Research paper

'Bullying is bullying, if they want to say it's because of being LGBT that's another story': Perceptions of educators on LGBTQ+ bullying.

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ABSTRACT

The identification and response of teachers and other educational agents to LGBTQ + bullying is essential to prevent and eradicate it. The present study explored the perception of these agents regarding LGBTQ + bullying in their schools. A qualitative approach based on 15 semi-structured interviews was used. The answers were analyzed using a thematic analysis. The results show an advance in the sensitization regarding sexual and gender diversity in schools. However, they also show an under-identification of LGBTQ + violence, an individualization of this problem -focusing it on the characteristics of the victim-, and a predominance of punitive responses over more inclusive strategies.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been an important social and legislative change concerning sexual and gender diversity, especially in western countries. Thus, in different countries, both European and American, new laws have been passed, which are aimed to tackle against inequalities and stigma towards LGBTQ+[1] people (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2018; European Commission, 2020). For instance, about half of European Union countries have passed laws regarding same-sex unions, with equality marriage currently being legally recognized in 14 out of 27 countries (ILGA-Europe, 2023). In the same sense, some countries (8 out of 27) in the European Union, such as Spain and Ireland, have passed gender recognition legislation for trans people (people whose gender identities differ from their allocated sex at birth) based on self-determination (TGEU, 2023). Some American and Asian countries, such as Argentina and Australia, have also passed laws that recognize trans people's rights (Castro-Peraza et al., 2019). In spite of these new laws, these changes were not as significant as expected. In this sense, one of the largest LGBTI Survey carried out in Europe over the time, the FRA LGBTI Survey, with almost 140,000 participants (LGBTI

people in the EU, North Macedonia and Serbia, aged from 15 to ≥ 55 years), revealed few advances in LGBTI people's human and fundamental rights in their daily living between 2012, in which the first survey on LGBT people was conducted in the EU, and 2019 (FRA European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). This study also revealed significant differences among the 28 countries surveyed of the European Union (the United Kingdom was part of the EU at that time). In fact, this survey highlighted regressions in some aspects. For example, in the most recent survey, 2019, a higher percentage of trans people felt discriminated in the 12 months before the survey (60% vs. 43% in 2012 survey); or felt discriminated in the workplace (36%) compared to 2012 (22%) and this perception of discrimination also increased in the rest of LGBT respondents (37% in 2012 vs 43% in 2019). Despite this, the percentage of LGBT respondents aged 18 years or older who openly expressed their sexual orientation or identity increased from 36% in 2012 to 52% in 2019. Similarly, the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) reported relevant changes in favor of the protection, recognition and guarantee of the human rights of LGBTI people in different countries of the Organización de Estados Americanos (OEA) (Organization of

[1] Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, questioning and any other sexual and gender minority (such as queer, gender-fluid …). However, when refer to other studies we used the original terms used in that study.

American States). However, it also showed that different types of physical, psychological and sexual violence identified are still present in those countries (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2018).

In the school scope, changes have also occurred, although there were some certain seemingly paradoxical results. Some studies have suggested that a shift towards inclusivity has occurred, with school environments now being relatively inclusive in terms of sexual and gender orientation (e.g., Blanchard et al., 2017). Some authors have even reported a complete absence of homophobia in some school environments. For instance, White et al. (2018), stated in their study carried out at one Further Education college in the south of England: "It is clear that, in this college, homophobia is stigmatized rather than homosexuality". In this sense, the previously mentioned study of the European Union found a decrease in the proportion of young people aged 18–24 years not open about their gender identity or sexual orientation at school, from 47% in 2012 to 41% in 2019 (FRA European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). However, despite the openness of LGBTQ + youth to show their sexual orientation and gender identity seeming to suggest more social acceptance thereof, the results of most surveys and studies about bullying have consistently shown a greater prevalence of violence and bullying against LGBTQ + students and, especially, against transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) youth, than against their cisgender heterosexual peers (e.g., Kosciw et al., 2020; Marx et al., 2021; Toomey & Russell, 2016).

1.1. Addressing LGBTQ+ bullying

This consistently higher prevalence of bullying against LGBTQ + students, compared to cisgender heterosexual peers, as well as its important consequences, has shown the necessity to consider this phenomenon as a specific type of bullying and, therefore, the necessity to tackle it in a specific way (Abreu et al., 2022; Earnshaw et al., 2018; Elipe et al., 2022; Lessard et al., 2020). Moreover, a review of interventions to prevent stigma-based bullying, in general, and LGBTQ + bullying, in particular, showed the lack of effectiveness of general anti-bullying programs in addressing this type of bullying (Earnshaw et al., 2018).

