School bullying: children and adolescent norms, cultures and identity development

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Introduction: School bullying arises from a system of peers who form bonds through the repeated victimization of others. This empirical research article examines the function of bullying within the context of children and adolescent norms and cultures, aiming to highlight the motivations underlying inappropriate and anti-social behavior in school.

Methods: The study is a multi-method qualitative inquiry undertaken in one school system in Switzerland, including participants from the two main linguistic and cultural areas (French and German-speaking regions). Primary and secondary school students took part in focus groups (76 students) or seven individual interviews (7 students), while non-participant observations were carried out in seven primary school classes (185 students).

Results: The findings indicate that when bullying occurs, it is mainly expected among peers, directly reflecting the prevailing but changing social norms within youth groups. They highlight how children and adolescent identity development is related to bullying.

Discussion: The article points to ways in which education actors can act when faced with anti-social behaviors or bullying situations.

KEYWORDS

bullying, norms, youth culture, identity, child, adolescence

1 Introduction

Research into school bullying initially concentrated on the individuals–bullied students and bullies–revealing risk or vulnerability factors notably (see Olweus, 1991; Sutton and Smith, 1999; Martin, 2012). More recently, the focus has shifted to the understanding that bullying stems from a group phenomenon within the school system rather than from antisocial behaviors between a few isolated students (Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010; Stahel, 2021; Stahel and Moody, 2023). From a systemic and interdisciplinary perspective, bullying dynamics can be understood as emerging from a "peer system" (Luisier, 2010, p. 10; see also Curonici and McCulloch, 2004): pupils influence each other and form a bond by repeatedly attacking, despising or excluding a classmate who is struggling to defend him or herself (Stahel, 2021). This leads to the idea that developing social bonds entails some antisocial risk. Since schools are both places of academic learning and settings that induce socialization, they are conducive to bullying by allowing, encouraging, or even forcing social peer bonds within youth groups. Students indeed form close relationships with some schoolmates at the expense of others (Kindelberger, 2018). Creating social bonds provides young people with valuable opportunities to learn about themselves, their peers, and norms. Moreover, by confronting and comparing themselves to others and identifying with peers, students discover and reveal aspects of their identity (Hernandez et al., 2014; Ragelienė, 2016; Stahel et al., 2024).

Peers provide feedback on who they are and how they behave, allowing them to define their identity as they develop (Ragelienė, 2016).

The need to belong and feel valued by a peer group leads students to conform (Coslin, 2007; Gifford-Smith et al., 2005; Kindelberger, 2018). Conformism is a necessary process for social cohesion and life in society (Denton et al., 2020) and relies on the ability of an individual to adjust perceptions, attitudes and behaviors according to social influence or pressure (Hernandez et al., 2014; Stahel et al., 2024). As students approach or transition between primary and secondary school, striving towards conformity becomes even more prevalent as they lose other reference points. Changing schools, classes, teachers, and even friends can increase the need to feel a sense of belonging among peers (Salmivalli, 2010). Therefore, students consolidate self-construction by connecting aspects of their identity to those of others (Durif-Varembont and Weber, 2014). Conformity is crucial to defining oneself and being recognized by schoolmates as one of them. Students will, thus, co-construct, share, and value the knowledge, understanding, and behaviors or skills to acquire and master in order to fit in with peers and peer groups. These skills are integral to children and adolescent cultures. Students aim to assimilate into the dominant social norm system and youth cultures, lest they be excluded by schoolmates and their identity development be weakened if they fail (Delalande, 2006; Félonneau and Lannegrand-Willems, 2005; Lachance et al., 2016; Ragelienė, 2016; Stahel et al., 2024). A set of norms emerges from youth cultures, conveying what an individual should or should not do (Verhoeven, 2012).

School bullying can be studied as emerging from the complex interplay between peer systems, group norms, and individual behaviors. What remains underexplored is how children and adolescents themselves experience these complex, co-occurring phenomena. As experts in their own realities (Kellett, 2010; Moody et al., 2021), considering their own understanding of the motivations underlying inappropriate and antisocial behavior in school is crucial to coping comprehensively with anti-social or bullying situations in school. Based on qualitative data drawn from focus groups, individual interviews, and non-participant observations carried out in compulsory schools in Switzerland, this research paper aims to answer the following research question: *what function does bullying have within the context of children's and adolescents' norms, cultures and identities, from the children's and adolescents' viewpoints?*

2 Literature review

2.1 School bullying

Given school bullying emerges from a peer system, both contextual and individual factors should be considered (Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015; Stahel, 2021; Stahel and Moody, 2023). Students' psychosocial behaviors can thus also be analyzed from their peers' perspectives. Research shows that individuals adopt various roles in bullying incidents, including being subjected to peer aggression (victims), aggressing others (perpetrators), or being exposed to such behaviors (bystanders) (Moody et al., 2020; Quartier and Bellon, 2020; Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010; Stahel, 2021). Noteworthy, bystanders, who are present in over 80% of bullying situations (Polanin et al., 2012), play a central role in the intensity and duration of the attack, giving it a purpose (Salmivalli, 2010). Without

witnesses, aggression does not offer an opportunity to demonstrate one's strength or dominating position. Such conclusions suggest that taking a closer look at what prevents or, conversely, encourages bystanders to intervene or support bullied students could allow for the identification of key levers for efficient interventions or prevention.

