The Psychosocial Dynamics of Bullying Amongst Special Needs Students at an Exclusive Educational Setting in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Bullying among special needs students constitutes a pervasive psychosocial concern with far-reaching consequences for mental health and well-being. This study examined the psychosocial dynamics of bullying among special needs students at Hellenic Silver Lining School in Harare, Zimbabwe, focusing on bullying perceptions, the onset of secondary mental health challenges, and the effectiveness of mitigation strategies. Employing an interpretivism research paradigm within a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Thirteen students (6 girls, 7 boys) aged 11–16years all presenting with intellectual, emotional, and social developmental challenges, were selected through purposive sampling. Inductive thematic analysis revealed three primary themes: bullying perceptions shaped by communication barriers, impulsivity, and disability-based vulnerability; onset of secondary disorders including anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional dysregulation; and mitigation strategies encompassing teacher counselling, parental collaboration, and peer intervention. Unique to an exclusive special needs school context, findings demonstrate that bullying dynamics in such settings are mediated by disorder specific characteristics such as autism spectrum disorder related communication difficulties. The study contributes novel insights to the existing body of literature on bullying in exclusive school environments and offers evidence-based recommendations for practitioners, educators, policymakers, and mental health professional.

Keywords: bullying, special needs students, psychosocial dynamics, mental health, Zimbabwe, inclusive education, autism spectrum disorder, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Bullying in school environments represents one of the most insidious challenges confronting educational systems globally, exerting profound psychosocial consequences on the children involved. While bullying adversely affects all students, children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are disproportionately vulnerable to victimisation, owing to the unique developmental, communicative, and social challenges associated with their respective conditions (Rose & Espelage, 2018; Ellis et al., 2021). The significance of this vulnerability cannot be overstated: beyond immediate emotional harm, sustained bullying among special needs students catalyses the onset of secondary mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and impaired self-efficacy, thereby compounding pre-existing developmental challenges (Maïano et al., 2019; Gage et al., 2021).

Globally, research consistently underscores the elevated risk faced by students with disabilities. In the United States, approximately 25% of special needs students have reported disability-based bullying, with verbal victimisation affecting up to 64% of this population (Hughes et al.,2021; Pacer Center, 2019). In the United Kingdom, Mencap (2019) documented that 30% of special needs students experience bullying. South African studies reveal that up to 80% of learners with special educational needs encounter bullying in school settings (Mncube, 2018). Despite these alarming statistics, the majority of existing literature focuses on bullying in inclusive educational environments where students with disabilities are integrated alongside non-disabled peers.

Far less scholarly attention has been directed towards bullying dynamics within exclusive special needs school settings, where all students present with varying degrees of developmental disorders.

The African context, and specifically the Zimbabwean landscape, presents a conspicuous gap in the literature. Whereas studies from high-income countries have extensively examined bullying correlates such as stigma, power imbalance, and lack of institutional support, the specific psychosocial dynamics operative within exclusive special needs schools in sub-Saharan Africa remain largely unexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining the bullying experiences of students at Hellenic Silver Lining School in Harare, Zimbabwe, an institution that exclusively serves students with intellectual, emotional, and social developmental disorders.

Three interrelated dimensions are investigated: (1) the perceptions held by victims and perpetrators regarding bullying; (2) the psychosocial problems emanating from bullying; and (3) the interventions employed to mitigate bullying behaviours. By centring the experiences of special needs students in an African exclusive school context, this study contributes to a more contextually nuanced understanding of bullying dynamics and informs evidence-based strategies for promoting safer, more supportive learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceptions of Bullying among Special Needs Students

Bullying is broadly conceptualised as a form of aggressive behaviour that is intentional, repetitive, and characterised by a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Giavrimis, 2020; Armitage, 2021). For students with special needs, the nature of this power imbalance is often mediated by disability-related vulnerabilities, including impaired communication, reduced capacity for self-advocacy, and limited peer acceptance. Research consistently demonstrates that special needs students are more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience all major forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying (Ratib & Lisa, 2021).