A useful theoretical framework to understand what aspects are important to consider in this type of bullying when designing effective intervention strategies is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social-ecological model, which was used to analyze the phenomenon of LGBTQ + bullying in previous studies (e.g., Hong & Garbarino, 2012). This framework posits the need to consider the influence of both personal variables and contextual variables–the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem–in order to understand the development of the individual. The appropriateness of this framework for studying LGBTQ + bullying lies in the different characteristics of LGBTQ + bullying compared to general bullying. Prominent among these is the fact that the motivation for such bullying goes beyond individual factors and is rooted in certain social factors, specifically homophobia, forming part of what has been termed stigma-based bullying (Earnshaw et al., 2018). Also useful is the Development Integroup Framework (DIF) (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017), which emphasizes as the basis of stigma-based bullying (and thus LGBTQ + bullying), power dynamics, rooted in social structures, beliefs, and ideas; social identity; peer group norms; and social and moral valuations of discrimination, all of which transcend the individual. These frameworks allow for a better understanding of one of main causes of the lack of effectiveness to prevent this bullying, when compared with general bullying, the relevance of the social beliefs and attitudes toward sexual and gender diversity, which permeate the different relevant contexts in this phenomenon: classroom, teachers and the rest of the educational agents, schools, families, and communities (Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

In addition, some authors have questioned the effectiveness of certain specific and well-intentioned measures that, since years ago,

have been developed in relation to LGBTQ + bullying, such as the use of gendered spaces and the provision of support groups as safe spaces, highlighting that such measures, although with some positive results, also have shown some adverse effects, such as greater isolation feelings for LGBTQ + youth (Formby, 2015; Harris et al., 2022).

1.2. Educators' difficulties in tackling LGBTQ+ bullying

Teachers and the rest of the educational agents play an essential role to tackle bullying since they are responsible for the creation of physically and psychologically safe environments in the classroom, pose essential models of care and respect in interpersonal relations, have a privileged position to identify and respond to violent incidents and refer the students to the services they need, and they are a fundamental link between the school and the community through their relations with the families (UNESCO, 2022). In fact, one of the keys to reducing the impact of LGBTQ + bullying is the support that students receive from the teachers (Crothers et al., 2017). However, several large-scale studies, such as that by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN[2]) of LGBTQ + people in the United States, have shown that most sexual- and gender-minority students believed that teachers witnessed homophobic bullying but did not intervene (Kosciw et al., 2014). In addition, in GLSEN 2017; 2019 Reports, half of all LGBTQ students said they felt ashamed to report bullying incidents to school staff members (43% and 49.5%, respectively), and about half (41.9% and 48.4%, respectively) felt they might be blamed by school staff simply for reporting the incident. Moreover, more than a quarter of students (29.9% and 27.7%, respectively) did not report harassment or assault because they felt that staff members at their school were themselves homophobic or transphobic (Kosciw et al., 2018, 2020). Moreover, most of LGBT students, in US and British schools, perceived that their teachers only "sometimes" or "never" challenged LGBTQ + phobic language when they heard it (Bradlow et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2020). In the same way, a teachers' report about homophobic bullying involving 1832 primary and secondary school respondents across the United Kingdom also showed that the vast majority of teachers heard students use expressions like "that's so gay" or "you're so gay"; 65% of secondary school teachers and 32% or primary school teachers have heard students use terms like "poof", "faggot", "dyke" and "queer"; 55% of secondary school teachers and 42% of primary school teachers conceded that they did not challenge homophobic language every time they heard it (Guasp, 2014). Even, some studies have found that more than half of LGBTQ + students reported hearing homophobic remarks and negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff (Kosciw et al., 2020). This negative response translates into a greater concealment of the problem by the students, who consider that revealing the situation would only make it worse (Kolbert et al., 2015).

Regarding lack of effectiveness in tackling bullying, in general, research have shown several factors that are important: teacher workloads, emphasis on academic performance, organizational constraints, lack of or insufficient training regarding bullying, inconsistent school policy, resistance to addressing the topic in teacher education programs, lack of support in addressing incidents of harassment, lack of consistency among colleagues in addressing such incidents, and interpersonal relationships with students (Meyer, 2008). In addition, it is possible that, given that most teachers have at least some professional and personal experience with bullying, they might have constructed beliefs related to it that are not easily changed, even by participating in an anti-bullying program; this could undermine assimilation of current knowledge of this

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[2] GLSEN has researched and assessed LGBTQ issues in K-12 education in the US since 1999. Every two years, this organisation conducts the National School Climate Survey. This national survey examines many aspects of school safety, from elementary school students and teachers' experiences, including the interactions LGBTQ parents have had with school staff at their children's schools.

topic (Oldenburg et al., 2016). Moreover, in many countries school staff have a legal obligation to report and investigate bullying incidents but this does not always improve the situation. In fact, some studies have shown that excessive time spent reporting may negatively impact the amount of preventative work that occurs (Horton et al., 2023).

