

Addressing Digital Literacies and Bullying With Preadolescent Students Through *Life is Strange* Video Game

Abordaje de las literacidades digitales y el acoso escolar con estudiantes preadolescentes mediante el videojuego *Life is Strange*

Laura Uribe-Gómez, Nicolás López-Granda,
Jonathan Grajales-Peláez, Felipe Ocampo-Arroyave,
Elizabeth Moreno-Valencia, & José Vicente Abad
Universidad Católica Luis Amigó, Medellín, Colombia

This action research study assessed the use of the video game *Life is Strange* as a pedagogical tool to promote critical digital literacies and address school bullying among 22 sixth-grade students in a private school in Medellín (Colombia). The participants first interacted with the video game to explore themes of bullying. Subsequently, they completed a problem tree activity and participated in a focus group discussion. Data analysis revealed that the intervention enabled students to successfully recognize the causes, manifestations, and possible responses to bullying in both digital and real-life contexts. We conclude that carefully selected video games, paired with active pedagogical mediation, are useful tools for developing students' critical digital literacies and addressing pressing social issues that affect their lives.

Keywords: action research, bullying, critical digital literacies, *Life is Strange*, secondary education, video games

Este estudio de investigación-acción evaluó el uso del videojuego *Life is Strange* como herramienta pedagógica para promover las literacidades críticas digitales y abordar el acoso escolar entre 22 estudiantes de sexto grado de una institución educativa privada en Medellín (Colombia). Los participantes primero interactuaron con el videojuego para explorar temas relacionados con el acoso escolar. Posteriormente, completaron un árbol de problemas y participaron en un grupo focal. La intervención permitió a los estudiantes reconocer las causas, manifestaciones y posibles respuestas al acoso tanto en contextos digitales como de la vida real. Concluimos que los videojuegos cuidadosamente seleccionados, junto con una mediación pedagógica activa, son herramientas útiles para desarrollar las literacidades críticas digitales de los estudiantes y para abordar problemas sociales que afectan sus vidas.

Palabras clave: acoso escolar, educación secundaria, investigación-acción, *Life is Strange*, literacidades críticas digitales, videojuegos

Laura Uribe-Gómez  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5184-5697> • Email: laura.uribego@amigo.edu.co
Nicolás López-Granda  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1431-3175> • Email: nicolas.lopezgr@amigo.edu.co
Jonathan Grajales-Peláez  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6883-7352> • Email: jonathan.grajalespe@amigo.edu.co
Felipe Ocampo-Arroyave  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8704-5910> • Email: andres.ocampoar@amigo.edu.co
Elizabeth Moreno-Valencia  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5871-2173> • Email: elizabeth.morenova@amigo.edu.co
José Vicente Abad  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1548-9043> • Email: jose.abadol@amigo.edu.co

This article is based on the undergraduate monograph completed by Uribe-Gómez et al. (2025). Professor Abad acted as the monograph supervisor.

How to cite this article (APA, 7th ed.): Uribe-Gómez, L., López-Granda, N., Grajales-Peláez, J., Ocampo-Arroyave, F., Moreno-Valencia, E., & Abad, J. V. (2026). Addressing digital literacies and bullying with preadolescent students through *Life is Strange* video game. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 28(2), 197–213. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v28n2.122751>

This article was received on September 12, 2025 and accepted on April 29, 2026.

This is an Open Access text distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons license Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. Consultation is possible at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Introduction

Nowadays, language teachers must be prepared to address not only their students' learning needs within specific sociocultural contexts but also their naturalized use of technology. Such a paradigm shift can be challenging to some teachers due to their resistance to change and their persistence in using only traditional teaching methods. This lack of adaptation can lead to classroom environments that hinder students' engagement with language learning. Hence, it is essential that language teachers embrace new educational approaches to meet students' evolving digital literacies in alignment with 21st-century educational demands (Schleicher, 2015).

Another recurrent educational challenge is the need to strengthen students' critical thinking or, better yet, their critical consciousness (Seider et al., 2020), that is, their ability to recognize oppressive social forces so that they can make informed decisions to minimize their impact on themselves and their communities. From this perspective, critical consciousness distances itself from a notion of critical thinking understood as a merely cognitive competence involving the resolution of abstract problems detached from social realities; instead, its development has direct implications for students' lives, as it pertains to their ability to navigate complex social conditions that have a bearing on their development.

In Colombia, the General Education Act (Ley General de Educación, 1994) calls for the development of students' critical, reflective, and analytical competencies to strengthen the nation's cultural, scientific, and technological progress; improve citizens' quality of life; and generate alternative solutions to pressing social problems. However, in many schools, language teachers fail to discuss social issues tied to students' immediate reality. Instead, language teaching often revolves around grammar-based instruction, repetition drills, and standardized testing methods. This pedagogical approach not only turns students into passive agents in relation to their learning but also fails to provide

them with the opportunity to critically reflect on social issues affecting their daily lives. As a result, students at different educational levels tend to lack understanding of the role they play in preventing or addressing these issues and are poorly equipped to articulate well-informed positions when dealing with them (Harsono & Febrivana, 2026).

Bullying is one of the issues that most seriously compromises students' personal, social, and academic life; it entails any form of physical, verbal, or psychological violence exerted by an aggressor to oppress a victim. Bullying involves abusive behavior that is rooted in some kind of power imbalance (Mbah, 2020) and that often repeats over time in both physical and digital settings (Olufunso et al., 2023). As in other parts of the world, in Colombia, bullying has become a major problem in and outside of schools. The National Institute for Family Well-Being (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, 2022) reported nearly 2,240 children and adolescents who were victims of bullying from 2012 to 2022. The Ministry of National Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2025) reported 11,161 cases of bullying between 2020 and 2025. According to these national agencies, a great part of Colombian students have either witnessed bullying or suffered it directly.

