anales de psicología, 2014, vol. 30, nº 2 (mayo), 499-511
http://dx.doi.org/10.6018/analesps.30.2.158211

ISSN edición impresa: 0212-9728. ISSN edición web (http://revistas.um.es/analesps): 1695-2294

Rejection and victimization of students with special educational needs in first grade of primary education

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Título: Rechazo y victimización al alumnado con necesidad de apoyo educativo en primero de primaria

Resumen: Este estudio pretende analizar el rechazo y victimización social que experimenta el alumnado con necesidad de apoyo educativo en comparación con sus compañeros. Participaron 1351 alumnos de primero de educación primaria de los que 253 (el 18.7%) fueron etiquetados por sus profesores como alumnos con necesidad de apoyo educativo ya que presentaban dificultades que hicieron necesaria ayuda educativa especial y adicional al resto de compañeros. La información ha sido proporcionada por los iguales (tipología sociométrica, reputación social y calificación sociométrica), el profesorado (competencia social) y el propio alumno (victimización y competencia percibida). Los resultados indican que los alumnos con necesidad de apoyo educativo son más rechazados, tienen peor reputación social (más agresivos, más aislados y menos prosociales) y sus profesores les califican como menos competentes socialmente. Informan de que son victimizados con más frecuencia que sus compañeros y se autoperciben como menos competentes cognitivamente y menos aceptados por sus iguales. Todo ello revela una evidente caracterización de este alumnado como rechazado y excluido. Es más, los aspectos que definen el perfil del rechazo se ven intensificados cuando se trata de estos alumnos, motivos por los que se concluye con la necesidad de prestar especial atención y cuidado a este colectivo en riesgo.

Palabras clave: Rechazo entre iguales; necesidad de apoyo educativo; victimización; competencia percibida; reputación social; competencia social.

Abstract: This study aims to analyze the social rejection and victimization experienced by students with special educational needs compared to their peers. Participants were 1351 first graders of primary school, 253 of them (18.7%) were considered by their teachers to be students with special educational needs, as they had difficulties requiring special and additional educational support. The information was provided by peers (sociometric typology, social reputation, and sociometric rating), teachers (social competence), and the students themselves (victimization and perceived competence). The results indicate that students with special educational needs are more rejected, have a poorer social reputation (more aggressive, more isolated, and less prosocial) and their teachers consider them to be less competent socially. These students report that they are victimized more often than their peers and they perceive themselves as less competent cognitively and less accepted by their peers. This clearly describes these students as rejected and excluded. Moreover, the aspects that define the rejection profile are intensified when applied to these students, highlighting the need to pay special and attention to this at-risk group.

Key words: Peer rejection; special educational needs; victimization; perceived competence; social reputation; social competence.

Introduction

To be accepted and loved by classmates, to have friends and be integrated in the various school, family, virtual, and leisure scenarios in which children and adolescents live and relate to others are basic evolutionary steps that must be reached to achieve optimal emotional, cognitive, and social development. In this long and complex process, most adolescents achieve positive and satisfactory relationships, but some do not participate or are rejected from these interactions and suffer negative experiences. Among them are those who are actively and systematically rejected, victimized, and excluded by their peers. These situations lead to very harmful consequences for their socio-emotional and cognitive development (Bierman, 2004; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

In recent decades, thriving research on peer relations has greatly increased our knowledge about the nature and importance of phenomena like rejection and peer harassment.

Studies show that rejection implies negative feelings (neglect, antipathy, dislike...) of the group towards some of its members who, for various reasons, are not liked by the others. This means that the rejected child is excluded from peer dynamics and misses opportunities of contact and social learning that take place with classmates, while consolidating his or her bad reputation in the group, thus entering a negative spiral. All of this confirms the interpersonal and group involvement in these situations and not just the individual characteristics of the rejected child (Coie, 1990; Escobar, Fernández-Baena, Miranda, Trianes, & Cowie, 2011; García Bacete, Sureda, & Monjas, 2010). In this regard, the sociometric correlates of the rejected child have been investigated, indicating four associated behavioral patterns; firstly, low rates of sociability and prosocial behavior; secondly, high aggression and disruptive behavior; thirdly, immaturity and lack of attention; and finally, social anxiety and avoidance behaviors (Bierman, 2004). It is also known that between 10 and 15% of the students are rejected by their peers (García Bacete, Sureda, & Monjas, 2008), and this status is fairly stable (Cillessen, Bukowski, & Haselager, 2000; Jiang & Cillessen, 2005).

Peer harassment or bullying is conceptualized as a type of interpersonal violence involving abuse and intentional and systematic harassment by one child towards another who is helpless and who becomes a victim, such that peer relations are distorted, they cease to be equal and symmetrical and become unbalanced and regulated by the domination-submission schema between bully and victim (Avilés & Monjas, 2008; Cerezo, 2009; Cerezo & Ato, 2010; Garaigordobil & Oñederra, 2010; Monjas & Avilés, 2006).

These two topics, which currently play a relevant role in

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research on social development, are usually studied separately because their manifestations are, in a sense, different. However some authors like Juvonen and Gross (2004) include bullying within the broader category of rejection, whereas others like Harris (2009) consider social rejection to be some kind of emotional harassment. There is also some controversy as to whether rejection contributes to victimization or vice versa (Lucas, Pulido, & Solbes, 2011). Summing up, they can be considered nonequivalent but conceptually and empirically related phenomena. Studies indicate a correlation of about .50 (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003) and, in both cases, these experiences are repeated, aversive, and very painful, and they deprive the child of opportunities of peer interaction. This affects the child negatively because it restricts his or her social practices and leads to social exclusion, which is a serious threat to emotional well-being and implies relevant consequences at the short, mid, and long term (Buelga, Cava, & Musitu, 2012; Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Sánchez, Ortega, & Menesini, 2012; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003).