Perceptions of bullying among special needs students are shaped by multiple interacting factors. Gage et al. (2021) found that special needs students perceived bullying as encompassing social isolation, teacher hostility, and intentional physical abuse, with prevalence rates of verbal bullying reaching 100% within their sample. UNESCO (2019) highlighted how stigma and lack of disability awareness among peers and educators contribute to the social exclusion of special needs students, rendering them easy targets for sustained victimisation. Berchialla et al. (2020) further established that continuous negative attitudes directed at individuals with disabilities constitute a recognised form of disability-based bullying.

In the sub-Saharan African context, additional cultural dimensions complicate bullying perceptions. In Nigeria, Raji et al. (2019) noted that bullying is often normalised within educational environments, with teachers and parents expecting children to endure peer aggression as an inherent aspect of socialisation. In South Africa, Mncube (2018) found that 90% of special needs students attributed bullying primarily to a lack of understanding and empathetic engagement from both teachers and peers. These cultural dynamics suggest that effective anti-bullying interventions in African contexts must address attitudinal barriers alongside structural school-based mechanisms.

Psychosocial Consequences of Bullying

The psychosocial sequelae of bullying among special needs students are extensive and clinically significant. Sustained victimisation is associated with the onset of secondary comorbid disorders, including anxiety disorders, major depressive disorder, PTSD, and social phobia (Holden et al., 2020; Oluwoye et al., 2022). Maïano et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study in France involving 115 participants with intellectual disabilities and documented that 44.3% had experienced bullying, with associated rates of depression (63.5%), anxiety (57.4%), and stress (54.8%). Similarly, Ellis et al. (2021), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of 22 UK-based studies, established that children with special educational needs are 2.5 times more likely to be bullied, with bullying linked to elevated rates of anxiety (75%), depression (61%), and stress (55%).

Beyond clinical symptomatology, bullying erodes self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a sense of social belonging. Rueger et al. (2020) documented heightened anxiety, depressive affect, and diminished self-worth among students with mental health challenges who experienced bullying. The World Health Organisation (2019) emphasised that stigma-driven bullying perpetuates a cycle of social exclusion, low self-esteem, and psychological withdrawal, all of which are compounded in students who already contend with developmental disorders.

For students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the psychosocial impact of bullying is further complicated by deficits in social cognition and emotional recognition. Simpson et al. (2018), applying Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Theory to a qualitative investigation of ASD students, found that social skills difficulties, sensory sensitivities, and limited peer understanding collectively amplified bullying experiences and their mental health consequences. Gage et al. (2021) established that 80% of bullied special needs students experienced anxiety, with 70% reporting sadness and 60% exhibiting self-isolation as behavioural responses.

Mitigation and Intervention Strategies

A range of evidence-based interventions have been proposed and evaluated across multiple international contexts. Teacher-led approaches are widely regarded as foundational, with Berchialla et al. (2020) advocating for targeted teacher training that equips educators with the knowledge and skills required to identify and respond to bullying behaviours involving students with disabilities. Mncube (2018) recommended a multi-component approach encompassing anti-bullying policies, social skills development curricula, peer support programmes, and parental involvement in school-based intervention frameworks.

The Restorative Justice Council (2018) in the United Kingdom proposed restorative circles, restorative conversations, and mediation workshops as collaborative strategies for addressing bullying in school settings. These approaches prioritise accountability, empathy, and conflict resolution through structured dialogue among students, teachers, and parents. In Nigeria, Kasanambe and Mwale (2018) demonstrated that peer mediation interventions significantly reduced bullying incidents in school settings, underscoring the utility of student-led advocacy in supporting vulnerable peers.

Despite these advances, significant gaps persist in the evidence base, particularly regarding interventions tailored to exclusive special needs school environments in African contexts. Most existing studies examine anti-bullying strategies in inclusive mainstream settings where the power dynamics, communication challenges, and relational complexities specific to special needs-only schools are absent. The present study addresses this critical lacuna.