Children's and adolescents' identities are developing.[1] These processes heighten the importance of pleasing peers or avoiding exclusion by meeting their expectations (Durif-Varembont and Weber, 2014). Levels of conformity among students are even more remarkable due to the more symmetrical relation that unites them (see Bègue, 2024). Unlike other authority figures, especially adults and teachers, peers do not perceive each other as having educational intentions or explicitly requiring obedience. While educational intentions among youth and the study of childhood culture have been conceptualized (Delalande, 2003, 9), the prevailing debates around intentionality in both bullying studies (Carrera et al., 2011; Volk et al., 2014) and the psychosocial theories about conformism (Bègue, 2024) refrain us from using this concept entirely. In this paper, the term 'educational function' will be preferred, indicating that the aim to educate others is deliberate (non-incidental) but that the consequences may not always be fully considered by children and adolescents engaging in anti-social behaviors.

Peer systems are partly regulated through social influence and feedback from the students within them. Feedback informs students that they must adjust their behaviors. When pupil behaviors deviate widely from the prevailing group norms, they put the system at risk of unbalance (Seron and Wittezaele, 2009). Role permeability in bullying situations results from all actors' attempts to restore balance: bullies might become bullied, or victims get forgotten and become simple bystanders again (Moody et al., 2020; Stahel, 2021). By continually adjusting behaviors, students change roles through and while interacting with their schoolmates. However, adapting behaviors is complex because students may simultaneously belong to multiple peer systems–involving diverse norms in place–while also being part of broader systems such as the class, school, and family levels (Luisier, 2010; Seron and Wittezaele, 2009). Scholars show that when the functional norm of one system promotes aggression, students are more inclined to imitate and, therefore, intensify the aggression inflicted by their peers in a bullying situation (Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015).

Bullying fulfils a function for peer systems in schools. Focusing on a common goal maintains social cohesion among the members and within the systems, particularly those whose balance is vulnerable (Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015; Seron and Wittezaele, 2009; Stahel, 2021). Exclusion creates otherness, consolidating a common identity among students to the detriment of one or more marginalized peers. By identifying 'others' whom they see as different from themselves, students further highlight and emphasize the similarities that unite

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1   Within the scope of this paper, we use the word 'children' to refer to primary school students (6−12 years old in Switzerland) and 'adolescent' to refer to secondary school students (12−15 years old). Nonetheless, we acknowledge the porosity of such categories, particularly with regard to social development. Therefore, the description of teenage realities should be nuanced depending on individuals (10−12 years old). The term youth is used to include both categories.

them (Durif-Varembont and Weber, 2014; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This produces a negative perception of the victims, who could be seen as to blame for what happens to them (Moody, 2020a; Salmivalli, 2010). A vicious cycle of increased conformity among students begins and two main normative influence factors can explain students' motivations to conform. On the one hand, belonging to a majority is desirable and protects from exclusion (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). On the other hand, bullying increases the visibility of individuals' behavior, whether victims or perpetrators. This is known as a factor that increases normativity and conformism (Bègue, 2024).

2.2 Children and adolescent cultures

Students acquire and apply understandings, knowledge, and behaviors while interacting with schoolmates. In doing so, they identify and highlight which skills young people should master and which should be disregarded, thereby contributing to the co-construction of youth cultures. Such skills will vary depending on age, gender and social contexts. Scholars show that the more skills are valued and shared among peers, the stronger they become as core features of youth cultures (Delalande, 2003; Lachance et al., 2016; Singy et al., 2014). Moreover, cultures are closely linked to the peer systems from which they emerge (Félonneau and Lannegrand-Willems, 2005; Lachance et al., 2016).

Youth cultures meet specific identity criteria, characterizing the periods of childhood and/or adolescence. Delalande's research on childhood culture (Delalande, 2003, 2006) shows that primary school students expend a lot of energy complying with norms defined by what they see as valuable skills: "a child playing a game untypical of their age group, or engaging in an activity that is unseasonal or no longer popular is seen by others as deviant" (Delalande, 2003, p. 8). Durif-Varembont and Weber (2014) highlight the importance for adolescents of sharing a common identity with their schoolmates, causing them to reject those they see as different (see also Schachter, 1951). Based on what skills children and adolescents believe their peers should acquire and master, students co-define prevailing norms and the conditions to be accepted into peer systems. These norms pertain to actions and refer to what can or cannot be done at a certain age (Prairat, 2012; Veenstra and Lodder, 2022; Verhoeven, 2012). They are also contextualized and specific to each peer group. The norms qualify as particular to children and/or adolescents because they originate from shared cultures in the process of self-construction (Félonneau and Lannegrand-Willems, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2014). In order to define themselves and gain peer recognition, students show that they belong to the shared culture, meeting their schoolmates' expectations.

Youth cultures respond to the need for young people to act as autonomous individuals and take part in defining their realities, choices, lifestyles and values (Félonneau and Lannegrand-Willems, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2014; Lachance et al., 2016). Having long been considered as distinct from the adult world or a 'sub-culture', it is now acknowledged that youth cultures are the expression of generational overlaps (Delalande, 2003; Félonneau and Lannegrand-Willems, 2005; Lachance et al., 2016). Many cultural products–films, music, or clothes–are designed by adults for children and adolescents and diffuse their own perceptions of what skills are valued (Lachance et al., 2016). Children and adolescent cultures mark periods of development

and transition between early childhood and adolescence and adolescence and adulthood, respectively. The understandings, knowledge and behaviors that come to the fore during these periods allow children and adolescents to explore, test, reject or gradually adopt skills. They do so with the help of peers who provide regular feedback. Youth cultures also carry strong stereotypes or simplified understandings of broader social norms, cultures and values. These support children's and adolescents' needs to assert progressively their own identity and allow them to make choices without, for example, relying on their parents or other adults for guidance (Durif-Varembont and Weber, 2014).