Students with special educational needs

For this study, we consider as students with special educational needs (hereafter SEN) those students who have received special educational support, reinforcement, or assistance —additional or different from the rest of the classmates— during the school year. This support, individual or in groups of two or three people, has been provided inside or outside of the reference classroom, either by the regular classroom teacher (group tutor) or by other teachers of Physical Education, Mathematics, Language or English or by specialized teachers (Therapeutic Pedagogy, Hearing and Language, or Compensatory Education). In the opinion of the tutor and the group teacher, these students show a discrepancy compared to their classmates, presenting difficulties, or the risk of developing them, in various aspects (cognitive and intellectual, behavioral, emotional and social, physical or sensory, communication and language, reading-writing, and school performance). It should be emphasized that they constitute a heterogeneous group with very diverse characteristics and needs (ORDEN EDU/1152/2010) and, as can be expected in the first year of primary education, only in rare cases are they diagnosed as students with SEN or disability.

The literature review carried out reveals that, despite extensive research on rejection and bullying, students with SEN have not received enough attention. Due to their special characteristics and circumstances (weakness, disadvantage, being inferior in number, lack of social support network...), this group presents some initial vulnerability and constitutes a group at risk for peer rejection, harassment, and exclusion. Especially in our country, this topic has not been sufficiently investigated; hence, we will take into account the contributions made by authors from other countries, noting the difficulty involved in comparing investigations with different educational systems, different approaches to inclusive policies and even with certain conceptual and terminological differences (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Primarily, although not exclusively, we have analyzed studies conducted in primary education, especially with younger children in regular school settings that include students with SEN, giving priority to research using sociometric techniques to identify rejected students.

Social acceptance of students with special educational needs

Research consistently reveals that high rates of students with SEN in regular classrooms are accepted less and rejected more than their peers without disabilities (Baydik & Bakkaloglu, 2009; Estell et al., 2008; Frederikson, 2010; Frederikson, Simmonds, Evans, & Soulsby, 2007; Nakken & Pijl, 2002: Nowicki, 2003; Pijl, 2007; Sabeh & Monjas, 2002, among others). This situation of rejection and low social status occurs both when playing and in academic situations and can even be observed in situations in which they are a part of the class and have friends (Frederickson & Furnham, 2004).

It has also been reported that students with SEN have more social difficulties (Nowicki, 2003), display more solitary behavior and higher rates of social isolation (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Kemp & Carter, 2002), participate less frequently as members of subgroups (Frostad & Pijl, 2007), have fewer friends and may experience more loneliness than their peers (Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2010; Whitney, Nabuzoka, & Smith, 1992). Their deficits in social skills are repeatedly reported (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004; Estell et al., 2008; Kavale & Forness, 1996). Their problems with self-concept have also been noted (Bakker & Bosman, 2003; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Pijl and Frostad (2010) found a relation between low acceptance and low self-concept in students with learning difficulties, and Bakker, Denessen, Bosman, Krijger. and Bouts (2007) discovered that students with general learning difficulties had a poorer self-image than students with specific learning difficulties, especially among girls and students enrolled in regular schools. However, the literature is very scarce in this regard, as it questions these students' ability of self-perception and information.

We note that these findings are similar in different school systems and in different countries, such as England, Spain, or Norway, the last country with more experience and tradition of inclusion. We also note that the same results are reported with different limitations, such as intellectual disabilities (Scheepstra, Nakken, & Piel, 1999), hearing impairment (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003), learning difficulties (Bakker et al., 2007), visual impairment (Eguren, Gutiérrez, Herrero, & López, 2006), autism (Symes & Humphrey, 2010) and behavioral problems (Mand, 2007). The fact that the evidence suggests that rejection is quite stable over time is also a cause for concern (Estell et al., 2008).

In contrast, some other studies present a more positive image of students with SEN within the social network of the class. Some results have reported that their social position does not differ largely from that of their peers (Koster, Pijl, van Houten, & Nakken, 2007), although they interact with their peers for less time and spend more time alone and isolated (Kemp & Carter, 2002). Avramidis (2010) indicated that they have friendly relations and are members of subgroups. Vaughn, Elbaum and Schumm (1996) found that they were rejected at the beginning of the school year, but as the year passed, they increased their social acceptance and the number of reciprocal friendships. The results of Estell et al. (2008) were similar to the previous ones, but they indicated that these students' status is lower regarding the number of nominations as best friend, and their popularity is also slightly lower. Specific works suggested that they sometimes join groups of students who are similar to them, who usually also have social deficits, or present aggressive and/or antisocial behavior (Farmer, 2000). We note the position of Frederikson (2010), who states that students with special needs may be more favorably treated by their classmates, and states that, for students with more obvious needs, their classmates without special needs apply more indulgent standards, expect fewer benefits, and tolerate more costs in relationship (Frederikson & Furnham, 2004).

Lastly, several of the mentioned studies indicated that the view of the parents and teachers about the social position of students with SEN is more positive than that manifested and expressed by the group classmates. Adults underestimate these students' interaction problems, and therefore, they do not develop strategies of prevention or intervention. The support teacher's idea, although also positive, is closer to that of the peers (Koster et al., 2007; Pijl & Frostad, 2010).

