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Homophobic bullying in schools globally: a systematic review

Bullying homofóbico en los colegios a nivel global: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

This bibliographic analysis critically examines international scientific research on homophobic bullying in educational institutions between 2020 and 2025, using the PRISMA (2020) protocol to ensure methodological rigor. Fifty studies from indexed databases such as SciELO, Redalyc, Web of Science, Dialnet, and Academia were reviewed to identify the manifestations, causes, effects, and intervention strategies for homophobic violence in schools. The results show that homophobic bullying continues to be a widespread and structural practice in school contexts, manifesting itself through insults, social exclusion, physical aggression, and cyberbullying, which profoundly affects the self-esteem, emotional well-being, and academic performance of LGBTQ+ students. The lack of teacher training, heteronormative curricula, and the absence of inclusive policies were identified as factors that perpetuate discrimination. Likewise, it was found that the most effective interventions integrate emotional education programs, continuing teacher training, and inclusive curricula focused on diversity and empathy. However, the research has methodological limitations due to the scarcity of longitudinal studies and the lack of consensus on operational definitions of the phenomenon. In conclusion, it is reaffirmed that homophobic bullying constitutes a structural problem that requires a multidimensional approach, coordinating educational, institutional, and sociocultural actions to build safe, equitable, and inclusive educational environments.

Keywords: homophobic bullying, sexual diversity, educational inclusion

Resumen

En el presente análisis bibliográfico se examina críticamente la producción científica internacional sobre el bullying homofóbico en instituciones educativas entre los años 2020 y 2025, empleando el protocolo PRISMA (2020) para garantizar la rigurosidad metodológica. Se revisaron 50 estudios provenientes de bases de datos indexadas como SciELO, Redalyc, Web of Science, Dialnet y Academia, con el fin de identificar las manifestaciones, causas, efectos y estrategias de intervención frente a la violencia homofóbica escolar. Los resultados evidencian que el acoso homofóbico sigue siendo una práctica extendida y estructural en los contextos escolares, manifestándose a través de insultos, exclusión social, agresiones físicas y ciberacoso, lo cual afecta profundamente la autoestima, el bienestar emocional y el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes LGBTQ+. Se identificó que la falta de formación docente, los currículos heteronormativos y la ausencia de políticas inclusivas son factores que perpetúan la discriminación. Asimismo, se halló que las intervenciones más efectivas integran programas de educación emocional, formación continua del profesorado y currículos inclusivos centrados en la diversidad y la empatía. Sin embargo, la investigación presenta limitaciones metodológicas debido a la escasez de estudios longitudinales y a la falta de consenso sobre las definiciones operativas del fenómeno. En conclusión, se reafirma que el bullying homofóbico constituye un problema estructural que requiere un enfoque multidimensional, articulando acciones pedagógicas, institucionales y socioculturales para construir entornos educativos seguros, equitativos e inclusivos.

Palabras clave: bullying homofóbico, diversidad sexual, inclusión educativa

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Introduction

Homophobic bullying in educational institutions worldwide can no longer be considered an isolated issue; it is now recognized as a problem with profound, serious, and lasting consequences. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021) reports that more than half of LGBTQ+ students in Europe have experienced some form of bullying in schools, colleges, or institutions due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Ochoa Díaz, 2020). In other countries, such as the United States, recent studies have shown that over 83% of LGBTQ+ students attending in-person classes in 2021 and 2022 were victims of harassment, aggression, or discrimination based on their identities (Kosciw & Zongrone, 2020).

The repercussions of this type of violence extend beyond the immediate incident. Recent research confirms that both homophobic bullying and cyberbullying negatively affect the emotional well-being and quality of life of young people (López, Armenta, Vega, & Díaz, 2021), damaging their self-esteem, mood, and integration within the school environment. A 2024 study demonstrated that experiences of homophobic victimization significantly increase levels of depression, loneliness, and suicidal ideation among adolescents (Hurtado Mellado & Rodríguez, 2024). In Ireland, nearly half of secondary school LGBTQ+ students acknowledged having faced homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic bullying or aggression.

Even everyday insults, offensive jokes, or the simple act of "name-calling" inflict deep wounds, undermining students' sense of belonging in schools, exacerbating symptoms of anxiety and depression, and often leading to school absenteeism. UNESCO (2021) highlights that nearly half of LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 13 and 17 were bullied due to their sexual orientation in the past year. Furthermore, when institutions lack inclusive policies or perpetuate anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, the psychological harm intensifies.