2.3 Group norms and bullying dynamics

Popular students play a major role in influencing social norms and bullying dynamics (Dijkstra et al., 2008; Salmivalli, 2010). Popularity can take two primary forms: perceived or sociometric (Stahel et al., 2024). Perceived popularity often manifests as domination or prominence among peers; the sociometric form (also termed 'social preference') characterizes students who inspire positive emotions or feelings in their schoolmates (Salmivalli, 2010; Kindelberger, 2018). Students who present a high level of perceived popularity exert significant influence over their peers, which has the effect of prioritizing their opinions when defining the group norms. Bullies with high perceived popularity sometimes use it to influence schoolmates into imitating their own violent behaviors, generating a norm that encourages their peers to use aggression within their interactions. In such contexts, peers are more likely to act violently (Henry et al., 2000), which maintains or even increases the popularity of the people at the source of these behaviors.

The influence of students with high perceived popularity is most prevalent in systems that have a strong social hierarchy and rely on a common purpose to strengthen social cohesion (Salmivalli, 2010; Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015). Notably, not all bullies initially display high perceived popularity. Some engage in violent behavior in the hope of gaining social recognition from their peers, such as higher perceived popularity and advancement in the social hierarchy (Kindelberger, 2018). Others do so to cause harm. In such cases, the presumed failure in identity construction prevails, creating a situation that can take a more pathological turn if it continues over time (Braconnier, 2008).

Social norms within peer groups or classrooms play a crucial role in shaping behavior and significantly affect how children and adolescents interact and develop socially. Laninga-Wijnen et al. (2020) underscore how different combinations of prosocial and aggressive popularity norms within school peer groups may influence friendship dynamics. They suggest that not just one type of norm governs prosocial (helpful, cooperative) and aggressive (hostile, dominating) behavior. Instead, it is the interaction of multiple norms (either descriptive or injunctive) that shape both prosocial and aggressive friendship processes. A focus on the classroom level shows that norms regarding cooperation, aggression, and academic engagement influence individual students' behavioral patterns over time (Veenstra and Lodder, 2022). Norms about appropriate behavior become salient and drive behavioral development in children, in particular when stressed by teachers (Henry et al., 2000). This suggests that interventions targeting classroom norms can have far-reaching effects

on improving student behavior, in particular, if they are teacher-led and aim to foster norms that promote prosocial conduct and discourage aggressive or disengaged behaviors.

In summary, this literature review emphasizes the complex dynamics of school bullying, highlighting the interplay between peer systems, group norms, and individual behaviors. The roles of bullying—victim, perpetrator, and bystander—are fluid, with bystanders playing a crucial role in either perpetuating or mitigating aggression. Peer influence, driven by the desire for social conformity and identity consolidation, fosters a cycle where aggression may become a functional norm, enhancing group cohesion at the expense of marginalized students (Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010; Stahel et al., 2024). Youth cultures, grounded in shared skills and values, amplify this dynamic by establishing norms that govern inclusion and exclusion. Popular students, especially those with perceived popularity, wield considerable influence, shaping norms that may normalize aggression to sustain social hierarchies. The interaction between prosocial and aggressive norms within classrooms further impacts social and friendship dynamics.

3 Research question and methodology

Available literature highlights the importance of examining how group norms, the cultures of children and youth, and their developing identities interact to create a more or less conducive environment for bullying. This study does so from the perspective of the key participants involved: the children and adolescents themselves. A central assumption here is that failing to conform to youth norms poses a risk factor for bullying. Drawing on anthropological insights regarding educational intentions within peer groups (Delalande, 2003, 2006), bullying can be viewed as a mechanism through which students perceived as highly popular use feedback as a form of social reinforcement to instruct their peers on the behaviors they should adopt. This concept highlights what we consider the educational function of bullying. A sub-question arises: might a more adaptive function coexist? Peer feedback could gradually help students improve their social fit, guiding them on how to align with group expectations. Bullying emerges when individuals fail to adapt to this feedback, potentially threatening the cohesion of the peer system. This research adopts a comprehensive approach (Charmillot and Seferdjeli, 2002), exploring the meanings that students attach to bullying and focusing on the roles they actively play in constructing their realities, particularly their youth cultures and norms.

3.1 Methods, sample and ethics

A qualitative multi-method research design was implemented to examine and describe the links between bullying and youth cultures, norms, and developing identities and to include subjective experiences (Kohn and Christiaens, 2014; Queiros, et al., 2017). Combining the viewpoints of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders provided access to the different experiences of students involved in a bullying situation. Although the fluidity of bullying roles was acknowledged, the research protocol aimed to include as many different perspectives on the phenomenon as possible. Therefore, the students were considered according to the bullying role they believed themselves to occupy at

the time of the study (previous roles were discussed but did not affect the mode of inquiry). To minimize the risk of reprisals from peers for sharing information about them or reactivating distress, victims and perpetrators were invited to individual interviews, which provided greater confidentiality. In contrast, bystanders were given the opportunity to talk to schoolmates who have been in similar situations, which can encourage more introverted pupils to speak out.

School psychologists asked 10–17-year-old students who they thought may be victims or perpetrators whether they were interested in taking part in an interview to share their experiences of bullying. School mediators or teachers invited all students to volunteer as participants in a focus group if they had been bystanders to bullying. Self-determined victims and perpetrators were thus interviewed individually (7 10–17 years old), and self-determined bystanders took part in focus groups (38 10–15 years old).