Theoretical Framework: Social Ecological Theory

This study is grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which conceptualises human development as a product of dynamic interactions across nested environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Applied to bullying in special needs school contexts, this framework elucidates how individual disorder-related vulnerabilities interact with proximal environments (peer relationships, classroom dynamics, teacher-student interactions) and distal systemic influences (school policies, community attitudes, national disability legislation) to produce or mitigate bullying behaviours.

Espelage (2014) demonstrated that socio-ecological interventions targeting multiple system levels are more effective in reducing bullying than single-domain approaches. Shams et al. (2018) similarly affirmed the utility of socio-ecological model-based educational programmes in reducing school bullying. For special needs students, the theory is particularly illuminating: disorder-related characteristics at the individual level (e.g., communication impairments in ASD, emotional dysregulation in intellectual disabilities) interact with microsystem factors (peer exclusion, teacher responses) and macrosystem dynamics (cultural stigma, policy frameworks) to shape the intensity, frequency, and form of bullying experienced.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Design

This study was conducted within an interpretivism research paradigm, which privileges the subjective meanings, lived experiences, and contextual interpretations of participants. Interpretivism was selected for its capacity to illuminate the nuanced and complex realities of bullying among special needs students, whose diverse communication profiles and developmental challenges require research approaches that are flexible, empathetic, and context-sensitive (Bunker & Horrocks, 2018).

A qualitative case study design was employed, facilitating an in-depth examination of bullying dynamics within the bounded context of Hellenic Silver Lining School. The case study approach is well-suited to exploratory investigations of complex social phenomena within specific institutional settings, enabling the triangulation of multiple data sources to enhance the validity and reliability of findings.

Participants and Sampling

The study population comprised senior school students at Hellenic Silver Lining School, an exclusive special needs institution in Harare, Zimbabwe, serving students with mild to moderate intellectual, emotional, and social developmental disorders. Purposive sampling was employed to select 13 participants (6 girls, 7 boys) aged between 11 and 16 years, ensuring diverse representation across gender, age, and disability profile. Two key informants—experienced teachers at the school—were also included to provide contextual insights into bullying dynamics from an educator's perspective.

All participants presented with developmental challenges spanning intellectual disabilities (including Down syndrome and ASD), emotional and behavioural disorders (including ADHD), communication disorders, and learning disabilities. The sample size was determined by the principles of purposive qualitative inquiry, with adequacy assessed by the depth of data generated rather than numerical representativeness.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary instruments: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The semi-structured interview guide comprised open-ended questions addressing bullying perceptions, emotional implications, and mitigation strategies, with flexibility for probing and follow-up queries tailored to participants' communication capabilities.

Participant observation was conducted during classroom and playground activities, enabling the researcher to observe natural behavioural patterns, peer interactions, and bullying dynamics in situ. Field notes and checklists were employed to systematically record observations. Document analysis encompassed school policies, incident reports, teacher notes, and student records, providing historical and institutional contextualisation for the primary data collected.

Data collection was preceded by a pilot study that informed the refinement of observation protocols, particularly to accommodate the communication needs of speech-impaired and autistic participants. Ethical protocols were rigorously observed throughout, including the attainment of informed consent from parents or guardians and written assent from participants, with full disclosure of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and the right to withdraw.

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, it involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Descriptive codes captured the observable characteristics of bullying incidents, while emotive codes mapped the affective dimensions of participants' experiences, and mitigation codes indexed the intervention strategies articulated by participants. Themes were inductively derived from the codes and validated through cross-checking and verification against the full dataset, ensuring analytical rigour and reflexivity (Horrocks & Bunker, 2018).

