
Bullying in Physical Education Classes as a Social Sustainability Issue: Teachers' Perspectives

Aurélien Besseling ^{1,2}, Simon Monnard ¹, Théo Relekom ¹, Maurine Remacle ¹ & Alexandre Mouton ^{1,2}

¹ Department of Physical Activity and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Liège, Building B21, 4 Allée des Sports, 4000 Liège, Belgium

² Research Unit for a life-Course perspective on Health & Education, University of Liège, Belgium

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Christophe Schnitzler – Professor – HEP Vaud – University of Strasbourg

Lisa Lefevre – As. Professor – HEP Vaud

ABSTRACT

Bullying is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in our society, and physical education (PE) classes are no exception, appearing even as a context conducive to its occurrence, particularly when inclusive and supportive learning conditions are not fully ensured. However, the perception of this phenomenon by PE teachers remains little studied, despite its implications for classroom climate and students' well-being. The primary aim of this study is therefore to examine how these teachers perceive bullying in their classes.

To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 secondary school PE teachers. They were asked to describe a recent experience of bullying that occurred during their classes and to answer a series of questions about the factors that might explain the perpetrators' behavior.

The results indicate that teasing plays a central role, with bullying occurring in the majority of cases during class. Motives related to physical appearance and motor skills often appear to justify such behaviors. These findings highlight the importance of pedagogical differentiation as well as the need to develop interventions that encourage bystander engagement when confronted with bullying as a key condition for promoting social sustainability in physical education learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

While education for sustainable development has largely focused on environmental issues, the social dimension of sustainability remains comparatively underexplored, particularly in physical education (Baena-Morales et al., 2023; Royet et al., 2024). Bullying is a widespread phenomenon that can occur in various contexts, such as at work, at school, or during leisure activities. According to Olweus (1994), a behavior can be classified as bullying when it meets three criteria: it is repeated, deliberately intended to harm someone, and involves a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim. Bullying can also be categorized based on its forms: physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying (Van Noorden et al., 2015). Studies on school bullying show that certain environments or periods of schooling are particularly conducive to the emergence of this phenomenon. Galand (2021a) notably highlights that the transition from primary to secondary school is a particularly “critical” period in terms of bullying. Certain subjects, such as physical education (PE), are, for their part, contexts that favor the emergence of bullying. Secondary school victims reported significantly higher rates of bullying occurring in the gymnasium and locker rooms (Vaillancourt et al., 2010). This can be explained, in part, by factors that are difficult to control. For example, locker rooms are frequently described as “bullying zones,” mainly due to the lack of adult supervision. Teachers’ reluctance to oversee this space is explained by child protection requirements and the taboos associated with observing partially undressed children (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025). Moreover, PE classes involve multiple simultaneous activities across spaces of varying size and layout, making it difficult for teachers to monitor all student behaviors. This limited supervision can contribute to the emergence of inappropriate behaviours such as bullying (Cothran & Kulinna, 2014). On the other hand, certain more easily controllable factors, such as teachers’ instructional practices, can influence the emergence of bullying. For example, highly competitive approaches tend to increase students’ aggressiveness (Méndez, Ruiz-Esteban & Ortega, 2019), whereas a more open and less authoritarian teaching style, incorporating activities with adjustable levels of difficulty, helps reduce such behaviors (Benítez-Sillero et al., 2024).

From a broader educational perspective, bullying in physical education can also be understood as an issue of social sustainability, as it undermines equity, inclusion and students’ well-being within learning environments. In this context, equity refers to ensuring fair learning conditions adapted to students’ diverse abilities and characteristics, inclusion to active participation and a sense of belonging for all, and well-being to students’ physical, emotional and social safety during learning (UNESCO, 2015). Socially sustainable education relies on safe and supportive contexts that foster long-term engagement and participation for all students (Baena-Morales et al., 2023; Royet et al., 2025). Students who are victims exhibit high levels of demotivation, whereas those less affected maintain a more self-determined motivation (Murillo-Moraño et al., 2025). In the long term, negative experiences in PE, amplified by a negativity bias, can reduce their willingness to engage in physical activity (Ladwig, Vazou & Ekkekakis, 2018). Wei, Richards, and Graber (2024) highlight that research has primarily focused on classroom teachers’ responses to bullying, while little is known about how physical education teachers perceive these situations. From a social sustainability perspective, identifying how bullying manifests in PE is essential to better understand the conditions and mechanisms that may weaken the social climate and the long-term quality of learning environments. This general aim will therefore be explored through three research questions:

- Question 1: What are the most frequently observed forms of bullying in PE according to teachers?

