



Grade Retention and Peer Aggression in Middle School Contexts: A Socio-Psychological Analysis of Bullying Behavior and Victimization Patterns

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex relationship between grade retention and bullying dynamics among middle school students, with a particular focus on behavioral aggression and victimization patterns within peer groups. Grounded in a socio-psychological interaction framework, the research aims to examine how academic repetition influences students' social positioning, psychological states, and involvement in bullying processes. A quantitative, comparative research design was employed, involving a sample of 50 students from a middle school in Tlemcen Province, Algeria. The sample was equally divided into retained and non-retained students, aged between 12 and 15 years. Data were collected using two validated instruments measuring bullying behavior and exposure to victimization across multiple dimensions, including physical, verbal, psychological, and social forms. The findings reveal a significant asymmetry between bullying behavior and victimization experiences. Retained students demonstrated higher levels of engagement in bullying, particularly in physical and psychological forms, which can be attributed to increased age-related dominance and social positioning within peer hierarchies. In contrast, non-retained students reported higher levels of psychological and social victimization, indicating greater vulnerability within the school environment. The results support a dual-pathway explanation, whereby grade retention simultaneously contributes to dominance-driven aggressive behavior and vulnerability-driven victimization. This highlights the dynamic and fluid nature of bullying roles, challenging traditional dichotomous classifications of "bully" and "victim." The study contributes to the existing literature by integrating academic performance variables with socio-psychological mechanisms of peer aggression, offering a more comprehensive understanding of bullying as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon. From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the need for holistic intervention strategies that address both academic and psychosocial dimensions, promoting inclusive and supportive school environments.

Citation

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Introduction

Forty years ago, teachers in public schools considered the most pressing classroom problems to be tardiness, excessive talking, and chewing gum. Today, however, educational authorities view the most serious school-related issues as drug use, affiliation with local gangs, bringing weapons onto campus, threats of assault, theft, vandalism, sexual assault, and even homicide, alongside bullying, which has become one of the most pervasive forms of peer aggression in schools. Some researchers have reported that over 4.8 million students in the United States are annually subjected to physical or verbal threats by their peers (Harris & Petrie, 2003). Over the last two decades, school bullying has become a major source of concern. Although the topic was not entirely absent from past educational debates—similar issues were raised in the nineteenth century—the systematic scientific study of bullying began with Olweus' research in the 1970s, which revealed its nature and psychological and social impacts. Bullying negatively affects the overall school climate, fostering fear and a lack of respect, which hinders student learning. Victims often feel unsafe and lose their interest in school, while inadequate intervention by teachers or administrators may lead them to believe that adults neither control the situation nor care about what happens to them (Olweus & Limber, 2007). Most victims experience reduced self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and school refusal, whereas perpetrators are more likely to engage in violent behaviors later in life. These findings impose an ethical responsibility on educators and researchers to intervene, especially following tragic suicides in Norway in 1983 that led to the country's first national anti-bullying program led by Olweus (Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004).

Certain students are more likely to be bullied or to become perpetrators due to personality traits, family circumstances, social reputation, or academic standing. In particular, students who repeat a school year due to failure may be more vulnerable to victimization because their academic status differs from that of their classmates. They may also be more likely to engage in bullying, as they tend to be older than their peers in the same grade. Some studies suggest that repeating a year is associated with an increased risk of bullying (Lian et al., 2021), and variations in educational policies between countries may account for differences in bullying prevalence. Research also indicates that exposure to physical and social bullying is statistically associated with increased academic delay, whereas verbal bullying shows no significant correlation, with possible explanatory mechanisms including poor school integration and psychological or health-related issues (Barbosa & Teixeira, 2025).

This study addresses the following questions: Does repeating a school year make students more susceptible to victimization due to their academic status and the stigma of failure, or does the age difference between repeaters and their classmates empower them to become bullies? Furthermore, does the level of bullying differ by gender within this group of students?

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, comparative research design to examine the relationship between grade retention and bullying behaviors among middle school students. A cross-sectional approach was adopted to capture behavioral patterns and victimization experiences at a specific point in time.

