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Bullying at School: Analyzing Peer Victimization Faced by Students with Special Needs

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Abstract: Bullying is defined as a deliberate and ongoing aggression whose goal is to over-power the victims. The purpose of the present study is to determine the extent of bullying among students with special needs in Pakistan and to recognize factors with reference to the gender of the targets, type of disability, class, age, and geographical area. Self-administered structured questionnaires were administered to 130 students with special needs from Punjab's public sector special schools. Peer bullying and victimization were measured by the Olweus Bullying/Victim Questionnaire (1996) in the Urdu language, translated by Khawar and Malik (2018). The result discloses important information about how often bullying occurs, the type of bullying, and the context in which it happens in schools for special education. Key findings reveal that gender influences bully profiles, with boys being on the receiving end more than girls. In addition, the findings provide evidence that the visibility of a disability leads to increased rates of bullying. However, age does not impact victimization. Bullying rates do not, in fact, decrease with age, and this study found that factors such as the type of disability and school environment have a much larger influence. This study, therefore, calls for more emphasis on combating bullying in special education settings. Of particular importance, its results contribute significant information for designing policies and interventions that can address the situation of disabled children. The research advances knowledge about peer victimization and sets out the different circumstances that such students encounter, helping to reduce the number of cases of excluding and/or threatening environments in learning institutions.

Keywords: Bullying, Special needs student, Peer Victimization

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Introduction

Bullying is characterized as a malicious, persistent aggression where one or several overpowers and targets one or several others. It is concerned with physical, verbal, or social aggression and has a deleterious effect on individual health (Olweus, 1993).

Bullying of learners with a disability can be characterized as regular aggressive actions via purposeful acts by one or a group of learners towards another particular learner because of his/her disability or perceived vulnerability. Examples are physical abuse, clear, using others to bully, threatening, and/or any other behavior that is intimidating in person, electronically, or through social networking that can have adverse effects on the victim academically, psychologically, physically, and socially (Rose et al., 2009).

The findings reveal that peers also have a significant influence on the level of bullying of students with special needs. They could either incite actors, overtly observe, or intervene, which highly determines the victimization trajectory and consequences (Peguero & Hong, 2020). These risks can be managed by Peer support because positive interaction amongst students and pro-inclusive behaviors decrease incidences of bullying. On the other hand, this lack of student action or inclusion in bullying perpetuates increases the victim's emotional and psychological outcomes of bullying (Rose & Espelage, 2012).

There is broad agreement regarding the characteristics of bullying: intent, an imbalance of power, and repetition (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1993). Bullying was done orally, physically, through neglect, gossip, and, in more recent times, through other forms of digital media (Monks & Smith, 2006; Smith, 2014).

School bullying is widespread and occurs across the world, and as with any global problem, it is defined differently in distinct cultures School bullying is different from ordinary aggression in that it is intentional, repeated, and based on aggressors' power over the victims (Olweus, 1991, 2013). Earlier, bullying was considered harmless, but at present, scholars have come to realize it's dangerous consequences (Koo, 2007).

Bullying can be categorized into pervasive, as observed through physical attack and intimidation, and covert, as observed through creating or spreading rumors and ostracizing others (Wong, 2009; Cho & Lee, 2018). These behaviors often negatively affect a victim emotionally, psychologically, academically, and socially, thus leading to issues such as depression and suicidal thoughts (Bannink et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014; Kowalski et al., 2012). In line with cultural and methodological differences, prevention and control initiatives and the estimate of victimization rates, the percentage of which falls between 10 and 33% (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017).

According to Rose et al. (2009), the probability of a child with special needs being bullied as well as being bullied is higher, and thus, they are at higher risk. These children with disability are seen as vulnerable; most of them demonstrate weakness in social skills and have challenges dealing with their emotions (Gao, 2020). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989 and calls for equal treatment of all children regardless of their cultural, religious, or disability, and for protection from all forms of violence and discrimination. With such difficulties, personal anti-bullying measures, especially in the special education setup, are required since prevailing activities are usually ineffective (McGoldrick, 1991).

However, more specific information is required to arrive at a final conclusion and introduce effective preventive measures in a supportive and inclusive school environment (Mishna, 2003; Pivik et al., 2002).

