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HOW DO PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS PERCEIVE PEER BULLYING AGAINST STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS?

¿CÓMO PERCIBEN LOS PROFESORES DE PRIMARIA EL ACOSO ENTRE IGUALES A LOS ALUMNOS CON NECESIDADES EDUCATIVAS ESPECIALES?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine peer bullying in primary school inclusion students in terms of teachers' views, because the teacher's awareness of peer bullying in teacher-student interaction enables these students to participate more effectively in inclusive education. The study was designed as a case study, and 24 teachers were determined through criterion sampling method. Data was collected through semi-structured interview form. Findings revealed that teachers are aware of peer bullying and types of peer bullying. They stated that mainstreaming students were mostly exposed to emotional bullying. They stated that as a result of bullying, these students felt lonely and worthless and did not want to come to school. They stated that the students who engage in bullying behaviors are students who do not receive love, are exposed to bullying behaviors from their environment and want to attract attention. As a solution to bullying, they mostly suggested solutions such as revealing the strengths of inclusion students, empathizing with the bullying student, and teachers being role models on how to treat inclusion students.

Keywords:

Inclusive education, peer bullying, primary education

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es examinar el acoso entre iguales en alumnos de inclusión de primaria desde el punto de vista de los profesores, porque la concienciación del profesor sobre el acoso entre iguales en la interacción profesor-alumno permite a estos alumnos participar más eficazmente en la educación inclusiva. El estudio se diseñó como un estudio de casos, y se determinaron 24 profesores mediante el método de muestreo por criterios. Los datos se recogieron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los resultados revelaron que los profesores son conscientes del acoso entre iguales y de los tipos de acoso entre iguales. Afirmaron que los alumnos integrados estaban más expuestos al acoso emocional. Afirmaron que, como resultado del acoso, estos alumnos se sentían solos e inútiles y no querían venir a la escuela. Afirmaron que los alumnos que realizan conductas de acoso son alumnos que no reciben amor, están expuestos a conductas de acoso por parte de su entorno y quieren llamar la atención. Como solución al acoso, sugirieron sobre todo soluciones como revelar los puntos fuertes de los alumnos de inclusión, empatizar con el alumno acosador y que los profesores sean modelos de cómo tratar a los alumnos de inclusión.

Palabras clave:

Educación inclusiva, acoso entre iguales, educación primaria

INTRODUCTION

Peer bullying is not a new phenomenon, however, in recent years there has been increasing public awareness of its visibility both at the societal level and at the level of the educational environment (Gonzales Contreras et. al., 2021). Although peer bullying in the educational environment is experienced by every student group (Farmer et al., 2015), after the 1970s, the inclusion of students with special education needs (SENs) in regular education programs with the inclusive educational contexts and individualized education plans (IEPs) increased their visibility and the failure to ensure their inclusion caused them to be exposed to peer bullying more than other groups (Rose, & Gaga, 2017). This model is known as the most widely adopted model in the world because it is based on the principle that children with special needs should be educated in regular classrooms, be less isolated and acquire certain skills more easily with their typically developing peers (Cagran, & Schmidt, 2011). The inclusive education model and the individual education plans have provided meaningful educational benefits to SENs, thus increasing the amount of time these students spend in the mainstream education context (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). All this has increased the opportunities for inclusive education, but it has also increased the risk of peer bullying for these vulnerable students.

Studies have shown that the reasons for peer bullying experienced by children with SENs are academic, social, communication, behavioral and functional skill deficits (Kendall, & Taylor 2016); having less social power (Malecki et al., 2020), being differentiated in terms of intelligence and physical appearance (Giguere et al., 2011). As consequences of peer bullying, children with special needs experience more anxiety, fear and depression in response to physical and emotional bullying (Rodríguez-Hidalgo 2019), and experience higher levels of psychological distress, physical and emotional harm (Hartley et al., 2015).

SENs are exposed to bullying more than their peers with typical development (Bromhead, 2019). It has been reported that it is not only groups with intellectual disabilities who are exposed to this, but also individuals with autism (Jackson et al., 2019), individuals with ADHD (Prino et al., 2016) and those with learning disabilities (Berchiatti et al., 2021). A meta-analysis revealed that 36.3 percent of individuals with mild intellectual disabilities were exposed to bullying and that there was a positive correlation between low IQ and peer bullying (Maiano et. al., 2016). It has also been reported that this bullying is sustained at both primary, middle and high school levels (Rose & Gaga, 2017).