Bullying and students with special educational needs

Regarding bullying, and bearing in mind that there is limited research with this population, the studies show that students with SEN are at increased risk and suffer high levels of harassment and bullying by their peers without SEN (Bourke & Burgman, 2010; Frederikson, 2010; Heinricks, 2003; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011). This situation occurs in various disabilities and special needs, as shown by Carter and Spencer (2006), who reviewed 11 studies that fall into two categories of difficulties: the visible ones (spina bifida, cerebral palsy, dysphemia, etc.) and the invisible ones (learning disabilities, hyperactivity disorder with attention deficit, behavioral problems, etc.) and they conclude that all students with SEN, visible and invisible, experience more harassment than their peers. This is revealed in hearing impairment (Dixon, Smith, & Jenks, 2004), language difficulties (Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999; Lindsay, Dockrell, & Mackie & 2008), motor problems (Lindsay & McPherson, 2010), learning difficulties (Norwick & Nelly, 2004), Asperger syndrome (Granizo, Na, & del Barrio, 2008; Hernández & van der Meulen, 2010), language problems (Evans, Healey, Hawai, & Rowland, 2008; Savage, 2005), and intellectual disabilities (Flynt & Morton, 2004). The only exception refers to totally blind students, who are less harassed; in these cases, their disability is more like a protective factor than a risk factor (Eguren et al., 2006).

Students with SEN who actively participate in bullying other classmates should also be considered (Kaukiainen et al., 2002). It has been found that students with behavioral problems, emotional difficulties, and problems with self-control (Carter & Spencer, 2006) bully more than those who present aggressive behaviors (Estell, Farmer, Irvin, Crowther, Akos, & Boudah, 2009). Finally, we note the presence of students with a double profile of bully-victim or victim-provoker (Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004).

Considering these approaches, this study aims to analyze the rejection and social victimization of students with SEN compared with their peers without SEN. We also intend to determine possible differences between rejected students with and without SEN. Specifically, we proposed two goals: 1) To analyze possible differences in social acceptance, victimization, social reputation, perceived competence and social competence in students with and without SEN; and 2) To determine possible differences between rejected students with and without SEN in social reputation among peers and in social competence as estimated by the teaching staff.

According to the evidence of previous research, the following hypotheses are formulated: compared with their peers without SEN, students with SEN suffer more rejection and victimization by their peers; have a more aggressive, less prosocial, and more isolated behavioral reputation; they perceive themselves more negatively; and are rated by their teachers as being less socially competent. Rejected students with SEN, compared with their rejected peers without SEN: have similar scores in prosocial behavior, have lower scores in antisocial behavior, and are rated by their teachers as being less socially competent.

Method

Participants

A total of 1351 students, 672 boys (49.7%) and 679 girls (50.3%), aged 5 and 6, from two separate cohorts by one year, enrolled in 58 classrooms in the first year of primary education of 24 public schools in urban areas of Castellon (539 students, 39.9%), Palma de Mallorca (191 students, 14.1%), Seville (320 students, 23.7%) and Valladolid (301 students, 22.3%). The subsample of students with SEN was identified by the teacher according to the criteria established in the introduction and is made up of 253 students (18.7% of the students). There were 168 boys (66.4%) and 85 girls (33.6%).

Specifically, the teachers considered that 212 students (83.8%) of this subsample presents SEN related to personal conditions of physical, auditory and visual deficiencies, intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, etc.; 28 students (11.1%) have behavioral problems; and 13 students (5.1%) have SEN arising from special social, economic, cultural, geographic, or ethnic conditions. It should be taken into account that, in certain cases, the child presents more than one problem, for example, learning difficulties and behavioral problems, but they have only been assigned to one category.

Instruments

Sociometric Peer Nominations Questionnaire.

We used a sociometric peer nomination test with a direct (*like to be with*), two-dimensional positive (*classmates you like to be with*) and negative preference criterion (*classmates you do not like to be with*), allowing unlimited nominations within the group class. The children had to designate, in a class photograph with pictures of all the students of their class, those classmates with whom they liked to be and those with whom they did not like to be (GREI, 2010). This instrument was administered to all the participating children. Calculations were made with the Sociomet program (González & García Bacete, 2010), which provides the identification of the sociometric types of each classroom. Students are identified in one of five sociometric types: preferred, average, rejected, neglected, or controversial.

Sociometric Peer Rating

This procedure consists of asking the participants to estimate, usually on a Likert-type scale, the degree to which the other classmates of the group meet a certain criterion, usually related to liking or playing. For example, "Would you like to play with this child?" (*1 = not at all or very little, 2 = a little, 3 = a lot or very much*). As noted in Asher and Dodge (1986), the rating method is similar to the classical social distance scale of Bogardus. In the opinion of Cillessen (2009), although not as popular as the nomination method, this technique is still frequently used. In contrast to the nomination methods, its main disadvantage is that it requires much more time, so it is sometimes impossible to obtain this information in large groups or samples. In contrast, this method has an advantage over the nomination methods, insofar that it ensures that all the students are rated by all their classmates, which can increase its social validity. The criteria used were: (a) Liking: *How much do you like being with...?;* (b) Prosocial-help: *How much does he/she help others?;* (c) Shyness: *Is he/she shy? How embarrassed is he/she when with other children?;* (d) Physical aggression: *How much does he/she hit others?*; and (e) Neglect: *How often do they seek him/her to play?*; in the last item, the score is reversed so that higher scores indicate being ignored more.

Teacher-rated social competence

This consists of a single item in which the teacher-tutor of each group was asked to rate the social competence of each student on a scale ranging from 1 (*very incompetent*) to 5 (*very competent*).