For younger students (5–10 years old), the choice was made to conduct non-participant observations completed by focus groups to reveal the systemic dimensions of bullying and its complexity (Trainor and Graue, 2014).[2] Non-participant observations were carried out in seven primary school classes (185 5–10-year-old students) and 38 students took part in focus groups.

The study was a multi-method qualitative inquiry conducted in one administrative subdivision of Switzerland (Valais). It comprised one school system and participants from the two main linguistic and cultural areas (French and German-speaking regions). The schools were selected for their size (number of classes: min = 1, max = 24) and regional criteria (side valley or lowland areas, French or German-speaking) to represent the whole administrative subdivision of Switzerland (Valais).

All data was collected by a pair of two members of the research team (one leading, one observing). The languages used were either French or German, depending on the region in which the school was located. The discussions were structured around interview guides adapted to the participant's age and role in bullying situations (victim, perpetrator, or bystander, as self-attributed). By asking open-ended questions, the research team could collect data on the participants' experiences of bullying, the emotions they felt, how they and their peers reacted, and how violent situations unfolded. The participant's data (age, sex, school grade, number of siblings, etc.) were collected beforehand. Up to six students participated in the focus group sessions held during school hours in rooms set aside. The individual interviews were conducted outside school hours in rooms provided by the psychological counselling centers or venues chosen by participants. The group sessions and individual interviews lasted approximately 45 to 90 min and were audio-recorded.

The non-participant observations were conducted during the school morning for approximately 3 h and 30 min (including school arrivals, departures, and breaks). Researchers were introduced to the children by their teachers as individuals associated with a teacher college, researching how children interact with one another in school. The teachers provided them with a class plan–such as the

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2   Previous research on the topic (Moody et al., 2013; Piguet et al., 2013) revealed that the two last years of primary school in Switzerland could be studied with the same (or slightly adapted) tools as those used with 12–15-year-olds.

seating arrangement of each student in the classroom–and classroom regulations. Researchers employed a predefined observation grid to focus on peer-to-peer and teacher-student interactions, group formations, and disruptive behaviors. Each item was described based on notable events occurring during the morning, and the individuals involved were specified. Interactions between children were recorded according to the seating arrangement, alongside qualitative notes during breaks or other classroom settings (e.g., physical education).

A committee reviewed the project's ethical framework, including the principles associated with participation, the production and storage of data, and the dissemination of the results.[3] Parents, along with participants, provided written consent. The anonymity and confidentiality of responses were guaranteed. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice or negative consequences, and could access their data anytime. These data were destroyed at the end of the research. Feedback on the results was sent to participants in age-appropriate language, along with any solutions offered if they needed to discuss issues that may have arisen.

3.2 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using MAXQDA software (2018), combining several phases inspired by three methods of analysis used in qualitative research: Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), Miles and Huberman's qualitative analysis method (Miles and Huberman, 2003), and Paillé and Mucchielli's thematic analysis (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2019; see also Intissar and Chouigui, 2015). During the first pre-analysis phase, the audio-recorded data were transcribed, ensuring the participants' wording was not modified (Intissar and Chouigui, 2015; Zihisire, 2011). Notes taken during the focus group sessions and individual interviews were incorporated into the transcripts, adding non-verbal behaviors (such as laughing, sighing, or intonation). A synthesis was drafted for each observation session.

In the second coding phase, the transcripts and synthesis were broken down into units of meaning according to the meaning participants ascribed to their experiences of bullying rather than the form of their wording (Mucchielli, 2006). This process was applied line by line for each transcript and synthesis. One or more keywords or phrases were combined with each unit of meaning, supporting the idea that coding can be plurinominal (Ayache and Dumez, 2011).

During the third phase, the list of keywords and phrases with common properties was categorized (Intissar and Chouigui, 2015). As these elements were taken from the verbatim reports or observation notes of several participants, the categories were derived from multiple accounts rather than the experience of a single participant (Intissar and Chouigui, 2015). Memos (notes taken by the research team during previous phases to record observations) supported the definition of the categories. The categories were linked

during the final phase using various strategies (schematization, classification of categories according to the number of keywords and phrases included, contradiction resolution, etc.; Intissar and Chouigui, 2015).

4 Results

4.1 Conformity and bullying risks

Many of the accounts indicate that students are judged negatively by their peers when their understanding, knowledge, or behaviors do not meet group norms: "*She does not really like the same things as us, she listens to [names music genres]*" (Lucie, F, 12–14 years, focus group[4]). All actors of peer systems identify these expectations clearly: "*People also teased me because of my height […]. Well, a bit because of my behavior, too, because I was quiet in class and I used to draw all the time on worksheets or whatever, people thought I was a bit weird*" (Katoni, M, 14 years, individual interview). Different behaviors draw the attention of schoolmates because they highlight a failure to conform to expectations. Beyond peer pressure and teasing, students who do not conform do not fit in, as Joe (F, 12–14 years, focus group) suggests: "*If you are not into the same stuff as the others, it's harder to join a group.*" Being part of a group of peers requires acquiring a set of necessary skills: taking others' opinions into account to conform sufficiently and not be deemed 'different' while also standing out to a minimal extent as a distinct individual. Kassandra (F, 12–14 years, focus group) describes how she navigated such expectations related to fashion trends:

> When I looked in the mirror, I'd say, 'Do not wear those clothes because they'll judge you at school.' It was as though this schoolmate was right there looking at me and saying, 'If you wear that, I'll say it looks bad on you when you arrive at school.'

