

Bullying and Victimization Experienced by Students with Learning Disabilities: Brief Literature Review

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Abstract

Bullying and victimization have been documented in the school culture for decades. However, research on the involvement of students with learning disabilities emerged in the 1990s to evidence high perpetration and victimization rates in this population. General and special education teachers have to implement proper intervention strategies and prevention programmes in order to promote a safe context for all students and ensure that bullying behaviours are not perpetuated. The present article is a brief review of the literature on the involvement of children with disabilities in bullying. After defining bullying, victimization and learning disabilities and reviewing relative research, with reference to Greek studies, the article attempts to provide insight into the consequences of bullying and victimization and shed light on teachers' role.

Keywords: *Bullying; Victimization; Students with Learning Disabilities; Teachers; Risk Factors; Consequences; Prevention; Intervention*

Introduction

Defining bullying, victimization and learning disabilities

Bullying and victimization have been persistent phenomena at schools for decades. Bullying involves the existence of a powerful individual who repeatedly exhibits aggressive behaviour with the intention to cause pain or distress to a less powerful individual ([1], p.22, p.30). Bullying may be direct or indirect ([2], p.338) and can have various forms, such as physical, verbal or relational ([3], p.802; [4], p.28; [5], p.23). It is manifested in various ways ([6], p.504), like hitting, threatening, teasing, insulting, swearing, rumor spreading, rejection or social exclusion ([4], p.28). However, the common ground is the repetition of these aggressive acts, which implies an imbalance of social, psychological or physical power that makes the victims unable to defend themselves ([2], p.338; [3], p.802; [6], p.504; [4], p.28).

Victimization refers to the intentional pain or injury to a person through physical or interpersonal means ([7], p.11). Research reveals that boys are usually victims of physical victimization, while girls are often victims of indirect victimization, like social exclusion ([8], p.40).

Most research indicates the association between bullying and low academic scores and school adaptation, without, however, implying that bullying is the sole factor that adds to low achievement and adjustment or the opposite ([8], p.38). Victims are more likely to avoid school or drop out, while the risk increases significantly when there is lack of parental support and positive peer relations, especially if there are additional behavioral problems ([8], p.39).

Considering the above, students with learning disabilities face additional challenges. Learning disabilities constitute a constellation of disorders in understanding and producing oral and written language, reasoning or mathematics, due to serious neurological disorders [9]. According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [9], the term "learning disabilities" refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders which emerge due to central nervous system dysfunction.

Learning disabilities are intrinsic and accompany the individuals throughout lifetime, but their manifestations differ. They coexist with other deficiencies or problems [9] and are associated with problems in social behaviour, attention and self-regulation ([10], p.9). Research has evidenced that students with learning disabilities have fewer friends, are shy and bullied or victimized more than their peers without learning disorders ([11], pp.17-1813, p.1436, p.1446).

Research on the involvement of students with learning disabilities in bullying

According to Swearer [8], earlier research had ineffectively studied factors that promote or prevent bullying with a focus on physical contexts, such as the ratio of teachers and students, the student population and the budgets of school units. However, as no valuable conclusions could be drawn about the risk or protective factors when characteristics of schools, families and communities were taken into consideration, recent research has shifted its focus to include wider concepts. School policies, teachers' attitudes, group dynamics and school climate started being considered as potential predictive factors of positive and problematic behaviours ([8], p.38).

Since the early 1990s, when international research on the involvement of students with disabilities in bullying started, there has been growing evidence that students with disabilities are at great risk for being involved in bullying, either as bullies or as victims ([12], p.1; 20, pp.504-505).

Therefore, along with other emotional and behavioral problems, students with learning difficulties may experience impulsivity or aggressiveness, which are bullies' characteristics, stress, which is typical of victims, or anger, low tolerance to disappointment and low academic achievement, which are experienced by bullies who are concurrently bullied ([6], p.504).

Most researchers have evidenced the high levels of verbal abuse, social exclusion and physical aggression experienced by students with learning difficulties [2]. However, there is a growing body of research that indicates greater rates of students with learning disabilities who are bullies themselves [2]. This fact can be explained by the assumption that victims of chronic bullying may develop characteristics and behaviours that are similar to those of bullies, so that they become able to cope with their victimization ([2], p.339; [8], p.40). In fact, 15 - 42% of the students with physical, psychological and learning disabilities display bullies' characteristics ([8], p.40).