- Question 2 : In which settings do these bullying incidents occur?
- Question 3 : What reasons or factors do teachers identify as underlying the occurrence of bullying in PE?

METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and is based on semi-structured individual interviews. The qualitative component, centered on the analysis of critical incidents, allows for the exploration of the first and second research questions. The quantitative component relies on a questionnaire using a frequency scale, aimed at addressing the third research question. This study was approved by the University Hospital-Faculty Ethics Committee of Liège (file reference: 2024-223). The procedures for obtaining informed consent and ensuring anonymity were rigorously followed.

PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample was recruited using various information dissemination strategies, including emails, social media, and word of mouth. A total of 253 teachers were invited to participate in the interviews, of whom 65 agreed. To be eligible, PE teachers had to work in secondary education and have at least one year of experience with first-year secondary students. Among the 65 volunteers, 15 did not meet the eligibility criteria, and 14 withdrew. The final sample therefore consisted of 36 teachers (Figure 1).

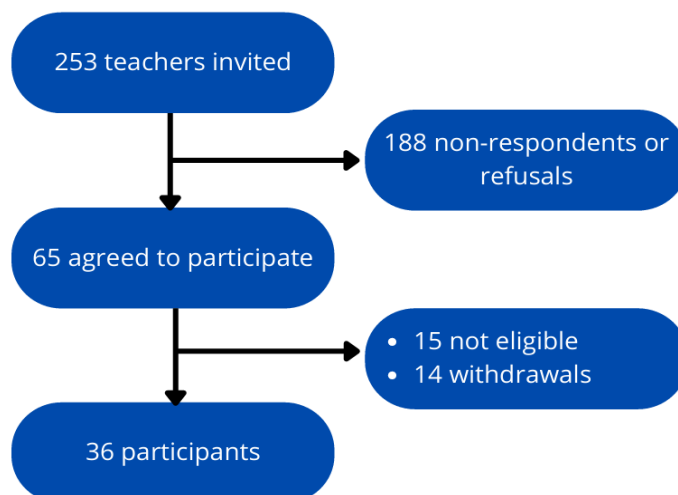


Figure 1 : Flowchart of the convenience sample selection

The sample consisted of 24 men and 12 women, aged 25 to 60 years (mean = 40 years). The teachers came from various schools in the French-speaking regions of Belgium, including the provinces of Liège, Luxembourg, Namur, and Hainaut. Their experience with first-year secondary students ranged from 1 to 33 years, with a mean of 14 years.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide divided into three sections: demographic information, critical incidents in PE, and teachers' perceptions of bullying motives. These interviews were conducted either online using Microsoft Teams or in person. The interviews began with the collection of demographic information, such as age, years of experience teaching first-year secondary students, and the school in which the participants worked.

Subsequently, the definition of bullying proposed by Olweus (1994) was presented to the teachers. Based on this definition, they were asked to describe a critical incident. More specifically, teachers were asked to recall a recent situation in which they had observed one of their students being a victim of bullying during a PE class. They were invited to describe this event in as much detail as possible, specifying what happened, how the situation unfolded, who was present, where the incident took place, and when it occurred.

Finally, teachers' perceptions of bullying motives were assessed by asking whether they had ever witnessed bullying for any of the following five reasons: (1) atypical gender expression, (2) gender-nonconforming ways of moving, (3) poorer motor skills, (4) physical appearance, and (5) having a multiethnic background. Responses were recorded using a frequency scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (almost daily) (Kokkonen, Gråstén, & Kokkonen, 2024).

DATA ANALYSIS

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed using the artificial intelligence software "TurboScribe". Each transcription was then carefully reviewed to correct any potential errors. Next, an Excel file was created with two sheets: one dedicated to qualitative analyses and the other to quantitative analyses.