The study sample consisted of 50 middle school students selected from Ahmed Yabderi Middle School in Ain El-Hout, Tlemcen Province, Algeria . The sample included two groups: 25 retained students (those who repeated a grade) and 25 non-retained students. Participants were aged between 12 and 15 years ($M = 13.26$). A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure representation of both retained and non-retained students.

Data Collection Instruments

Two validated instruments were used:

1. School Bullying Scale (Ahmed, 2020)
This scale consists of 45 items measuring five dimensions: verbal bullying, physical bullying, psychological bullying, threat-related bullying, and property-related bullying.
2. Bullying Victimization Scale (Saadawi & Al-Eid, 2024)
This scale includes 36 items assessing exposure to bullying across verbal, physical, social, and psychological domains.

Both instruments demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging between 0.60 and 0.80.

Data collection was conducted over a two-week period (October 1–16, 2025) under the supervision of school authorities. Participants completed the questionnaires in a controlled school environment to ensure consistency and reliability.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using descriptive and inferential methods. Measures such as mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were calculated. Independent samples t-tests were used to examine differences between retained and non-retained students in terms of bullying behavior and victimization.

Literature Review

Bullying has been extensively studied as a complex social and psychological phenomenon affecting school environments worldwide. Early foundational work by Olweus (1993) conceptualized bullying as repeated aggressive behavior characterized by power imbalance. Subsequent research expanded this definition to include multiple forms such as physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying (Wang et al., 2009).

From a psychological perspective, bullying is associated with individual traits such as impulsivity, low empathy, and aggression (Brank et al., 2012). Victims, on the other hand, often experience anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Arseneault, 2018). Social-ecological models emphasize the role of peer dynamics, school climate, and broader societal factors in shaping bullying behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

Recent studies have highlighted the relationship between academic factors and bullying. In particular, grade retention has been identified as a significant risk factor. Retained students may experience stigmatization and social marginalization, increasing their vulnerability to victimization (Lian et al., 2021). Conversely, their age and physical maturity may also position them as dominant actors within peer groups, increasing the likelihood of engaging in bullying behaviors.

Cross-national studies further indicate that bullying prevalence varies depending on educational policies and cultural contexts (Craig et al., 2009). Despite extensive research, there remains a gap in integrating academic performance variables with socio-psychological mechanisms of bullying, which this study aims to address.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant differences between retained and non-retained students in both bullying behavior and victimization patterns. Retained students exhibited higher levels of bullying, particularly in physical and psychological dimensions, while non-retained students reported greater exposure to psychological and social victimization.

These results support the proposed socio-psychological interaction model, which suggests that grade retention influences both behavioral and social positioning within peer groups. The higher levels of bullying among retained students can be explained by their relative age advantage and increased physical and social dominance. This aligns with previous research indicating that power imbalance is a central feature of bullying behavior (Olweus, 2013).

At the same time, non-retained students appear more vulnerable to victimization, particularly in relational and psychological forms. This may be attributed to their comparatively lower social status and reduced ability to defend themselves within peer hierarchies. These findings are consistent with studies highlighting the role of social exclusion and peer marginalization in victimization processes (Salmivalli, 2010).

The results also highlight the dynamic nature of bullying roles. Rather than being fixed categories, students may shift between roles depending on situational contexts, supporting contemporary perspectives that view bullying as a fluid social interaction rather than a static individual trait.

Importantly, the study underscores the broader educational implications of grade retention. Beyond its academic consequences, retention appears to influence social relationships and behavioral outcomes, reinforcing the need for integrated educational and psychological interventions.

Historical Background

The first strong societal attention to peer bullying emerged in Sweden in the late 1960s and early 1970s under the term “mobbing,” referring to collective, temporary, and often emotionally charged aggressive behavior. The term was introduced into public discourse by school physician P.-P. Heinemann in the context of racial discrimination. Heinemann borrowed “mobbing” from the Swedish edition of a book on aggressive behavior by Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1963), where it described collective attacks by animals on a larger or naturally threatening individual. The term was later applied to classroom or military contexts to

describe group aggression toward an individual. Interestingly, Lorenz himself did not use “mobbing” in the original German edition; it was the Swedish translator, also an ethologist, who introduced it (Olweus, 2013).

