

Experiences Of Bullying Among Special Needs Students In Inclusion Classrooms: A Literature Review

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Abstract:

Bullying is a significant negative experience impacting students across all educational levels. Institutions such as the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), NGOs, and educational organizations have conducted extensive research and interventions focusing on social-emotional development. Despite existing anti-bullying educational programs, stronger societal awareness policies are required. Special needs students encounter compounded disadvantages, specifically social isolation and educational barriers, increasing their vulnerability to bullying. This systematic literature review examines statistical risk factors of bullying among special needs students in inclusive classrooms, critically analyzes international and national research on bullying experiences, and explores academic, psychological, and social impacts of bullying. The synthesis includes effective prevention and intervention strategies, concluding with targeted recommendations for policy and practice implications.

Keywords: Special Needs, Inclusive Education, Peer Bullying, Intervention Strategies, Social-Emotional Development

INTRODUCTION:

1.1. Definition of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a significant educational approach aiming to create equity and opportunities for all students. Inclusive education is defined as providing services that cater to the special needs of students, enabling them to participate fully or partially throughout their educational time in the least restrictive environments suitable for their needs [1]. This involves adapting curricula, instructional strategies, and educational settings to effectively meet diverse student needs and ensure meaningful participation for all learners. According to the Regulation on Special Education Services dated July 7, 2018, No. 30471 by the Ministry of National Education, inclusive education is defined as offering supportive educational services to students with special educational needs at all levels and stages, enabling them to interact reciprocally with peers and other individuals and achieving educational goals at the highest level possible [2]. Based on these definitions, it is evident that the main objective of inclusive education is to facilitate mutual interaction and achieve the highest educational outcomes by meeting the special needs of individuals with special needs and their typically developing peers within the same educational setting. Significant research in the literature highlights the contributions of inclusive education [3], [4], [5], [6], [7].

1.2. Definition and Significance of Peer Bullying

Although there are various international definitions of peer bullying, most researchers agree that for an experience to qualify as bullying, behaviors should be repetitive, cause stress and harm, and involve a power imbalance [8], [9], [10]. According to the Ministry of National Education, peer bullying is defined as repetitive behaviors intended to harm another student, performed by one or several students in a stronger position [11]. Researchers have categorized bullying into physical bullying, relational bullying, verbal bullying, and sexual bullying [12], [13]. Physical bullying includes violent acts such as hitting, pushing, and kicking. Verbal bullying involves behaviors like threatening, name-calling, and mocking. Relational (Indirect) bullying involves less visible behaviors such as excluding someone from the group, spreading rumors about them, or speaking negatively about them. Cyberbullying includes behaviors like opening unauthorized accounts, posting negative comments on social media, insulting, sharing private

photos without consent, or threats thereof. Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, and Del Rey emphasize that cyberbullying can rapidly reach large audiences [14].

Considering peer bullying negatively affects not only the victim but also the bully and the bystanders, it emerges as an issue that requires a holistic approach, involving strategies such as comprehensive prevention programs, psychological support, educational interventions, and community-wide awareness. Research indicates short-term effects on bullies include weak school relationships and low academic performance [15]. Long-term effects include tendencies toward criminal behavior and psychiatric disorders [16], [17]. Numerous studies demonstrate that students victimized by bullying experience negative impacts physically, emotionally, behaviorally, and academically both in the short and long term [18], [19], [20], [21], [22]. The short-term effects include physical health issues, mental health disturbances, weakened school relationships, and academic performance declines. In the long term, bullying victimization is associated with psychiatric disorders, self-harming behaviors, and low self-esteem, significantly impacting life negatively. Students who both bully and are bullied face short-term psychological difficulties and, in the long term, display more behavioral problems, rule-breaking, and lower levels of self-control, social skills, and social adjustment compared to their peers [23]. Bystander students experience fear of becoming victims themselves, distancing from school, and perceiving their environment as unsafe [24].

1.3. Peer Bullying Among Inclusive Students

Peer bullying of students with special needs is commonly examined through their perceived "different appearances or perceptions," typically cited as a reason for victimization. From a social model perspective, the social rejection of students with special needs creates a barrier. This viewpoint emphasizes that social integration is a two-way process, requiring not only the development of social skills in students with special needs but also examining and enhancing social acceptance among peers and other individuals within their environments. Unfortunately, bullying among inclusive education students persists contrary to the ideals of inclusive education. Research indicates bullying is a prevalent experience in the daily lives of children and young people with special needs [25], [26]. This widespread experience constitutes a psychosocial disability, which refers to emotional and psychological challenges such as anxiety, lowered self-esteem, or feelings of isolation, creating barriers affecting self-perception and social well-being [27], [28]. Consequently, bullying leads to adverse academic, psychological, and social outcomes for students with special needs [29], reinforcing structural and social inequalities, such as unequal access to quality education, lack of inclusive policies, and societal stigmatization, which make disability a significant societal distinction. Research supports that students with special needs are at greater risk of bullying, both as victims and perpetrators, compared to their peers [30], [31]. This increased risk is associated with impulsivity, anger management issues, lower academic achievement, and social-emotional adjustment difficulties [32], [13], [33]. A significant study on inclusive education students indicates that most experience bullying daily [33]. Students receiving education separately from inclusive classrooms are reported to experience more bullying, suggesting inclusive environments may perpetuate bullying without adequate integration [33], [13]. These findings underscore the importance of research and interventions aimed at fulfilling the inclusive education requirements of peer integration.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY:

This study employed a systematic literature review design to analyze the experiences of bullying among special needs students in inclusive classrooms. The primary objective was to synthesize findings from existing research and identify common risk factors, prevalence rates, and intervention strategies.