Revised Class Play (CPR, Wojslawowicz, Rubin, Burguess, Booth-LaForce & Rose-Krasnor, 2006, expanded by GREI, 2010).

We employed a classic reputational nomination format using the *Class Play* (Masten, Morison, & Pellegrino, 1985). The procedure consists of individually asking the students to imagine they are the directors of a film or a play and they must assign a series of roles among their classmates, taking into account that their personal characteristics should be as similar as possible to those of the role they represent. To facilitate the understanding of some items, drawings with dolls representing this situation were used. For each of the behaviors assessed, we estimated the proportion of times that each student was nominated by the group to represent that role.

We drew on a broad initial item pool, mainly taken from the proposal of the *Extended Class Play* of Wojslawowicz et al. (2006), to which we added items mainly related to relational aggression (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997) and perceived popularity and social dominance (Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002). For this study, we only used items corresponding to aggression, prosociability, and shyness (25 items). Exploratory tests, analysis of items, and exploratory factor analyses (hereafter EFA) with principal components and varimax rotation were conducted. The Kaiser-Meyer Olkin test had a value of .933 and Bartlett's sphericity test of 11357.775 ($df = 300$, $p < .000$). We selected factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. EFA clearly indicated a three-factor structure: aggression, prosociability, and isolation/shyness, which accounted for about 63% of the variance (35.14, 18.43, and 9.01%, respectively). Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed by means of the maximum likelihood method with robust estimations (MLR method). To show the adequacy of the model, the following fit indices were used: Satorra-Bentler Scaled χ^2, S-Bχ^2/df, Bentler-Bonett non-normed fit index (BBNN), comparative fit index (CFI) and root mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA). The criteria for a good fit are: indices close to or less than 2 for the S-Bχ^2/df index, values near to or greater than .950 for the BBNN and IFC indices, and values less than .05 for the RMSEA index. Fit is considered moderate or reasonable when the S-Bχ^2/df index is between 2 and 5, the BBNN, CFI, and IFI indices have values equal to or greater than .90, and the value of RMSEA index is equal to or lower than .08. The results obtained in the CFA by the robust method confirmed a three-factor model: aggressiveness,

prosociability, and isolation ($\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}(98) = 228.7616$, $p = 0.000$; $\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}/df = 2.33$; BBNN = 0.933; CFI = .945; RMSEA = .046, 90% CI [[.038, .053].

The sociability factor, consisting of 5 items, included aspects related to assertiveness, communication skills, and prosocial behavior (*follows rules*, *helps others*). The aggression factor, with 6 items, contained aspects of direct aggression, relational aggression, and hyperactivity (*gets into fights*, *tells another child: you cannot play with us until you do what we tell you*, *bothers others when they are working*). The factor of shyness/isolation, consisting of 5 items, includes passive isolation and shyness (*is very shy/embarrassed, is almost always alone"*). As for reliability analysis, all the factors, presented good Cronbach alpha coefficients: prosociability, $\alpha = .90$, aggression $\alpha = .92$, and shyness/isolation $\alpha = .72$.

Victimization Scale (GREI, 2010)

We used a self-report of 8 items designed ad hoc in which we asked the child to report the frequency (*never, rarely, several times, almost every day*) with which various situations relating to possible harassment and victimization by peers had occurred in the past month. Examples: *Some children of the class ... insult you, they call you names, and say nasty or unpleasant things to you, they exclude you from the games and do not want to be with you, they mock you and laugh at you.* In order to validate it, a principal component EFA with varimax rotation was conducted. The Olkin Kaiser-Meyer test had a value of .902, and Bartlett's sphericity test of 2702.405 ($df = 28$, $p < .000$). We selected factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. The 8 items form a single factor (with a total of 44.94% of explained variance). Finally, CFA was conducted using the robust method, showing that the 8 items yield a single factor of victimization ($\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}(20) = 26.2302$, $p = .158$; $\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}/df = 1.31$; *BBNN* = .98; *CFI* = .99; *RMSEA* = .035, 90% CI [.000, .068], and with high reliability ($\alpha = .82$).

*The Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Childre*n, Harter & Pike, 1983).

This instrument is one of the most cited and broadly used tools to assess children's perceived competence between ages 4 and 7. It consists of 24 items assessing children's self-perceptions of physical competence (e.g., running, jumping), cognitive competence (e.g., reading, counting), peer acceptance (e.g., has many friends) and maternal acceptance (e.g., mother cooks the daughter's favorite food). Each item is presented on a sheet with two allusive images and a 4-point scale. The children must point to the boy/girl that is most similar to them, as there are separate sheets for male and female protagonists. In the present investigation, when the original document referred to "Mom", we alluded to "mamá" or "papá".

The results obtained in the CFA with robust method confirmed the 4-factor structure, each one with 6 items, proposed by Harter and Pike (1983). Indices showed a good fit of the data to the model ($\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}(243) = 391.498$, $p = .000$; $\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}/df = 1.61$; BBNN = .94; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .027, 90% CI [.022, .031]. The reliability coefficient was .70 for the factor Perceived cognitive competence, .54 for Perceived physical competence, .77 for Perceived peer acceptance, and .68 for Perceived parental acceptance. The reliability indices of perceived competence were acceptable, except for the Perception of physical competence.

Procedure

Different public schools in Castellón, Palma de Mallorca, Seville, and Valladolid were contacted and informed of the details of the investigation. The school boards or school faculties agreed to participate. In addition, we obtained the signed authorization of the families of the participating children.