The increase of bullying in both face-to-face and online settings calls for the development of students' critical digital literacies (CDLs). Researchers in areas as varied as social studies (Sulianta, 2024), science (Fauzi et al., 2025), arts (Hikmawaty, 2024), and political education (Nasution & Situmorang, 2024) insist on the need to integrate technology into the classroom so that students can gain historical, social, and cultural knowledge while developing their ability to assess information critically (Fauzi et al., 2025; Sulianta, 2024). Some studies in the field of CDL have focused on preventing bullying through strategies such as collaborative art sessions (Hikmawaty, 2024) and Q&A discussions (Nasution & Situmorang, 2024).

On a separate note, video games have been extensively used as a pedagogical tool. Specifically, studies in English language teaching have shown that they can help improve students' motivation (Ebrahimzadeh, 2017; Pulido Salcedo, 2023), vocabulary (Bin-Hady, 2023; Camacho Vásquez & Ovalle, 2019; Ebrahimzadeh, 2017; Naranjo-Couoh et al., 2023), and speaking (Benzetta, 2022). Furthermore, video games can bolster the development of students' intercultural communicative competence (González Osorio et al., 2020; Toufik & Sarnou, 2021) as well as their social and critical thinking skills (Mora & Lopera Gómez, 2016).

Some studies have explored the use of video games to foster students' CDLs in analyzing complex social issues (Fonseca et al., 2023; Pineda-Martinez et al., 2023). By offering an interactive experience through immersive narratives built within world-like scenarios, video games have been used to represent large-scale social problems such as environmental crises (Larreina-Morales & Gunella, 2023), gender discrimination (Calvo-Morata & Fernández-Manjón, 2023), armed conflict (Torres-Barreto et al., 2024), and race bias (Gutierrez et al., 2014) within the safe environment of the classroom.

Our review of the literature, nonetheless, shows a paucity of studies exploring the use of video games to foster CDLs around the analysis of a problem as serious as bullying, particularly in Colombia. To help bridge this gap, we decided to conduct an action-research study with a group of sixth graders at a private bilingual school in Medellín, where multiple forms of symbolic and armed violence continue to permeate school life.

Five novice English teacher-researchers, guided by their advisor, conducted this study as part of their bachelor's degree graduation requirement. After identifying bullying as a significant issue within the school, they chose video games as a pedagogical strategy. The team designed a study with the following objective: to evaluate the effectiveness of using the video game *Life*

is Strange in promoting students' development of CDLs and in providing them with tools to address bullying.

Theoretical Framework

Video Games

A video game is a piece of digital entertainment software developed primarily for users to have fun by controlling images in a make-believe world displayed on a screen. Different types of video games satisfy customers' diverse expectations, so their focus and purpose vary widely and are constantly evolving. For Moreno Cantano and Venegas Ramos (2020), video games are "simulators which implicitly carry in their design the rules, mechanics, narratives, evils and adventures of our present reality, so they contribute greatly to 'reordering' . . . the complexity of the world that surrounds us in a playful way" (p. 4).

Video games can aid the development of several abilities that are paramount to learning (Ashinoff, 2014). As suggested earlier, they can help students improve not only their communicative skills (González Osorio et al., 2020; Toufik & Sarnou, 2021) but also their sociocritical thinking skills (Fonseca et al., 2023; Pineda-Martinez et al., 2023), which are fundamental to face complex real-life situations. To accomplish these goals, however, a video game must be carefully selected based on its storyline and underlying message, vis-à-vis students' ages and learning needs. These two main characteristics are crucial to using video games as a central component of any effective pedagogical intervention.

Critical Digital Literacy

CDL refers to the ability to analyze, question, and understand the digital world more deeply. It encompasses knowledge of how to use digital tools and the ability to recognize hidden messages in online spaces. In other words, CDL highlights students' competence in symbolically reconstructing the world as they

develop a deeper understanding of its organization, especially when interacting with digital media (Luke, 2013).

Digital resources and social media influence how people comprehend reality and interact with it. These platforms have created a space that affects how people perceive themselves, leading to challenges with self-concept, body image, and self-esteem, which can be shaped by how they relate to others online (Meilinda et al., 2020). According to Darvin (2017):

[CDL] examines how the operation of power within digital contexts shapes knowledge, identities, social relations, and formations in ways that privilege some and marginalize others. It equips learners with tools to examine the linguistic and nonlinguistic features of digital media, to identify their embedded biases and assumptions, to access the truth. (p. 2)

Method

Conforming to the sociocritical paradigm, we conducted an educational action-research study aimed at preventing bullying by having sixth-grade students reflect on its implications, so they could recognize the impact of their decisions on the continuation or reduction of this problem and thus become active agents towards social transformation. According to Orozco Alvarado (2016), “the socio-critical paradigm aims to promote social transformations, providing answers to specific problems present within communities, but with the participation of their members” (p. 6). In addition, this research subscribes to the field of critical literacy (Pandya et al., 2021), particularly in relation to the development of CDLs (Luke, 2013).

Educational action research has two characteristics that make it a suitable methodological alternative for the project: First, its orientation toward social change entails a pedagogical intervention aimed at promoting a new relational dynamic among participating members of the school community (Gergen, 2003). Second,

the participants’ active involvement in the intervention enables responses to the identified problem that better adapt to the needs of their context and generate a greater sense of shared responsibility for their enactment and sustainability (Martínez, 2014).

Through this action research, we intended not only to make a change in young students’ perception of bullying but also to encourage them to reflect critically about it, so they could suggest solutions and put them into practice to improve school coexistence. It is worth noting that participants, especially middle schoolers, engage in the action-research process according to their age, developmental level, and expertise, so their involvement is proportional yet asymmetrical in relation to that of the researchers (Casals et al., 2008).