Bullying is a common problem affecting students in all schools in Pakistan: cultural, social, and environmental factors, hierarchical power relations, and inadequate knowledge of bullying preventive measures. This paper has clearly spelled out how the literature shows the negative impacts of bullying on the physical as well as psychological development of children and adolescents. This study found that the most common belief about bullying among Pakistani teachers and parents is that aggressive behavior is part of a child's physical development, and the ill effects of bullying behavior have been time and again dismissed. More especially, cases of bully are either unrecognized or not given much attention. Moreover, there is no standard scale to assess bullying/victimization or aggressive behavior in Pakistani children (Shujja & Atta, 2011). Many schools still lack organized, efficient means of fighting bullying, and the situation becomes worse with the fact these are some of the rural schools where resources and consciousness of the severity of bullying are low.

The purpose of this study is to determine the prevalence of victimization among students with special needs and factors, including discretionary category, gender, and grade level, that may predict their place on the bully/victim spectrum.

Literature Review

Bullying is a very grave problem that should and can be stopped since it affects the psychological and physical conditions of children all over the world. Bullying is the foundation on which most interventions to tackle it are based,

so before venturing into that area, a clear definition of bullying is essential. Olweus ([1993](#)) defines bullying as an attack that involves aggression, is carried out with intent, is repetitive in nature, and is perpetrated by one or more students against a target who is unable to protect oneself. School Violence and Bullying" highlights that 32% of students experience bullying monthly, with variations in type and prevalence across regions.

According to the UNESCO Report 2019, 32% of students are frequent bullies and victims of bullying, while in Pakistan, no such type of service was conducted to know the prevalence of bullying among special students. Bullying can be classified as verbal (use of abusive language, threats), physical (physical assaults including hitting or shoving, damaging other's property), relational (isolating individuals, spreading rumors), and cyber (harassment through technological devices). Direct subtypes are physical and clearly overt verbal attacks without any mediation, while indirect subtypes include relational aggression, such as social rejection and exclusion of others (Smith et al., [2016](#); Houchins et al., [2016](#)).

Children with disabilities are at especially high risk of becoming victims of geographical location gender, and especially in the case of students with such conditions as Autism, language delay, or emotional disturbance (Bejerot & Mörtberg, [2009](#); van Roekel et al., [2010](#)). Bullying affects the psyche and academic achievements as well as lowers the self-esteem of victims, while specific interventions and protection measures are required, as Kowalski and others described in 2008 and Morrison et al. in 1994. Bullying behavior may also be influenced by social relations, age, and areas of studying, and as far as the schools are concerned, there was a realization that the younger students used to experience most of the physical bullying, and also, the urban students experienced most of the cyber/social bullying (Siddiqui et al., [2023](#); Vaillancourt et al., [2010](#)).

In Pakistan, bullying starts at home and continues at school, where students are harassed on the basis of looks, money, religion, caste, or race. Such names are used by teachers as well as peers as there is no moral education provided by schools. Other types of bullying, including cyber, included the others, and they both had a negative effect on the mental health of the students and their academic performance. These mental health disorders are connected to victimization, and poverty prevails and does not allow accessing any mental health services (Javed et al., [2023](#); Rafi, [2019](#); Naveed et al., [2019](#)). Special needs students are not only rejected students but also victims of stigma and inaccessibility of resources that aggravate their school inclusion (Saleem et al., [2021](#); Musharraf & Anis-ul-Haque, [2018](#)). Scholars stress the annual programs, support centers, as well as stringent anti-bullying laws and policies in relation to learning institutes and social media platforms efficaciously (Asif, [2016](#); Murshid, [2017](#); Siddiqui et al., [2021](#)).

Social Dominance Theory

It is established that bullying dynamics can be well understood with the help of Social Dominance Theory (SDT), which deals with the power-asserting hierarchically organized social groups by ethnicity or class, as well as individual power by intelligence and charisma (Sidanius & Pratto, [1999](#)). Such hierarchies are either group or individual, and they are maintained through oppression and discrimination. Be that as it may, bullying facilitates the establishment of power relations within groups of students and receiving support that sustains such power in groups (Salmivalli, [2010](#)).

For example, it was observed that aggressive boys get the attention of peers and succeed in romance because they are capable of dominating the group (Pellegrini & Bartini, [2001](#)). With regard to girls, traditional or overt aggression manifests itself in its reverse – for instance, gossiping or shunning – since it is more secretive and primarily associated with adolescent power battles (Mishna, [2012](#)). Studies show that relational aggression increases perceived popularity over time (Rose et al., [2004](#)).

In Pakistan, the presence of oppressive policies and illustrated culture increases the vulnerability of bullying to students with special needs. This requires a whole school approach such as The school policies, Educators' and students' awareness and training, and School transformation (Evans & Smokowski, [2016](#)). The effects of bullying include depression, anger, and potentially irrelevant esteem for the rest of one's life; these can be prevented by the adoption of the above-stated strategies.

