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## Aggressive behaviors and supportive interactions in the school environment

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### Abstract

The present study, a descriptive cross-sectional study, investigates students' perceptions of aggressive behaviors, bullying and supportive relationships in the school environment. The sample consisted of 124 middle school students, who completed a self-assessment questionnaire with 22 Likert-scaled items (1 = "never", 5 = "very often"). The descriptive analysis focused on item frequencies and means (M) and standard deviations (SD). The results show that 73% of students reported the absence or rarity of experiences of verbal, physical or relational aggression (M = 1.87, SD = 0.76). Only 15% admitted to frequent involvement in their own aggressive behaviors (M = 1.61, SD = 0.68). In contrast, 63% of students reported frequent experiences of peer support and friendship (M = 3.82, SD = 0.94). Also, 80% of participants did not face negative social pressures (M = 1.45, SD = 0.59). The study's conclusions emphasize the importance of developing educational programs to prevent bullying and strengthen peer relationships. The recommendations aim at implementing socio-emotional activities, awareness campaigns and the active involvement of teachers and parents, in order to maintain a safe, supportive and inclusive school environment.

**Keywords:** bullying, aggressive behaviors, social support, student self-evaluation, school climate.

### Introduction

The phenomenon of bullying in schools is a major concern of contemporary psychological and educational research. Bullying is defined as aggressive, repetitive behavior, characterized by an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim (Olweus, 1993). International studies show that bullying can take various forms from physical and verbal aggression to social exclusion and cyberbullying all with negative consequences on the socio-emotional development of students (Kowalski et al., 2021). The consequences of bullying are particularly complex, affecting mental health, academic performance and social integration. Student-victims often present increased levels of anxiety, depression and decreased self-confidence (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). In parallel, aggressors have a higher risk of manifesting antisocial behaviors and long-term adjustment problems (Espelage & Hong, 2019). Similarly, the literature highlights that witnesses to bullying may experience emotional distress and develop passive attitudes towards aggression, which contributes to the perpetuation of the phenomenon (Salmivalli, 2010).

In the context of digitalization, cyberbullying has become an extension of school aggression. Recent meta-analyses indicate an increase in the prevalence of online bullying and a strong

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correlation between digital experiences and the mental health of adolescents (Modecki et al., 2020; Kowalski et al., 2021). This new dimension raises additional difficulties in managing the phenomenon, as online aggression is more difficult to monitor by teachers and parents.

In Romania, research suggests that bullying is present in schools, but is often underreported or minimized (Băban, 2017). The lack of clear prevention and intervention mechanisms places the onus largely on teachers and school psychologists, who must develop effective strategies for socio-emotional education and inclusion. On the other hand, numerous studies highlight the positive role of supportive peer relationships in reducing aggression. The presence of supportive interactions, cooperation, and a sense of belonging to the group protect students against the negative effects of bullying (Volk et al., 2022). Likewise, a positive school climate, characterized by safety, inclusion, and collaboration, significantly contributes to reducing aggressive behaviors and increasing student well-being (Wang et al., 2020). Given these perspectives, the present study aims to investigate how students perceive bullying, both from the perspective of potential victims and possible aggressors, but also to highlight the level of supportive relationships between peers.

The objectives of the research are:

- identifying the perceived frequency of aggressive and bullying behaviors directed towards students;
- analyzing the degree of awareness of one's own aggressive behaviors;
- highlighting positive experiences of peer support and interaction;
- formulating educational recommendations for preventing aggression and strengthening the school climate.

## Method

**Research Design.** The study had a descriptive cross-sectional design, aiming to analyze students' perceptions of aggressive behaviors, bullying experiences, and supportive peer relationships.

**Participants and Sampling.** The sample consisted of 124 students (54 boys, 70 girls), selected through conventional sampling from an urban pre-university educational institution. The participants' ages ranged from 12 to 18 years ( $M = 14.6$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ).