The administration of questionnaires began in the middle of November of each year, once the group-classroom was structured after two months of classes.

Taking into account the participants' age— 5 or 6 years— and the fact that they were nonreaders or novel readers with incipient reading competence, all the questionnaires were administered individually. The children were interviewed by members of the research team and students trained for this purpose. To expedite questionnaire administration, several interviewers visited the school simultaneously. At the end of each evaluation session, distracting strategies were used: the children received a small sticker to stick onto their hand or a sheet to color, draw on, or cut out to prevent them from talking about the topic when returning to classroom and so that the test content would influence classroom dynamics as little as possible.

The analysis of the results was carried out with the statistical package SPSS, version 19. For the analysis of differences, after ensuring that the assumptions for the use of parametric tests were met, we used Student's *t*-test for independent samples, in addition to calculating the effect size with Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1988), taking into account the difference in sample size of the groups, considering high, medium, and low effect size depending on the cut-points of .80, .50, and .20, respectively. Contingency tables were used for the comparison between qualitative variables, calculating the standardized corrected residuals.

Results

Firstly, we determined the sociometric typology for the total sample and identified the rejected students. The calculations were made with the Sociomet program (González & García Bacete, 2010) resulting in the following percentages of sociometric types: Preferred (13.2%), Rejected (13%), Neglected (3.9%), Controversial (1.6%), and Average (68.2%). These findings are consistent with other studies of

the sociometric distribution of classrooms, where it is estimated that around 15% of the student body is rejected, and that of them, approximately 75% are males. In this case, we identified a total of 176 rejected students, 13% of the total. Of them, 114 (64.8%) were male and 62 (35.2%) were female.

When analyzing the percentage of students with SEN within each sociometric type (Table 1), it can be observed that, in general, children with SEN are more frequently found in the rejected and neglected types, in contrast to the average and, particularly, to the preferred children, producing a statistically different distribution in the average and preferred, groups, and a markedly different distribution in the rejected children. In this sense, whereas 9.2% of the children without SEN are rejected, 29.2% of the children with SEN are rejected. However, 15.2% of the children without SEN are preferred, versus 4.7% of the students with SEN. The percentage of average children is also lower in the subsample of students with SEN, although to a lesser extent. Consequently, students with any SEN are significantly more likely to be rejected, and less likely to be average and, especially, preferred.

On the other hand, Table 2 shows that students with SEN report more maltreatment than students without SEN, and the differences are significant in the single Victimization factor and in aspects such as insulting, hitting, making someone cry, annoying or excluding, although, in all these cases, the effect size is low. No significant differences in other evaluated aspects were observed.

In terms of social reputation, both rated and identified through the *Peer Rating scores* and the *Class Play* respectively (Table 3), it can be seen that students with SEN were rated significantly lower in *Like* and *Help* than their peers without SEN, with a medium effect size. However, they were rated much higher, in increasing order of significance, in shyness, aggressiveness, and neglected, data that were confirmed when the children were asked to identify those roles for a play or film in the described behavioral dimensions.

Table 1. Students with and without SEN in each sociometric type.

			SEN		
			YES	NO	Total
Sociometric Type	Average	*f*	151**	771*	922
		%	59.7%	70.3%	68.3%
		RTC	-3.3	3.3	
	Preferred	*f*	12**	167*	179
		%	4.7%	15.2%	13.3%
		RTC	-4.4	4.4	
	Rejected	*f*	74*	101**	175
		%	29.2%	9.2%	13%
		RTC	8.5	-8.5	
	Neglected	*f*	13	39	52
		%	5.1%	3.6%	3.9%
		RTC	1.2	-1.2	
	Controversial	*f*	3	18	21
		%	1.2%	1.6%	1.6%
		RTC	-0.5	0.5	

* <-1.96; ** >1.96

Regarding perceived competence (see Table 4), we found, although to a different degree, statistically significant differences to the detriment of the students with SEN in Perceived cognitive competence and Peer acceptance, with a medium and low effect size, respectively. However, no group differences were observed in the other two factors, Perception of parental acceptance and Perceived physical competence.

Lastly, we analyzed the teachers' perception of their students' social competence, finding a lower score for students with SEN (n = 232, M = 1.33, SD = 1.64) versus students without SEN (n = 1062, M = 2.25, SD = 1.93), and this difference was highly significant ($p < .001$), t (1292) = -7.39, $p < .000$, d = -.49, revealing that students with SEN are rated by their teachers as being less competent than their peers without SEN.

Table 2. Differences in victimization between students with and without SEN.

Items	SEN	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*d*
Some children class insult you, give you nicknames..	YES	233	2.13	1.16	2.950**	.003	.23
	NO	1037	1.88	1.05			
…they push or kick you	YES	233	2.23	1.12	3.277**	.001	.25
	NO	1038	1.97	1.03			
…they mistreat you or make you cry	YES	233	2.02	1.12	3.809***	.000	.30
	NO	1036	1.72	0.99			
…they pinch you, tease you, annoy you	YES	232	2.24	1.15	3.468**	.001	.27
	NO	1038	1.95	1.07			
…they exclude you from the games and don't want to be with you	YES	232	2.08	1.18	4.306***	.000	.35
	NO	1036	1.72	0.99			
...they make you do things that you don't want to do	YES	233	1.85	1.06	1.096	.273	.08
	NO	1035	1.77	1.00			
…they mock you and laugh at you	YES	231	1.85	1.10	1.361	.174	.10
	NO	1031	1.75	1.01			
… they try to stop other children from being your friends	YES	231	1.81	1.07	1.444	.150	.11
	NO	1038	1.70	0.99			
Unique victimization factor	YES	228	.50	.18	3.946***	.000	.29
	NO	1024	.45	.17			

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Differences in social reputation between students with and without SEN.