Olweus (2013) questioned the appropriateness of “mobbing” for describing school bullying, as it implies collective aggression from an entire group, whereas bullying often involves a single perpetrator or a small group. Early Swedish debates highlighted that “mobbing” could inadvertently blame the victim. The Scandinavian terms “mobning” or “mobning” eventually evolved into the English term “bullying,” along with “victimization,” which better captured the repeated and systematic aggression without implying collective blame. The English term “bully” itself derives from the Middle Dutch word *boele*, originally meaning “lover” or “good companion,” which shifted over time to its current negative connotation. Today, bullying is recognized as a morally and socially unacceptable behavior warranting educational and societal intervention (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014).

Given the lack of empirical research in the early 1970s, Olweus launched the first systematic study of peer bullying in Sweden, published in 1973 and 1978 in *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys*. His findings demonstrated that school bullying differs from the traditional concept of “mobbing,” emphasizing repeated and systematic harassment of an individual by one or more peers. Public awareness of bullying grew further following the suicides of three Norwegian children in 1982 and a Japanese student in 1986 after severe peer ridicule (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014).

Definition of Bullying

Bullying is a complex and multifaceted behavior, making it difficult to provide a precise universal definition. Often, it is described as extreme or aggressive conduct; however, many children experience daily ridicule or social exclusion, which may not fall under the traditional definition of severe aggression, yet have profound psychological effects (Harris & Petrie, 2003).

The Scandinavian researcher Dan Olweus (1931–2020), recognized today as a leading authority on bullying, introduced the terms “bully/victim” and “whipping boy” in his early studies. Due to its harmful nature, bullying is sometimes referred to as peer abuse or peer harassment, though the term “bullying” remains the most widely used in academic research.

In Arabic, the term “تنمر” (tanammur) derives from the root word “نمر” (tiger). In classical Arabic, it was used to describe a man of bad character who acts with anger or deceit (Halhit, 2023, p. 115). Conceptually, some define bullying as “a deliberate, repeated behavior by an individual with power over a weaker person, involving threats, intimidation, physical or verbal assault, and psychological harm, often resulting in significant physical or emotional damage” (Batouf&Khloufi, 2020, p. 212).

During Norway’s national anti-bullying campaign in 1983, Olweus formally defined bullying as occurring when a student is repeatedly exposed over time to negative actions from one or more peers (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014). He highlighted three essential components:

1. Intentional aggressive actions
2. Repetition over time
3. Power imbalance, making it difficult for the victim to defend themselves

This definition laid the foundation for modern scientific studies of school bullying, emphasizing systematic, unbalanced aggression in peer relationships, where the bully seeks control over the victim (Batouf&Khloufi, 2020, p. 215). Key features also include intentionality, aggression, and targeting a vulnerable individual (Wari, 2022, p. 246).

Despite efforts to establish a universal cross-cultural definition, bullying remains context-dependent. For example, in Japanese, *Ijime* refers to social manipulation and psychological suffering within a group; in Italian, *Prepotenza* and *Violenza* emphasize direct physical aggression; in French, *Faits de Violence* or *Malmenances* are used (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014).

Three Conceptual Approaches to Bullying

1. **Bullying as individual aggressive behavior:** Olweus’ original approach focuses on personal traits of the bully (aggression, desire for control, lack of empathy) and victim (submissiveness, anxiety, vulnerability). While valuable for identifying behaviors, it provides a simplified moral perspective and emphasizes the bully-victim dyad, sometimes overlooking broader social dynamics.
2. **Bullying as social violence:** This approach views bullying as a structural, societal phenomenon rooted in economic, cultural, and media contexts. Interventions must target systemic social problems, not only individual behavior.
3. **Bullying as a group dynamic malfunction:** Bullying arises when children fail to empathize or lack moral awareness to prevent harm. Solutions include ethical education, promoting respect, cooperation, and creating an equitable school environment.