Context

Located in northwestern Medellín, the private school where the study was conducted offers bilingual, trilingual, and basic language-learning modalities in a peaceful, semi-rural environment. The community is made up of middle and high-income families. The school has modern facilities that support the teaching and learning process. Each classroom, for example, is equipped with advanced technological resources such as air conditioning, a projection screen, computers, and internet access, ensuring an optimal setting for learning English with digital tools.

As stated in official school policies, one of the main components of the school’s mission is to promote students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills by providing them with tools to navigate the digital world as they engage in the guided use of media and new technologies. The goal is to educate critical, well-informed technology users who can actively engage with the dynamics of the modern world.

The school’s teaching approach focuses on developing competencies through meaningful learning experiences. Teachers promote the development of interpretive, argumentative, and proactive skills (such

as suggesting hypotheses, proposing solutions, making decisions, or acting in the face of social conflicts) through strategies such as project work, problem-solving, and teaching for understanding. Students take English classes five times a week, for a total of eight face-to-face instructional hours. Four of these hours are allocated for conversation clubs and one for English reading clubs.

The school, however, is not exempt from bullying, which has become a major issue in recent years. Students are often victims of verbal aggression aimed at their appearance, customs, or personalities. Besides, they suffer physical attacks such as pushes or punches. These forms of bullying have brought about issues such as depression, anxiety, emotional distress, and low self-esteem in students.

On the other hand, one of the researchers was the participating students' English teacher. As a member of the teaching staff, he had direct access to the school, which facilitated obtaining formal authorization to conduct the study. Moreover, his dual role as a teacher-researcher helped build trust, enabling students to participate in study-related activities and become familiar with other members of the research team who assisted with data collection.

Participants

The pedagogical intervention was conducted with two sixth-grade groups comprising 38 students aged 11 through 13. The groups comprised 17 boys and 21 girls from Venezuela (3) and Colombia (35). The participants' English proficiency level ranged from A2 to B1.¹ In addition, students came from middle- and high-income families, so they had access to various technological resources, including cell phones, tablets, computers, and consoles. This familiarity with digital technologies enabled them to play video games regularly.

¹ According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020).

Although two groups of sixth-grade students were initially invited to participate in the study, competing extracurricular activities and the subsequent loss of English class hours with one of the groups forced us to collect data only with the other. Therefore, although both groups received the intervention to ensure equal learning opportunities, data were collected from 22 participants in one group.

Following a homogeneous sampling method, we selected participants with similar characteristics (i.e., age, social background, educational level, and school context). This measure was key to the research design, particularly as we decided to use focus groups. By bringing together students who shared similar cultural capital regarding their use of technology and their experiences with bullying, we ensured that they understood each other and could articulate a collective understanding of the issues under study. Shaheen et al. (2019) state that "focus group interviews concentrate on homogeneous groups . . . bringing individuals from similar contexts to participate in a group interview" (p. 31).

To ensure compliance with ethical standards, we requested permission from the institution to carry out the study. The authorization letter, signed by the school authorities, described the study's objectives, methodology, and ethical considerations. This measure enabled the study to be conducted while maintaining confidentiality and ensuring the exclusive use of data for research purposes. Further, since the students were underage, we obtained the participants' verbal assent and their parents' or legal guardians' informed consent for their participation in the study.

Pedagogical Intervention

For the pedagogical intervention, we selected specific parts from the video game *Life is Strange*, which is set in the fictional city of Arcadia Bay. The main character, Max Caulfield, is a student at the make-believe Blackwell Academy, where one of the central themes is

bullying. Kate Marsh, the co-protagonist, endures both online and face-to-face bullying from her peers. As players take on the role of Max, who can rewind time, they must make decisions about other characters (including Kate), consider the consequences of their actions, and go back in time to explore alternative outcomes.

The pedagogical intervention was developed in four class sessions. In the first session, participants discussed their previous experiences with video games and the benefits they attributed to them. In addition, we explored their vicarious and firsthand experiences with bullying, both in and outside of school, which helped introduce the topic and prepare the students for the following activities.

In the second session, the video game was introduced. Students were organized into teams that took turns playing *Life is Strange* on a console connected to a TV screen. While one team played, the others had to remain silent and observe how the story unfolded as decisions were made. At the end, each group wrote a reflective text answering the question: “In the video game, Maxine Caulfield sometimes must choose between helping others or herself. How can we balance our needs with those of the community?”

In the third session, we carried out an interactive technique involving a problem tree. Initially, the technique was explained, and the students were then organized into teams of 3 to 4. They answered a series of questions about what happened in the video game and how it connected to real-life experiences. Finally, we opened a space for dialogue in which members of each team had a chance to share its conclusions.

In the fourth session, the teacher led a reflective discussion, posing questions to each group to deepen their answers and encourage critical reflection. The questions were:

- How do bullying situations in the video game relate to your own personal lives and experiences?
- Can you remember any example in which you have been a bully, a victim, or an observer of bullying?

- How does bullying influence the way we feel in video games and real-life scenarios?
- What decisions did you make in each of the situations, and what consequences did they have?
- From the video game and your own experiences, do you think you will begin to participate in the prevention of bullying directly or indirectly?
- How do you think the application of these video games can positively influence interpersonal relationships and the educational community?

Data Collection

Data collection expanded over two weeks. Students received a one-hour class session every day, for a total of 10 sessions, distributed as follows: four sessions for game play, three sessions to complete the interactive technique, and three sessions for the focus group discussion.

Interactive Technique: Problem Tree

The problem tree interactive technique was developed over three class sessions. As described by Veselý (2008), a problem tree is a universal heuristic for identifying, prioritizing, and visualizing problems, providing a framework for analyzing their causes and effects. To guide the reflection on bullying, the problem-tree activity was divided into three sections: one focused on the video game (see Figure 1), another on real life (see Figure 2), and the final one for class discussion.