FINDINGS

Bullying Perceptions: Context, Dynamics, and Perpetrator Characteristics

Thematic analysis of participant accounts revealed a complex landscape of bullying perceptions, organised under three sub-themes: context and setting, frequency and duration, and perpetrator characteristics. Bullying was predominantly reported in unstructured environments, particularly playgrounds during recess, where reduced adult supervision created conditions conducive to peer aggression. Verbal bullying emerged as the predominant form, characterised by repetitive targeting of specific individuals.

Participant **SLSS021** described witnessing persistent verbal bullying directed at the same peer across multiple incidents: "I have never been bullied, but I have witnessed incidents of bullying behaviours especially in the playgrounds. The bullying is usually verbal directed against the same person on many occasions." This account illustrates the repetitive and targeted nature of bullying as experienced within the school, consistent with definitional criteria emphasising intentionality and recurrence (Giavrimis, 2020).

Avoidance behaviours emerged as a salient psychosocial response to perceived threats. Participant **SLSS018** explained: "I stay away from students who are aggressive, I also avoid playing with them." While such avoidance offered short-term protection from victimisation, it concurrently restricted participants' social engagement opportunities, contributing to social isolation and impaired peer relationship development.

Key informant accounts offered important insights into perpetrator dynamics. **SLSS031** observed: "When confronted about their abusive actions, perpetrators may exhibit a surprising response in tears." This was contextualised by SLSS032's observation that "perpetrators may engage in bullying behaviours without realising [the] harm caused and become emotional when admonished." These accounts point to a significant and distinctive feature of bullying in exclusive special needs environments: many perpetrators, owing to their own developmental disorders, may lack the social cognition required to anticipate the emotional consequences of their actions on others, a finding unique to this context and not widely documented in the extant literature.

Participant observation further revealed that autistic students sometimes exhibited aggressive behaviours driven by sensory processing difficulties and communication frustrations rather than premeditated intent to harm. This underscores the need to apply contextually sensitive definitions of bullying when working with populations characterised by neurodevelopmental diversity.

Onset of Secondary Mental Health Challenges

Findings under this theme documented a range of secondary psychosocial disorders emerging from sustained bullying experiences, organised into two sub-themes: negative emotions and feelings, and uncertainty and doubt.

Multiple participants reported experiences consistent with anxiety disorder symptomatology. Participant **SLSS014** articulated a persistent state of hypervigilance: "I am always on edge, unsure of when the next incident will occur." Participant **SLSS022** similarly conveyed the emotional exhaustion of indirect bullying exposure: "Witnessing bullying has made me feel like I am walking on eggshells, never knowing when the next incident will happen. It is exhausting and painful." These accounts resonate with the clinical presentation of generalised anxiety disorder and social anxiety, reflecting the cumulative toll of chronic exposure to bullying.

Diminished self-esteem and impaired self-efficacy were widely reported. Participant **SLSS0111** stated: "I feel worthless and lack confidence due to the persistent bullying." Participant **SLSS018** described the internalisation of peer criticism: "I have started to doubt my abilities and second-guess myself because of the constant criticism and belittling comments from my peers." These findings align with Rueger et al.'s (2020) documentation of bullying-related reductions in self-worth among students with mental health challenges, and with the WHO's (2019) framing of stigma-driven bullying as a mechanism through which special needs students develop pervasive negative self-perceptions.

Notably, some participants with ASD demonstrated limited metacognitive awareness of the connection between bullying experiences and their emotional distress, underscoring the disorder-specific complexity of bullying's psychological impact in exclusive special needs settings. Key informants confirmed that bullying frequently triggered emotional meltdowns and behavioural shutdowns, particularly among students with limited emotional regulation capacities.

Mitigation Strategies and Support Systems

Findings under this theme identified three primary sources of mitigation: teacher support, peer intervention, and parental collaboration, organised under the sub-themes of awareness and reporting, and resilience and positivity.