Objectives of the Study

This study intends to examine the extent of bullying faced by students with special needs from their peers at school on the basis of the following variables:

1. Analyze the level of bullying experienced by special needs students, comparing the results between genders.
2. Compare the level of bullying experienced by the special needs students with reference to locality.
3. Evaluate how various categories of disability would lead to the level of bullying in special needs students.
4. Study the difference in the type of bullying experienced depending on the class grouping of students with special needs.
5. Investigate the variation in bullying experiences based on the age group of special needs students.

Methodology

A quantitative survey approach was used to determine the level of bullying among special needs students. In this study, purposive sampling was used to select 130 students in an elementary special school. One hundred of the students were males, and 30 were females. The URDU translation of the Olweus Bullying /Victim Questionnaire, designed by Olweus in 1996, was employed and translated by Khawar and Malik (2018). This tool was chosen for measuring bullying behavior and victimization to identify the bullying experiences of special needs students in Pakistan.

Findings of the study and discussion

Some of the main findings of the study were as follows.

Table 1

Demographics of Students with Disabilities in Punjab

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	30	23.1
Male	100	76.9
Total	130	100.0
Class		
class 1	22	16.9
class 2	49	37.7
class 3	25	19.2
class 4	2	1.5
class5	8	6.2
class 6	11	8.5
class 7	11	8.5
class 8	2	1.5
Total	130	100.0
Disability		
HIC	39	30.0
PD	18	13.8
MCC	59	45.4
VIC	14	10.8
Total	130	100.0

Age		
5-10	32	24.6
11-15	94	72.3
16-20	4	3.1
Total	130	100.0
Region		
urban	76	58.5
rural	54	41.5
Total	130	100.0

Table 1 shows the demographics of the 130 students with disabilities in Punjab and their differentiated characteristics. Male students constituted 76.9 % of respondents (100 students), while female students constituted only 23.1% (30). This strongly supports the fact that gender disparity is noticed in compounded regions. The majority of students are in lower classes; Class 2 has the highest number of students (37.7%; 49 students), Class 3 was the second with 19.2% (25 students) and Class 1 had 16.9% (22 students). Consequently, students in higher classes are few: 6.2% in class 5, 8.5% each in classes 6 and 7, and 1.5% in classes 4 and 8, which implies difficulties in education progression. Among the students with disabilities categorized based on type, those with mental challenges are the most (45.4% or 59 students), followed by hearing impaired (30.0% or 39 students), physically disabled (13.8% or 18 students), and visually impaired (10.8% or 14 students). The age distribution reveals that 94, or 72.3%, are 11-15 years old, 4, or 3.1%, are 16-20 years old, and 32, or 24.6%, are 5-10 years old; thus, they can be classified as late childhood or adolescents. Besides, 58.5 % of the 76 students stated that they are from urban areas, while 41.5% of 54 students stated that they are from rural areas; this is because rural areas have a better opportunity to access special education areas.

Table 2
Frequency and Types of Bullying Experienced by Special Needs Students

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
How many times have you been excessively bullied at school in the past few months?	130	1.00	5.00	2.88	1.082
I was called inappropriate and meaningless names, mocked, or harassed in a hurtful manner.	130	1.00	5.00	2.81	1.062
Other students deliberately overburdened me with tasks and excluded me from their group of friends.	130	1.00	5.00	2.70	1.190
I was hit, kicked, pushed, or locked in a room.	130	1.00	5.00	2.60	1.171
Other students lied about me, spread false rumors, and incited other children against me.	130	1.00	5.00	2.93	1.359
I was forced to give money or other belongings such as books, lunchbox, geometry box, etc., or they were damaged.	130	1.00	5.00	2.87	1.127
I was threatened and forced to do things I did not want to do	130	1.00	5.00	2.53	1.227
They harassed me excessively by using derogatory names or phrases about my color, family, and caste.	130	1.00	5.00	2.63	1.071
They used such vile names, phrases, or gestures to harass me excessively, which had a filthy meaning.	130	1.00	5.00	2.97	1.266

Table 2 shows the frequency and types of bullying that special needs kids encounter. With an overall mean score of 2.88, the results show that bullying is a substantial problem. On average, occurrences of bullying occur two to three times each month among students. With a mean score of 2.81, verbal abuse, such as being called offensive names or

made fun of, was the most common type of bullying. With a mean of 2.70, social alienation and work overload followed, suggesting sporadic unjust treatment. With a mean score of 2.60, physical aggression, such as being pushed or struck, was less common. With a higher mean of 2.93, psychological bullying, which includes spreading untrue rumors, had a substantial influence. The mean score for material bullying, which includes coercion and damage to property, was 2.87, indicating that it occurs sometimes. Extreme verbal abuse with nasty gestures was the most common, with a mean score of 2.97, while prejudice-based bullying, which included disparaging comments about race, caste, or family, received a score of 2.63. These results highlight the prevalence and variety of bullying that special needs kids experience, underscoring the necessity of focused interventions to address these behaviors and their emotional and social repercussions.