This technique followed the stages of preparation, reflection, expression, interpretation, analysis, and evaluation (Abad Olaya, 2024). In the first week, the meaning of each part of the tree was explained: the roots corresponded to the context of the city; the trunk symbolized the school context, the branches represented specific bullying situations in both the video game and real life, the leaves reflected problem-solving alternatives, the fruits represented decisions and their consequences, and the flowers evidenced strategies for bullying prevention.

Figure 1. Parts of the Tree: Video Game

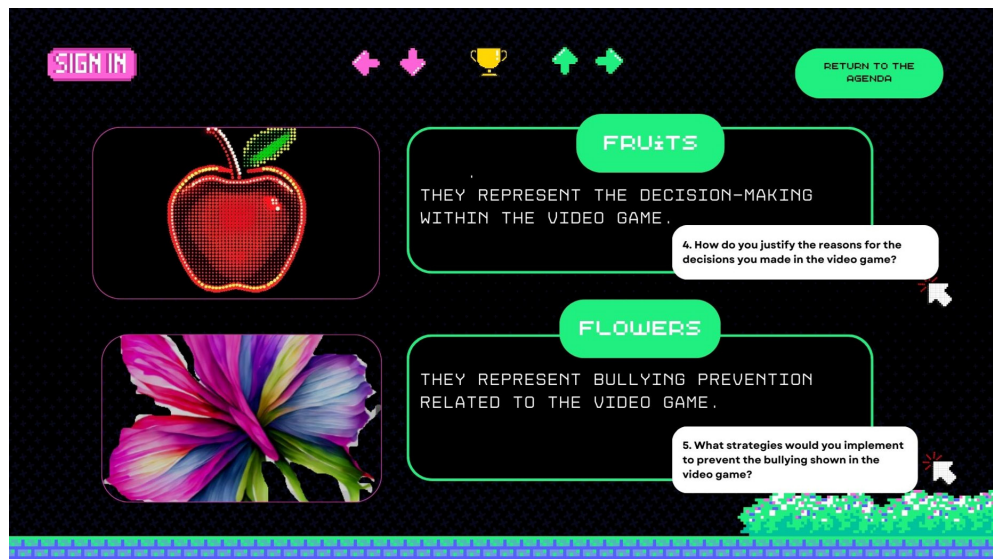


Figure 2. Parts of the Tree: Real Life



Then, teams of 3 to 4 people were formed to dialogue and write their answers on a *Padlet* (version 215.8.0). They had a week to answer the questions posed for each part of the tree. In the second week, teams shared their answers to encourage collective reflection. Finally, a whole-class discussion was held to interpret the findings. These activities were followed by an analysis of the data done by the researchers. Then,

the problem tree activity was evaluated, and the results were shared with the students in a separate session that helped ensure democratic and catalytic validity (Burns, 1999).

Focus Group Discussion

Cortés Gómez (2008) defines a focus group as “a qualitative research technique whose objective is to

obtain data through the perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and opinions of groups of people” (p. 36). For this study, the focus group discussion was guided by a protocol comprising nine open-ended questions and a space for participants’ final comments on video games, critical digital literacy, and bullying. Through these questions, participants expressed their perceptions and opinions about the activity, the video game, and bullying both in and out of school.

To carry out the focus group (Sachdeva et al., 2024), the 22 participants were organized into teams of

3 to 4 members to supplement their answers during the interactive technique and to expand their reflections on bullying. The discussion was initially scheduled for a one-hour session; however, because participants took longer than expected to answer the questions, it had to be split into two sessions. Hence, the focus group discussion was conducted with the same participants over three 1-hour sessions. Table 1 summarizes all the stages we followed to complete the action-research cycle (Burns, 1999).

Table 1. Action Plan

Stages	Objectives	Period
Diagnosis and planning	To read the school context and recognize bullying as a problem affecting the entire school community	February 2–23, 2024 (3 weeks)
	To design the pedagogical intervention with the video game <i>Life is Strange</i>	March 1–22, 2024 (3 weeks)
	To design instruments for data collection and receive feedback from external evaluators	April 5 to May 17, 2024 (6 weeks)
	To obtain an authorization letter from the institution and consent forms from the guardians of participating students	August 6–20, 2024 (2 weeks)
Intervention and data collection	To explore how students respond to bullying as portrayed in the video game <i>Life is Strange</i>	August 26 to September 6, 2024 (2 weeks). 1-hour session every day from Monday to Friday
	To describe how students critically analyze bullying in real-life situations	
Data analysis and evaluation	To analyze the effectiveness of the video game <i>Life is Strange</i> in promoting digital critical literacy and a deeper understanding of bullying	September 24 to October 30, 2024 (6 weeks)
	To present research results before the academic community	October 30 to November 12, 2024 (2 weeks)
	To conduct members’ checking to validate the results with the participants	November 21, 2024

Data Analysis

In keeping with standard approaches for qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2013; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013; Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003), we followed a six-step plan to analyze the information obtained through the interactive technique and the focus group. Using *Padlet* to record the participants' answers ensured we had easy, permanent access to the data, which we first reread several times to become familiar with it.

The second and third steps involved segmenting and coding the data. Individual sessions of in-vivo coding gave way to subsequent sessions of analytical coding, once the category scheme was consolidated in whole-team discussions. During those discussions, as a team and with the advisor, we refined the initial codes, adjusting them to correct overly broad, vague, or repetitive ones.

For the fourth step, categorizing, we grouped similarly coded data into broader pre-set categories

(video games, critical digital literacy, and bullying) using an Excel worksheet for further organization and analysis. Within each broad category, we identified and defined subcategories that more specifically represented nuanced aspects of the data.

During this process, new categories emerged and were incorporated into the category scheme, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the constructs addressed in the study. The resulting structure was organized into two main axes: (a) analysis of bullying in both the video game and real life, and (b) development of CDL. Tables 2 and 3 show these category schemes. Finally, for the fifth and sixth steps, converting and creating, we drew patterns, connections, and relationships within and between categories. Then, we consolidated our findings by presenting them in tables and figures and comparing them with existing research.