Considering all these studies, it is important to develop the competencies of teachers who will ensure that the group with SENs can be socially accepted by their peers so that the academic, social, communication, behavioral and functional skills gains provided by inclusive education processes are not interrupted. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be aware of bullying in this process and to be able to perceive it, put forward solutions and produce protective factors. Peer acceptance becomes even more important for the development of these skills in primary school period. However, considering the challenging aspects of including these children in school, it is important to determine in which environments and in which situations bullying arising from physical and mental differences is encountered in primary school in terms of teachers' views in order to improve teacher awareness and competence. Therefore, this study aims to examine peer bullying in primary school inclusion students in terms of teachers' views. For this purpose, answers to the following questions will be sought:

1. How would you define peer bullying?
2. What kind of bullying do you think inclusion students are exposed to by their peers?
3. Which bullying behaviors do you think inclusion students are exposed to the most?
4. How do you think inclusion students exposed to peer bullying are impacted?
5. What are your views on the characteristics of students who engage in bullying behaviors?
6. What kind of measures can be taken to prevent bullying behaviors towards inclusion students?

Theoretical framework

Inclusion

What inclusion is, how it should be implemented and why it is necessary is a controversial concept among researchers, practitioners and policy makers (Kefallinou et. al., 2020). It is fundamentally based on the principle that every individual should be able to receive an equal and quality education from a human rights perspective (Council of the European Union 2018). Göransson, & Nilholm (2014) bring together existing definitions and classify inclusion under four definitions. The first group is inclusion as the placement of a student with special needs in a general education classroom; the second group is inclusion in terms of meeting social and academic needs; the third group is inclusion as the development of the aforementioned skills of all students; and the last group is inclusion achieved by forming specific groups. In general terms, inclusion is an educational model in which students with

SENs share the same educational environment with typically developing students, where the two groups interact and aim to develop social and academic skills related to life. In their narrative syntehis, Lindner, & Schwab (2020) listed the following as characteristic features of inclusive education: collaboration and co-teaching, grouping, modification (assessment, content, scope, instruction, learning environment, materials, process, product and time frame), individual motivation and feedback, and staff support for students.

In short, while this model aims to develop the aforementioned skills of students with special needs, it also aims to improve the ability of students with typical development to recognize and accept differences (Sucuo lu & Kargin, 2010). During inclusive education, individuals with special needs meet their educational needs together with their peers in general education classes with individualized education plans and support education services (Yilmaz, & Meleko lu, 2018). Studies conducted in this context also show that inclusive education positively affects the academic achievement of students with special needs (Hehir et al. 2016); improves social skills positively in a meta-analysis (Oh-Young & Filler 2015).

Bullying

Based on the definition of Olweus (2005), who conducted the first studies on this concept, bullying is defined as a phenomenon characterized by an imbalance of power in which one or more students belonging to the same peer group intentionally express physical, verbal, emotional and social aggression towards another student and aim to cause harm through these means. Olweus (2005) claimed that peer bullying is a dynamic structure that is more complex than the interaction of bully, victim and bystander. There are eight groups of people identified by Olweus (2005) to explain this situation. The person who initiates the act of bullying is defined as the person who is at the forefront and active in bullying (A). The group of bystanders in bullying are people who do not initiate the bullying but take an active role alongside the bully (B). People who do not take part in bullying but support the bully are in group C. The person in group D watches and enjoys the bullying but does not support the bully. Group E is the group that witnesses bullying and remains only as a bystander, i.e. they are not involved in bullying. Group F dislikes bullying and states that the victim needs help, but does not take any action. Group G is the group that dislikes bullying and provides protection to the victim. At the center of the cycle is the victim who is exposed to peer bullying.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

In this study, case study design, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was used in order to examine teacher views on peer bullying experienced by primary school inclusion students in depth. Case study is a method that guides data collection by paying attention to the individual, event and context within its own boundaries in one or more situations comprehensively (Patton, 2014).

Sample

Twenty-four teachers working in a provincial center in the Central Black Sea Region of Turkey participated in this study. Teachers were expected to have inclusion students in their classrooms and to volunteer to participate in the study. Due to these criteria, criterion sampling method, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used in the study. The demographic information of the participating teachers is as shown in Table 1.