Teacher involvement emerged as the most consistently cited source of support. Participant **SLSS014** reported: **"Teachers provided counselling and comfort when I reported continuous belittling by a fellow student."** Participant **SLSS022** noted that "teachers encourage students to engage in self-advocacy and self-expression, empowering them to voice their concerns and feelings." Teacher-led supervision of playground activities was also identified as a preventive mechanism, with heightened monitoring reducing bullying opportunities during unstructured periods.

Peer support was identified as a secondary but meaningful source of emotional regulation. Participant SLSS018 described the comfort derived from supportive classmates: "I get comfort from my friends when I am emotionally down." Such peer relationships served as protective buffers against the full impact of bullying-induced distress, consistent with the evidence base on social support as a mediator of bullying's psychological consequences (Kasanambe & Mwale, 2018).

Resilience and positive coping also emerged as significant themes. Participant **SLSS0111** reflected: "I always accept my situation and find comfort in playing puzzles when I am emotionally disturbed." Such adaptive coping strategies, though not sufficient in themselves to address systemic bullying, represent important individual resources that can be cultivated and strengthened through targeted therapeutic and psychoeducational interventions.

A notable finding was the persistence of anxiety and phobia-like responses in some participants even after teacher-mediated intervention, suggesting that bullying trauma in this population may be resistant to short-term counselling and may require more sustained, individualised therapeutic support.

DISCUSSION

Bullying Perceptions in an Exclusive Special Needs Context

The findings of this study both corroborate and extend existing international literature on bullying among special needs students. The identification of playgrounds and unstructured environments as primary sites of bullying is consistent with global evidence on the role of reduced supervision in facilitating peer aggression (Gaffney et al., 2020). Verbal bullying as the predominant form of victimisation aligns with U.S. data indicating that verbal aggression is the most common bullying modality in special needs populations (Hughes et al., 2021).

However, the present study offers a distinctive contribution by illuminating bullying dynamics in an exclusive special needs school environment, where perpetrators themselves present with developmental disorders. The observation that many perpetrators lacked awareness of the harm caused by their actions, and exhibited emotional distress when confronted, challenges traditional conceptualisations of bullying as a unidirectionally intentional act driven by clear power asymmetry. In the context of neurodevelopmental diversity, the boundaries between bullying, impulsive aggression, and disorder-driven behaviour require more nuanced definitional consideration than existing frameworks typically afford (Armitage, 2021).

These findings diverge from studies in inclusive settings (Mncube, 2018; UNESCO, 2019; Gage et al., 2021) which attribute bullying primarily to stigma, lack of disability knowledge among non-disabled peers, and teacher inadequacy. In an exclusive setting, bullying is instead mediated by disorder-specific characteristics:

communication barriers among autistic students, impulsivity associated with ADHD, and the emotional dysregulation common to many intellectual and developmental disorders. This represents an important contextual distinction with significant implications for intervention design.

Psychosocial Sequelae: Comorbidity and Compounding Vulnerability

The onset of secondary mental health challenges documented in this study including anxiety, emotional dysregulation, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal is consistent with the broader evidence base on the psychological consequences of bullying in special needs populations (Maïano et al., 2019; Ellis et al., 2021; Gage et al., 2021). The prevalence of anxiety symptomatology, in particular, aligns with Oluwoye et al.'s (2022) finding that 39.5% of children with mental, emotional, or developmental disorders in the United States experience bullying-related victimisation associated with anxiety.

Of particular clinical significance is the compounding dynamic at play in this population: students who already present with intellectual, emotional, and social developmental disorders are rendered additionally vulnerable by bullying-induced secondary comorbidities. This creates a cycle of escalating psychosocial risk in which pre-existing vulnerabilities amplify the impact of bullying, which in turn generates new psychological burdens that further compromise adaptive functioning. Addressing this cycle requires holistic, individually tailored clinical and educational interventions.

The finding that some ASD participants lacked metacognitive awareness of bullying-related distress represents a novel contribution to the field. Existing literature has documented the social cognition deficits associated with ASD (Simpson et al., 2018), but the specific implications of these deficits for bullying recognition, processing, and disclosure in exclusive school environments have received insufficient empirical attention.