In the case of LGBTQ + bullying some other factors seem to be relevant. Teachers have identified as some of the main limitations to tackle this type of violence, their lack of preparation and confident to address this problem, the lack of priority given to LGBTQ + bullying, normalization of victimization behaviors, belief that the victimization experience is a means of acquiring resiliency and self-confidence, their own feelings toward certain minority groups, and fears of community and family resistance (Conoley, 2008; Markland et al., 2023; O'Donoghue & Guerin, 2017). In this sense, teachers have often expressed doubts about their authority to act in the face of this type of bullying and their capacity to do so effectively (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009), which could explain the absence of intervention reported in previous studies. This low perception of competence is combined with other factors. In fact, a study by UNESCO (2022) showed that teachers are often unaware that certain groups of students are more likely to be a target of violence, which would hinder their identification.

Likewise, some studies have shown the importance of attitudes, as well as, teachers' point of view of sexual orientation and gender identity as a fundamental element in intervening in this type of bullying (Markland et al., 2023; Nappa et al., 2018). However, the results reported in this regard are dissimilar. Thus, whereas some studies showed, in general, positive attitudes of teachers and school staff towards LGBTQ students, suggesting there has been a significant cultural shift in attitudes towards sexual and gender minorities (Dragowski et al., 2016; White et al., 2018), others studies demonstrated the existence of certain pathologizing beliefs, for example, regarding transgender identities (Harris et al., 2022). The context of the study, i.e., the countries and cultures/subcultures in which it was conducted, the year of the study, and the prevailing beliefs regarding sexual and gender minorities in these different places and times, as well as the fact that the majority of the studies are qualitative and based on self-report measures (affected by social desirability), could explain these discrepancies. Lastly, it is also essential to highlight the influence of contextual factors on the teachers' responses. In this sense, the study of Zotti et al. (2019) identified that perceiving colleagues as legitimizing or intervening towards homophobic bullying predicted similar responses among the other school staff.

2. The present study

The literature reviewed shows the need to delve deeper into the narratives of teachers and other educational agents to determine what they identify as LGBTQ + bullying, as well as their perceptions toward its causes and the resources they have to address it.

The general objective of the present study was to analyze the perception of the educational agents regarding LGBTQ + bullying in their schools. To this end, the following specific objectives were set:

(1) To explore the visibility of sexual and gender diversity in their schools.
(2) To know their perception about violence towards sexual and gender minority youth and identification of LGBTQ + bullying episodes.
(3) To identify, from their perspective, the main risk factors of this type of bullying.
(4) To analyze the strategies used to tackle LGBTQ + bullying and promoting safe spaces for LGBTQ + students, as well as the main resources and barriers in this regard.

3. Method

The present study was exploratory. The research design was qualitative and based on semi-structured interviews. Convenient sampling was used.

3.1. Participants

Participants were 15 educational agents from seven public high schools located in five different provinces of Andalusia (South of Spain). These schools included compulsory secondary school (students from 12 to 16 years old) and non-compulsory secondary school (from 16 to 18 years old). The participants included one educational counselor, seven teachers from different fields (Philosophy, English Language, French Language, Spanish Language and Literature, Geography and History, and Maths) and seven other teachers who also had specific educational board roles: one school principal, one head teacher, one secretary, one Equality Plan Coordinator,[3] one Coexistence Plan Coordinator[4] and two Heads of the Departments. In three of the schools, three participants were interviewed; two participants were interviewed in two other schools, and one participant was interviewed in each of the remaining two schools. The age range of participants was 30–57 years ($M = 44.4$, $SD = 8.24$). Among them 8 were men and 7 women. The professional experience of the participants varied from 8 months to 22 years ($M = 15.92$, $SD = 9.62$).

3.2. Instruments

A semi-structured interview was designed for the present study based on four major issues (for the script, see the Appendix):

a) Sexual and gender diversity in schools.
b) LGBTQ + violence and bullying.
c) Factors associated with LGBTQ + bullying.
d) Educational response to LGBTQ + violence and bullying.

3.3. Procedure

Several secondary schools in different provinces of Andalusia (Spain) were contacted by e-mail and telephone to explain the research and its objectives, and to request their collaboration. The interested schools were then provided with additional information on the conditions of their participation. The educational board of schools decided which school personnel would collaborate (school counselors, teachers, principals, heads of departments, etc.). Once it was decided who would participate, they had to sign an informed consent form to participate in the study. A date was then set for the interviews.

The interviews were conducted between April and June 2021. Since, at that time, there were different restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 9 interviews were conducted in the schools and 6 through the Google Meet online platform. The interviewer used the semi-structured interview script to introduce topics but the interviewees were free to add any additional information.

All interviews were recorded, using an audio recorder in the case of the face-to-face sessions, and through the Google Meet platform recording tool for the online sessions. The interviews lasted between 30 and 52 min ($M = 30.47$, $SD = 10.84$).