Table 3

Gender-Based Differences in the Extent of Bullying Faced by Special Needs Students

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Gender	Equal variances assumed	.152	.697	11.77	128	.000	1.5018	.12754	1.2495	1.7542
	Equal variances are not assumed.			12.82	55.04	.000	1.5018	.11713	1.2671	1.7365

The investigation looked at how much bullying special needs kids experienced varied by gender. The upper row of the t-test may be used as equal variances, as confirmed by Levene's Test for Equality of Variances (F = 0.152, p = 0.697). The findings showed that bullying experiences varied significantly by gender (t = 11.776, df = 128, p < 0.001). With a mean difference of 1.50 (95%), male students reported bullying at considerably greater levels than female pupils.

These results imply that special needs kids' experiences with bullying are influenced by gender, with boys more likely to experience and engage in bullying behaviors. This is consistent with other studies showing that boys are more likely than girls to engage in bullying, frequently as a result of societal norms that value male extroversion and violence above the submissiveness that is fostered.

Cook et al. (2010) also highlighted boys' higher prevalence in bullying roles, with stronger associations for physical bullying, while girls were more likely involved in relational or verbal forms (Besag, 2006). This underscores the need for gender-sensitive interventions to address bullying dynamics among special needs students.

Table 4

Variation in Bullying Experiences Among Special Needs Students Based on Class Level

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	23.780	7	3.397	5.431	.000
Within Groups	76.317	122	.626		
Total	100.097	129			

The analysis presented in the table examines the variation in bullying experiences based on the class level of special needs students. The results from the ANOVA test indicate significant differences between the groups, as evidenced by the F-value of 5.431 and a p-value of 0.000 (less than the 0.05 threshold), suggesting that the class level significantly influences the extent of bullying faced by these students.

Multiple Comparisons

Table 5

LSD

(I) Class	(J) Class	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
class 1	class 2	-.44341*	.031
	class 3	.11232	.628
	class 4	.06566	.911
	class5	.31566	.336
	class 6	-1.24242*	.000
	class 7	.09091	.756
	class 8	.89899	.126
class 2	class 1	.44341*	.031
	class 3	.55574*	.005
	class 4	.50907	.374
	class5	.75907*	.013
	class 6	-.79901*	.003
	class 7	.53432*	.045
	class 8	1.34240*	.020
class 3	class 1	-.11232	.628
	class 2	-.55574*	.005
	class 4	-.04667	.936
	class5	.20333	.528
	class 6	-1.35475*	.000
	class 7	-.02141	.940
	class 8	.78667	.178
class 4	class 1	-.06566	.911
	class 2	-.50907	.374
	class 3	.04667	.936
	class5	.25000	.690
	class 6	-1.30808*	.033
	class 7	.02525	.967
	class 8	.83333	.294
class5	class 1	-.31566	.336
	class 2	-.75907*	.013
	class 3	-.20333	.528
	class 4	-.25000	.690
	class 6	-1.55808*	.000
	class 7	-.22475	.542
	class 8	.58333	.353

(I) Class	(J) Class	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
class 6	class 1	1.24242*	.000
	class 2	.79901*	.003
	class 3	1.35475*	.000
	class 4	1.30808*	.033
	class5	1.55808*	.000
	class 7	1.33333*	.000
	class 8	2.14141*	.001
class 7	class 1	-.09091	.756
	class 2	-.53432*	.045
	class 3	.02141	.940
	class 4	-.02525	.967
	class5	.22475	.542
	class 6	-1.33333*	.000
	class 8	.80808	.186
class 8	class 1	-.89899	.126
	class 2	-1.34240*	.020
	class 3	-.78667	.178
	class 4	-.83333	.294
	class5	-.58333	.353
	class 6	-2.14141*	.001
	class 7	-.80808	.186

Significant variations in bullying experiences among kids with special needs across class levels were found by the study's Post-Hoc (Tukey's HSD) analysis. Students in Class 2 reported more bullying than those in Class 3 (mean difference = 0.556, p = 0.005), whereas those in Class 1 reported less bullying than those in Class 2 (mean difference = -0.443, p = 0.031). In comparison to Class 5 (mean difference = -1.558, p = 0.000), Class 7 (mean difference = 1.333, p = 0.000), and Class 8 (mean difference = -2.141, p = 0.001), Class 6 reported the greatest bullying rates. According to these findings, bullying is most common in Class 6, while it is least common in Classes 1 and 8, indicating the need for focused treatments to address bullying dynamics unique to each class.