This bibliographic analysis aims to explore these recent data, identify the factors sustaining violence within the educational environment, and analyze interventions that have been proven effective in mitigating such behavior. The objective is to provide a comprehensive view of how educational policies, teacher training, school norms, and the sociocultural environment interact to propose evidence-based strategies that foster safe, inclusive, and respectful educational settings for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Methodology

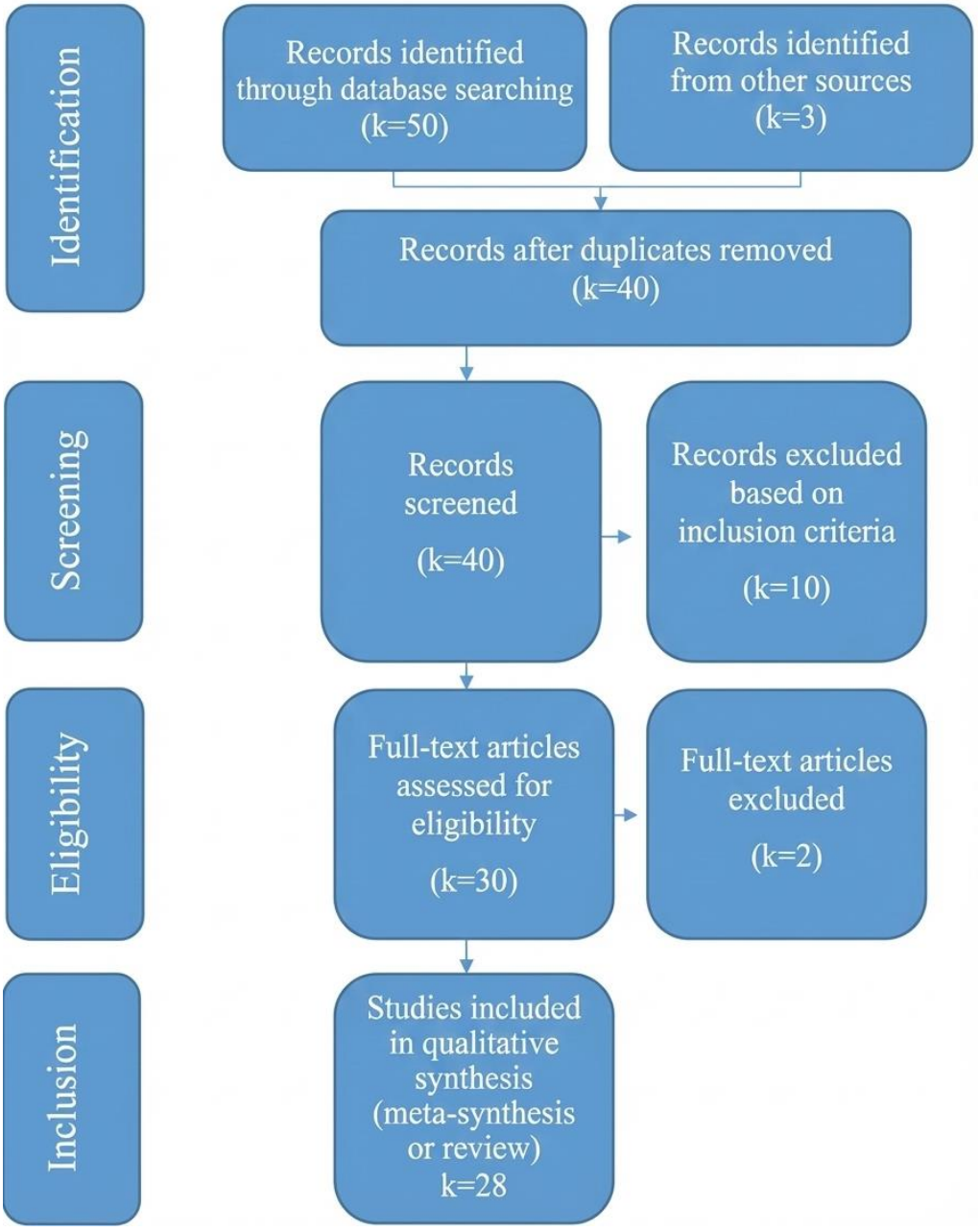
This study adopted an analytical and critical approach. Its primary purpose was to conduct a thorough and systematic review of the most recent scientific literature globally regarding homophobic bullying in educational settings. The main goal of the research was to rigorously identify, evaluate, and synthesize the principal documented findings. This comprehensive synthesis sought to offer an in-depth understanding not only of the magnitude of the phenomenon and the surrounding risk factors but also of the institutional responses and strategies that have been implemented and evaluated in various international contexts, aiming to create a complete picture that serves as a foundation for future effective interventions.