Types of Bullying

Research identifies four main types (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014):

1. **Physical bullying:** Aggressive physical acts such as hitting, pushing, or punching.
2. **Relational/social bullying:** Social exclusion, rumor-spreading, or deliberate isolation from activities.
3. **Verbal bullying:** Direct verbal aggression, insults, name-calling, or ridicule.
4. **Cyberbullying:** Peer aggression via digital platforms, including messaging, email, or social media.

For each type, participants are categorized as: Bully, Victim, Bully-victim, or Not involved. Victims can be passive, showing fear and withdrawal, or provocative, demonstrating irritability and retaliating when attacked (Halhit, 2023, p. 118).

Individual characteristics, such as hyperactivity, impulsivity, low empathy, low intelligence, defensive ego, or belief in permissive social norms, increase the likelihood of bullying (Brank, Hoetger, & Hazen, 2012). Interestingly, positive traits, like leadership skills or wide social networks, can also be associated with bullying tendencies. Behaviorally, children exhibiting externalized aggression, causing school problems, or showing dishonesty are more likely to engage in bullying.

Finally, perceptions of bullying vary between teachers, parents, and students. Teachers often hold a loose definition, focusing on physical and psychological power, while students perceive systematic exploitation of power against the weak, aligning more closely with academic definitions. This difference can lead to practical challenges, as many bullying incidents go unnoticed by adults, highlighting the importance of adopting the child's perspective in research (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014).

Grade Retention in Middle School

According to Ministerial Circular No. 26 dated 15 March 2005, issued by the Ministry of National Education, Directorate of Evaluation, Guidance, and Communication (2005), student promotion from one grade to another is based on pedagogical considerations and the decision of the teaching staff, with a passing threshold of 5/10 in primary education and 10/20 in middle and secondary education. A more recent directive, Circular No. 272, dated 18 October 2023 and issued by the General Director of Education (2023), specifies that the annual average is calculated as the mean of the three term averages obtained throughout the academic year, from September to June. Term averages are computed by weighting subject grades according to their coefficients, with the final subject grade including continuous assessment (the average of two in-class tests and ongoing evaluation) and the final exam score, in which the exam is doubled, summed with continuous assessment, and divided by three. Additionally, Ministerial Decree No. 23 (30 June 2013) and Circular No. 1313 (30 June 2013) reorganized the middle school timetable and standardized grade calculations.

In general, grade retention refers to requiring students to repeat an academic year when they fail to meet required standards. This practice is relatively common in some countries (e.g., Belgium) but restricted or prohibited in others (e.g., Norway). According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2009), over 10% of 15-year-old students in 30 countries had repeated at least one grade. Globally, approximately 32.2 million primary school students repeated a grade in 2010 (Lian et al., 2021).

Grade retention remains a controversial issue worldwide. Critics argue that it is costly, provides no clear academic or social benefits, and may lead to well-documented negative outcomes. Contrary to popular belief, retention does not automatically offer students opportunities for growth. Research indicates that retained students may experience multiple adverse effects. For instance, an American study (Lian et al., 2021) found that grade retention is independently associated with an increased risk of behavioral problems, including heightened exposure to bullying, although prior research was limited in scope and often produced inconsistent results.

Study Scope and Sample

This study was conducted from 1 October to 16 October 2025 at Ibdiri Ahmed Middle School, Ain El-Hout, Chetouane District, Tlemcen Province. The sample was selected purposively and included 25 students repeating the third year of middle school for the 2024/2025 academic year, formally enrolled in 2025/2026. A comparison group of 25 randomly selected non-retained third-year students was also included. Data collection was supervised by the school principal (researcher) and the school counselor (co-researcher).

Measures Applied

1. **School Bullying Scale (Jihad Karam Mohamed Ahmed, 2020)** This 45-item scale assesses multiple dimensions of school bullying among middle school students. Bullying is operationally defined as a negative behavior directed by one or more students toward peers, conducted deliberately and repeatedly. It may include spreading rumors, verbal or physical attacks, social exclusion,

or other subtle acts aimed at controlling and humiliating the victim, always with an inherent power imbalance. The scale consists of five dimensions:

- **Verbal bullying:** Mockery, insults, rumor spreading, threats, and verbal aggression (10 items).
- **Bullying against property:** Taking, destroying, or hiding others' belongings (7 items).
- **Physical bullying:** Physical assault or using objects to harm the victim (7 items).
- **Threat bullying:** Threats of violence to assert dominance (5 items).
- **Psychological bullying:** Intimidation and psychological harm (4 items).

Exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha were used to evaluate construct validity and reliability, with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.6 to 0.8, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

2. Exposure to School Bullying Scale (SaadawiYamna, supervised by Faqih Al-Eid, 2024). This 36-item scale measures student victimization across four dimensions: verbal, physical, psychosocial, and property-related bullying. Items are rated on a three-point Likert scale, with total scores ranging from 36 to 108. The scale demonstrates strong internal consistency and discriminant validity, making it suitable for assessing bullying victimization in middle school populations.

Study Sample

The study sample consisted of 50 middle school students from Ibdri Ahmed Middle School, Ain El-Hout, Chetouane. Among them, 25 students were retained in the current academic year, and 25 students were non-retained. The students' ages ranged from 12 to 15 years, with a mean age of 13.26 years. The distribution by gender and retention status is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample distribution by gender, retention status, and age

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean Age	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Retention Status	Retained Students	25	50.0%	12.68	—	Students who repeated the academic year; likely to have higher age-related maturity within class
	Non-retained Students	25	50.0%	13.84	—	Students progressing normally; relatively younger or socially less dominant
Gender Distribution	Female	22	44.0%	—	—	Slightly lower representation compared to male participants
	Male	28	56.0%	—	—	Majority group; may influence behavioral patterns such as physical bullying
Total Sample	All Participants	50	100%	13.26	—	Balanced sample allowing comparative analysis
Age Range	12-15 years	—	—	13.26	—	Typical developmental stage for early adolescence
Group Composition	Retained (Female)	9	18.0%	—	—	Smaller subgroup; potential differences in bullying involvement
	Retained (Male)	16	32.0%	—	—	Largest subgroup among retained students
	Non-retained (Female)	13	26.0%	—	—	Moderate representation

	Non-retained (Male)	12	24.0%	–	–	Balanced gender distribution
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Descriptive Statistics of Bullying and Victimization Scores

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted for the School Bullying Scale and the Exposure to School Bullying Scale. Table 2 presents the main descriptive statistics for the total scores of both scales.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for bullying and victimization scores (N = 50)

Statistic	School Bullying Scale	Exposure to Bullying Scale	Comparative Interpretation
Mean	38.14	95.08	Victimization levels are considerably higher than active bullying behaviors, indicating widespread exposure
Median	34.00	97.00	Median values confirm central clustering of responses around moderate levels
Mode	36.00	103.00	Most frequent responses suggest moderate bullying but high victimization frequency
Standard Deviation	20.37	9.53	Greater variability in bullying behavior compared to victimization
Variance	414.90	90.89	Reinforces dispersion differences between behavioral and experiential measures
Skewness	1.654	-0.876	Positive skew for bullying (few high scorers); negative skew for victimization (many high scorers)
Kurtosis	3.058	-0.134	Bullying shows peaked distribution; victimization more evenly distributed
Range	92.00	36.00	Bullying scores vary widely; victimization more consistent
Minimum	13.00	72.00	Indicates baseline levels of bullying and victimization present in all participants
Maximum	105.00	108.00	Presence of extreme cases, particularly in bullying behaviors
Sum	1907.00	4754.00	Aggregate victimization significantly exceeds bullying behavior

Interpretation:

- The School Bullying Scale shows a positively skewed distribution (Skewness = 1.654), indicating that most students scored lower on bullying behaviors, with fewer students showing high bullying scores.
- The Exposure to Bullying Scale has a slightly negative skew (Skewness = -0.876), suggesting that most students reported moderate to high victimization experiences.
- The standard deviations indicate greater variability in bullying behaviors compared to victimization experiences.