Table 2. Category Structure for the Analysis of Bullying

Categories	In the video game	In real life
Causes	• Environmental contamination • Social degradation	• Drug problems • Social structures
Manifestations	• Drug abuse • Psychological • Physical • Gender-based	• Psychological problems • Physical abuse
Possible responses	• Anticipatory communication • Emotional support	• Proactive communication • Healthy environment construction • Emotional help • Intervention

Table 3. Category Structure for the Development of Critical Digital Literacy

Main category	Emerging categories
Criticality	• Decision-making analysis • Perception shift • Awareness of consequences
Ethical considerations	• Online responsibility • Personal and social well-being

Methodological Integrity

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, we implemented three key strategies based on Shenton (2004). First, we achieved triangulation of researchers by having each team member analyze portions of the data individually, then coming together to compare our coding and validate our individual analyses in team discussions. This made it possible to identify coincidences, harmonize differences, and curb individual biases, ensuring a more accurate interpretation.

Second, we held regular debriefing sessions with our advisor to discuss progress, receive feedback, and consider different perspectives. These sessions helped us detect potential errors, evaluate alternatives, and improve our approach to data collection and analysis. In addition, sessions were key to minimizing bias in interpreting the data and ensuring that our conclusions were accurately supported by them.

Third, during and at the end of the data collection process, we held member-checking sessions with the participants. On the one hand, they had the opportunity to revise their transcripts and confirm that their words accurately reflected what they intended to express, allowing them to correct potential misunderstandings. On the other hand, at the end of the data analysis, they had the opportunity to verify the accuracy of our findings, which helped strengthen the credibility of our analysis.

Results

Students explored and analyzed the causes, manifestations, and possible responses to bullying both in the video game *Life is Strange* and in real life. In this process, students developed CDLs by critically reflecting upon the ethical implications of their responses to bullying.

Bullying in *Life is Strange*

As indicated in Table 2, participants analyzed bullying in both the video game and real life in terms

of its causes, manifestations, and possible responses. The causes that students identified in the video game included environmental contamination; social degradation resulting from an unequal division of classes; and the trafficking, sales, and abuse of drugs. During the interactive technique, when asked to describe the setting in which the storyline takes place, some students mentioned:

The environment is a mix of many issues, including noise and pollution. (Participant 2)²

The school is big, and there is a lot of bullying; the hallways are dirty. (Participant 5)

Everything is divided like a pyramid of social classes. (Participant 3)

It's a lonely place; uncomfortable and dangerous situations are experienced, and there are many ill-intentioned people with unequal privileges. (Participant 6)

It feels like the environment of a small town in the United States, where people sell drugs to high school students to make money. (Participant 4)

The participants also explored the psychological, physical, and gender-based manifestations of bullying in the video game. On a psychological level, students highlighted a stressful and disorderly environment that generates mental distress. On a physical level, they identified aggression, violence, and the use of illegal weapons. Regarding gender-based aspects, it was noted that both men and women face risks, but that women feel more vulnerable. Students commented:

It's a U.S. setting that tries to replicate an environment of stress and disorder, which causes students to feel or go crazy due to the stress they carry. (Participant 4)

[The environment] is very heavy, full of aggressive or violent people. (Participant 1)

There are moments when it can be a bit dangerous, especially for women. (Participant 2)

² All excerpts were translated from Spanish for publication purposes.

Students also proposed possible responses to bullying in the video game, such as anticipatory communication and emotional support. Participants suggested that talking to an older adult would help address the situation (“Alert a teacher or parent in time,” Participant 5). They also highlighted the importance of providing emotional support to victims, especially during difficult times: “Providing emotional support to Kate from the beginning and acting directly on the rooftop by offering her genuine support” (Participant 2).

Bullying in Real Life

After identifying the causes and manifestations of bullying as well as possible responses to it in the video game, students went on to explore these elements in their own social context. Concerning the causes of bullying, students mentioned the presence of illicit substances and their early use, as well as social inequality and disputes to control territory. The following excerpts, from the interactive technique, illustrate each of these aspects:

Colombia is a place where a lot of illicit substances are consumed. (Participant 4)

I feel it's a bit heavy, not just in the city but also at school. Everyone is very rude and violent, and people aged 12–13 and up love drinking and doing drugs. (Participant 1)

There are places with bad people who take over and turn them into dangerous areas. (Participant 3)

In addition, participants analyzed various ways in which bullying manifests in real life, including psychological problems and physical abuse. Students highlighted that bullying could lead to physical harm, anxiety, and depression:

Anxiety is a problem caused by harassment or bullying, which leads to depression and other mental disorders. (Participant 3)

Some people are rude, offensive, and selfish because they lack good judgment; they physically hurt others and start fights every day. (Participant 1)

Regarding possible responses to bullying in real life, participants suggested three strategies: first, engaging in proactive communication. The participants emphasized the importance of alerting authorities, teachers, or family members in a timely manner: “We should tell a teacher or parent before something worse happens” (Participant 5). “The authorities should be called to stop these situations; and [we should] also talk to the teachers” (Participant 2).

A second strategy involves promoting a healthy environment to make school a safe place for everyone: “[We should] be very selective with friendships; be responsible and obedient; and create a healthy and safe environment through our behavior and attitude” (Participant 3). Finally, the third strategy is to provide victims with emotional support and to intervene when witnessing repetitive bullying episodes: “[We should] provide emotional support to the person” (Participant 1). “[We should] intervene when we see a situation, especially if it's repetitive” (Participant 6).