The document search was conducted using the PRISMA (2020) framework, ensuring methodological rigor in each phase: identification, selection, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies. In the identification phase, databases of journals indexed in prestigious international systems, such as Redalyc, Web of Science, Academia, INFAD de Psicología, and SciELO, were consulted, including only peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025.

For the search strategy, phrases incorporating descriptors in both Spanish and English were used, including "Bullying homofóbico," "Homophobic bullying," "School," "Violence," and "LGBTQ+ students," combined with filters for recency and access to full texts. Inclusion criteria were established for articles that: (a) explicitly addressed homophobic bullying in the school context, (b) presented empirical, theoretical, or systematic review designs, and (c) were published in indexed peer-reviewed journals. Studies lacking methodological rigor or focusing on non-educational contexts were excluded (Martín, 2022).

Once the records were retrieved, a critical evaluation of titles, abstracts, and full texts was performed to select those meeting the inclusion criteria (Moreno, 2023). The chosen studies were organized into an analysis matrix that included authorship, publication year, study country, methodology used, participating population, and main findings. Subsequently, the information underwent a comparative synthesis process, which facilitated the identification of common patterns, gaps in research, and the most relevant contributions to understanding homophobic bullying in schools (Faustino Gálvez, 2023).

Figure 1
PRISMA flow diagram



Results

This review included fifty studies selected through the PRISMA (2020) framework, which collectively provided a comprehensive perspective on the prevalence, aggravation, and systemic consequences of homophobic bullying in educational contexts. Prior bibliographic analysis revealed that research concerning inclusion and sexual diversity has intensified in recent years; out of the 50 documents retrieved during the initial exploration, 13 were deemed directly irrelevant. The following databases were consulted: SciELO (10 articles), Web of Science (4), Redalyc (10), Dialnet (18), Academia (5), and INFAD de Psicología (3). A notable increase in publications was observed beginning in 2020, with the majority of identified documents concentrated between

2020 and 2024. These findings confirm a sustained academic interest in the topic over recent years, despite clear disparities in the themes of scientific production (Pérez Rubiano & Fuentes Doria, 2022).

The thematic findings were organized into four main axes: (1) manifestations and scope of homophobic bullying; (2) institutional practices and heteronormative curricula that perpetuate it; (3) psychosocial and educational effects on victims; and (4) evidence regarding prevention and intervention, with a particular emphasis on emotional education and teacher training.

Concerning manifestations and scope, the synthesis revealed that homophobic bullying occurred in multiple and simultaneous forms: persistent insults and name-calling, social exclusion, and stigmatization in communal spaces, physical aggression occurring with less frequency but still significant, and digital modalities (cyberbullying) that extended humiliation beyond school hours (Pérez Rubiano & Fuentes Doria, 2022). While the exact prevalence varied across studies and contexts, both qualitative and quantitative evidence highlighted that actual or perceived sexual orientation acted as a trigger for repeated mockery and a group dynamic that legitimized everyday aggression. These patterns were observed in both life narratives analyzed in case studies and in quantitative data provided by indexed works (Espinoza, 2024).

Regarding institutional practices, the analyzed studies documented that many schools indirectly or explicitly reproduced heteronormative frameworks normalizing homophobic violence (Barreiro, Montenegro & Andrade, 2022). It was found that pedagogical practices, school discourses, and daily institutional organization tended to render invisible students with diverse sexual orientations by failing to include content on diversity in curricula, maintaining routines and disciplinary sanctions that penalized difference, and relegating the "management" of bullying to isolated actions and audiovisual materials without intensive teacher training (Ferreira do Nascimento, 2024). This collective set of institutional conditions facilitated the reproduction of stereotypes and silences that legitimized exclusion. Qualitative field studies also described how teachers themselves, often due to a lack of training or adherence to dominant cultural norms, at times acted as agents reinforcing stigmatization (Ruiz Dionisio, 2021).