For the qualitative data, a deductive approach was used, meaning that the categories were defined prior to analysis. Regarding forms of bullying, the categories were based on the classification by Van Noorden et al. (2015): physical, verbal, and relational, with theft added as an additional category. For the location of bullying, three contexts were identified: the locker rooms, PE class, and the route between the locker rooms and the class. The analysis focused on the occurrence of categories, that is, the number of times each category was mentioned by the teachers. The reliability of the categories was assessed using inter-rater and intra-rater measures and was confirmed. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on means and standard deviations.

RESULTS

FORMS AND LOCATIONS OF BULLYING: QUALITATIVE DATA

Of the 36 teachers interviewed, 33 (91.6%) reported a critical incident that occurred during a PE class. Regarding the forms of bullying, it should be noted that a single critical incident could involve multiple types of bullying. From this perspective, the different forms were recorded for a total of 46 citations. For example, Teacher 24 highlights verbal, physical, and relational bullying at the same time, stating: “Then we come to physical intimidation: pushing, hurting (...) and insulting. (...) Almost every class has a WhatsApp or Telegram group; the person we want to intimidate is excluded, then reintegrated into the group only to be insulted.”

Verbal bullying was the most frequently reported type by teachers (59% of mentions), followed by relational bullying, which accounted for about a quarter of mentions (26%). Physical bullying (11%) and theft (4%) were reported much less frequently (Figure 2).

The location of bullying was mentioned 30 times. It is important to note that a single teacher could report multiple locations for the same incident (e.g., both in the locker rooms and during the PE class). Among these mentions, 21 incidents (70%) occurred during the PE class, 8 incidents (27%) in the locker rooms, and one teacher (3%) reported the route between the locker rooms and the gym as a location of bullying.

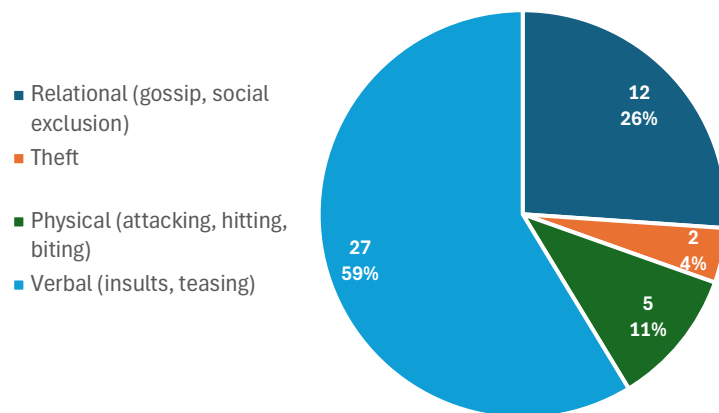


Figure 2 : Distribution of bullying forms by number of mentions

MOTIVES FOR BULLYING: QUANTITATIVE DATA

Table 1 presents the frequency of bullying motives reported by teachers. It appears that students’ poorer motor skills (2.5 ± 1.21) and physical appearance (2.3 ± 1.07) are the primary factors contributing to bullying in PE. Gender and ethnicity do not appear to be primary factors contributing to bullying in PE.

Motives for bullying	Mean (0-4) +/- SD
Atypical gender expression	1.4 (+/- 1.02)
Gender-nonconforming ways of moving	1.4 (+/- 0.96)
Poorer motor skills	2.5 (+/- 1.21)
Physical appearance	2.3 (+/- 1.07)
Having a multiethnic background	1.7 (+/- 1.07)

