit, push, or insult another classmate or something like that?
Example of extension question	Do people do or say something that might make others feel bad in order to solve problems between classmates? (Could you give an example?)

In the second phase, initial codes were generated through an inductive or ascending method to identify the data. This method starts with raw data without intending to adjust them to a pre-existing theoretical framework or pre-conceived ideas of the researchers. The codes were discussed in pairs by all the authors, proposing multiple coding if there was no consensus.

In the third phase, topics and subtopics were proposed, grouping the codes. Maps and tables were developed as a visual representation, as they have shown their usefulness in thematic organization, even helping to discard irrelevant codes. To generate the topics, the researchers chose a constructivist perspective, in which no description is made but instead explores topics that are latent in the information. From this perspective, broader assumptions, structures, and/or meanings are accepted to support whatever is expressed in the data.

Once the topics and subtopics were obtained, in the fourth phase, a step backwards was made in the process, reviewing the codes or even the extracts of information to refine them and ensure that they were consistent with the data, making the necessary adjustments. Unless the information was particularly relevant, for a topic to be considered as such, it had to be present in at least four focus groups. After this refinement, a map was made to structure the information.

Finally, in the last two phases, the topics were definitively defined and named, discussing data saturation and producing a report. After these phases, we obtained a clear and concise idea of the main topics and their respective subtopics, the role each one plays, and a set of literal examples that helped us to describe and understand the topics.

As Braun and Clarke (2006) described, this process requires constant backward and forward steps in the dataset to avoid biases and ensure the veracity of the information collected. The NVivo software was used for code generation. The participation of the interviewees was limited to the interview. The transcripts were not returned to them for review and they did not participate in the conclusions of this study.

Researcher Positionality

The research team consisted of a clinical psychologist with training and experience in focus groups (first author), a forensic psychologist who works actively with child population (second author), a full professor in legal and forensic medicine (third author), an academic social psychologist who is an expert on attitudes (fourth author), and an academic psychiatrist who is an expert in the psychosocial approach (fifth author). All of them have extensive experience in research and publication of scientific articles on school violence.

The focus groups were conducted by the first author with the assistance of the rest of the authors. The first author is a clinical psychologist with demonstrable training and experience in the creation and extraction of data through focus groups in several studies applying this methodology. He had no prior relationship or contact with any of the focus group participants. Before starting to record, he spent 5–10 minutes generating rapport with the attendees through trivial questions. After this, they were informed about the functions, objectives, and the importance of the study of school coexistence. The interviewer sought to remain neutral and free from biases, assumptions, or interest in the results. The rest of the authors took turns supporting the various focus groups by taking notes and complementing the interviews. All the authors worked in paired discussions on coding, topic generation, and the writing of the study.

Results

The thematic analysis applied to the various focus groups identified a set of nine interrelated blocks of attitudes towards violence. Given the complexity of interactions, the data are presented isolatedly. However, it should be noted that these attitudes can appear together. They were named by the authors of this study as follows: attitudes towards violence: (a) violence to feel better or increase self-esteem, (b) violence as a form of leisure or fun, (c) violence perceived as legitimate, (d) violence against those who are different, (e) when violence has no consequences, (f) violence as a way of resolving conflicts (g) violence as a way of socializing, and (h) violence as a way of attracting the attention of peers. Each of these large blocks is, in turn, divided into subtopics that refine each of these attitudes (refer to Figure 1).
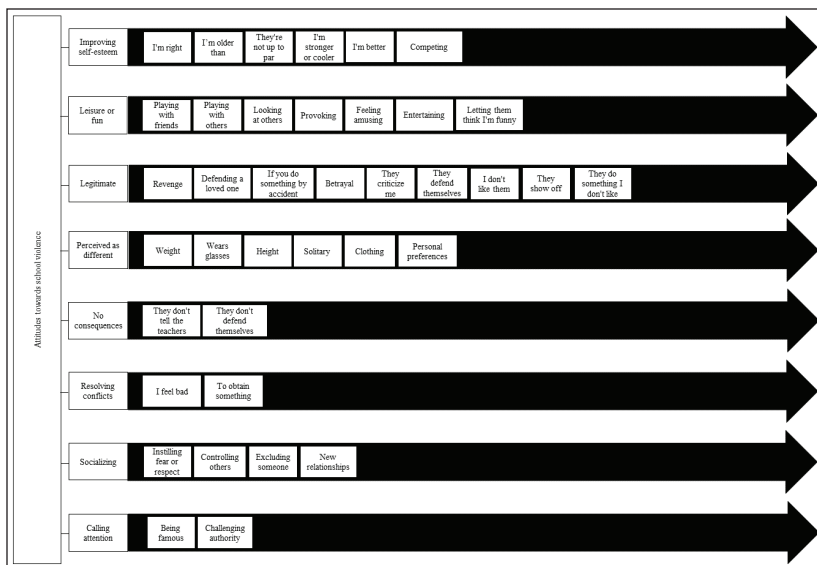
Figure 1. Attitudes towards school violence: Topics and subtopics.