Before initiating this study, the Ethics Committee of the University of Jaén (DIC.18/1.PRY) approved it.

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[3] Equality Plan is a document implemented on a compulsory basis in Andalusian schools. It includes actions and strategies designed to promote gender equality.
[4] Coexistence Plan is a document implemented on a compulsory basis that specifies actions and strategies to promote a positive school climate.

3.4. Data analysis

First, the audio recordings were imported and transcribed using the transcription module of NVivo 1.6.1 software. The transcriptions were then revised and corrected for the analysis.

For the analysis of the data, a thematic analysis methodology was followed according to six steps described previously (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, in the first phase, the interviews were transcribed, the material was read and re-read, and some general ideas were written down, searching for structures and meanings. Then, a series of initial codes were generated, organizing the information from the thematic structure of the interview. From there, an iterative process was carried out to search, review, discussing the codes when there were discrepancies about their meaning, and re-codify themes. Lastly, the themes were ultimately identified and defined, a hierarchy of themes and sub-themes was established, and a final report was drafted. Thematic analysis was mainly based on a deductive approach, as we selected themes according to previous work in this field. However, we also included some themes based on the interviews (inductive approach), thus following a hybrid approach (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

4. Results

The results are presented considering the four research objectives set for this study, and themes and sub-themes that emerged in the analysis of the main topics.

4.1. Sexual and gender diversity

This dimension allowed us to explore the conceptions and attitudes of the teachers toward sexual and gender diversity in the schools. This is a central aspect since previous research indicates that there is a relationship between these ideas and attitudes and the responses given to diversity. We identified different themes for grouping the teachers' contributions on this topic: the visibility of sexual and gender diversity in schools, the manifestations of this diversity, and teachers' conceptions thereof. Concerning the visibility of sexual diversity, most of the teachers identified this diversity in the schools and they highlighted their normalization within this context, justifying the absence of problems in this respect.

> In fact, I currently have a couple of transgender boys and, so far, we haven't had any problems (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years old).

> There are (lesbian and gay) couples who say it openly, and everything's fine (Woman, Head of the Department of Extracurricular Activities, 39 years).

However, some teachers mentioned that there is still a fear of showing this diversity openly.

> There are students who do not want to be visible because there is still a fear of bullying behavior, especially by their peers (Man, Teacher, 40 years).

This diversity was also recognized among the teachers, although, in this case, they mentioned that it is usually less visible. In this sense, it seems that, among adults, this visibility is somewhat linked to the scope of personal intimacy.

> Among teachers, I don't detect that visibility. I don't know if this is due to age, culture, or the current times. But it isn't addressed. It's right there, but nobody gets involved (Man, Coordinator of the Coexistence Plan, 45 years).

> Of course, this is something personal, and, well, we can talk about many things, but we don't usually talk about our private lives (Woman, Teacher, 52 years).

> Some of our teachers are homosexual. But I think that it's up to each person to decide whether they want to keep it to themselves (Man, Teacher, 30 years).

The second theme was related to the manifestations of this diversity. Regarding this topic, teachers mentioned lesbian, gay and bisexual gender orientations, and they also acknowledged other manifestations like non-binary identity, different gender expressions, and transgendered identity.

> There are homosexual couples (Man, Teacher, 40 years).

> She (a girl in my school) says it is gender neutral (Woman, Teacher, 52 years).

> There are students who are openly bisexual (Man, Teacher, 37 years).

> I currently have a couple of transgender boys (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

The last theme concerned teachers' conceptions of sexual and gender diversity. The contributions reflected the relevance of social changes for explaining diversity in schools, where the freedom to express one's diversity is greater now than before. However, some contributions, as mentioned above, pointed out that this greater freedom should not obfuscate the fact that the ultimate decision to recognize one's diversity should be a personal choice.

> The issue is in the street, it is in the home, everywhere it appears the same (Woman, Teacher, 52 years).

> I think that's a personal choice; some people take it more personally, they don't like that people know about their personal life or talk about it (Man, Teacher, 30 years).

Although teachers accepted diversity, some ideas may preclude true tolerance. In the case of our interviews, statements alluding to being in fashion and attributing gender orientation or gender expression to age confusion supported this position.

> Now that it's fashionable, she now says she's bisexual (Man, Teacher, 37 years).

> Yes, I think (a girl defined as non-binary) is confused. That's my impression (Woman, Teacher, 52 years).

4.2. LGBTQ+ violence and bullying

The analysis of the interviews allowed us to identify four themes that reflect teachers' ideas about the nature of this phenomenon and its relationship with general bullying, the prevalence of these episodes and teachers' knowledge of specific cases, the most common forms of aggression, and the characteristics of victims and aggressors. Concerning the nature of LGBTQ + bullying and its relationships with general bullying, the teachers' responses showed some variability. While most teachers identified homophobic bullying as a specific form of bullying with its own characteristics, some of them understood that we are actually talking about the same phenomenon.