For her part, Luana (F, 12–13 years, individual interview) recounts how her fashion choices affect the opinions of peers she hardly knows. Their behavior towards her changes depending on how she is dressed:

> I tried wearing different clothes … like one of the [brand name] belts that I got once. I decided to wear that and get tanned [points to her skin]; when I got to school, everyone looked at me and was like, 'Hey, Luana, how's it going?' My friends would look at me the same. After that, I'd notice the difference if I just wore ordinary, normal clothes.

As suggested above, non-compliance with the prevailing norms does not systematically lead to bullying; sometimes, students develop a sense of individuality through distinctiveness. However, failing to adhere to youth norms becomes problematic and may put students at risk of bullying if they seek to stimulate interactions with peers. Noel (M, 17 years, individual interview) explains how he tried to draw

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3 Ethics committee of the University of Teacher Education Valais and the Ministry of Education Valais Education (2018).

4 Hereafter, the information in brackets is the pseudonym chosen by the pupil, their declared gender identity (M = masculine, F = feminine, O = other), age and method of data collection.

attention to himself from his schoolmates: "*I made up a foolish story to get noticed because I did not feel like anyone saw [considered] me, I felt like a ghost. And gradually, as the year went on, it completely changed. I was bullied to death.*" In this case, forced interaction with peers gave them some information they ultimately used against him. Nono (M, 12–14 years, focus group) tells a similar story about another pupil:

> *She did things… it's really embarrassing talking about it and we are all embarrassed to have to talk about it [other students laugh], but she filmed herself doing [sexual] things and showed it to several people. And the people who'd seen it, they started on at her, because… you just do not do that, and they started teasing her. In the end, it turned into bullying. But then she did not have any excuse to say they were bullying her for no reason because of everything she'd done […]. And she's still doing it!*

These verbatim accounts suggest that peers usually give feedback–or believe they have–on inappropriate behavior before a bullying situation emerges and settles. In such cases, bullying represents for respondents a penalty imposed after several warnings. To gain attention from their peers, students more or less unintentionally break with prevailing norms, and this often arises when an individual misinterprets or is unaware of which skills are needed to interact with their peers. Erion (M, 12–14 years, focus group) is clear about his schoolmate: "*He's weird too… He comes over to us, and instead of saying something like 'Hey, did you have a good weekend?', he starts talking about* badminton*! He shows off about it….*" Other students (12–14 years) describe how they feel uncomfortable with a schoolmate trying to interact with them and talking positively about cartoons, which are not valued by the group: "*I think she kind of makes things up because sometimes she shows us pictures of manga*" (Lucie, F); "*She has bizarre moods*" (Papy, M); "*I think she makes up her own world with the things she likes*" (Juliette, F). On the other hand, insufficient responses to interactions initiated by schoolmates can put students at risk of being sanctioned and bullied. Anna and Francis (12–14 years, focus group) underline the issue by exposing the case of a girl in their school: "*During the break, she's often on her own by the door*" (Francis, M); "*We all try to be nice, but, if she knows the students she'll talk to them, but, if she does not, she will not say anything. I do not think she really tries to fit in*" (Anna, F).

4.2 Bullying and children and adolescent norms

Bullying turns the spotlight on which understanding, knowledge, or behaviors youth should have. Repeated aggression constrains students to adopt actions and values which characterize children and adolescent cultures. However, students provide very few examples of how bullying influences or even induces changes in their own behavior. Luana is an exception: "*[…] they'll come and insult you and say stuff like, 'Your clothes are crap, you suck,' then the next day, it's Saturday, your parents say they are going shopping. First thought: I can go to the clothes store*" (F, 12–13 years, individual interview). Role changes in bullying (from being bullied to being a bully) are also evoked as an escape from the repeated attacks. In a focus group, Nono (M, 12–14 years) regrets:

> *I managed to get out of it by doing something really mean, actually, they were bullying me and also another girl, a little girl who had not done anything, she was even younger than me, and for them to stop picking on me I had to become the aggressor, […] so I had to bully the little girl.*

The norms to be respected between peers highlight how distant an individual should stay from the world of younger or older ones. Some students suffer aggression for not behaving as people their age are expected to. Not yet part of the eldest groups at school, Arum (F), 10 years old, describes how 11-12-year-olds laugh at her abilities, saying she cannot ride her bicycle and how terrible her academic grades are. Schoolmates define what 'too childish' is. In a focus group (12–14 years), "*All his stuff is broken, and he's always got his fingers up his nose or in his mouth…*" (Baptiste, M); and also:

> *Yeah, I think that's the main reason why people hassled him, he was always picking his nose, and no one wanted to lend him their stuff, no one wanted to touch his things, we played 'Virus' a lot, we hassled him a lot about that*" (Johanna, F).

While younger children use both physical and verbal bullying to punish inappropriate behaviors, adolescents often favor verbal forms of bullying to indicate what norms their peers should follow. Observations in primary schools suggest that exclusion and bullying are more closely linked to learning and adhering to school norms and codes (such as respecting class rules and appropriate actions in violent situations). Often, it is the teacher who highlights which school norms are being violated for example, in physical education, when a five-year-old was repeatedly walking backwards on the bench, despite the teacher's explicit instructions to walk forward, his peers began to grow annoyed and reprimanded him. Peers expect students to conform, and when they fail to do so, comments, avoidance, and eventually aggression are used to pressure the transgressive student. When asked whether students involved in bullying situations behave in class, focus group participants emphatically responded, "*No, they do not.*" Renouée (F, 8–10 years) noticed: "*As soon as I got a tick [several ticks can lead to a sanction by the teacher], they made fun of me.*" Classroom observations confirm this tendency: the more forcefully the teacher intervenes, the more quickly and decisively the pupils push aside or intervene to correct their classmates' behavior. Adolescents, for their part, report how explicit injunctions to align with norms–such as standards of physical beauty–are spoken out loud: "*Girls and even some boys say 'You're ugly, you should get plastic surgery'*" (Noel, M, 17 years, individual interview). In a focus group, Lucie confides (F, 12–14 years, focus group): "*The other day, she was sitting on the bench and this boy came over and said 'Get up, or you'll break the bench'*" (Lucie, F, 12–14 years, focus group).