Attitudes Towards Violence as a Way to Increase Self-esteem

Participants from all the groups stated that, in a wide variety of situations, violence is used to feel better about oneself. One of the goals of such behavior would be to try to impose themselves or be right: "They fight for their opinion. If someone thinks differently, well, they fight over it, because they are right" (School 3, 2nd grade CSE, Interviewee 2). Demonstrations of violence to be right or win an argument are mainly expressed as physical violence, anger, or insults, and lies.

Age also plays an important role in the expression of self-esteem-related violence. In this sense, the older children of the school take advantage of their age difference to annoy the younger ones, this being more characteristic of the students of PE. The most common behaviors in our study were harassing or annoying, but insults or beatings were also reported.

> There are three sixth-grade bullies who are always picking on the little kids. (School 1, 5th grade PE, Interviewee 5)

> They go to the middle of the field and keep showing off because they're older, because they say they got better grades, and they felt more powerful. (School 2, 5th grade PE, Interviewee 6)

In the same vein of what has been discussed so far, the children believe that violence is also used when someone is "not up to par" or to "feel powerful," intending to highlight that sense of the performer's superiority. This can be done to send a message to the victim or the peer group. The behaviors mentioned were annoying, humiliating, or provoking conflict and fighting. A conversation between the first author and Interviewees 7 and 8 of School 3, 3rd grade CSE, was as follows:

> P7: He did … I don't know what…, pow, smack! (giving an example).
>
> I: And what do they want to achieve?
>
> P7: Humiliate.
>
> P8: No, and so others can see that he's the prepotent one.
>
> P7: The best.

One of the most common uses of violence in schools seems to pursue, as the interviewees themselves say, feeling "stronger and/or cooler" than the others. This is done through insults, threats, fights, humiliation, nicknames, provocations, or persecutions.

> I: What else do you think happens or these classmates do to feel better, to feel strong and tough?
>
> P: Well, in my class last year, and this year, they pull your pants down. (School 2, 5th grade PE, Interviewee 5)

Finally, competitiveness very often leads the children to show violent behavior. The most competitive contexts for the interviewees are academic performance (grades) and sports that are performed either during recess or in Physical Education class. This competitive context leads them to exclude members who are not good enough and to give people nicknames and mock those who perform worse. This situation makes them think they will not be punished for mistreating losers, in addition to the subjective well-being they feel for being the best and beating everyone.

> They want to win so that their classmates won't make fun of them. That happens a lot here, when someone wins, they mock the others. (School 2, 6th grade PE, Interviewee 4)

Attitudes towards violence as a form of leisure or fun. Another important block of attitudes towards school violence in all the groups focuses on violence used as a means for fun. These attitudes are different when playing with peers from the child's close social circle than when interacting with other

peers outside the circle. In the first case, it is performed within a game context where there seems to be no interest in offending or harming "they play-fight, they grab each other by the neck, and throw each other to the ground" (School 2, 5th grade PE, Interviewee 1). When these behaviors are performed towards people with whom they do not have a personal relationship, it seems that some intentionality to annoy is added to the attitude of having fun through violent behavior.