> Yes, it is different. It has to do with someone different being vulnerable (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

> Yes. I think bullying in terms of sexuality is more serious. Well, yes, I believe that; I don't know if it's more serious, but it's much clearer because it identifies a group of people (Man, Teacher, 37 years).

> I don't think so. I believe both phenomena would be more or less the same. (Woman, Teacher, 52 years).

> There is bullying, there are people in this group who are weaker than others because of the way they are … If they want to say it is bullying

because of being LGTB, that is another story (Man, Head of Studies, 57 years).

The second theme was related to teachers' experience as observers of such episodes and their relative estimates of prevalence. The analysis showed that some participants have seen this form of violence. However, it was also common for teachers not to have witnessed episodes of LGBTQ + bullying, which could support the invisibilization of this phenomenon.

Some students do not want to be visible because they are still afraid of bullying behavior (Man, Teacher, 40 years).

I've never seen it, never. I've never heard a bad word in the school. Regarding this topic, no; regarding other topics, there have been problems, but not with respect to this topic, never (Man, Teacher, 30 years).

Teachers also pointed out that LGBTQ + bullying in schools was more prevalent than general bullying. This is particularly relevant to LGBTQ + students who would be particularly vulnerable, such as transgender students. In addition, the interviewees highlighted 16–17 years as the age range associated with the highest rate of bullying.

I am sure that in the vast majority of schools there is LGBT bullying. I am very sure (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

Yes (LGBTQ + bullying is more prevalent), because they are more visible (Woman, Secretary, 48 years).

I think so (there's more violence toward sexual minorities). And the more novel they are in that sense, the more obvious it is (Man, Teacher, 38 years).

I think that some sexual orientations are more visible than others; that is, it is not the same if you are gay or lesbian, which is, let's say, that you are still you, but when we talk about a transgender person, there is already something different (Man, Head of Studies, 57 years).

In the peak of puberty. In Year 11 and Year 12, they're probably more awake (Woman, Secretary, 48 years).

In relation to the third theme, according to the interviews, the most common form of aggression was homophobic (including explicit or implicit reference to gender identity or orientation). In addition, other forms of LGBTQ + bullying such as insults were also highlighted.

In social media, they're saying horrible things; for instance, they call a transgender boy 'Transformer' (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

Insults; mostly, there are insults (Woman, Teacher, 31 years).

The characteristics of victims and perpetrators was the fourth theme identified. When describing the victims, teachers particularly emphasized their shyness or insecurity. In the case of bullies, the main feature was their popularity or power within the group.

The problem is the insecure, introverted, shy person, or the person who doesn't accept it … the problem is when you don't accept it or when you are still lost and don't know who you are. Then you may be a target for others (Woman, Teacher, 52 years)

The problem is that the aggressor is always the powerful one (Woman, Teacher, 52 years).

4.3. Factors associated with LGBTQ+ bullying

In the analysis of the LGBTQ + bullying phenomenon, the teachers were also asked about the perceived factors associated with this problem. Their answers provided different aspects that were grouped into two themes: risk and protective factors. Among the risk factors, they specifically mentioned factors linked to the individual, group and social context. Among the individual aspects, they highlighted the personality characteristics of the victims of such type of bullying, but also how the victim interacted with the aggressor to initiate the bullying dynamic.

… the problem is that the person is insecure, introvert, shy or doesn't accept it; so he can become a target for others (Woman, Teacher, 52 years).

Bullies attack those who deny it, because they know it hurts them. Those who accept it say: 'yes, so what?' Thus, they tend to leave the latter alone (Woman, Teacher, 31 years).

The group factors mentioned above are mainly linked to the victim's adjustment to the group. That is, the more the victim differs from the group, the more likely he/she is to be excluded or rejected by it.

To strengthen themselves as a group, in which we are in, and you are out … so, getting together helps us stick together, and this is the gregarious spirit of the adolescent, distinguishing the one who is in the herd and who we take out of the herd (Man, Teacher, 40 years).

Being different from the group is enough. I think that's the reason for the aggression (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

Families also play an important role in teachers' discourse on risk factors. More specifically, the lack of acceptance of gender orientation or gender identity by the family is pointed out as a factor that hinders students' adjustment and, as a consequence, facilitates LGBTQ + bullying.

What happens is that he (the victim) has a very difficult family who do not accept anything (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

The typical student who has suffered bullying has a rather complicated family situation (Man, Teacher, 37 years).