The psychosocial and educational effects emerged as one of the most compelling findings, with victims reporting consequences such as a diminished sense of belonging, low self-esteem, anxiety, depressive episodes, and, in extreme cases, suicidal ideation or dropping out of school (Giraldo Aguilar, 2025). Several studies indicated that sustained exposure to homophobic ridicule (García Tabares, 2025) and everyday micro-violences (Collell & Escudé, 2025) produced disruptions in academic performance, increased absenteeism, and social withdrawal; moreover, the damage was shown to persist over time, affecting the educational trajectories and personal projects of impacted youths (Bernárdez Gómez, 2022). These results were consistent across qualitative studies that reconstructed life trajectories and documentary analyses linking school climate with mental health outcomes.

Regarding strategies for prevention and intervention, the synthesis revealed that the most promising initiatives comprised three components: ongoing teacher training, curricular changes incorporating content on diversity and citizenship, and socio-emotional development programs (Sánchez Serrano, 2023). In particular, recent reviews highlighted that emotional education—focused on skills such as empathy, self-regulation, assertive communication, and peaceful conflict resolution—significantly reduced aggressive behaviors and improved coexistence indicators when implemented as part of the curriculum in a systematic manner (Nariño, 2020). Additionally, it was found that when teacher training included elements of self-efficacy to intervene against homophobic bullying, the likelihood of effective responses from school personnel increased. However, evidence also indicated that these interventions were heterogeneous in their design and that their impact depended heavily on institutional coherence, implementation time, and political-administrative support.

The regional contrast that emerged from the review indicated that, although the basic patterns of homophobic bullying (stigmatization, exclusion, insult) were replicated in diverse regions, the intensity, institutional responses, and barriers to intervention varied according to sociocultural and normative factors (Gelpi Pepe, 2020). In contexts with legal frameworks and inclusive educational policies, a greater availability of programs and school protocols was observed; conversely, in more conservative settings, social tolerance fostered invisibility and silence, complicating early detection and intervention. The bibliographic analysis also showed an overrepresentation of studies from specific areas of Latin America, while other regions appeared conspicuously underrepresented in indexed literature.

Methodologically, most of the included studies employed cross-sectional designs, qualitative case studies, and narrative reviews; only a few adopted sufficiently robust longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causality regarding the effectiveness of interventions. Furthermore, there was a lack of homogeneity in the operational definitions of “homophobic bullying” and in measurement scales, which complicated quantitative comparisons between studies and the generation of consolidated meta-analytical evidence. These methodological

limitations highlight the urgent need for longitudinal studies, controlled evaluations of programs, and operational agreements that harmonize diagnostic and measurement criteria.

Subsequently, the critical synthesis highlighted two significant findings that guided the conclusions: first, that school homophobic violence does not manifest as a series of isolated episodes but rather as a structural phenomenon embedded in pedagogical practices, curricular norms, and school climates that reproduce heteronormativity; and second, that effective prevention requires systemic transformations—not merely isolated actions—ongoing and profound teacher training, curricular integration of diversity, explicit school policies, and socio-emotional programs woven into daily practice. These two axes formed the central components of the critical interpretation and underscored the urgency of educational and research policies aimed at inclusion and protection of rights.

The comparative analysis of the studies revealed that homophobic bullying frequently manifests through insults, social exclusion, physical aggression, and cyberbullying, with insults and ridicule being the most common behaviors. In most cases, the victims' sexual orientation—real or perceived—served as the primary motive for aggression. This form of violence resulted in severe psychological consequences, such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and school absenteeism.

Additionally, the results demonstrated a shared institutional responsibility: many educational institutions reproduce heteronormative discourses and lack inclusive protocols. The absence of teacher training and curricular content on sexual diversity reinforces discrimination and silence regarding instances of bullying.

Recent studies have highlighted the effectiveness of interventions based on emotional education, where skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and assertive communication emerge as preventive tools against violence. Moreover, the research consistently shows that strategies incorporating continuous teacher training and inclusive institutional policies significantly reduce the incidence of homophobic behaviors in classrooms.

Lastly, a scarcity of longitudinal and experimental studies was observed, which hinders the ability to measure the sustained impact of these interventions, highlighting the need to unify conceptual and methodological criteria to strengthen the scientific evidence surrounding this phenomenon.