> And here, for example, in Spain … because they insult in a certain way … as a joke, for example, they can say: son of a bitch, your whore of a mother, I shit on your dead.… And that can bother you.… I'm from Morocco and if you say that insult once, you don't ever say it again … because if you ever say it again, anything can happen to you. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, interviewee 6)

Participants also commented that violence can be fun not only when participating in it. In this line, watching or taping fights among other classmates, ignoring or laughing at someone who has hurt themselves, intentionally hurting, or laughing the others' violent tricks (acting as a reinforcement for the performer) are expressions of attitudes towards violence as a way of having fun:

> P1: Spreading shit around, that's done a lot.
>
> I: And why do your classmates do that?
>
> P4: To watch a fight.
>
> P2: To have fun and see what's going on.
>
> P4: Sure, it's cool, and recording it and so on. (School 3, 2nd grade CSE, Interviewees 1, 2, and 4)

Closely related to the aforementioned idea, provoking fights in the school is perceived as amusing by many children. This is usually done in two ways. On the one hand, there may be a provocation between third parties, so that they will fight, and the others can watch. On the other hand, a child may start a fight with another classmate for entertainment.

> Well, for example, someone slips (by accident) and then someone else passes by and … falls because he has stumbled on the other person (faking). And then, there you can start a fight … why did you throw me down, you tripped me or pushed me. (School 2, 6th grade PE, Interviewee 7)

Concerning the idea of seeking social reinforcement, the interviewees said that they like to feel witty and for the others to think so. To this end, they perform a wide variety of behaviors that hinder school coexistence with the sole purpose of making classmates laugh. Among them would be to hide,

steal, and break others' possessions, change the names of classmates, insult, disturb, exclude, hit, or annoy, among others.

> In my class, in general, they insult me because I have a very ugly name and sometimes they call me "tortilla."… And there is a guy who goes to my class, who's always insulting me. Even if you tell him [to stop] or you insult him too, they keep insulting you and they do it every day. I've already said that they think they are cool but then … they believe that they do it because it's funny, but it is not at all funny for me and they laugh at me. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, Interviewee 2)

Attitudes Towards Violence When Perceived as Legitimate

Based on the participants' testimonies, attitudes towards violence when perceived as just or legitimate present the greatest number of variants. When asked about such actions, revenge seems to be the main driver of the use of violence. This may be due to a prior assault, insults, or annoyance by a classmate, someone hiding their materials, or teachers reprimanding them, or they were humiliated, among many other aspects. The peculiarity of these responses is that they are disproportionate to the violent behavior received, almost always leading to a much more intense response in terms of severity. A particularly aggressive variant of the children is when a loved one is threatened, insulted, or assaulted. In this sense, deceased mothers, fathers, and family members generate the most reactivity in the children, followed by other relatives and friends.

> For me, when they "shit on my dead," which is what I like the least, I get up and break his head. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, Interviewee 4)

This concept of legitimacy to assault other peers can also occur when another classmate accidentally performs a behavior that annoys, even though it was apparently unintentional. The children also consider that responding with violence is appropriate when they feel betrayed, criticized, or someone has spread lies or rumors about them.

> When someone has made a little joke to someone else, but someone who has imagined something has told that person … then a big fight starts … they start to fight about why you told me this, why you said this to the other person, and all that. (School 2, 5th grade PE, Interviewee 2)

The more violent children justify physical violence when the classmate they are insulting or annoying defends themselves. This usually happens

when they defend themselves or warn the teachers ("squealing"), thus legitimizing their behavior. Interviewee 4, 5th grade PE, says,

> You have to bear their taunts because otherwise they will be angry with you, and the whole class will be angry … because the whole class follows them. But if you say anything, then he [the classmate] will be upset about that, and you can't tell the teacher.… Or they will beat you too.

When a nickname, joke, or any other similar behavior is repeated over time it can cause discomfort, which would justify a violent response to that situation. If these behaviors are performed by someone whom the child does not like, then the violence can be justified almost immediately, without the need for such repetition. Moreover, for several of the interviewees, the mere fact that there is no link with the other child is sufficient reason to laugh at, annoy, harass, exclude or even physically assault that person.

In previous points, we presented the use of violence to "show off," boss the others, or show that one is better at something. Contrary to this, the respondents believe that violence against peers who perform such behaviors, that is, against those who show off excessively is justified. In this same sense, if another classmate does something they do not like, either because it makes them feel bad or the other child just thinks differently from them, this is perceived as a justification for violent behavior.