Development of Critical Digital Literacies

Developing CDLs using *Life is Strange* involved tapping into—while simultaneously promoting—the participants' critical consciousness (Seider et al., 2020), especially as they went through a three-step process: analyzing decisions around bullying, becoming aware of their consequences, and undergoing a subsequent perceptual shift in their understanding of this issue. Hence, they analyzed the different decisions made in the video game, recognized that each choice could have significant effects, and consequently began to see bullying from a broader perspective. During the focus group discussion, participants mentioned:

Talking to Kate on the rooftop was the hardest part because every word we said could change the situation. If we made the right decision, we helped her; but if we failed, we could lose her. (Participant 3)

We didn't think our decisions would be so important, but then we saw that if we didn't help the characters, things would get worse. Now we know that everything you do has consequences. (Participant 2)

We thought bullying was only when someone laughed at you or pushed you, but now we know that sometimes bullying is more subtle and can happen through rumors or things people say about you on social media. (Participant 6)

As their critical consciousness about bullying grew, participants drew some ethical considerations regarding its ramifications online, especially concerning responsibility and personal and social well-being. They mentioned the importance of thinking before posting, being careful about what they share, avoiding harm to others, and recognizing how social media affects people's lives. Additionally, they highlighted the need to strike a balance between caring for themselves and supporting those around them. The students remarked the following during the focus group discussion:

Now we know that we have the responsibility not to share things that might hurt others, as we saw in the game, so we should always think before posting anything. (Participant 4)

In *Life is Strange*, we saw how social media can affect people's lives, so we understand that we must be responsible when sharing anything online. (Participant 2)

It's good to have a balance between helping others and taking care of our own well-being. (Participant 1)

Discussion

In line with previous research (Fonseca et al., 2023; Mora & Lopera Gómez, 2016; Pineda-Martinez et al., 2023), our study shows that video games can be an effective pedagogical tool for the development of CDLs around the analysis of complex social issues. From this perspective, the careful selection and implementation of video games can help improve not only students' linguistic competence (Benzetta, 2022; Bin-Hady, 2023; Camacho Vásquez & Ovalle, 2019; Naranjo-Couoh

et al., 2023) but also their intercultural competence (González Osorio et al., 2020; Toufik & Sarnou, 2021) and criticality, so they can more effectively assess issues that seriously compromise their personal, social, and academic life.

In our case, the scaffolded analysis of *Life is Strange* offered meaningful opportunities for students to develop CDLs by reflecting on their choices and their consequences. They shifted their view on bullying and considered the ethical impact of sharing content and practicing respectful behavior online. Additionally, students became more aware of how their actions affect themselves and others in digital and real-life contexts.

In addition, *Life is Strange* provided a platform for discussing and reflecting on bullying. Students explored the causes and manifestations of bullying, as well as possible responses, gaining valuable insights into this issue as they drew parallels between situations in the video game and those in their personal lives.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

During the project's completion, the most significant limitation was time constraints. The novice teacher-researchers conducted the study within the context of their last two practicum experiences, which extended over one academic year. This allowed for the completion of only one action-research cycle (Burns, 1999), which involved (a) recognizing bullying as a problem affecting the entire school community; (b) planning the research study, including the pedagogical intervention; (c) implementing the transformative action; (d) collecting and analyzing data; and (e) evaluating the impact of the study through members checking.

Unfortunately, the school did not renew the novice teachers' contracts, so further exploration into developing CDLs on bullying prevention through video game analysis was not possible. Hence, concerning future research, it is important to explore how the develop-

ment of CDLs around complex social issues varies across educational levels and school contexts when using different types of video games.

Recommendations for the Pedagogical Use of Video Games

Despite its limitations, the study left valuable lessons on integrating video games into the English classroom. Passively exposing students to them will not do the trick; their adequate pedagogical use requires both careful material selection and pedagogical mediation.

First, it is recommended that teachers select video games based on students' sociocultural backgrounds, developmental levels, and learning needs. If minors are exposed to sensitive topics, it is important to obtain signed consent from both parents and institutions. In any case, teachers must exercise caution concerning the way in which topics such as suicide, gender discrimination, or drug abuse are treated in video games. However, the fact that students may be constantly exposed to these realities may still tip the balance toward exploring them through the guided analysis of video games.

In addition, effectively integrating video games into the English curriculum requires carefully mediated pedagogical interventions aimed at transforming the gaming experience into a learning opportunity. According to R  th (2022), the efficacy of games depends on both the teachers' ability to leverage them as learning tools and the students' willingness to engage in gameplay and related activities. Therefore, the pedagogical integration of video games should include two key components: First, the lesson must include guided reflexivity through thought-provoking questions to help students connect the game's themes with their real-life experiences. Second, teachers must resort to collaborative activities (e.g., interactive techniques, discussion groups, or case analyses) to support the col-

lective building of knowledge around the social issues identified in the game.

Conclusion

School bullying remains a layered social problem that cannot be addressed individually. Action research using interactive techniques may be beneficial for investigating this problem, as it allows students to share diverse perspectives, experiences, and emotions through communal dialogue and reflection. Moreover, our study suggests that addressing issues such as bullying requires pedagogical mediation and active participation from all members of the school community (Irianto et al., 2024). This approach is particularly important when pedagogical interventions are crafted around the critical analysis of video games to foster students' development of CDLs and a consensual search for meaningful solutions to problems that impact their day-to-day lives.

References

- Abad Olaya, J. V. (2024). *Escritura colaborativa entre maestros formadores y en formaci  n en los semilleros de investigaci  n desde un enfoque en literacidades acad  micas cr  ticas* [Doctoral dissertation, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana]. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11912/12150>
- Ashinoff, B. K. (2014). The potential of video games as a pedagogical tool. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01109>
- Benzetta, A. (2022). *Students' and teachers' perceptions of educational video games in improving students' speaking skill: The case of second year EFL students at Biskra University* [Master's thesis, Mohamed Khider University of Biskra]. <https://bit.ly/4awWGHd>
- Bin-Hady, W. R. A. (2023). The role of games in enhancing EFL students' vocabulary acquisition. *Journal of the Faculty of Education*, 11(17), 48–58. <https://doi.org/10.60037/edu.v11i17.1178>
- Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.