Noteworthy, the fine line between verbal aggression and humor confirms to some extent that intentionality is not always present in bullying and conforming to norms: "*When I'm picking on people, I do not always think 'Hey, I'm bullying someone,' I just think I'm teasing them a bit. I do not realize it*" (Baptiste, M, 12–14 years). Moreover, students do not always anticipate the consequences of their aggressive verbal behavior. Students,

however, identify some criteria to distinguish a joke from verbal abuse. Who is speaking matters according to them: "*Sometimes, you just say things for a laugh, but if it's a bully saying it, then it's mean*" (Mo-Avan, F, 12–14 years). The red lines of attacking family or identity are also broadly agreed upon: "*If […they] talk about my mum, wow, that's going too far!*" (Nono, M, 12–14 years, focus group). Lu adds: "*If you hit their sensitive spots, if they [the students who are insulted] really are what you say, then you get to them. If not, they could not care less*" (Lu, M, 12–14 years, focus group).

4.3 Youth cultures and identity issues

The norms to be respected between peers respond to identity issues and emerge from youth cultures. Youth norms are also influenced by the broader cultural codes and social norms. Francis (M, 12–14 years, focus group) talks about how one student walks in a particular stereotyped feminine way and is disapproved of: "*She walks weirdly, she walks with her bag like that [mimes raising a forearm with a bag in the crook of the elbow] […]. You try not to notice.*" Louis (M, 13–14 years, individual interview) also describes how his peers have a gender-based stereotyped view of the behavior expected from other students:

> *There's this shy boy […], as the boys are all quite rough when they do sport or whatever, they push each other all the time, well, this boy asked [the teacher] whether he could join the girls instead. And then I heard they started wondering whether he was a girl […].*

Stereotypical representations show the exceptional nature of certain behaviors and allow students to explore the norms they should adhere to as they grow up. Sometimes, this occurs indirectly, as testified above by Louis. At the same time, stereotypical representations indicate that students must make their own interpretation of how to behave, confirming the need for autonomy. However, as Nono explains (M, 12–14 years, focus group) when talking about two schoolmates, this need should not be expressed by too high a level of independence or individuality: "*[…] She knows she has a bad reputation, I do not know how she does it. She dated, I think, three-quarters of the boys in [this town].*" He adds, "*She's a bit big-headed, 'Yeah, I'm so this and so that,' in the way she dresses, she's dyeing her hair, and tomorrow, she's going for a piercing […].*"

The need for young people to assert themselves to other generations also manifests as the distinction made by adolescent norms between the world of school and the behaviors demonstrating optimal integration into school (obedience, academic success, etc.). This distinction is partly due to the influence of popular peers on adolescent norms. Popular students project a 'yob' image, Lanny notices (M, 12–14 years, focus group): "*The popular ones are often the ones who get bad school grades, who smoke stuff*" (M, 12–14 years, focus group) and Lotte adds:

> *I think that out of the popular people, there is not one who's a good student or does good things, anything like that… they do what they want all the time, like smoking, drinking vodka in the street at 2 am […]* (F, 12–14 years, focus group).

This directly opposes what is valued in primary school, where academic underachievement or being deemed 'stupid' is clearly understood as a bullying risk. Ficaire (F, 8–10 years, focus group) highlights it when she explains how she tried to defend her friend: "*Well, I said: 'Stop bothering my friend, she does not deserve it, she's good, she's intelligent.'*"

Popular peers generate fear amongst students, who want to please them to minimize bullying risks. Some students admit:

> *Because she was the most popular girl in the class and I liked her anyway, I did not want to get on the wrong side of her. […] She could be really mean […]. If I got on the wrong side of her, she could have turned all my friends against me too.* (Mo-Avan, F, 12–14 years, focus group).

"*The others are scared of them [the popular ones], and then they'll try to be friends with them*" (Lotte, F, 12–14 years, focus group). A means of protection is to value their opinions on which behaviors to adopt, as Luana explains: "*[…] So if you do not wear a belt that the popular ones want you to wear, then it's 'Bye bye, you are not with us any more,' you are a loser–that's what they'd say*" (Luana, F, 12–13 years, individual interview). Previous experiences of bullying increase perceived popularity and fear: "*The two leaders, let us call them, they left, so now it's all OK, but before they turned everyone in the class against me, at one point, I was having a hard time*" (Mo-Avan, F, 12–14 years, focus group).

By progressively valuing 'yobbish' rather than appropriate or prosocial behavior, students mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, a period in which school and social norms can be challenged. Students who conform to the latter without questioning them are at greater risk of being bullied. However, due to the transitional characteristics of the adolescence period–which outcome is adulthood–expectations remain versatile. Take the example of academic achievement that is not valued in the same ways as during childhood but remains desirable if deemed achievable by individuals. Louis (M, 13–14 years, individual interview) explains: "*You come to realize that getting good grades is not always an advantage. I get quite good grades, but the people whose grades aren't as good will get jealous and will not be as nice to you.*" Individual strategies can, however, be put in place by students, such as being a 'good student' at the same time as being committed to a sport (Louis, M, 13–14 years, individual interview). Then, getting good marks does not seem to be the only driver for the student and it becomes more acceptable.