> I: What happened to you at school?
>
> P4: Well, they hit me.
>
> I: But why?
>
> P5: Because they don't like him, they're jealous of him, he's the smartest in the class, and that's it. (School 2, 5th grade PE, Interviewees 4 and 5)

Attitudes Towards Violence Against Those Who Are Different

Closely related to the previous attitude but a variant that deserves a category in itself is the expression of violence against people who are different. In this sense, being overweight or being too thin, wearing glasses, being too tall or short, being a shy or lonely person, dressing differently, coming from another country, having a disability, being homosexual, or having different personal tastes (e.g., in leisure) are the main topics presented in our results. Many examples have been identified for each of these groups, which could be summarized in the excerpt from Interviewee 4, School 3, 4th grade CSE:

I think so. Because there are people who think they're better than others, and it's like they won't let her play because she's not like them, some people don't accept others because they're not like them.

Attitudes towards violence when it has no consequences. When the children perceive that violent behavior does not lead to any personal consequence, it can increase the likelihood of such behavior being expressed. Children who do not tell teachers when they are being assaulted by other peers would be a target of this type of behavior. However, even if the children do not tell the teachers, if they defend themselves, they are less likely to be a target of these aggressions. Some of the testimonies mention insults, physical assaults, or taking advantage of classmates by forcing them to run errands for everyone.

Last year, one of my best friends was bullied, and a girl who goes to our class stole his lunch every day. Well, one or two [days]. They stole his lunch and he had to go without food. And my classmate didn't tell the teachers for fear they would do something to her. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, Interviewee 5)

Attitudes Towards Violence as a Way of Resolving Conflicts

Violence can also be used to resolve conflicts, according to our interviewees. These violent responses can pursue a need to vent emotionality because the child had a bad day or has problems at home. When this happens, some participants talk about violence as a tool to escape, serving as a relief: "Well, they got bad grades in one exam and they take revenge on somebody else who was not to blame" (School 2, 5th grade PE, Interviewee 4).

Violence is also used to deal with interpersonal conflicts, that is, to achieve something instrumentally. This block would encompass violent expressions to solve a one-off problem quickly, to intimidate or so others will not to continue to pick on them.

They told me they wanted to hit me … I went to see that chap … he told me he was going to hit me for no reason.… Well, the next day, he called his cousin to hit me.… Well, I said: if you call your cousin.… I'll call mine. And that's what happened. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, Interviewee 4)

Attitudes Towards Violence as a Way to Socialize.

Violence is also used as a way to interact with the rest of the school classmates. In this sense, some children need to instill fear or respect in the rest of

their classmates. This is done to avoid being assaulted or to gain social status. These types of behaviors encompass fights, threats, or insults. Moreover, they are not done exclusively individually. Sometimes the children form groups to intimidate others.

> For example, when I see someone is picking on me, if I see that it's just one person, before it gets worse and he brings along his relatives and that stuff, I'd rather hit him first … so he will see who I am before he starts screwing me, so he will respect me. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, Interviewee 4)

Violence is also used as a mechanism to control the group. Sometimes, it is used to make someone do what another member wants, to force an unwanted member to leave the group, or even to make new friends. Violent behaviors can also be shown towards the rest of the classmates when they try to join a group, to maintain some exclusivity.

> Well, if there is a group of 3 classmates who are the strongest and the toughest … well, you have to be funny and act subnormal and so on … so that they will admit you to their group. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, Interviewee 7)

Attitudes Towards Violence as a Way to Attract the Attention of Peers

The last of the topics extracted from the focus groups is based on seeking the group's attention. This use of violence is not a priority objective of increasing self-esteem or socializing, even if it is closely related to them. This set of attitudes refers to the use of violence to gain notoriety or fame within the school and can be performed both in and out of the classroom. These behaviors mainly include starting public fights, destroying the school material or facilities, and disrespect for teachers.

> For example, one day you do something and the next day, the whole school is talking about what you did. For example, if you break a table, a chair or whatever, well the next day, "so-and-so has broken this table," and things like that. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, Interviewee 7)

Sometimes this pursuit of fame can lead them to engage in violent behavior that goes against authority or older people.

> Some kids can even pick on the teacher, and when the teacher scolds them, they reply by shouting and being rude. (School 1, 5th grade PE, Interviewee 9).