- Calvo-Morata, A., Fernández-Manjón, B. (2023). Serious games for social problems. In C. S. González-González, B. Fernández-Manjón, F. Li, F. J. García-Peñalvo, F. Sciarrone, M. Spaniol, A. García-Holgado, M. Area-Moreira, M. Hemmje, & T. Hao (Eds.), *Learning Technologies and Systems* (pp. 98–109). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-33023-0_9
- Camacho Vásquez, G., & Ovalle, J. C. (2019). Video games: Their influence on English as a foreign language vocabulary acquisition. *GiST: Education and Learning Research Journal*, (19), 172–192. <https://doi.org/10.26817/16925777.707>
- Casals, A., Vilar, M., & Ayats, J. (2008). La investigación-acción colaborativa: reflexiones metodológicas a partir de su aplicación en un proyecto de música y lengua. *Revista Electrónica Complutense de Investigación en Educación Musical*, 5(4), 1–17. <https://bit.ly/4rswVhf>
- Cortés Gómez, C. F. (2008). *La técnica del Focus Group para determinar el diseño de experiencias de formación de usuarios* [Working paper]. Repositorio IIBI UNAM. <https://bit.ly/3ZScCxG>
- Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Companion volume). www.coe.int/lang-cefr
- Darvin, R. (2017). Language, ideology, and critical digital literacy. In S. Thorne & S. May (Eds.), *Language, education and technology: Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 1–14). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02328-1_35-1
- Ebrahimzadeh, M. (2017). Readers, players, and watchers: EFL students' vocabulary acquisition through digital video games. *English Language Teaching*, 10(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n2p1>
- Fauzi, M. I., Al Muhdhar, M. H. I., & Susanto, H. (2025). The use of digital media in empowering students digital literacy and critical thinking in biology learning. In The International Academic Forum (Ed.), *Proceedings of The Asian Conference on Education 2024* (pp. 1–6). <https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2186-5892.2025.1>
- Fonseca, I., Caviedes, M., Chantre, J., & Bernate, J. (2023). Gamification and game-based learning as cooperative learning tools: A systematic review. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 18(21), 4–23. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v18i21.40035>
- Gergen, K. J. (2003). Action research and orders of democracy. *Action Research*, 1(1), 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14767503030011004>
- González Osorio, J., Restrepo Cano, R., & Ruiz Victoria, J. D. (2020). *The impact of using video games for the development of the knowledge component of the intercultural communicative competence on students of the first semester at the Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en Inglés* [Undergraduate monograph]. Repositorio Institucional Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira. <https://hdl.handle.net/11059/12235>
- Gutierrez, B., Kaatz, A., Chu, S., Ramirez, D., Samson-Samuel, C., & Carnes, M. (2014). “Fair Play”: A videogame designed to address implicit race bias through active perspective taking. *Games for Health Journal*, 3(6), 371–378. <https://doi.org/10.1089/g4h.2013.0071>
- Harsono, C. S., & Febriyana, N. (2026). Understanding and addressing bullying in children and adolescents. *Journal of the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 37(1), 51–62. <https://doi.org/10.5765/jkacap.250040>
- Hikmawaty, L. (2024). The role of teachers in preventing bullying in schools through collaborative art education. *Proceeding of the International Conference on Mathematical Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Computing*, 1(2), 81–87. <https://prosiding.arimsi.or.id/index.php/ICMSNSC>
- Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar. (2022, November 10). *Todas y todos contra el acoso escolar o bullying*. <https://bit.ly/3MUTvA5>
- Irianto, B. S., Sutrisno, S., & Suryasaputra, R. (2024). Efforts to stop bullying in schools: Strategies, challenges, and solutions. *Equilegum: International Law Journal*, 2(3), 84–90. <https://doi.org/10.61543/equ.v2i3.78>
- Larreina-Morales, M., & Gunella, C. (2023). Video games for environmental awareness: The accessibility gap. *Universal*