Teachers also mentioned cultural and societal aspects, especially those that define heteronormativity. In this sense, it seemed that the further away from the *cis*-heteronormative patterns, the greater the risk for LGBTQ + students. Thus, those students whose gender expression did not fit the stereotypes established by society would be at special risk. It is worth mentioning that educators also pointed out factors related to the values of society, stating that these explain the risk that LGBTQ + students are faced with.

It's easy when someone who is a bit more vulnerable or appears to be more vulnerable, because he's not part of the heteronormative community; when someone shows a different side, there it goes (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

In general, part of the student body continues to participate in LGTB phobic dynamics as a cultural phenomenon … more than out of their own conviction, as part of the patriarchal and sexist culture in which we live (Man, Teacher, 40 years).

That her granddaughter suddenly says she is a boy (…). No, our society has a hard time with that at the moment. It will not accept it (Man, Teacher, 37 years).

I think that this is due to cultural and educational reasons, an old view of what is considered normal (Man, Teacher, 54 years).

Teachers' ideas about possible protective factors (second theme) were also explored during the interview. The analysis of the respondents' contributions showed that peer support seemed to be fundamental for protection against LGBTQ + bullying, as well as family support.

If it turns out that your class supports you, you almost don't care if your family doesn't (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

The family support they have as well (…) I think that it is important (Man, Teacher, 54 years).

4.4. Educational response to LGBTQ+ violence and bullying

Teachers provided considerable information about the educational measures that were put in place in schools. These were grouped into three themes: actions to address sexual and gender diversity in schools, specific resources to address LGBTQ + bullying, and the main difficulties in implementing them.

Concerning the first theme, in all interviews the teachers stated that sexual and gender diversity must be addressed in all schools. Among their arguments, it was pointed out that failing to tackle this reality is one of the causes of LGBTQ + bullying.

When diversity is not fully addressed, when these kinds of needs of the children are not addressed, the problem (LGBTQ + bullying) arises (Man, Teacher, 37 years).

This diversity can be seen, because it's natural, but we have to prevent it from being a target of bullying and insults. Being different should be accepted (Woman, Teacher, 31 years).

The interviews gathered a large number of strategies to work on sexual and gender diversity in schools. According to the interviewees, the most common strategies were sensitization activities (i.e. activities aimed at increasing knowledge and improving reactions to a phenomenon, in this case, sexual and gender diversity and LGBTQ + bullying) through presentations and workshops with the participation of LGBTQ + associations, external agents and institutions. Thus, the teachers mentioned that these activities must be included in the equality plan and linked to the work carried out in the tutorials.

Perhaps in the tutorials, introducing some content about this would be interesting, because the tutorials have to be done, at least at the level of secondary education (Man, Teacher, 30 years).

We have an LGTB library with poetry, essays, young adults and children's literature, and graphic novel sections. I think that this, for example, is absolutely necessary (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

The teachers mentioned that the curriculum should also address sexual and gender diversity. When this was done, these contents were usually included cross-sectionally.

I don't think it's the best idea to teach a whole subject on this alone, but I think that the cross-sectional contents should be taken more seriously, and that, in one way or another, we should work on it from all subjects (Man, Teacher, 38 years).

Lastly, it was worth pointing out the initiatives that give prominence to the students in developing these activities, either as support groups of students who belong to this community or as mediation groups.

This is why we work a lot with the equality plan. In fact, in the last years, our school has changed greatly. Boys and girls are increasingly aware of and surprisingly trained in aspects of equality (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

For example, we have the EVOHÉ group, which is made up of teachers and students, mostly students. This small group of students is a reference (Woman, Head of the Department of Extracurricular Activities, 39 years).

Well, the students of the school acted as mediators (Woman, School Counsellor, 43 years).

Beyond general strategies to address sexual and gender diversity, teachers also reported being aware of specific strategies to address LGBTQ + bullying. These responses were identified as belonging to the second theme of this dimension. However, the measures they proposed were basically punitive and related to the application of the general sanctions system of each school.

… dealing with it as any other type of insult or humiliation toward a student would imply the usual course of warning, punishment and such (Woman, Head of the Department of Extracurricular Activities, 39 years).

This should be reported to the principal to see what measures can be applied with the person who is exerting that kind of violence. These measures should be harsh, with expulsion at least (Man, Teacher, 30 years).

Nevertheless, the interviews also showed, to a lesser extent, other strategies of action focused on positive approaches related to knowledge and acceptance of diversity.

We invite this association (referring to an LGBTQ + association) to give presentations and advice to the students, so that the latter can see that this is a reality and that there is nothing extraordinary; the idea is to normalize it (Man, School Principal, 46 years).

Through presentations and tutorials … For example, I ask them to write down positive things about their classmates (Woman, Teacher, 31 years).

In my classes, I personally have zero tolerance to any kind of aggression, any kind of use of terms with an LGBTI-phobic meaning, even if they don't intend it. Also, I explain the reason for this and the repercussions that it could have on their classmates who may belong to the LGBTI community. We talk to them, we have presentations, we solve doubts. Well, I tell them beyond what they have seen and experienced so far (Man, Teacher, 40 years).