	Items	SEN	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*d*
Peer Rating	Liking	YES	185	1.89	.45	-6.639***	.000	-.54
		NO	823	2.13	.44			
	Help	YES	185	1.87	.47	-9.492***	.000	-.76
		NO	823	2.23	.47			
	Shyness	YES	185	1.59	.32	4.097***	.000	.33
		NO	823	1.48	.33			
	Aggression	YES	185	1.62	.63	5.367***	.000	.54
		NO	823	1.35	.47			
	Neglect	YES	175	1.90	.46	6.547***	.000	.59
		NO	757	1.65	.41			
Class Play	Aggressiveness	YES	253	.13	.14	5.495***	.000	.57
		NO	1096	.07	.09			
	Prosociability	YES	253	.05	.04	-11.519***	.000	-.72
		NO	1096	.10	.07			
	Isolation	YES	253	.10	.06	5.567***	.000	.54
		NO	1096	.07	.05			

*p < .05. **p < .01. *** p < .001.

Table 4. Differences in perceived competence between students with and without SEN.

	SEN	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*d*
Peer acceptance	YES	215	.82	.15	-2.605*	.010	-.22
	NO	1020	.85	.13			
Perceived cognitive competence	YES	217	.82	.14	-4.650***	.000	-.44
	NO	1021	.87	.10			
Parental acceptance	YES	217	.69	.16	.226	.821	.00
	NO	1016	.69	.15			
Perceived physical competence	YES	217	.81	.13	.667	.505	.00
	NO	1017	.81	.12			

*p < .05. **p < .01. *** p < .001.

When examining the specific behaviors that differentiate rejected students with SEN from rejected students without SEN, we can see (Table 5) that, although no significant differences in any of the three factors analyzed were observed, there was a clear tendency for higher scores in the reputational dimensions of aggressiveness and isolation in students with SEN.

Table 5. Differences in social reputation among rejected students with and without SEN.

SEN		*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*d*
Aggressiveness	YES	74	.25	.17	.950	.053	.30
	NO	101	.20	.15			
Prosociability	YES	74	03	.02	-1.229	.221	-.16
	NO	101	.04	.03			
Isolation	YES	74	.14	.07	1.960	.052	.30
	NO	101	.11	.08			

*p < .05. **p < .01. *** p < .001.

The items that indicate significant differences between these two subgroups are shown in Table 6. The analysis shows that the differences are to the detriment of rejected students with SEN, as they correspond to aggressive and disruptive behaviors. We found no significant differences in aspects relating to prosociability and sociability.

Finally, with regard to social competence perceived by the teacher, in the group of rejected students, those with SEN obtained a lower score (n = 71, M = 1.07, SD = 1.37) than those without SEN (n = 98, M = 1.96, SD = 1.63), and the differences were statistically significant (p < .001), t (167) = -3.83, p < .000, with an effect size of d =-. 57.

Discussion

This work, which focused on students who present SEN when initiating compulsory schooling, attempted to clarify some aspects related to rejection and the possible victimization that this group suffers from their classmates. In synthesis, the results show that students with SEN, in comparison to their classmates without SEN, are rejected more, have a worse social reputation, perceive themselves more negatively, feel themselves to be the victims of abuse, and are considered less competent by their teachers. Moreover, when comparing rejected students with and without SEN, the former have a worse social reputation and the teacher rates them lower on social competence.

Taking into account the information provided by all the students in the classroom, our results indicate that students with SEN are rejected more and have a worse social reputation than their peers without SEN.

With regard to the differences in social acceptance, data from this study are in line with the current state of knowledge on this subject, which emphasizes that this group is rejected more, and the percentages of rejection found in students with SEN are similar to those of authors like Frostad and Pijl (2007), although they are lower than those reported by other studies (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Vuran, 2005). The results of this work are discrepant with the thesis defended by Frederickson (2010) and Frederickson and Furnham (2004) because, in the classrooms of this study, no benevolent treatment of students towards their classmates with difficulties was found. On the contrary, they receive more negative nominations, a fact that shows that their classmates do not like to be with them, preferring the company of other peers without SEN.

Table 6. Behaviors that produce differences between rejected students with and without SEN.

SEN		*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*d*
He/she gets into fights	YES	74	.33	.27	2.286*	.024	.36
	NO	101	.24	.23			
He/she is very shy	YES	74	.13	.09	2.086*	.038	.32
	NO	101	.10	.09			
They hit him/her, kick him/her….	YES	74	.19	.14	2.515*	.013	.41
	NO	101	.13	.11			
… he/she has good ideas for playing	YES	74	.04	.05	-2.202*	.029	-.34
	NO	101	.06	.05			
He/she says to other children:*"You are no longer my friend"*	YES	74	.18	.14	2.129*	.035	.32
	NO	101	.14	.12			
He/she does not pay attention to the teacher	YES	74	.33	.21	2.309*	.022	.35
	NO	101	.26	.20			
He/she is a crybaby	YES	74	.21	.15	2.495*	.014	.38
	NO	101	.15	.14			
The other children do not like him/her	YES	74	.25	.15	2.928**	.004	.45
	NO	101	.18	.14			
When things do not go as he/she wishes, he/she throws a tantrum, screams…	YES	74	.27	.21	3.610***	.000	.58
	NO	101	.16	.15			
They choose him/her the last	YES	74	.19	.11	2.245*	.026	.24
	NO	101	.16	.11			
He/she often hits	YES	74	.33	.27	2.082*	.039	.32
	NO	101	.24	.23			
He/she is almost never in his/her place	YES	74	.31	.23	3.069**	.003	.48
	NO	101	.21	.19			
When he/she doesn't want to listen to another child, he/she turns away…	YES	74	.19	.15	2.465*	.015	.39
	NO	101	.14	.11			