**Instrument.** The Self-Assessment Questionnaire of Interpersonal Behaviors in School (CACS) was used, an instrument built based on items adapted from the specialized literature on bullying and peer relationships (Olweus, 1993; Hymel and Swearer, 2015). The questionnaire includes 24 items grouped into four dimensions:

1. Perceived aggression (victimization experiences, 8 items);
2. Own aggression (aggressive personal behaviors, 6 items);
3. Supportive interactions (cooperative and supportive relationships, 6 items);
4. Negative social influence (peer pressure, 4 items).

Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "never", 5 = "very often").

Internal reliability was assessed by the Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient = 0.87, indicating good internal consistency of the instrument.

**Procedure.** Data collection was carried out online, with the consent of teachers and parents, ensuring complete confidentiality of the responses. Data analysis included descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) and qualitative interpretations.

The analysis of the responses obtained from the 124 participants highlights several important directions regarding the perception of bullying and interpersonal relationships in the school environment.

**Aggression and perceived bullying.** The data show that approximately 73% of students reported that incidents of verbal, physical or relational aggression never occurred or happened very rarely. This result confirms the general perception of a relatively safe school environment. However, the responses also reveal the existence of occasional situations of offensive labeling, negative nicknames and social exclusion, which indicates the persistence of some forms of bullying at the level of small groups. The phenomenon, although not dominant, remains an important aspect that needs to be monitored, since even isolated cases can have significant psychosocial effects on victims.

**Own aggressive behaviors.** Most students did not recognize frequent aggressive behaviors, suggesting that aggressive tendencies are not internalized as dominant in the analyzed group. However, a small percentage of students reported engaging in behaviors such as calling classmates names, spreading false information, or excluding others from shared activities. These data may indicate either a lack of awareness of the impact of these actions or a tendency to minimize one's own behaviors perceived as negative.

**Supportive interactions.** The dimension of peer relationships was assessed through items that targeted mutual support, cooperation, and social acceptance. The results show that between 60% and 67% of students reported frequent experiences of support, participation in shared activities, and friendships. These responses suggest the existence of a predominantly positive school climate, but the differences between individual experiences highlight the fact that not all students benefit equally from these supportive relationships.

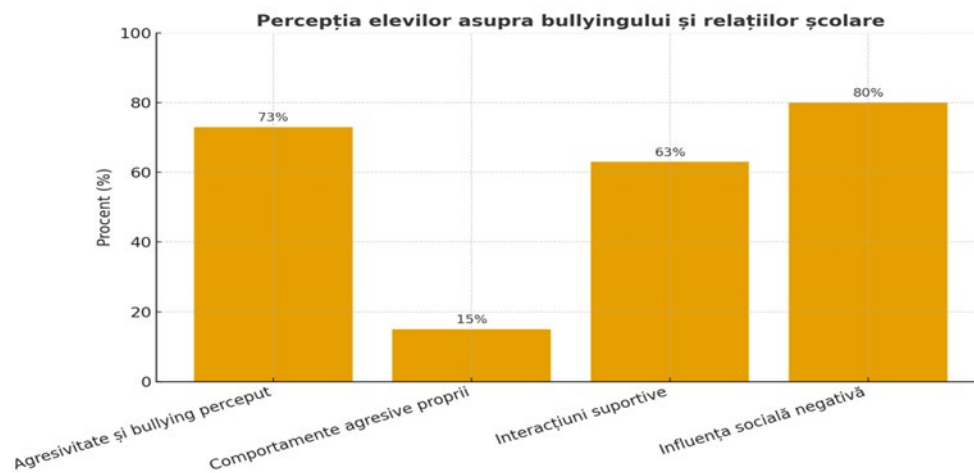
**Negative social influence.** Regarding the pressure exerted by other classmates to adopt aggressive behaviors, the results show that most students do not face such situations. This is an important finding, as it reflects a school climate in which group norms do not promote aggression and do not stimulate bullying behaviors.