Table. 1. Demographic Data of Teachers

Participants	Age	Gender	Years of Experience	Number of Inclusion Students
T1	41+	Male	15-20	1
T2	31-35	Male	20+	1
T3	41+	Male	20+	1
T4	41+	Female	20+	1
T5	36-40	Male	11-15	1
T6	41+	Male	20+	1
T7	41+	Female	20+	1
T8	31-35	Female	11-15	1

T9	41+	Female	20+	1
T10	41+	Male	15-20	1
T11	41+	Male	20+	1
T12	36-40	Female	15-20	2
T13	36-40	Female	11-15	2
T14	36-40	Male	15-20	2
T15	41+	Female	20+	2
T16	36-40	Male	11-15	1
T17	41+	Female	20+	3
T18	36-40	Female	15-20	1
T19	41+	Female	20+	1
T20	41+	Female	11-15	1
T21	41+	Female	20+	1
T22	41+	Male	20+	1
T23	41+	Female	20+	1
T24	41+	Female	20+	3

Source: Own elaboration

Data collection tools

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form. The purpose of using the semi-structured interview technique was to obtain detailed data and to determine the views of classroom teachers on peer bullying experienced by inclusion students. In the prepared form, demographic information was first collected with interview questions. After the structured interview form was prepared, expert opinion was obtained. It was deemed appropriate to use the interview form consisting of a total of 6 questions. The interview form consists of open-ended questions prepared for classroom teachers. Twenty-four participants were reached. The researcher called the volunteer teachers who wanted to participate in the study and informed them about the purpose, subject and importance of the study. The data collection process of the study lasted approximately four weeks.

RESULTS-DISCUSSION

Data analysis

The data were analyzed by content analysis, one of the qualitative data analysis techniques. The data obtained with the voice recording program were sorted according to the order in which the interviews were conducted. Interviewed teachers were given code names. No changes were made while transcribing the interviews. In order to analyze the information obtained from the participants, the interviews were transcribed and sub-themes were created in this context. After the analysis of the interviews, the data that could be collected under the same sub-theme were determined. The data were presented by quoting teacher opinions with similar sub-themes.

Findings

Definition of peer bullying

All of the classroom teachers (24) responded to the question “How do you define peer bullying?” as physical or psychological violence, pressure, exclusion, ridicule and intimidation by children of the same age group or attending the same school. Some of the teachers’ statements are presented below:

- “A child is constantly exposed to violence by his/her peers (T1).”
- “Children in the same age group physically or psychologically inflicting violence on each other (T4).”
- “When children in the same age group constantly put pressure on others (T13).”
- “Violent sanctions of one peer against another (T19).”
- “Physical and psychological violence against peers (T21).”
- “A person or a group systematically exerting pressure on a disadvantaged individual or group compared to themselves (T24).”

Types of peer bullying

According to the opinions of the teachers, they stated that they observed bullying behaviors such as teasing, nicknaming, insulting, hitting, pushing, humiliating, excluding and belittling inclusion students by their friends. According to the teachers' opinions, the type of bullying that inclusion students are exposed to is verbal, physical and emotional. Some of the teachers' statements are presented below:

"They exclude mainstreaming students, do not want to include them in games, make fun of them, call them names (T1)."

"Humiliation, ridicule (T2)."

"Excluding them from games, constantly complaining about what they do or do not do (T13)."

"Exclusion, not making friends, not wanting to sit next to them, not letting them into games (S15)."

"Teasing, mocking, slang words, swearing, insulting (S16)."

According to the teachers' statements, in the emotional type, they expressed bullying behaviors such as exclusion, not allowing them to play games, not wanting to make friends, and humiliation. In the verbal type, they stated that bullying behaviors such as mocking, nicknaming, swearing were practiced. According to the teachers' statements, they stated that bullying behaviors such as hitting, pushing, and physical violence were performed in the physical type. Some of the teachers' statements are presented below:

"I think there are physical bullying behaviors (T4)."

"Physical or verbal violence (T19)."

"Hitting, pushing, humiliation, belittling, nicknaming, insulting, excluding the child (T6)."

Frequency of bully behavior types

In the research, an answer to the question "Which bullying behavior do you think the inclusion student is exposed to the most?" was sought. The data obtained from the teachers are shown in Table 2. Half of the teachers (12) think that inclusion students are mostly exposed to emotional bullying. It is seen that the bullying behavior is in the form of "exclusion, exclusion from games". The second most common type of bullying is verbal bullying (7). The bullying behaviors were stated to be in the form of "mocking, humiliation". Physical bullying (2) is seen in the form of hitting and pushing.

Table 2. Most Common Bullying Behaviors.