- Access in the Information Society*, 24, 1931–1943. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-023-01026-6>
- Ley General de Educación [General Education Act], Diario Oficial No. 41.214 (1994).
- Luke, A. (2013). Defining critical literacy. In J. Zacher Pandya & J. Ávila (Eds.), *Moving critical literacies forward: A new look at praxis across contexts* (pp. 19–31). Routledge.
- Martínez, M. C. (2014). Reflexiones en torno a la investigación-acción educativa. *CPU-e: Revista de Investigación Educativa*, (18), 58–86. <https://doi.org/10.25009/cpue.voi18.756>
- Mbah, R. M. (2020). *The perceptions of students about school bullying and how it affects academic performance in Cameroon* [Master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland]. <https://doi.org/10.48336/6KA2-2F62>
- Meilinda, N., Malinda, F., & Aisyah, S. M. (2020). Literasi digital pada remaja digital (sosialisasi pemanfaatan media sosial bagi pelajar sekolah menengah atas). *Jurnal Abdimas Mandiri*, 4(1), 62–69. <https://doi.org/10.36982/jam.v4i1.1047>
- Ministerio de Educación Nacional. (2025, May 2). *Colombia registra más de 11.000 casos de acoso y agresión escolar y refuerza su estrategia nacional*. <https://bit.ly/4awE9uC>
- Mora, R. A., & Lopera Gómez, M. C. (2016). Games in the classroom: More than just having fun. *HOW*, 8(1), 75–82.
- Moreno Cantano, A. C., & Venegas Ramos, A. (2020). El videojuego como espejo de la sociedad contemporánea. *Barataria: Revista Castellano-Manchega de Ciencias Sociales*, (29), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.20932/barataria.voi29.577>
- Naranjo-Couoh, V., Morales-Caamal, D., Pantoja-Lee, A., & Silva-Colli, O. (2023). The use of video games in vocabulary acquisition: A short narrative review. *Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Computing Applications*, 1(1), 17–25. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10694852>
- Nasution, F. A., & Situmorang, T. P. (2024). Building an inclusive school: Preventing bullying through political education at Padamu Negeri Medan High School. *Sovereignty Journal of Community Service*, 1(2), 16–23.
- Olufunso, O. O., Alani, A. O., Olabisi, O., & Ayemowa, M. (2023, June). *An overview of cyberbullying* [Conference session]. 1st International Conference on Science & Technology, Gateway (ICT) Polytechnic, Saapade, Nigeria.
- Orozco Alvarado, J. C. (2016). La investigación acción como herramienta para la formación docente: experiencia en la Carrera Ciencias Sociales de la Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación de la UNAN-Managua, Nicaragua. *Revista Científica Estelí*, (19), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.5377/farem.voi19.2967>
- Pandya, J. Z., Mora, R. A., Alford, J. H., Golden, N. A., & de Roock, R. S. (Eds.). (2021). *The handbook of critical literacies*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003023425>
- Pineda-Martinez, M., Llanos-Ruiz, D., Puente-Torre, P., & García-Delgado, M. (2023). Impact of video games, gamification, and game-based learning on sustainability education in higher education. *Sustainability*, 15(17), 13032. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sui151713032>
- Pulido Salcedo, A. (2023). *Enhancing students' motivation in the EFL classroom through Life is Strange: A digital game-based learning scenario proposal* [Master's thesis, Universitat de Barcelona]. Dipòsit Digital. <https://hdl.handle.net/2445/200580>
- Rüth, M. (2022). *Learning and teaching with video games: Toward theoretical progress and educational practice* [Doctoral dissertation, Universität zu Köln]. Kölner UniversitätsPublikationsServer. <https://kups.ub.uni-koeln.de/52965/>
- Sachdeva, S., Tamrakar, K. A., Perwez, E., Kapoor, P., & Gupta, D. (2024). Focus group discussion: An emerging qualitative tool for educational research. *International Journal of Research and Review*, 11(9), 302–308. <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20240932>
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed). SAGE.
- Savin-Baden, M., & Howell Major, C. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003377986>

- Schleicher, A. (2015). *Schools for 21st-century learners: Strong leaders, confident teachers, innovative approaches*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264231191-en>
- Seider, S., El-Amin, A., & Kelly, L. L. (2020). The development of critical consciousness. In L. A. Jensen (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of moral development: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 203–221). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190676049.013.11>
- Shaheen, M., Pradhan, S., & Ranajee, R. (2019). Sampling in qualitative research. In M. Gupta, M. Shaheen, & K. Reddy (Eds.), *Qualitative techniques for workplace data analysis* (pp. 25–51). IGI Global Scientific Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-5366-3.ch002>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Sulianta, F. (2024). Literature review: Digital literacy in social studies education as a tool. In *Proceedings of the 1st Widyatama International Conference on Management, Social Science and Humanities* (pp. 143–153). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-608-6_17
- Taylor-Powell, E., & Renner, M. (2003). *Analyzing qualitative data*. Program Development and Evaluation, University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://bit.ly/4tPaZOO>
- Torres-Barreto, M. L., Díaz-Vargas, L. A., & Salcedo-Parada, M. (2024). El rol de los videojuegos educativos en la enseñanza sobre conflictos armados. *Trilogía: Ciencia, Tecnología, Sociedad*, 16(33), e3086. <https://doi.org/10.22430/21457778.3086>
- Toufik, G. M., & Sarnou, H. (2021). Investigating the potential of online video games in enhancing EFL learners' communication skills. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 9(2), 292–298. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2021.090205>
- Uribe-Gómez, L., López-Granda, N., Grajales-Peláez, J., Ocampo-Arroyave, F., & Moreno-Valencia, E. (2025). *Promoting critical digital literacies through Life is Strange video game to address bullying in the EFL classroom* [Unpublished undergraduate monograph]. Universidad Católica Luis Amigó.
- Vesely, A. (2008). Problem tree: A problem structuring heuristic. *Central European Journal of Public Policy*, 2(2), 68–81.

About the Authors

Laura Uribe-Gómez was the leading researcher in the study reported here. She is a licensed English teacher from Universidad Católica Luis Amigó (Colombia). Her field of interest is video game literacies from a critical perspective.

Roles: conception of the research project, analysis and interpretation of data, major contribution of investigation materials, and drawing up the different text versions of the paper.

Nicolás López-Granda is a licensed English teacher from Universidad Católica Luis Amigó (Colombia). His field of interest is video game literacies from a critical perspective.

Roles: conception of the research project, interpretation of data, and drawing up the different text versions of the paper.

Jonathan Grajales-Peláez is a licensed English teacher from the Universidad Católica Luis Amigó (Colombia). His field of interest is video game literacies from a critical perspective.

Roles: conception of the research project, analysis and interpretation of data, and major contribution of investigation materials.

Felipe Ocampo-Arroyave is a licensed English teacher from the Universidad Católica Luis Amigó (Colombia) and a member of the student research lab LSLP. His field of interest is video game literacies from a critical perspective.

Roles: conception of the research project; collection, analysis of data, and interpretation of data; and major contribution of investigation materials.

Elizabeth Moreno-Valencia is a licensed English teacher from the Universidad Católica Luis Amigó (Colombia). Her field of interest is video game literacies from a critical perspective.

Roles: conception of the research project and interpretation of data.

José Vicente Abad works as an ELT teacher educator and researcher at Universidad Católica Luis Amigó (Colombia). His research focuses on teacher research training, critical academic literacies, and collective writing practices. He is a member of the EILEX research group and the EscriLab writing center and coordinates the student research group (*semillero*) FORMALE.

Roles: conception of the research project, development of methods, interpretation of data, and drawing up the different text versions of the paper.