The implementation of measures against LGBTQ + bullying was not exempt from difficulties (third theme) and thus was recognized by the teachers in their contributions. Among the most frequent challenges, they stated that it is hard to identify this kind of bullying, the lack of resources to implement (or maintain) the measures, and the lack of training among teachers.

In many cases, it's difficult to detect it, because it may have happened one second before you arrived. Sometimes you arrive, see that something happened, but you don't know what it is. And I think that's the main problem (Man, Head of Studies, 40 years).

… because, in many cases, we don't see or hear it. You know something bad happened, but you didn't hear it, and they deny the facts (woman, advisor, 43 years).

I need time, I need people who support me (Woman, Coordinator of the Equality Plan, 52 years).

Stability is fundamental, as well as having a team of people in whom you can trust (Woman, Teacher, 52 years).

This is why I believe that they should give us much more training, and this training should be real and practical (Woman, Head of the Department of Extracurricular Activities, 39 years).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyze the perceptions of educational agents regarding LGBTQ + bullying in their schools.

Regarding sexual and gender diversity in schools, the results are in

line with those of previous studies, which state that, to identify such diversity, teachers usually rely on testimonies, LGBTQ + stereotypes and same-sex couples among the students (Kuhlemeier et al., 2021). This aspect somewhat indicates the lack of inclusive thinking, keeping the idea of *cis*-heterosexuality as the norm in the background and under-valuing the proportion of students with different identities, orientations and expressions. Likewise, the fact that some teachers justify the acceptance of diversity based on the lack of problems suggests that, despite the advance achieved in this sense, the paradigm continues to be rather focused on preventing violence than on promoting environments aimed at facilitating the development of the potentials of everyone from their differences.

Furthermore, although some of the participants recognized and highlighted the need to bring to light diverse orientations and identities to serve as referents for the students, they pointed out that this repre-sentation is less frequent among teachers than among students, identi-fying it as an aspect of their private lives. This finding is in line with those obtained in previous studies where, even in schools perceived as totally open in terms of sexual diversity, a considerable proportion of the teachers admitt that they are not totally open with their students about this topic (White et al., 2018). In this sense, it seems that, even though some teachers recognize the importance of their role as models and referents, there is still a conflict in the school environment that considers an incompatibility between the professional identity of the teacher and sexual minority identity (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013).

Concerning the identification of violence against LGBTQ + students and LGBTQ + bullying, it is remarkable how among teachers there is often the idea that there are no cases, or at least, not ones that they have not seen, of LGBTQ + bullying in their schools. This result contrasts with the consistent quantitative results that show a high prevalence of this type of bullying (e.g., Abreu et al., 2022; Kosciw et al., 2020), which suggests an under-identification of the phenomenon.

In relation to the risk factors, most of the teachers highlight heter-onormativity and social rejection towards diversity. However, some participants point out the victims' characteristics, such as introversion, shyness and a lack of acceptance of one's own identity or orientation. This indicates that, perhaps involuntarily, some of the teachers under-stand this type of bullying as a problem associated with the lack of competencies of the victims, thus reducing the responsibility of the ag-gressors. Previous studies have found similar results, showing that stu-dents of diverse sexual orientation, and those perceived as such, are more likely to be targeted and blamed for being victims (Ana-gnostopoulos et al., 2009). In this sense, Aronson (2008) proposed that those who are a part of the majority tend to have difficulty empathizing with victims of prejudice and stereotyping and show a tendency blame the victim. Using a social approach, Bierhoff (2002) related this phe-nomenon to belief in a just world. This author points out that strong believers in a just world admire successful people, have a winner–loser world concept and "perceive personal deprivation as fair." In addition, this author states that, when victims belong to a minority group or have a complex situation requiring assistance, or if there are too many victims to help given the available resources, it victim-blaming becomes more likely because their existence challenges the perception that the world is just and fair. Also, blame victims has been associated with the use of different mechanisms of moral disengagement, which, among other aspects, transfer the responsibility from the aggressor to the victim (Camodeca et al., 2019). In addition, this contrast with results of studies in which most of victims of this type of bullying describe this bullying as targeting their perceived gender non-conformity, which they believe is often interpreted as evidence of a non-heterosexual orientation and serving to extend the *cis*-heteronormative community climates in schools (Marzetti et al., 2022). These results show how personal and contextual factors, as suggested by the social-ecological model (Bron-fenbrenner, 1979), intersect to facilitate the emergence of this type of bullying. In addition, these results also demonstrate the relevance of social and moral valuations of discrimination, as proposed by the DIF

(Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017), to understand the current phenomenon and its dynamics. Therefore, there is a need to critically examine the sexist and heterosexist roles, norms, and practices that underlie this type of violence and one's own beliefs about these issues.