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Considering the differences in social reputation between students with and without SEN, this work offers interesting results because it provides a reputational profile of students with SEN showing more aggression, more isolation/withdrawal, and especially, less prosociability, as this is the factor that produces a more pronounced difference between the two groups. These aspects coincide with the characteristic behavioral pattern of rejection described repeatedly in the literature. In effect, as reported by authors like Bierman (2004), rejected children are the least sociable and prosocial, the most aggressive-disruptive, and the most isolated. When determining possible differences in social competence between students with and without SEN as rated by teachers, the results support our predictions because the teachers label students with SEN as less competent in the social area, which is consistent with the body of accumulated knowledge reporting a negative view of rejected students by the teaching staff (Nowicki. 2003; Pijl et al., 2010). These results are consistent with the idea that these students have social difficulties and lack or are deficient in the necessary social skills to interact appropriately with others and to achieve social acceptance and active integration in the peer group and/or, at the same time, they present behaviors that are awkward, aversive, and annoying (Estell et al., 2008). Although Frostad and Pijl (2007) suggest a circular cause-effect relationship, because if the child has no social skills, he does not relate to others, and this lack of relationships leads to an insufficient and inadequate development of social competence, the present study does not allow us to reach conclusions about the causes of the social deficits.

Therefore, in the light of these data and taking into account the research on the relationship between social reputation and rejection, the spiral of rejection of students with SEN is verified, confirming that rejection is a group phenomenon. Initially, the child with SEN, due to his/her characteristics or deficits in social skills, manifests some behavior that annoys or irritates others, and group reacts with an "I don't like" in the form of exclusion or explicit rejection. Faced with this rejection, the child can react aggressively or disruptively-irritatingly or he/she can withdraw and isolate him/herself, whereupon the group intensifies its behaviors of displeasure and exclusion. In this process, the child with SEN acquires a poor reputation among his/her peers, which will intensify their behaviors of ignoring and avoiding him/her so that the rejection becomes a group process. The fact that the group of students with SEN has this image of being aggressive, weird, and with few social skills in their classroom is a clear risk factor for maintaining their status of rejection and exclusion (García-Bacete et al., 2010; Gest, Rulison, Davidson, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2008).

In relation to the information provided by the students themselves about their perceptions and ratings of the relations with others, students with SEN perceive themselves more negatively than their peers and do not feel well treated by them.

With regard to the goal of determining possible differences in perceived competence between students with and without SEN, our results partially support our expectations, because students with SEN have a poorer self-concept than their peers without SEN in relation to personal competence (perceived cognitive competence) and peer

acceptance; they feel rejected. These aspects have been previously identified by authors such as Bakker and Bossman (2003), Cambra and Silvestre (2003) and Pilj and Frostad (2010), who report that these students have a more negative perception of their self-image, social competence, social self-efficacy and lower self-esteem and self-confidence. But in our study, no significant group differences in self-perception of physical competence or of family acceptance were found. However, all these issues must be considered with caution because few studies have analyzed the self-perception of competence in this population and age group.

When focusing on the differences in victimization between students with and without SEN, results confirm the proposed hypothesis and are consistent with previous investigations reporting that this population undergoes and feels exclusion, humiliation, and ostracism by their peers (Frederikson, 2010; Frederikson et al., 2007, among others). An issue that must be pointed out is that, in this study, we evaluated the perception of maltreatment and the feeling of being a victim; we did not assess harassment in the strict sense of repeated aggressions. The questions referred to the frequency of occurrence of certain events in the past month, an adequate period of recall in children of this age. Although victimization scores were not very high, students with SEN report receiving insults, physical attacks, exclusion, and isolation to a greater extent than their peers without SEN, and these situations can lead to harassment if they recur systematically. However, this subgroup does not perceive peer mistreatment in other less direct circumstances (*they make you do things that you don't want to; they try to stop other children from being your friends*). It should be taken into account that these children are first graders of primary education, and as a result, their degree of social awareness is still incipient, which, together with their own social difficulties (isolation, lack of support network) makes them little skilled at recognizing more indirect and relational situations of abuse (Bourke & Bourgman, 2010; Rose et al., 2011).

The scientific literature explains the process whereby students with SEN are the target of harassment, humiliation, and systematic exclusion. Usually, bullying starts with aggressive pro-active behavior (a joke, humiliation, aggression, exclusion...) by the bully, which the recipient does not deal with or does so inadequately. This response stimulates and causes to the harasser to repeat the action; if the victim again fails, the first links in the chain of harassment are initiated, and it is consolidated as the rest of the group members take on different roles in the dynamics of intimidation-victimization (Monjas, 2009; Ortega & Mora, 2008; Sánchez et al., 2012). Although initial investigations of Olweus (1998) pointed out that external negative deviations did not induce victimization, subsequent studies have shown that physical characteristics such as weakness, defects, or the various difficulties presented by students with SEN are associated with more bullying. Likewise, it has been noted that these children's low social competence and their integration and social acceptance difficulties pose an important risk factor (Frederikson, 2010; Rose et al., 2009; Whitney et al., 1992). The student with SEN is an easy target for bullying because he/she has no social support network in the group; no friends or very few, and they are usually other victims or other classmates who also have difficulties, and who cannot offer much help against bullying (Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005; Carter & Spencer, 2006; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Thompson, Whitney, & Smith, 1994).