When students legitimize the use of aggression through their behavior, aggression can become a norm of the peer system; this legitimization becomes even more critical if the popular students themselves make use of aggression:

> *[Other students] act like them to fit into their group, for example, if they want to join the popular ones' group, they'll behave just like them, so if they insult someone or if they say they are not bothered about pollution, the end up not being bothered about pollution either. They will not think for themselves.* (Luana, F, 12–13 years, individual interview).

As this verbatim report underlines, popular students have a significant influence on creating the prevailing norms between peers and, in particular, on the emergence of violent behavior, enabling

them to maintain dominance in the peer systems "*they always pair with the stronger one,*" adds Luana. Moreover, their position becomes stronger as the number of supporters increases.

Findings in this study show that it is not enough to be aware of the culture codes. Students must own the appropriate behaviors and know how to apply them, acting in what is seen as an appropriate way. Students recognize that copying what their peers do or how they behave, or merely following them like sheep, will not be enough for them to be viewed positively: "*I talked to him once because my friend got annoyed, he was always following me and that, then he was copying what I was doing […]. You just do not do that*" (Papy, M, 12–14 years, focus group). A similar effect is produced when a pupil 'pretends', as Pauldori (M, 12–14 years) explains to a schoolmate in a focus group: "*You should stop pretending to act like a rebel and that when you are really a nerd, […] yes, you were, you were acting like a rebel. You pretend, 'Yeah, I get bad grades'. But, you do not.*" Keeping up with adolescent norms is not easy, especially as they evolve alongside peer interactions. Students, thus, must continuously adjust their behavior. Luana (F, 12–13 years, individual interview) concludes: "*The thing is, it can change at any time, if you do something and someone likes it, you are accepted, if not you are out.*"

5 Discussion

Failing to respect youth norms increases the risk of bullying when students try to interact with their peers, and the level of risk depends on the importance students give their schoolmates. The need for acknowledgement drives students to seek the attention of their peers, leading them to reveal personal information which can then be used against them. The importance students ascribe to their peers forces them to value their opinions on how to behave. The basis for interpreting the results of this study must include various aspects such as conformity (Coslin, 2007; Gifford-Smith et al., 2005; Hernandez et al., 2014; Schachter, 1951; Stahel et al., 2024), youth cultures and norms (Félonneau and Lannegrand-Willems, 2005; Lachance et al., 2016; Verhoeven, 2012), and bullying (Quartier and Bellon, 2020; Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010; Stahel, 2021). A developmental perspective is also used here for aspects relating to identity.

As the results indicate, respecting youth norms is a crucial issue for students; it supports creating, maintaining and reinforcing a common identity and highlights the existence of children and adolescent cultures even further. Knowing how to behave among peers becomes a skill to be mastered, which may explain why students do not tolerate schoolmates who make mistakes in acquiring the skills of youth culture. The failure to manage these skills may also explain the high levels of bullying, ranging from 10 to 33% internationally (Hymel and Swearer, 2015; Modecki et al., 2014). It is not enough to partially or approximately adopt behaviors or merely pretend or imitate schoolmates: students must own the behaviors of the prevailing youth culture and prove it. Specifically, students must show their compatibility with the youth culture and satisfy schoolmates' expectations with an individual flair. The element of individuality confirms that skills have been integrated into students' identities— however, balance is needed; it should not dominate peers' expectations. Self-definition occurs through a student's experiences of socialization, marked by a high level of conformity (Hernandez et al., 2014) and a need to be acknowledged by other young people, together with their identity requirements. This need, which translates into the inappropriate and antisocial behavior characteristic of bullying, may indicate a method of socialization particular to young people. We must point out, however, that

the results obtained in this research do not answer the question of why students tend to imitate or back up their peers' violent behavior to avoid becoming the next target (Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015). Indeed, whether such a response will be protective against bullying is doubtful because it does not testify to ownership of the behavior, it only shows conformism.

The results confirm that the norms prevailing among students stem from youth culture. Specifically, they show a constant influence between youth norms and cultures, gradually evolving through peer interaction. Students can spur the evolution of both culture and norms, especially those with high perceived popularity (Kindelberger, 2018). By defining which new behaviors to adopt and encouraging their schoolmates to respect or even adhere to them, students with high perceived popularity shed light on what is acceptable and what is not. Ultimately, it may happen that these behaviors gradually become part of the youth culture.[5] This may also explain how aggression between peers can take on a repetitive character and contribute to a case of bullying. Similarly, students with high perceived popularity can establish a norm through their violent behaviors. As peers conform to the norm, these behaviors become valued and a skill to acquire and master within a peer system; the system members are, therefore, encouraged to act violently towards schoolmates (Saarento and Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). The findings here show that the influence of students with high perceived popularity is even more significant when they are part of a system whose operational norm is maintained by isolating a non-conforming schoolmate. Conversely, if these students do not generate enough fear towards schoolmates to highlight new behaviors, the situation can be turned against them.

Students can experience difficulties interpreting or understanding which behavior to adopt in order to interact with their peers. These difficulties can be multiplied when keeping up with the continuous evolution of youth cultures and norms, running in tandem with students' personal development. Research (Félonneau and Lannegrand-Willems, 2005; Lachance et al., 2016) shows that youth norms, as well as cultures, can express a generation gap. Data from this study indeed indicate that students explore the social norms they will have to adhere to in adulthood. Because of the need to act as autonomous individuals and take part in defining their realities, choices, lifestyles and values, these norms should also be interpreted from the perspective of youth culture (Stahel and Moody, 2023). The behaviors of students and the norms prevailing in interactions stem from their own productions (Lachance et al., 2016), which means they are sometimes stereotypical, satisfying the need to define a distinct culture (Durif-Varembont and Weber, 2014). This complicates the interpretation of the behaviors expected of schoolmates even further, as they are radical, unnuanced and do not correspond to broader social norms (Stahel and Moody, 2023).