Table 1: Frequency of bullying motives in PE

DISCUSSION

Bullying manifests itself in various contexts, and the classroom is no exception. More than 90% of teachers report having witnessed a recent incident of harassment in their class. According to a study conducted by Gano-Overway (2013) among approximately 12-year-old youth in the United States, 28% of students report being victims of bullying in PE classes, while 15% acknowledge being perpetrators. Reducing this phenomenon is likely to have both immediate and lasting effects. Lower levels of victimization in PE are indeed associated with higher self-determined motivation in this subject (Murillo-Moraño et al., 2025). Such motivation supports students' engagement and stimulates their daily physical activity at school, while also promoting the acquisition of skills and knowledge essential for maintaining physical activity outside of school (Vasconcellos et al., 2020). In the long term, bullying in PE constitutes a particularly salient negative emotional experience that can become durably embedded in students' memory. Memories associated with shame, humiliation, or social exclusion remain especially prominent and may subsequently influence decisions to participate in physical activity (Ladwig, Vazou & Ekkekakis, 2018), whereas positive affective experiences have a favorable impact on future participation in physical activity across the lifespan (Feil et al., 2025). In addition, a deteriorated social climate limits the achievement of pedagogical objectives and may generate frustration and professional strain among teachers (Taylor et al., 2009). Addressing bullying is therefore not only a matter of student protection, but also a condition for maintaining meaningful and sustainable teaching environments (Wei & Graber, 2023). The form of bullying most frequently reported by teachers is teasing, highlighting the role of the immediate pedagogical environment in shaping social interactions. This observation can be linked to the most commonly cited motives for bullying, namely criticism related to perceived poor motor skills and physical appearance. Many authors emphasize that bullying often originates in the perception of difference in others (Galand, 2021b). According to Borowiec et al. (2022), overweight students are more likely to be victims of verbal bullying, particularly because PE exposes their bodies and physical abilities to the scrutiny of others. This observation highlights the importance of pedagogical differentiation in the prevention of bullying (Benítez-Sillero et al., 2024). In this context, differentiation refers to designing flexible learning situations that provide multiple entry points, adjustable levels of difficulty, and reduced reliance on public comparison. Such an approach is consistent with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which aim to remove barriers and ensure accessibility and meaningful participation for all students (Priyadharsini & Mary, 2024).

PE classes appear to be the place where bullying occurs most frequently, while the locker rooms come in second, accounting for about one-third of the reports. In either case, the setup of PE classes makes

it difficult to monitor all student behaviors, especially since students often try to conceal their actions from teachers (Cothran & Kulinna, 2014). In locker rooms, the lack of adult supervision exacerbates this issue (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025). This highlights the crucial role of student bystanders. However, the literature shows that, when faced with bullying situations, bystanders often tend to remain passive (Tolmatcheff, Galand, & Roskam, 2018). From this perspective, pedagogical differentiation and bystander-oriented interventions appear essential to support socially sustainable PE environments that promote equity and participation (Royet et al., 2024, 2025).

PERSPECTIVES AND CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of teasing, particularly those targeting students’ physical appearance and motor skills. For practitioners, these findings emphasize the need to adapt learning activities to each student’s level in order to prevent bullying.

The study also shows that bullying is particularly prevalent during PE classes, with more than 90% of teachers reporting having recently witnessed at least one incident. Our discussion also points to the difficulties teachers face in monitoring and intervening in all student behaviors during class. It is therefore essential for researchers to develop interventions that promote bystander engagement and support. For educators and trainers, it is equally crucial to provide tools that facilitate communication between students and teachers and strengthen educational actions not only for bullying prevention, but also for fostering social sustainability in PE settings (Royet et al., 2024). PE can provide an effective setting for implementing bullying prevention programs (Rico-González et al., 2025).

These findings call for a shift toward a more socially sustainable vision of PE. Such an approach requires moving from reactive responses to preventive and systemic strategies aimed at creating inclusive, safe and equitable learning environments that support all students’ participation and well-being. Based on the findings of this study, three priority areas form a practical blueprint for action to prevent bullying and support the development of socially sustainable PE (Table 2).

Study finding	Sustainability issue	Priority for practice
Teasing frequently targets motor skills and physical appearance	Negative peer comparison and student vulnerability	<i>Inclusive pedagogical design (UDL-informed):</i> provide multiple entry points, flexible levels of difficulty, and minimize public comparison
Most incidents occur during PE lessons or in less supervised moments (locker rooms)	Difficulty detecting and preventing emerging situations	<i>Proactive management of learning situations:</i> anticipate sensitive contexts and create conditions that support a safe and respectful social climate.
Bullying frequently takes verbal and relational forms	Risk of a deteriorated social climate and	<i>Bystander and climate work:</i> establish explicit norms for respectful interactions and encourage

(e.g., teasing, exclusion) within peer interactions	reduced sense of safety for some students	students to adopt supportive and prosocial responses
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Table 2 : A practical blueprint for action toward socially sustainable PE based on the study findings

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