Teachers	Bullying Behaviors	Types of Bullying
T6	Mocking, ridicule	Verbal
T10	Humiliation	
T11	Mocking, insulting	
T16	Mocking, insulting	
T20	Mocking	
T21	Mocking	
T24	Humiliation	
T4	Pushing, hitting	Physical
T19	Physically harming	
T1	Exclusion	Emotional
T2	Exclusion	
T3	Exclusion	
T5	Exclusion	
T8	Exclusion	
T9	Exclusion	
T12	Exclusion	
T13	Exclusion	
T14	Exclusion	
T15	Exclusion	
T16	Exclusion	
T17	Exclusion	
T18	Exclusion	

Source: Own elaboration

Consequences of peer bullying

The research sought an answer to the question “How do you think inclusion students who are exposed to peer bullying are affected?”. Teachers stated that students generally felt “a sense of worthlessness, withdrawn, lonely, unhappy, distant from school, irritable, etc.”. According to these opinions of the teachers, inclusion students were negatively affected by this situation. Some of the teachers’ statements are presented below:

“They become unhappy, do not want to go to school (T1).”

“Feeling lonely, withdrawal, self-confidence problem (T6).”

“Of course they are affected badly. They feel bad, they think they are not enough (T11).”

“They become more withdrawn (17).”

“They get depressed, lose interest and effort in the lesson (20).”

“They become sad and withdrawn, they feel inadequate (T24).”

“They do not communicate much with their classmates. Or they become quieter, or they become irritable and exhibit aggressive behavior (S13).”

“They feel lonely and cannot make sense of the situation they are exposed to (S14).”

“Their self-confidence decreases and they develop a sense of anger towards other people (S21).”

Characteristics of bully students

In the research, an answer to the question “What are your opinions about the characteristics of students who engage in bullying behaviors?” was sought. According to the opinions of the teachers, they stated that students who engage in bullying behaviors are generally students who do not receive love in the family, who want to attract attention, who have been exposed to bullying behaviors from their environment, and who want to apply the pressure they see at home to others. They also stated that they were selfish, overly pampered, irritable and aggressive students. Some of the teachers’ statements are presented below:

“Children who do not receive attention from their families or are overly spoiled, children who have been exposed to similar bullying behaviors themselves (T1).”

“Exposure to violence, lack of love and attention, wanting to do to others at school what they see at home and around them (T6).”

“They can do it to attract attention. Students who cannot show themselves are mostly trying to impose themselves on weaker students (T10).”

“Children who are generally active and want to dominate, mostly children who have been spoiled by their families in terms of upbringing (S11).”

“Children who are exposed to violence in their family and environment, children who grow up in families far from social values (T19).”

“They exhibit the behaviors they see from their families, they lack empathy (T21).”

“Children who grow up in a loveless environment generally exhibit negative attitudes. They are emotionless children of parents who lack empathy (T20).”

Teachers’ solutions to peer bullying

In the research, an answer to the question “What kind of measures can be taken to prevent bullying behaviors towards mainstreaming students?” was sought. In the solutions of the teachers for preventing bullying behaviors towards inclusion students; empathizing with the student who bullies inclusion students (4), cooperating with parents (1), revealing the strengths of inclusion students (7), organizing informative seminars for students who bully inclusion students and their families (3), punishing the bullying student (1), teachers being role models about how inclusion students should be treated (6), not including inclusion students in the same class with children with normal development (2). Some of the teachers’ statements are presented below:

“Inclusion students can be involved in every activity. Responsibilities can be given whether they are successful or not in the class (T13).”

“I think teacher attitudes and behaviors are important (T15).”

“They should try to normalize the situation in the classroom, how would you feel if it were you (T21).”

“They should empathize with the children and raise awareness about this issue (T23).”

“First of all, courses for parents, workshops and presentations can be organized by experts at the classroom level. Theaters, events, and sports activities can be organized so that they can work together with children and get to know each other. Children who bully should definitely be referred to a family therapist together with their families (T4).”

“Teachers and administrators should be made aware of this issue, they should attend seminars. Teachers should always be in touch with parents. Patience is the reason for everything good (T20).”

"To show that inclusion students can also achieve something (T24)."