Regarding the interventions, all the participants highlight the need to approach sexual and gender diversity in schools, which shows the advance in sensitization toward this topic relative to studies from the past few years, which reports teacher ambivalence with respect to intervening in cases of gay- and lesbian-targeted bullying (Ana-gnostopoulos et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the way this approach is applied could seem insufficient based on the recent literature. Thus, some schools address this topic through specific sessions that are, in many cases, conducted by external professionals. In this sense, it has been found that addressing LGBTQ + topics in single sessions and outside of the curriculum, instead of integrating them through examples in a generalized manner, would enhance the feeling of 'otherness' for these students, which is also potentiated with the use of non-inclusive curriculums (Formby, 2015). However, it is important to highlight that some schools include LGBTQ + topics in the curriculum cross-sectionally. Other measures barely used in Spain include support groups for young LGBTQ people and their allies. In relation to these groups, previous studies show their benefits, especially for LGBTQ + students (e.g., less homophobic comments, greater perception of safety and greater support from peers and staff of the school) (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, other studies report that, depending on how this measure is carried out, it could reinforce the idea that these young people are safe only when they are inside those groups, thus potentiating their isolation (Harris et al., 2022). Having a support group is not equivalent to an affirmative school environment. In fact, in some cases, it becomes a superficial measure that only tackles the symptom and avoids addressing the deeper causes of discrimination. Thus, it has been emphasized that schools must become safe environments with a clearly inclusive culture for all people (Formby, 2015; Harris et al., 2022).

One of the greatest difficulties pointed out by teachers, in line with previous studies, is the lack of training; despite the generally positive attitudes of teachers about support for LGBTQ + students, most teachers do not receive training to work with sexual minority populations (Kull et al., 2019). Therefore, the results agree with those reported by Kuh-lemeier et al. (2021), who found that, although the teachers are committed to the need for schools to become safe spaces for all students, the way in which this commitment is concreted in institutional actions is, in some cases, not effective.

5.1. Implications for practice

The results obtained in this study allow us to present some practical proposals for dealing with it. The first idea leads us to reflect on the training educators receive on sexual and gender diversity in general and LGBTQ + bullying in particular. Although it is clear from the educators' responses that their level of awareness of diversity has increased significantly in recent years, the truth is that, considering the high prevalence of LGBTQ + bullying reported in international studies (FRA European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020), as well as in Spain (Ojeda et al., 2023), this improvement seems to have not been translated into the identification of and effective intervention against LGBTQ + bullying problems. The culture generated in most schools of respect for diversity has been carried out through awareness-raising campaigns and messages aimed at developing good relationships between all members of the educational community. However, this approach does not seem to have been sufficient to reduce or eradicate this problem.

In this sense, examining teachers' responses, it seems that diversity awareness is a necessary but insufficient step in responding to LGBTQ + bullying problems. It appears that teacher training should include spe-cific elements linked to this form of bullying to achieve better results, such as knowledge to better understand LGBTQ + issues, the challenges

that LGBTQ youth face in current school environments, as well as strategies for creating a safer and more supportive environment (Bradley et al., 2019; Milburn & Palladino, 2012).

Similar implications can be drawn when we focus on developing psychoeducational proposals to fight against these forms of violence. The programs to be implemented should include specific elements about LGBTQ + bullying beyond conforming to generalist schemes designed for other forms of school violence, with consideration of the role that social beliefs derogating sexual and gender diversity plays in this type of bullying as well as normalization of the use of homophobic language in schools, which could make it more difficult to identify (Earnshaw et al., 2018; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2020). Some programs including these elements have been shown to be effective (e.g. Bradley et al., 2019).

5.2. Limitations of the study

This study has a series of limitations that must be pointed out. The main limitation relates to the use of convenience sampling. In this sense, since all the schools were public, the obtained results should be generalized with caution. It would be interesting for future studies to include a more extensive and diverse sample that allows controlling for variables such as the nature of the schools and their predominating values (e.g., in the case of religious schools). In addition, some of the participant teachers, albeit a minority, had specialized roles such as Equality Plan Coordinator, suggesting the possibility of greater sensitivity toward LGBTQ + bullying. Moreover, the method used to collect the information, namely self-report measures applied to obtain data through interviews, has the potential to bias the results. Potential biases include social desirability, perceptual, and memory biases. So, future studies could propose mixed designs (qualitative and quantitative), as well as develop ethnographic research to relate interview and observational data and 360° approach designs (e.g., including students), which would allow analyzing the extent to which the perceptions of the teachers are in line with those of the students.

Despite the limitations referred to above, the present work offers information regarding teachers' views on LGBTQ + bullying that maybe could be useful to a better understanding of the phenomenon as well as the development of measures to prevent it.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104381.

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