Implications for Mitigation and Support

The mitigation strategies identified in this study teacher counselling, peer support, and parental collaboration, reflect the multi-stakeholder approach advocated by Mncube (2018), Berchialla et al. (2020), and the Restorative Justice Council (2018). The centrality of teacher support in this exclusive setting aligns with Dasioti and Kolaitis's (2018) finding that school staff bear primary responsibility for creating supportive and inclusive environments for students with disabilities.

However, the persistence of anxiety and phobia-like responses in some participants following intervention raises important questions about the adequacy of school-based counselling as a standalone response to bullying-induced trauma in this population. The findings suggest a need for trauma-informed therapeutic approaches that extend beyond reactive counselling to encompass proactive emotional regulation skill-building, individualised behavioural support plans, and structured separation protocols between perpetrators and victims during high-risk activities.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an in-depth exploration of the psychosocial dynamics of bullying among special needs students at Hellenic Silver Lining School in Zimbabwe. The findings establish that bullying in exclusive special needs school environments is a complex, disorder-mediated phenomenon whose dynamics differ significantly from those documented in inclusive mainstream settings. Communication barriers, impulsivity, and limited social cognition rather than stigma and non-disabled peer ignorance are the primary drivers of bullying in this context.

Bullying revealed distinct implications on learners with intellectual, emotional, and social challenges: intellectually, students with dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD, and intellectual disorder faced repetitive targeting during visible academic tasks, leading to avoidance and widening learning gaps; emotionally, constant ridicule and low supervision heightened anxiety, shame, and distress for both victims and perpetrators, many of whom lacked the social cognition to anticipate harm; socially, learners with ASD, and attachment disorders, were

excluded from unstructured play and peer groups due to difficulties with communication, coordination, and social cues, reinforcing isolation and limiting relationship development.

The psychosocial consequences of bullying are severe and encompass anxiety, emotional dysregulation, diminished self-esteem, and social withdrawal, with some participants exhibiting persistent phobia-like responses resistant to standard school-based intervention. Effective mitigation requires multi-stakeholder collaboration, individualised therapeutic support, and prevention programmes specifically designed for the neurodevelopmental profiles characteristic of exclusive special needs school populations.

This study contributes a context-specific, empirically grounded perspective to an underexplored area of bullying research, with meaningful implications for school psychologists, special education practitioners, policymakers, and mental health professionals working with vulnerable child populations in Zimbabwe and comparable African contexts. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, larger samples from multiple schools for generalizability, and diverse geographic contexts to further extend understanding of bullying dynamics in exclusive special needs educational settings.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. The small sample size (N = 13), drawn from a single school, restricts the generalisability of findings to broader populations of special needs students. Speech and communication impairments among some participants limited the depth of verbal data obtainable through interview. Time constraints precluded an exhaustive longitudinal examination of bullying dynamics. Future research should address these limitations through larger multi-site samples, inclusive mixed-methods approaches, and extended data collection periods.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Develop and implement evidence-based bullying prevention programmes tailored to the specific neurodevelopmental profiles of special needs students, with embedded social skills training, emotional regulation curricula, and disability awareness components for all school stakeholders.

Establish structured supervision protocols for unstructured periods (e.g., recess, transitions) to reduce opportunities for bullying in high-risk environments.

Provide ongoing professional development for teachers in special education, disability awareness, and trauma-informed counselling to equip them to identify, respond to, and prevent bullying effectively.

Foster robust parental collaboration through restorative circles and parent-teacher communication frameworks that ensure consistency between home and school environments.

Implement individualised intervention plans that address each student's specific disorder-related vulnerabilities, with separate activity protocols for identified perpetrators and victims to interrupt cycles of victimisation.

Promote a school-wide culture of acceptance, empathy, and kindness through regular awareness campaigns, peer mentorship programmes, and inclusive extracurricular activities.

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