The review included both national and international sources published between 2000 and 2024 in English and Turkish. Sources were retrieved exclusively from Google Scholar using search terms such as "inclusive education," "peer bullying," "special needs students," "school bullying," and "intervention strategies."

The inclusion criteria for selected studies were as follows:

- Focus on peer bullying among students with special needs.
- Research conducted within the context of inclusive classroom environments (full-time or part-time).

- Empirical or theoretical studies published in peer-reviewed journals.
- Articles published in English or Turkish and accessible in full text.

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused solely on students in general education with no mention of inclusion.
- Were opinion articles or non-academic commentaries.
- Did not provide any direct implications for practice or policy.

The selected literature was analyzed thematically, focusing on:

- Types of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, cyber),
- Victim and perpetrator characteristics,
- Impacts on academic, emotional, and social development,
- Institutional and systemic factors contributing to bullying,
- Preventive and responsive strategies.

The review was conducted in line with a structured approach to ensure clarity and consistency in identifying patterns, conceptual gaps, and implications relevant to inclusive education and school policy.

RESULTS:

Prevalence of Bullying in Inclusive Settings

3.1. The Situation in Turkey

According to a survey conducted by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) in 2022, 13.8% of children aged 6-17 in Turkey experience peer bullying at least a few times a month. Additionally, the OECD's PISA 2018 report, published in 2019, indicated that 19% of 15-year-old students in Turkey experience physical or verbal bullying at least a few times per month. Furthermore, a systematic analysis conducted by Kılınç in 2023 reveals that peer bullying exists across all educational levels in Turkey, and existing preventive measures have been found insufficient in addressing the issue effectively.

3.2. The Situation Worldwide

A global study examining the prevalence of bullying analyzed data from the Global School-Based Student Health Survey, covering adolescents aged 12-17 across 83 countries. Findings indicated an average bullying victimization prevalence of 30.5%, with the highest rates observed in the Eastern Mediterranean and African regions. Additionally, the study found that higher levels of peer and parental support significantly reduced the risk of bullying victimization [34]. A comprehensive report published by UNESCO in 2017 highlighted global trends and prevalence in school violence and bullying, emphasizing that one-third of students worldwide reported experiencing peer bullying at least once within the previous month [35]. Considering the prevalence rates in both Turkey and globally, it is clear that bullying should be addressed as a significant societal problem.

DISCUSSION

Bullying Prevention and Intervention Strategies

4.1. School-Based Interventions

Bullying extends beyond an individual issue and must be addressed comprehensively at both school and societal levels. Effective intervention requires creating a positive and inclusive school environment and prioritizing student well-being. Among these approaches, the whole-school approach involves developing comprehensive anti-bullying policies school-wide, implementing targeted bullying prevention strategies, and collaborating closely with families [36]. Additionally, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) intervention programs aim to equip students with social-emotional skills and strategies for coping with bullying. These programs emphasize developing empathy, emotion management, and social problem-solving skills among students [37]. In addition to student-focused approaches, methods focusing on teacher training and professional development are essential to enable teachers to intervene effectively in bullying incidents [38]. These educational programs aim to enhance teachers' skills in identifying and appropriately responding to bullying. To improve the effectiveness of educational initiatives and intervention programs,

systematic implementation and evaluation processes are necessary. It has been demonstrated that systematic monitoring and supervision programs substantially improve effectiveness [39].

4.2. Roles of Teachers and Families

Research examining bullying experienced by students with special needs emphasizes that support from peers, parents, and teachers acts as a protective factor against bullying, whereas the lack of such support increases bullying risks [40], [41]. In this context, the awareness, responsiveness, and intervention skills of peers, families, and teachers are critical factors influencing bullying in school environments. Teachers' inability to recognize bullying situations or intervene effectively increases the likelihood of students experiencing bullying [13]. Literature highlights that teachers must actively participate in bullying prevention, highlighting the importance of fostering a positive school atmosphere through careful monitoring of social interactions between students with and without disabilities [13], [12].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, bullying experiences among students with special needs in inclusive educational settings constitute a significant concern requiring attention at individual and societal levels. Literature consistently indicates higher risks of bullying faced by these students across physical, emotional, and social dimensions [33], [40]. Long-term effects commonly include psychological distress, social isolation, and reduced academic achievement. Therefore, developing systematic and inclusive policies to prevent and combat bullying is essential. Educational institutions should adopt and systematically implement programs aimed at enhancing social acceptance among students, representing a significant step in addressing bullying effectively [13], [12].

Teachers and school administrators need to enhance their awareness regarding the challenges faced by students with special needs and establish effective response mechanisms for bullying incidents. Continuous training programs should be organized to improve teachers' abilities to recognize and handle bullying situations effectively [38]. Furthermore, expanding Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs can significantly enhance critical skills such as empathy, problem-solving, and stress management among students [37]. Additionally, it is essential to improve the accessibility of school counseling services to support students affected by bullying. It is recommended that academia, the Ministry of National Education, and civil society organizations systematically collaborate to develop and implement comprehensive bullying prevention and intervention programs.

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Miscellaneous:

This study is based on a systematic literature review and does not include original data collection or empirical analysis, which may limit the scope of its conclusions. The selection of literature was limited to sources accessible in English and Turkish, which may result in the exclusion of valuable studies in other languages. Additionally, while efforts were made to include the most recent and relevant research, the fast-evolving nature of inclusive education and peer bullying may mean that some newer findings were not captured at the time of writing. Finally, although international studies were reviewed, the generalizability of findings may vary across different educational systems and cultural contexts.