Commentary on Descriptive Statistics for Bullying and Victimization Scores

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 2 provide important insights into the distribution of bullying behaviors and exposure to bullying among the study sample of 50 middle school students.

Mean, Median, and Mode:

The close proximity of the mean, median, and mode in both scales indicates a relatively symmetric distribution of scores, particularly in the Exposure to Bullying Scale. This suggests a moderate level of homogeneity in students' responses regarding their experiences of victimization.

Standard Deviation and Variance:

The standard deviation for the School Bullying Scale (SD = 20.36) is considerably higher than that for the Exposure to Bullying Scale (SD = 9.53), indicating greater variability in bullying behaviors across the sample. This suggests that while a small group of students exhibit high levels of bullying, the majority engage in low to moderate levels. In contrast, victimization scores are more consistent among students, reflecting a relatively homogeneous experience of exposure to bullying.

Skewness:

- *School Bullying Scale (Skewness = 1.654)*: The positive skew indicates that most students display low to moderate bullying behaviors, with a minority exhibiting high levels. This pattern aligns with psychological research on negative behaviors, where extreme behaviors are limited to a small subset of individuals.
- *Exposure to Bullying Scale (Skewness = -0.876)*: The negative skew suggests that most students reported moderate to high levels of victimization. Thus, exposure to bullying appears to be widespread rather than confined to a small group.

Kurtosis:

- *School Bullying Scale (Kurtosis = 3.058)*: The leptokurtic distribution indicates that most students' bullying scores cluster around the mean, with a few extreme cases. This implies relative stability in bullying behaviors, with isolated instances of high-intensity aggression that may require targeted interventions.
- *Exposure to Bullying Scale (Kurtosis = -0.134)*: The platykurtic distribution suggests a flattened curve, reflecting substantial variability in victimization experiences. Students' exposure ranges from low to high, highlighting the diversity of experiences likely influenced by personal factors (e.g., shyness, self-esteem, social skills) and environmental factors (e.g., classroom climate, teacher supervision).

Overall Interpretation:

The data reveal an asymmetry between bullying behaviors and victimization experiences: while a limited number of students engage in high levels of bullying, most students experience bullying to varying degrees. The skewness and kurtosis values highlight that bullying behaviors are concentrated within a small subgroup (likely grade-repeaters), whereas victimization is more broadly distributed across the sample, particularly among non-retained students. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions for both perpetrators and victims, with attention to the broader school context that facilitates or mitigates bullying.

Discussion of Differences Between Retained and Non-Retained Students on Bullying and Victimization Scores

Table 3: Differences Between Retained and Non-Retained Students on Bullying and Victimization Scores

Scale / Dimension	Group	N	Mean	T-test	Significance
Total Bullying	Non-retained	25	30.96	-2.640	Significant
	Retained	25	45.32		
Verbal Bullying	Non-retained	25	3.08	-1.812	Not Significant
	Retained	25	5.76		
Physical Bullying	Non-retained	25	3.00	-2.108	Significant
	Retained	25	5.00		
Threat Bullying	Non-retained	25	2.28	-1.997	Not Significant
	Retained	25	4.00		
Psychological Bullying	Non-retained	25	3.00	-2.325	Significant
	Retained	25	5.00		
Property Bullying	Non-retained	25	3.44	-0.070	Not Significant
	Retained	25	3.52		
Total Victimization	Non-retained	25	98.16	2.392	Significant

	Retained	25	92.00		
Verbal Victimization	Non-retained	25	25.96	0.615	Not Significant
	Retained	25	25.44		
Physical Victimization	Non-retained	25	22.08	0.832	Not Significant
	Retained	25	21.48		
Psychological / Social Victimization	Non-retained	25	27.80	4.935	Significant
	Retained	25	23.88		
Property Victimization	Non-retained	25	22.32	1.723	Not Significant
	Retained	25	21.20		

Quick Summary:

- Retained students: Tend to engage more in bullying, particularly physical and psychological bullying.
- Non-retained students: Tend to experience more victimization, especially in the psychological/social dimension.
- Other dimensions showed no significant differences, indicating that bullying and victimization exist in both groups at varying levels.