### **Findings and discussion**

The analysis of the collected data aimed to highlight how students perceive and experience aggressive behaviors, supportive relationships, and social influences in the school environment. For each of the investigated dimensions perceived aggression, own aggression, supportive interactions, and negative social influence response percentages, means (M), and standard deviations (SD) were calculated, in order to identify general trends and differences in perception between participants. The results provide an overview of the school's relational climate, revealing to what extent pro-social behaviors, cooperation, and mutual support coexist with manifestations of exclusion or aggression. The percentage analysis allows identifying the level of coherence between students' perceptions of their own behaviors and those of their peers. The detailed distributions are presented in Table 1, which summarizes the main values obtained for each category of behaviors.

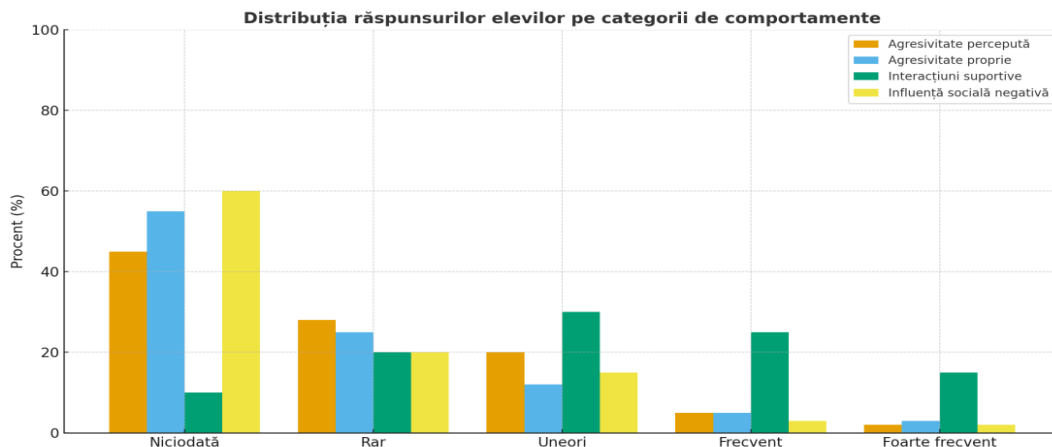
**Table 1 – Summary of the Percentage Distribution of Responses by Main Categories of Behaviors**

Size	Category analyzed	% students	M	SD
Perceived aggression	Never happened / rarely	73%	1.87	0.76
Own aggression	Low involvement (never / rarely)	85%	1.61	0.68
Supportive interactions	Frequent / very frequent	63%	3.82	0.94
Negative social	Never happened / rarely	80%	1.45	0.59



**Figure 1 – Students’ perception of bullying and school relationships**

Figure 1 illustrates a percentage summary of the main findings. It is observed that 73% of students report the absence or rarity of bullying experiences, approximately 15% recognize their own aggressive behaviors, between 60% and 67% declare frequent experiences of support and friendship, and over 80% state that they do not face negative social pressures to manifest aggressive behaviors. This general picture suggests a predominantly positive school climate, but with the presence of some specific cases that require attention.



**Figure 2 – Distribution of responses by behavior categories**

Figure 2 presents a detailed distribution of responses for each category of behavior, from “never” to “very frequently”. It is noteworthy that on the “perceived aggression” dimension, almost half of the students’ state that they have not experienced such situations, but there is also a minority percentage that declares that they sometimes or frequently face exclusion or offensive labeling. Regarding “own aggression”, the majority answer “never” or “rarely”, which indicates self-control and minimization of aggressive behaviors. In contrast, the distribution of responses for “supportive interactions” shows a greater concentration in the “sometimes” and “frequently” categories, suggesting that peer support is present, but not uniformly in the experiences of all students. The “negative social influence” dimension is dominant in the “never” category, which indicates an environment in which pressures to harm other classmates are almost absent.