According to the teachers' and students' opinions, 55% of the students with mild learning disabilities and 78% of the students with moderate learning disabilities have experienced moderate to severe levels of victimization ([13], p.763). In contrast, it has been estimated that students with learning disabilities bully their classmates twice as often as students without learning disabilities ([13], p.65).

Norwich and Kelly [14] found that students with learning difficulties attribute experienced bullying to their difficulties, regardless of the school environment, in general or special education. However, students in special education reported more incidents than students in mainstream education [14].

However, there are some studies that do not provide evidence on increased involvement of students with disabilities. Swearer, *et al.* found that there is no significant difference between students with and without learning difficulties, while they evidenced less victimization in students with learning difficulties in comparison with children with different disorders ([6], p.516). In a similar vein, Kaukiainen, *et al.* [15] did not show any relation between learning difficulties and victimization. On the contrary, the rate of students with learning difficulties that are bullies was higher than that of students with no disabilities ([15], p.275).

Nazuboka and Smith [16] explored the sociometric status of 179 students aged 8 - 12, among which 36 students with learning difficulties. In comparison to the students of typical development, more children with learning difficulties were rejected and less popular. They were also reported to be shy, help-seekers and victims of bullying and few were reported to be cooperative or leaders. Regarding aggressiveness, there were no significant differences between students with and without learning difficulties.

Similarly, Frederickson and Furnham [17] explored the relationships between students of the same age- 8 - 12 years old, with mild learning difficulties and their peers. Teachers' reports revealed that rejected children with learning difficulties exhibited low levels of prosocial behaviour, while rejected students of typical development showed both low levels of prosocial behaviour and high levels of negative social behaviour. Popular students with learning difficulties were reported to have low levels of negative behaviour, while popular students of typical development exhibited low levels of negative behaviour but high levels of prosocial behaviour.

In Greece, literature on the specific theme is limited. Hatzichristou and Hopf [18] explored academic and psychosocial adjustment of students with learning difficulties aged 11 - 12, as compared to their peers with typical development. Self-reports, teacher reports, peer reports and educational data revealed that students with learning difficulties have academic and psychosocial problems and that children with learning disabilities face rejection ([18], pp.52-53).

Three years later, the same researchers conducted a new research including students of all elementary grades and middle high school students in their sample [19]. While in their previous study no significant differences between boys and girls were found, in this study, Hatzichristou and Hopf found that boys had more problems in interpersonal adjustment, while girls had problems in intrapersonal adjustment ([19], p.1096, pp.1098-1100).

Kokkinos and Antoniadou [20] found that elementary school students with learning disabilities were more likely to become involved in bullying episodes. However, in contradiction to previous studies, there was no significant difference between them and their peers of typical development with respect to the frequency of exhibiting aggressive behaviours either as bullies or as victims ([20], p.674).

Efkarpidis [21] explored the characteristics of the social relations between students with mild intellectual disability and their peers in elementary school. According to the findings, these children are in adverse social status, facing marginalization and rejection. The reasons for being rejected are similar to the ones found in research in which students of typical development are studied. Inability to cooperate or engage in the learning process, inability to meet the demands of the school subjects or activities, interruptions during the lesson, non-accepted behaviours and different interests were among the criteria of rejection ([21], p.269).

Consequences of the involvement of students with learning disabilities in bullying

Students with learning difficulties face increased risk for additional educational and social or behavioral problems. Students with learning disabilities show difficulties in learning, have emotional and behavioral problems, low self-esteem and school underachievement or failure ([15], p.270, p.275). Because learning difficulties occur throughout lifespan, all aspects of students' daily life are affected, which leads to psychosocial problems. At the same time, students with learning difficulties develop a negative attitude toward learning and school, while they are likely to be isolated, have difficulties in adjustability and show symptoms of depression ([2], p.337).

Students with learning disabilities may also have deficiencies in social ability, experience rejection by their peers and have a lower social status, because they are less popular than their peers, less co-operative and selected as friends by few peers ([7], p.13; [15], p.269; [2], p.337; [16], p.1444; [5], p.22), mainly due to their problems in social relationships ([15], p.269; [16], p.1436, p.1444; [8], p.39).