Discussion

The aim of this study is to examine peer bullying in primary school inclusion students in terms of teachers' views. According to the research data, teachers observed that inclusion students were exposed to behaviors such as teasing, nicknaming, insulting, pushing, hitting, humiliation, exclusion, and humiliation by their friends. In alignment with the views of the teachers, it was revealed that the types of bullying were verbal, physical, and social. In line with the teachers' statements, the most common types of bullying applied to inclusion students were found to be emotional bullying, verbal bullying, and physical bullying respectively, and this finding is in line with Bear et. al. (2015). In a study conducted by Kabasakal et al. (2008), the rates of peer bullying applied to inclusion students were examined. In this study, it was determined that the rate of physical bullying by peers of students with special needs was 68.8% and the rate of verbal bullying was 25%. Son (2011) listed the types of bullying observed as social bullying, verbal bullying and physical bullying. While social bullying was the most frequently observed type of bullying, physical bullying was the least frequently observed type. Eroğlu, & Kılıç (2020) concluded that children with autism spectrum disorder were mostly exposed to verbal and emotional bullying. The reason for these bullying behaviors may be the problems that students with special needs experience in social skills and interactions, problem behaviors and inadequacies in participating in and sustaining in-class and extracurricular activities, and problems in communicating (Munro, 2016).

Based on the findings from research data, teachers stated that inclusion students who were exposed to peer bullying felt a sense of worthlessness, withdrew, became lonely, were unhappy, and withdrew from school. Gonzalez Contreras et. al. (2020) stated that while describing bullying, students with special needs generally stated that they were ignored, humiliated, intimidated and threatened by their friends.

Based on research findings, teachers pointed out that the characteristics of students who engage in bullying behaviors are students who do not receive love in the family, want to attract attention, are exposed to bullying behaviors from their environment, and want to apply the pressure they see at home to others. In a study, it was stated that the characteristics of bully students are that they lack love, cannot empathize, have anxiety about standing out among their friends and try to make themselves noticed (Sarı, & Pürsün, 2019).

In accordance with the findings derived from the conducted research, teachers conveyed that measures such as organizing informative seminars for students and parents and cooperating with parents can be taken to prevent peer bullying. According to the results of the research, teachers asserted that the following measures can be taken to prevent bullying behaviors: including mainstreaming students in all activities, developing empathy skills and being a role model, acting in cooperation with parents, and providing information seminars to students and parents. Interviews with the parents of bullies and victims, informing parents about bullying and cooperating with them for intervention is one of the solutions that can be used in the fight against bullying. In inclusion programs, normally developing students should be informed in order to reduce the risk of students with special needs being exposed to peer bullying and to ensure that other students accept them. In this way, the awareness of other students will increase and bullying behaviors can be prevented. Adding bullying education to the curriculum may also be a solution (Munro, 2016). Teachers' effective and efficient communication with students with special needs can also be said to reduce bullying (Iotti et al., 2020). The teacher's avoidance of conflicting student-teacher relationships can also eliminate this risk factor (Díaz-Aguado, & Arias, 2013).

CONCLUSION

As a result, teachers observed that inclusion students were exposed to verbal, physical and, most frequently, emotional bullying. They stated that the most common bullying behavior towards inclusion students was exclusion and making fun of them behind their backs. Because of these bullying behaviors, inclusion students experience a sense of worthlessness, withdraw from school and become withdrawn. Teachers indicated that students who engaged in bullying behaviors were students who did not receive love at home and were exposed to bullying behaviors in their environment and family.

Based on the results of this study, some suggestions can be made for future studies and practices. This study was conducted by taking the opinions of classroom teachers with inclusion students. However, peer bullying is observed in almost all classrooms and schools. Therefore, the views of other stakeholders, including classroom teachers and other branch teachers, can be consulted about the bullying experienced by students with special needs. Teachers' observations and opinions are very important in preventing peer bullying. In addition, not only teachers but also school administrators, other staff and parents

should express their views on this issue. This will provide a more detailed understanding of the peer bullying experienced by students with special needs. In addition, the opinions of students with special needs can be taken and it can be suggested to expand quantitative studies as well as qualitative studies. In terms of implementation, relevant ministries and schools can work together to raise awareness about students with special needs. It is recommended to organize trainings, seminars and workshops to inform teachers, students and families about the characteristics, needs and other issues of these students. The results of this study reveal that students with special needs are exposed to peer bullying. However, peer bullying can be observed in every classroom and school as a common social problem. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct a more comprehensive study by taking the opinions of not only classroom teachers but also other teachers, school staff and parents. The observations and opinions of teachers, school staff and parents play an effective role in the fight against peer bullying. In addition, it is important to conduct quantitative and qualitative studies by taking the opinions of students with special needs.

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