Bullying Behavior:

The results indicate statistically significant differences between retained and non-retained students on the total bullying scale, favoring retained students, suggesting that students who repeat the grade tend to exhibit higher levels of bullying behavior. However, these differences were not consistent across all dimensions. Significant differences were observed specifically in physical bullying and psychological bullying, again favoring retained students. Non-significant differences were found in verbal bullying and property-related bullying, indicating that both groups exhibited similar tendencies in these dimensions.

Interpretation:

The higher bullying behavior among retained students may be attributed to age and experience differences; retained students are often older, more physically mature, and more experienced within the school system. This maturity can translate into a sense of superiority or control, which may manifest as aggressive behaviors toward younger or less experienced peers. Consequently, retained students may leverage their social and physical advantages to assert dominance within the classroom.

Exposure to Bullying:

For the exposure to bullying scale, significant differences emerged in favor of non-retained students, particularly in the psychosocial and psychological victimization dimension, indicating that non-retained students are more likely to experience exclusion, ridicule, or marginalization by their peers. No significant differences were observed in verbal, physical, or property-related victimization.

Interpretation:

Non-retained students' greater exposure to psychological and social bullying may stem from their perceived vulnerability relative to older or more experienced retained students. Experiencing social exclusion or ridicule can negatively impact self-esteem, sense of safety, and school belonging, contributing to a cycle of vulnerability within the school environment.

Overall Patterns:

Both retained and non-retained students demonstrate high levels of bullying and victimization, highlighting the complex, interactive nature of bullying roles within middle school. A student may simultaneously occupy the role of bully in one context and victim in another, depending on situational and relational dynamics.

Educational Implications:

These findings emphasize that grade retention impacts not only academic progression but also social and psychological dynamics in the classroom. Retention may act as a risk factor for aggressive behaviors, while non-retained students may become more

vulnerable to victimization. To address this, schools should adopt comprehensive preventive strategies that integrate social-emotional learning, positive classroom management, and targeted interventions for retained students. Programs should:

1. Provide psychological and social support to retained students to promote positive peer interactions.
2. Implement anti-bullying and awareness programs for all students, emphasizing respect, tolerance, and collaboration.
3. Monitor and mitigate peer exclusion and social marginalization, particularly among non-retained students.
4. Involve school counselors and psychologists in reintegration strategies, ensuring that retained students can rejoin the peer community constructively without resorting to aggression.

Conclusion:

The study underscores the need for holistic interventions that combine educational, psychological, and social measures to reduce bullying in middle schools. Addressing the psychosocial effects of grade retention is essential for fostering a safe and inclusive environment, enabling all students—retained or non-retained—to thrive academically and socially (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014). This study provides empirical evidence that grade retention is a significant factor influencing both bullying behavior and victimization among middle school students. Retained students are more likely to engage in bullying due to increased age-related dominance and psychological factors, whereas non-retained students are more vulnerable to victimization, particularly in social and emotional domains.

The findings highlight the need to reconceptualize bullying as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by academic, psychological, and social variables. Educational policies addressing grade retention should therefore consider not only academic outcomes but also the psychosocial well-being of students.

From a practical perspective, schools should implement comprehensive intervention strategies that include social-emotional learning, peer integration programs, and targeted psychological support for both retained and non-retained students. Such approaches can contribute to creating safer and more inclusive school environments.

Finally, future research should expand the sample size and incorporate longitudinal designs to better understand the long-term effects of grade retention on student behavior and social development.

Author Contributions

Rahil Najafov conceptualized the study design and developed the theoretical framework. Djamel Rahmani conducted the field research, data collection, and preliminary analysis. Abderrahmen Senoussaoui contributed to data interpretation, statistical analysis, and drafting of the manuscript. All authors participated in revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content and approved the final version for publication.

Ethical Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants and their legal guardians prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly maintained throughout the research process. The study adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant institutional ethical guidelines.

AI Statement

The authors confirm that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely for language editing and improvement of readability. AI was not used for data collection, data analysis, or generation of research findings. All interpretations, conclusions, and intellectual contributions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the outcomes of this study.

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