It is worth noting that norms and cultures simultaneously process distance from other stages of life, e.g., (early) childhood, adolescence and adulthood. For example, although students use the knowledge or understanding acquired in childhood to define themselves, adolescent norms and cultures will challenge these elements. This is the case of academic achievement–valued in the early years of schooling when

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5   The study of the levels of conformism to violence is beyond the scope of this paper (see Kelman, 1958). However, whether students conform, as a compliance process, to avoid negative consequences, without identifying with the norms and/or values or internalizing them, is a question that would need further exploring.

students learn the rules of being a good student (Veuthey and Maulini, 2013)–which is called out in adolescence. Conversely, if a teenager shows independent and transgressive behavior too early–such as drinking alcohol, wearing too much make-up or not doing schoolwork–he or she may be at risk of exclusion and bullying. Depending on the group and its norms, a move towards the behaviors valued in the next stage of life may lead to an increase in perceived popularity and attractiveness to peers. For adolescents, behaviors that convey a 'yob' image are increasingly valued by students because they require the transgression of mastered norms and behaviors and respond to the identity issues faced by adolescents (independence, reassessment, identity definition, etc.).

As above-mentioned, bullying reinforces social cohesion within peer systems because it gives students a common objective. By stigmatizing their peers, students reinforce and highlight a shared identity; they make visible how they are similar and set apart from those who are different (Durif-Varembont and Weber, 2014; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Our findings further indicate that bullying also fulfils an adaptive function for victims. Following violent incidents, victims try to reinforce similarities they have with peers, adapting their behaviors and to meet expectations. The verbatim accounts above confirm our assumption that the behaviors within a peer group are constantly evolving and that errors may be tolerated if they are not too extreme. However, if students fail to adapt despite peer feedback— which can take different forms and convey different degrees of violence—bullying can emerge. It then becomes a penalty inflicted by peers on a behavior that has not been adjusted.

From a group bullying perspective, it should be asked why victims do not respond swiftly to peer feedback. Admittedly, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to adapt if the expectations relate to an unalterable attribute, such as height, body shape or facial features. Also, it should be remembered that the interaction of multiple norms shapes both prosocial and aggressive friendship processes (Veenstra and Lodder, 2022). Furthermore, bullying can be considered through its educational function: by repeatedly aggressing peers, students point out or even instruct which behaviors to adopt. Such interpretation calls into question the bully's intention to harm, which has long been considered a defining characteristic of bullying (Olweus, 1991; Quartier and Bellon, 2020). If true, it would make bullying an inevitable aspect of social development—a part of what children and adolescents need to learn to behave according to group expectations.

This does not justify aggression between students, nor does it lay responsibility for bullying with the victims. However, it suggests a series of directions for educational initiatives. In the first years of schooling, teachers could play a key role (Henry et al., 2000) in teaching students the prosocial skills and expected behaviors leading to living together peacefully–e.g. socio-emotional learning (Taylor et al., 2017), raising pupil awareness of diversity (Moody, 2021), rights and peace education (Moody, 2020b). Schools could also reinforce norms regarding cooperation and discourage aggression to influence individual students' behavioral patterns over time (Veenstra and Lodder, 2022). Finally, education actors should avoid highlighting academic achievement as the gold standard: for younger students to avoid targeting a pupil who is still not meeting the system's expectations and, in the case of adolescents, to encourage all students to invest in several areas that complement school, such as sports or community activities. Such endeavors could achieve the same educational function as bullying for students, without compromising the victims' physical and psychological integrity or infringing their rights and dignity.

While more research is needed on the educational function of bullying, we argue it provides an additional explanation for the emergence of such dynamics. Bullying is not only the symptom of an unbalanced system of peers aiming to rebalance it. It is also an integral part of social and identity development; a process through which individuals both learn from their peers and instruct them about what behaviors are expected to conform to prevailing youth norms and contribute to youth cultures. If the aggressive means remain inappropriate, the aims are meaningful and can be met through various prosocial educative endeavors.

6 Conclusion

Youth cultures and norms are sources of development for students in constructing their identity. They give students the chance to become independent, actively define their lives, and reinforce a common identity among each other. However, students who do not respect prevailing norms and do not fit in the shared peer culture or meet expectations are at higher risk of being bullied. Findings here provide additional explanations for the emergence of bullying, which results more from a group dynamic of aggression than an individual one. From this perspective, the risk of being bullied only emerges if students value their peers. As they seek acceptance from their schoolmates, some students have difficulty interpreting or understanding which behaviors they should adopt when they are children and then during adolescence. Knowing how to behave with schoolmates becomes a skill to be acquired and mastered throughout childhood and adolescence; this may explain the lack of tolerance some students have towards those who fail to do so. This also questions the understanding of bullying as assuming a mainly aggressive function (intention to harm). Instead, bullying appears to be a penalty emerging after several failed attempts by students to show their schoolmates what behaviors are expected, valued, and shared. This stresses the importance of providing students with prosocial knowledge and skills to foster a harmonious, rights-respecting and peaceful school environment.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Author contributions

ZM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TS:

Conceptualization, Data curation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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