In an attempt to explore and examine in more depth the aspects that differentiate rejected students with and without SEN, we formulated the hypothesis that there would be significant differences in the reputational profiles of both groups in the sense described by Frederikson (2010) that the rejected students with SEN would have lower scores on antisocial behavior and similar scores on positive behaviors. The results do not fully support this hypothesis because the rejected students with SEN present more anti-social and disruptive behaviors, such as some immature behaviors (*when things do not go the way he/she wishes, he/she throws a tantrum, screams, is a crybaby...)*, disruptive behaviors (*he/she does not pay attention to the teacher, is not in his/her place*), and aggressive behavior (*he/she gets into fights; hits*…). The reputational profiles of the two groups are very similar in their low positive performance in aspects such as prosocial behaviors (*helps others; defends others and shares*), positive affection (*is friendly; it has a sense of humor, is fun...)* and sociability (*has many friends; solves conflicts peacefully*…). Finally, to determine possible differences in social competence between rejected students with and without SEN as rated by teachers, the results ratified the proposed hypothesis, because the teachers considered that, among the rejected students, those with SEN had less social competence. All this indicates that students with SEN and who are also rejected have greater social-emotional problems and therefore, a worse prognosis than students without SEN.

As can be easily deduced from this work, suffering rejection or intimidation is not only a direct consequence of participants' deficits and individual and personal problems, but rather, they are both psychosocial phenomena, in which peer responses and the social dynamics that occur within the group must be considered. As indicated by Juvonen and Gross (2004), we refer to a set of intrapersonal and interpersonal difficulties that lead to and are the result of processes of peer rejection and bullying. Being an active part of the group and assertively dealing with bullying attempts and interpersonal violence are complex skills that require certain socioemotional skills that students with SEN do not seem to possess. If we want students with SEN to have positive interactions and friendship with their peers, we must teach them how to build these relationships through programs of social skills and other strategies dealt with in the peer group (Estell, Jones, Peral, & Van Acker, 2009; Flynt & Morton, 2004; Frederikson & Furnham, 2004; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Monjas, 2008).

In summary, the main findings of this study reflect serious problems of students with SEN, who constitute a group at risk with high vulnerability to undergo processes of peer rejection and bullying. This work is the first study carried out in our country on this subject with this population and age range and, therefore, it provides innovative results that contribute to extending the state of knowledge about rejection and exclusion of students with SEN.

Bearing in mind the suffering occurring as a result of being and feeling rejected or being a victim of peer abuse, and the negative consequences for these children's development due to the loss of learning opportunities and enjoyment with their peers, this study has different practical implications. The first involves the need for training teachers to make them aware of the specific problems of this population in these areas and of their influence on classroom dynamics and on the creation of support contexts and networks for students with SEN, and also of the appropriateness of emphasizing the socioemotional aspects and promoting a positive education in the sense of Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, and Linkins (2009), as education both for traditional skills and for happiness. The second refers to the importance of working with the peer group, which may be an important resilience factor to reduce the vulnerability of potentially rejected classmates or victims (Bierman, 2004; Bollmer et al., 2005; Gallagher, Dadisman, Farmer, Huss, & Hutchins, 2007; Margalit, 2004; Von Grünigen, Perren, Nägele, & Alsaker, 2010). The third implication is that greater understanding this phenomenon is required, to allow the design of more effective interventions with this group. In this connection, we propose a universal intervention with the classroom by means of, among others, socioemotional programs, cooperative methodology, eradication of reputational biases, promotion of friendship, and establishment of peer support networks, as well as more specific interventions with students with SEN and rejected students. We emphasize that these actions should be carried out within the framework of plans for improvement of coexistence and promotion of quality peer relations, integrating prevention and intervention into the curriculum and school routines and, of course, with the protagonism of teachers and support professionals (García Bacete et al., 2013).

This study has several limitations, such as the participants' age and the short time they had been together in the classroom, which has involved a long and complex process of data collection; the diverse and heterogeneous characteristics of the sub-sample of students with SEN, who, as we pointed out previously, have difficulties in a number of aspects. Also, the scarce scientific literature in our country on this subject and with this population advised us to take as a reference the research conducted in other countries with educational systems that are hardly comparable to ours. Therefore, the findings presented should be taken with precaution and, in some cases, rather than final results, they should be considered future lines of research. Despite these limitations, we believe that this work can guide future research to examine in more depth the relationships analyzed herein, thus contributing to improving our understanding of the problem. In this sense, it is necessary to stimulate more research in our country with students with SEN, extending the age range and delving into the diverse needs and disabilities. Longitudinal studies are needed to analyze these children's trajectories across their schooling, assess their strengths and positive aspects, social networks and groups of classmates with whom they join up, assess bullying, taking into account the reiteration of abusive behavior, analyze the participation of students with SEN in the role of bullies and deepen the assessment of their self-perceptions. It would also be interesting to study in detail the small percentage of students with SEN who are resilient and do not experience rejection or victimization.

Acknowledgements.- Research carried out with the aid of research "Rejection among peers and social dynamics in the classroom: a multidisciplinary and multi-methodological approach" (PSI2008-00541) granted by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (Plan Nacional de I+D+I. 2008-2011).
We want to explicitly thank the participating schools and student collaborators.

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(Received: 16-9-2012; revised: 27-3-2013; accepted: 21-5-2013)