Considering that either learning difficulties or bullying pose risks for students' emotional, behavioral and social life, their co-existence makes these children more vulnerable ([2], p.337). Due to their deficiencies in social competence, they belong to the group of high risk for involvement in bullying ([11], p.11, p.20; [12], p.2). The fact that they are less popular and more frequently rejected by their peers is an additional risk factor ([15], p.269; [8], p.39).

Baumeister, *et al.* [7], who explored victimization in students with learning difficulties, showed that victimization is connected to withdrawal, stress, depressive symptoms, social problems, problems in thought and attention, and disruptive behaviour. In addition, it was found that students with a comorbid psychiatric diagnosis were victimized at higher rates, when compared to students with no psychiatric diagnosis ([7], p.19).

Recent research evidences that repeated exposure to peer aggression adds to the development of a negative self-view and the selective avoidance of social interaction ([7], p.12, p.19). Consequently, social isolation prevents these children and adolescents from having prosocial relationships and developing healthy interpersonal relationships or strong self-esteem. Therefore, they are not likely to be helped or protected by friends in situations or incidents of bullying ([7], p.12).

Teachers' role: suggestions for addressing bullying by and toward students with learning disabilities

Teachers' role is challenging, considering that most of the bullying incidents take place during teachers' absence ([7], p.12) or in the playground ([1], p.24, p.30). In fact, incidents in the playground are double as many as those in classrooms. It is surprising, that, although aggressive students exhibit non-accepted behaviours more frequently in class, non-aggressive students seem to bully others outside the classroom, where supervision is not intense, activity levels are high, and they have more chances to involve in bullying ([1], p.30).

There have been numerous researchers whose findings have been effectively utilized in school daily practice. Among them, Swearer, *et al.* suggest programmes of prevention and intervention, which have been evidenced to enhance students' academic achievement, by creating a safe context which capitalizes on student potential ([6], p.518).

It is essential that students who are at greater risk for victimization are identified in a timely manner ([7], p.12, p.20). Teachers should be attentive to students with learning disabilities who are removed from class or need special support in class, as they might be stigmatized or marginalized and thus be a target of bullying behaviours ([7], p.13; 15). Therefore, promoting prosocial behaviours and cooperative climate among all students is very important ([6], p.506, p.517; [4], pp.45- 46).

Systemic interventions have been reported to be more effective than programmes that focus on students at risk, as all stakeholders are engaged ([2], p.341). Cooperation among groups of students can be the means of enhancing all students' social competence, with a focus on students with learning disabilities who have to overcome additional social and academic problems [22]. It is also suggested that enhancing students' self-confidence, empowering their social skills and promoting peer relations can create a positive and cooperative culture ([15], p.275).

The school climate is a significant factor in addressing bullying, considering that lack of supervision is associated with increased rates of bullying, while, in school contexts that focus on learning, the rates of aggression are reduced. Moreover, positive relationships at school prevent the existence of negative behaviours ([8], p.39).

A social-ecological model of bullying has also been proposed in literature ([2], p.340; [8], p.38, pp.42-43). The model provides a holistic view of students' behaviours, as they are shaped by personal characteristics and their interaction with contextual factors, i.e. school, family, peers, neighbors and society. Through this holistic perspective, evidence-based and effective programmes are created, as the complexity of the contexts that influence the development of students' behaviours is understood and because they focus on all contributing factors ([2], p.340; [8], pp.42-43).

Conclusive Remarks

It is clear that children and adolescents with learning difficulties need support and help from their families, schools and wider social environments ([10], pp.113- 114).

Teachers should ensure the creation and maintenance of a healthy and safe school context that promotes students' full development and life improvement, within an inclusive framework that promotes respect, acceptance and tolerance. In addition, a change of attitudes inside and outside school and the collaboration among school, family and society are also highlighted in literature ([2], p.341).

In order to reduce bullying and victimization, it is hoped that students learn to celebrate differences rather than use them as a means of discrimination and social exclusion in schools ([12], p.1).

The preventive efforts should be focused on students with learning disabilities both as vulnerable groups of being victims and perpetrators of bullying acts. Distribution of scientific findings regarding bullying and victimization experienced by students with learning disabilities may assist in prevention of further bullying experiences [23].

Conflict of Interest

There is no financial interest or any conflict of interest.

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