Discussion

The findings indicate that homophobic bullying remains a structural issue within educational systems, transcending isolated cases. The evidence confirms that schools, as socialization spaces, can transform into arenas for the reproduction of cultural and moral prejudices, especially when pedagogical discourses remain anchored in traditional views of gender and sexuality.

The review illustrates that institutional heteronormative practices and inadequate teacher training act as factors perpetuating symbolic and psychological violence against LGBTQ+ students. These conditions hinder the development of safe and inclusive environments, directly impacting young people's emotional well-being and educational trajectories.

Furthermore, the reviewed studies concur that emotional and socio-affective education constitutes a crucial element for the prevention of bullying, promoting empathy, tolerance, and respectful coexistence. Experiences that implemented comprehensive sensitization programs demonstrated a significant reduction in discriminatory behaviors and strengthened the sense of school belonging.

In this regard, there is an urgent need to integrate inclusive educational policies with normative support, as well as ensure continuous teacher training in sexual diversity and human rights. Addressing homophobic bullying should not be limited to isolated or punitive responses, but rather should aim for a profound transformation of school culture.

The systematic review demonstrates that preventing homophobic bullying requires a multidimensional approach, grounded in the interplay between emotional education, curricular inclusion, institutional policies, and community support. Only in this way can we move towards a truly safe, just, and respectful school environment that honors diversity.

Conclusions

The bibliographic analysis reveals that homophobic bullying remains a deeply rooted issue in schools across Latin America. Historical studies conclude that, despite a slight decrease in physical violence, homophobia and the invisibility of LGBTQ+ students persist largely unchanged. Moreover, an absolute rejection of diversity has led to a state of “resigned tolerance,” where underlying discrimination continues to thrive. In this environment, homophobic disdain does not disappear on its own; rather, it feeds on enduring cultural and educational prejudices.

Several significant psychosocial and school-related factors help sustain homophobic bullying. First, the lack of teacher training and sensitivity towards sexual diversity is seen as a major barrier to combating this

harassment. Insufficient preparation of educators, combined with curricula that only address heterosexuality or impose moralistic discourse, reinforces violence within the classroom. Additionally, the absence of clear laws and inclusive materials in school programs creates legal and educational gaps that foster discrimination. These shortcomings, together with a traditional social environment that supports conservative family structures and maintains gender biases, empower everyday homophobic attitudes, making it difficult to protect LGBTQ+ students.

The effects of homophobic bullying in schools are profoundly severe and long-lasting. Several studies have made this clear, and it is crucial to emphasize that members of the LGBTQ+ community who endured such violence in classrooms not only suffered at the time but carry an additional burden into adulthood. Chronic levels of anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem are, in essence, the emotional toll of that period—a legacy that exacts a price years later. These negative consequences manifest in educational settings: homophobic bullying directly impairs the emotional well-being of students, disrupts their academic performance, and can even lead to school dropout. Furthermore, evidence shows that homophobic violence inflicts lasting harm, deeply impacting the mental health and educational trajectory of those who experience it.

Conversely, research identifies effective actions and interventions to mitigate this type of school violence. In particular, the role of emotional education and socio-emotional skills emerges as protective factors. Various authors agree that fostering skills such as empathy, emotional self-regulation, and assertive communication among students can facilitate better conflict management and reduce bullying in classrooms. Additionally, teacher experiences with emotional education programs indicate that when these initiatives are comprehensively integrated into curricula, they create safer and more respectful environments.

The bibliographic review also underscores the need for concrete institutional measures. The urgency of developing inclusive educational policies and explicit school protocols against homophobic discrimination is highlighted. Studies recommend the continuous training of educators in sexual diversity and the design of clear procedures for addressing bullying cases. Only through well-defined protocols and ongoing teacher training can schools enhance their capacity to protect LGBTQ+ students. In this context, institutional policies must align with daily practice, ensuring that sanctions and support measures adhere to a human rights framework.

Overall, the findings indicate a need for a multidimensional approach to combat homophobic bullying. This requires not only the implementation of inclusive policies and school norms that openly recognize diversity but also specialized teacher training and a cultural shift towards accepting difference, in order to foster truly safe and inclusive educational environments. This comprehensive approach aligns with sustainable development objectives related to equality and quality education. In summary, the bibliographic evidence suggests that strengthening respectful coexistence in classrooms demands coordinated actions at the pedagogical, regulatory, and sociocultural levels, as proposed in this study's objectives.

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