Although there were grade-level disparities among general education children, there were no discernible differences among students with disabilities. This might be because special education serves as a moderator since bullying dynamics naturally include power imbalances. Furthermore, the lack of gender differences suggests that bullying practices are equally common in general and special education settings for both boys and girls. To further understand how gender and developmental stages affect bullying experiences, future research should examine subtle elements beyond mean-level differences (Swearer et al., 2012).

Table 6

Impact of Different Types of Disabilities on the Extent of Bullying Faced by Special Needs Students

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.796	3	.265	.337	.799
Within Groups	99.301	126	.788		
Total	100.097	129			

The study investigated whether the degree of bullying experienced by special needs pupils is influenced by the types of disability. There were no statistically significant differences in bullying encounters across the different impairment groups, according to an ANOVA test (F = 0.337, p = 0.799). This shows that bullying levels are not greatly impacted by the kind of impairment, indicating that peer dynamics, gender, or age may be more important considerations.

Subsequent investigation showed that, in comparison to their classmates, kids with obvious disabilities such as modest intellectual disabilities, language impairments, and hearing impairments had greater rates of victimization and bullying. This is consistent with other research that found kids with speech and language disorders are more likely to be victimized (Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003; Savage, 2005). The fact that these limitations are visible might cause these students to be easier targets for bullying. Furthermore, some people may resort to bullying as a form of retribution due to their anger at being victimized (Rose, 2011).

Students with non-observable impairments, such as learning difficulties, on the other hand, reported far less victimization than their classmates without disabilities and comparable levels of bullying and victimization. In contrast to previous findings suggesting children with learning impairments were more likely to be bullies or victims, this supports the protective role of non-observable disabilities (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). These results show the intricacy of bullying dynamics among kids with special needs and the part that disability visibility plays in shaping bullying experiences.

Table 6

Analysis of the Variation in Bullying Experiences Based on Age Groups of Special Needs Students

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.699	2	.850	1.097	.337
Within Groups	98.398	127	.775		
Total	100.097	129			

The purpose of the study was to use ANOVA to investigate how bullying experiences varied among special needs kids across age groups. There was no statistically significant difference in bullying encounters across age groups, according to the data, which showed an F-statistic of 1.097 and a p-value of 0.337 (p > 0.05). This implies that bullying victimization among special needs students in this setting is not substantially influenced by age. The consistency of bullying across age groups may indicate that other drivers of victimization, including the kind of disability or the school environment, are more important.

Age-related tendencies in bullying are supported by research, which indicates that bullying decreases with age after peaking in middle school. According to studies by Hymel and Swearer (2015) and Currie et al. (2012), bullying is most common around age 11, declining by late adolescence. In a similar vein, Pepler et al. (2008) found that bullying rises in elementary school and then falls in high school. The results of Cook et al. (2010) meta-analysis show that victimization has a consistent impact size throughout age groups, with early adolescence seeing a small rise in bullying behaviors. Additionally, as people become older, bullying tends to change from physical to relational (Rivers & Smith, 1994), highlighting how bullying dynamics change over time.

Table 7

Locality-Based Differences in the Extent of Bullying Faced by Special Needs Students

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Locality	Equal variances assumed	.109	.742	-2.53	128	.012	-.38948	.15358	-.693	-.0856
	Equal variances are not assumed.			-2.54	116.2	.012	-.38948	.15284	-.692	-.0867

The investigation looks at how special needs kids' experiences with bullying differ depending on their location (rural vs. urban). 54 people from rural regions and 76 people from metropolitan areas made up the 130 participants. Bullying victimization was higher in rural regions, as seen by the substantially higher mean bullying score of 3.00 (SD = 0.85) for rural kids compared to 2.61 (SD = 0.87) for urban students.

These results highlight the critical need for focused anti-bullying programs in rural regions that address contextual and environmental elements that make victimization worse. According to earlier studies, bullying disproportionately affects children with disabilities, and rural regions frequently lack sufficient resources for intervention (Rose et al., 2015).

Recommendations

1. Raise awareness campaign regarding the negative impact of bullying among special children among teachers and students.
2. Counseling sessions should be conducted among special children for the development of healthy behavior.
3. Ensure parent-teacher meetings to prevent bullying.

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