Something worse happened at my school … trying to be tough, all 6th grade, all 6-A and 6-B…, in a small forest, there is a large slope and further down a road … and three of my classmates were throwing stones at the cars and then they scratched cars and all that.… Well, a car passed and (to avoid the stones) a woman with her newborn baby was almost run over and … that's why they filed a serious report about them, and all three of them had to pay to fix the car … and they had to go and apologize to the woman for acting like that. (School 3, 1st grade CSE, Interviewee 1)

Finally, despite having made an isolated interpretation of the topics obtained, they could be interrelated. That is, a specific behavior could be performed based on a set of these attitudes. For example, some children might be involved in power-unbalanced school violence, at the same time finding it fun and trying to catch their classmates' attention.

Discussion

This study performs a qualitative exploration of attitudes towards school violence in Spanish children and relates them to various violent manifestations. Our results support the behavior-attitude relationship advocated by the main theoretical proposals (Kraus, 1995). From the perspective of school violence, the data about the participants' experiences allow us to understand this social problem more specifically, an essential requirement for the approach of more effective intervention programs (Merrell et al., 2008). Our results provide evidence of the importance of attitudes towards violence for the expression of aggressive behavior in children. Previous studies have found that attitudes towards violence have a fundamental influence on school coexistence (Huang et al., 2015; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2016). Our study supports these findings and specifically defines these attitudes and how they are expressed. In this sense, we have identified several blocks of common attitudes in the school environment, such as attitudes towards violence used as a way of feeling better or increasing self-esteem, as a form of leisure or fun, perceived as legitimate, when it is aimed at those who are different, when it has no consequences, as a way of resolving conflicts, as a way of socializing, and as a way of attracting attention. All these blocks show interactions with each other, forming a complex network of attitudes and behaviors that influence the problems of school coexistence.

The children interviewed show a wide range of attitudes towards violence through which they try to appraise themselves and make others value them better. Among them, we observe that fighting to be right, showing that you are greater or better than others, that you are stronger or "cooler," feeling

superior to or wanting to win at all costs would be the main variants of these attitudes. Previous studies have deepened the association between school violence and self-esteem without reaching definitive conclusions about the direction of school violence (Baumeister et al., 1996; Donnellan et al., 2005; Jang & Thornberry, 1998). In our view, and based on the data, the issue lies in the need to increase self-esteem, even though it is seemingly high. Children use violence as a compensation mechanism for affective deficiencies related to their most direct environment and/or lack of competence in other socially relevant facets. The role of low self-esteem has been highlighted both for victims and aggressors in longitudinal studies (Tsaousis, 2016). Our study suggests some of the mechanisms used by children to compensate for these subjective deficiencies.

Western culture is full of examples of the use of violence as a form of leisure or fun. Some of them can be seen in the cinema, video games, social networks, or cartoons. Consistent with this, children develop a diverse set of attitudes towards violence as a way of having fun, either as an active subject (in a game context with acquaintances or strangers, getting into fights or insulting others to be perceived as funny) or as a passive subject (watching or recording videos of fights or laughing at the violence that others perform). Other studies report such attitudes being more frequent in boys or CSE (Anand et al., 2019; Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2020). These same results are reported by the parents of children in previous qualitative studies (Martín et al., 2004).

Another topic extracted from the interviews was attitudes towards violence as a way of resolving conflicts. We presented participants' stories about using violence to cope with frustration and anger, or anxiety arising from conflict. The testimonies show that some children use violence as an escape route when they are frustrated or have problems at school or at home. Previous studies have associated the need for controlling emotional (Crapanzano et al., 2010) and family conflicts (Thornberg, 2010) through the expression of school violence. Also, this mechanism of conflict displacement may be explained by the Excitation-transfer Theory of Bryant and Miron (2003).