## Conclusion

The research results highlight the fact that most students perceive the school environment as relatively safe, in which aggressive and bullying behaviors are rare or isolated. Approximately three quarters of respondents report that they have not been frequent victims of aggression, which is a positive indicator for the school climate investigated. However, the existence of occasional cases of offensive labeling, social exclusion or nicknames confirms that the phenomenon of bullying, although not dominant, remains present and requires constant monitoring and interventions. This result is in line with international studies showing that bullying, even when not perceived as a large-scale phenomenon, has significant consequences on the emotional and social health of student-victims (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Volk et al., 2022).

The analysis of the dimension “own aggressive behaviors” highlighted the fact that students do not frequently assume the role of aggressor, but a small percentage admits to engaging in behaviors such as spreading lies or excluding peers. The specialized literature confirms that students often tend to minimize reporting their own aggressive behaviors, which may reflect both a social protection mechanism and a lack of awareness of the impact of these actions (Salmivalli, 2010).

The dimension of supportive interactions showed that most students experience supportive and friendly relationships, which contribute to the consolidation of a positive school climate. This result is consistent with the research of Wang et al. (2020), which highlights that a sense of belonging and peer support reduce the risk of aggressive behaviors and improve academic performance. At the same time, the results of the meta-analyses conducted by Kowalski et al. (2021) confirm that positive relationships between peers constitute a protective factor against bullying, including in the online environment. Regarding negative social influence, the fact that most students do not face pressure to adopt aggressive behaviors is a result that confirms the positive trends of the school climate. This finding is also supported by recent studies (Modecki et al., 2020), which show that group norms and school culture can act as a filter in reducing or, on the contrary, in amplifying aggression.

The results of the survey conducted within the school where the educational program for promoting values is implemented confirm the importance of a systemic and unitary approach, focused on the formation of a school culture based on values. Students and teachers become co-creators of a safe, emotionally balanced and inclusive educational climate, in which pro-social behaviors are constantly cultivated through models, experiences and interpersonal relationships. The development of a value-based organizational culture proves to be an essential pillar in

preventing the phenomena of exclusion and aggression. According to the literature, when empathetic and cooperative values are integrated into institutional norms and practices, they act as protective factors against deviant behaviors and support a positive school climate (Wentzel, 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Values do not remain just declarative ideals but become action guidelines internalized by students through active participation, reflection and the example provided by teachers. Consistent promotion of respect, tolerance and empathy strengthens the sense of belonging, reduces aggressive behaviors and facilitates the construction of a “safe relational space” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009), in which students can experience social and emotional learning in a framework of safety and mutual respect. In conclusion, the data obtained confirm that values systematically cultivated at school level can become a true framework of social self-regulation, capable of preventing aggressive behaviors and promoting the socio-emotional development of students. Based on the results obtained and in accordance with the specialized literature, the following recommendations for educational practice and policies can be formulated:

**Implementation of socio-emotional education programs:** Studies show that training emotional self-regulation and empathy skills significantly reduces the incidence of bullying (Espelage & Hong, 2019). Socio-emotional development activities can be integrated into the curriculum or carried out through workshops.

**Awareness and prevention campaigns:** Both victims and witnesses of bullying need resources to recognize and report aggressive behaviors. School campaigns that promote respect and inclusion have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing the phenomenon (Volk et al., 2022).

**Strengthening supportive relationships between peers:** Promoting cooperative and mutual support activities can strengthen the sense of belonging and reduce social exclusion (Wang et al., 2020).

**Involvement of teachers and parents:** Preventing bullying cannot be achieved only at the student level. An integrated approach is needed, by training teachers in recognizing early signals and involving parents in intervention strategies (Băban, 2017).

**Continuous monitoring of the school climate:** Even if current results indicate a relatively safe environment, bullying is a dynamic phenomenon, influenced by social and cultural factors. Periodic assessments through self-assessment questionnaires and direct observations can ensure effective prevention.

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