Normative beliefs about aggression influence children's aggressive behavior (Wright & Li, 2013). These beliefs may be justified or legitimized for many reasons, such as defending oneself from aggression. Sometimes, children seem to degrade this legitimization of violence by giving disproportionate responses to their peers' violent or accidental behaviors, thus establishing social rules that are used to impose on others (Beynon, 1989). Recent studies find that these types of attitudes are more present than the rest, regardless of sex or age (Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2020). A variant of these attitudes is those aimed at classmates who are perceived as different. In our study, we assigned

a specific topic to this, as it includes some of the social groups that suffer the most exposure to violence, such as homosexual, transgender, or immigrant children, among others (Juárez-Chávez et al., 2018; Madkour et al., 2019). This topic includes any child who has a characteristic or trait that is perceived as different by the rest (weight, height, etc.). This vision is shared by parents and teachers, that is, they also believe that feelings of revenge or justice motivate children's aggression, as well as perceiving the other person as different (Martín et al., 2004). Our study allows us to observe different situations that, although they do not legitimize any kind of violent act a priori, from the children's perspective, are sufficient reason to manifest these violent behaviors. Specifically knowing these attitudes is essential so that they can be addressed in child-focused intervention/prevention programs.

Violent behaviors can also be enhanced if they do not receive any negative consequences or penalties, thus obtaining the reinforcement derived from this behavior and increasing the likelihood that it will be repeated (Kazdin, 2018). When victims do not defend themselves or complain to the teachers, the violent behavior has no negative consequences, facilitating the expression of the rest of the attitudes that favor the use of violence. Previous studies have seen a decline in aggressive behaviors when students are willing to face the aggressors (Saarento et al., 2015; Salmivalli et al., 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013).

Finally, the last topics proposed were attitudes as a way of socializing and attracting attention. Research has found that violence can be used to establish or maintain social circles, especially with the change from PE to CSE, if social skills are lacking or were not developed (Werner & Hill, 2010). In addition, children with aggressive attitudes often relate to each other, maintaining and reinforcing the expression of their violent behaviors (Cairns et al., 1997; Dishion & Patterson, 1997). Schoolchildren believe that it is more likely to be popular and attract the attention of their peers if they present aggressive behaviors (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2009; Gendron et al., 2011; Huang et al., 2015; Wright & Li, 2013). In this sense, our results indicate that the participants showed a trend similar to that reported in the bibliography, even when this means challenging teachers or seriously humiliating a classmate. Other studies argue that these attitudes also help encourage and reinforce violent behavior in other classmates (Salmivalli et al., 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013).

Implications for Research and Practice

The conclusions reached in this study have a variety of implications both for assistential practice and research. First, the qualitative approach to attitudes

towards violence makes a novel contribution to their study. Attitudes are commonly addressed through questionnaires with a small number of items that often do not reflect their complexity and variety. Our results are useful for international research on school climate and violence in general, facilitating the proactive participation of children in knowledge building. This approach allows for an understanding of children's emotional experiences and how they occur in their contexts (Callaghan et al., 2015), which provides a particularly useful vision for professionals who work daily with children and adolescents.

Second, our results suggest the usefulness of designing prevention or intervention plans for school violence from the approach of changing attitudes towards violence. Some programs already address this problem, taking into account this idea with excellent results (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2016). This study could be useful to improve the specificity of these programs, adapting them to the children's context, thereby increasing their effectiveness.

Finally, the topics and subtopics extracted from the qualitative analysis can serve as the basis for the development of more comprehensive assessment tools, which could solve the problems commonly found in the questionnaires on attitudes towards school violence (Ruiz-Hernández et al., 2020).

Limitations and Recommendations for the Future

This study has some of the limitations commonly reported in qualitative designs. This implies that global inferences are very limited. The influence of culture and context makes it necessary to develop studies to explore the possible variations and intercultural similarities of attitudes. At the global level, interventions are effective when they include such variables (Fraguas et al., 2020; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2016). Within the same culture, studies should also be considered that include greater ethnic diversity for the specification of attitudes towards school violence with classmates/immigrants, where the literature has already indicated that there is an influence of minorities. Minorities have a lower incidence as perpetrators of violence but are often victims in the school context, both by native peers and by other minorities (Caravita et al., 2019; Rojas-Gaona et al., 2016).

Finally, the use of an incidental sample from three schools may not be representative of the adolescent population in the region or country. However, comparison with the literature suggests that the results obtained may be replicated in other populations. Also, the emergence of COVID-19 prevented us from increasing the number of CSE participants, limited to a single school. As recommendations, the authors propose qualitative studies that assess

attitudes towards school violence targeting specific topics, such as discrimi-
nation based on race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, among oth-
ers. It would also be interesting to perform longitudinal quantitative research
designs that would allow us to know in depth the relationship of the variables
studied herein to propose explanatory models.

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Conflict of Interest

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