

A Qualitative Research of School Bullying Among Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Regular Classrooms

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Abstract: The number of students with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms has been expanding yearly, but the problem of school bullying has severely impacted their physical and mental health and future development. Seven ordinary teachers were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, and qualitative data analysis was performed using MAXQDA 2022. The results showed that children with intellectual disabilities who were bullied lacked social skills and anti-bullying consciousness. Children with intellectual disabilities were often isolated and treated differently by ordinary students. Furthermore, schools failed to address school bullying, and teachers did not deal with school bullying properly. There were also problems in the parenting of those who had been bullied, and the parents' attitudes towards their children were often negative. In view of this, relevant countermeasures were proposed.

Keywords: Children with intellectual disabilities; School bullying; Learning in regular classrooms

Online publication: November 29, 2023

1. Introduction

As an important part of the national education system, special education is closely related to the realization of educational equity and the protection of the right of persons with disabilities to receive education. With the development of education and social progress, special education has received extensive attention. Special needs students in our country could receive compulsory education in special education schools. However, most special needs students would attend special education classes in ordinary schools and they would be given extra assistance by having teachers sent to their homes. Most special needs children are enrolled in regular schools instead of special education institutions. Based on statistics, the number of students enrolled in regular elementary schools nationwide amounted to 317,178 in 2021 compared to 300,688 in 2020, which was an increase of 5.48% ^[1,2]. With the scale expanding, learning in regular classroom act as a crucial factor in optimizing the quality of special education and it is also an inevitable trend in the development of special education ^[3].

Placing students with special needs in ordinary schools ensures that they receive adequate education ^[4]. With the implementation of three special education promotion programs, more special students have been placed in regular schools, which has also increased the likelihood of special students being bullied ^[5]. School bullying is the persistent physical and psychological damage to the bullied, either directly or indirectly ^[6]. It can be categorized as physical and verbal bullying, both directly and indirectly ^[7]. Bullying can also occur as cyberbullying, making the manifestations of school bullying more complex ^[8]. School bullying has a great impact on the physical and mental health and academic performance of teenagers. In severe cases, it may even lead to suicide.

In view of this, China has introduced a series of regulations and systems to protect minorities and combat school bullying, including the “Regulations on the Protection of Minorities in Schools,” the “Notice on Special Management of Campus Bullying,” and the “Guide on the Prevention and Control of Bullying and Violence Among Junior High School Students” ^[9-11]. The 12th edition of *Intellectual Disability: Definition, Diagnosis, Classification, and Support System* points out that intellectual disability is a condition in which the intellectual activity ability is significantly lower than that of the general population before the age of 22. It is caused by mental underdevelopment or intellectual retardation due to various harmful factors ^[12]. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, the proportion of students with intellectual disabilities being bullied has been increasing yearly. Therefore, the issue of school bullying among children with intellectual disabilities enrolled in regular classrooms is worth highlighting, which plays a far-reaching role in improving school safety, protecting the rights and interests of special students, and promoting the development of students’ physical and mental health.

Many studies have been done on the situation and influencing factors of school bullying. Students in ordinary schools are more likely to be bullied than those in special education schools, and special needs students are more likely than ordinary students to be ridiculed, teased, and intimidated by other students ^[13]. Bullying is the result of constant interaction between students with intellectual disabilities and the environment in which they live, encompassing both individual physiological and psychological influences, as well as influences from the school environment, family composition, and peer groups ^[14]. Besides, research has shown that children with intellectual disabilities have low self-esteem and are more susceptible to school bullying than ordinary children ^[15,16]. The main factor influencing factor of bullying is the level of school adjustment ^[17], a study showed that bullying is related to the cognitive level of students and that the rate of bullying tends to decrease with age ^[18]. The causes and countermeasures of school bullying have been systematically studied abroad. Countries such as the United States and Canada already have relatively complete regulations, policies, and intervention measures for school bullying that are integrated into society ^[19]. In European countries, America, Australia, and other countries, there has been a gradual trend towards an integrated model of “multi-participants and multi-level management,” which focuses on preventing and controlling bullying behaviors at three levels: individual, peer/classroom, and the school ^[20].

Based on the above discussion, not many studies have been done on the current situation and countermeasures of school bullying of children with intellectual disabilities in elementary schools from the perspective of teachers based on the grounded theory. Therefore, we explored the causes of school bullying among children with intellectual disabilities attending regular elementary schools and provided schools and families with effective school bullying countermeasures and prevention strategies.

2. Research design

2.1. Research methods

Combined with the qualitative research method based on the grounded theory, this research, we conducted a careful interview with teachers who were teaching children with intellectual disabilities who suffered from

school bullying. We encoded, categorized, and qualitatively analyzed to delve deeper into the research topic and research that has been done on the topic. MAXQDA2022 is a software that can encode and visualize interview text materials. We also used the MAXMaps plugin in the software to present coding results and word frequency data in the form of charts. Based on the analysis of the interview data and coding by the MAXQDA software, a theoretical model was formed to explore the current situation of school bullying and countermeasures for children with intellectual disabilities in elementary school classrooms.

2.2. Research subjects

We used convenience sampling to select four ordinary elementary schools that had cases of children with intellectual disabilities being bullied, and seven teachers of classes where the school bullying incidents occurred were called for semi-open-ended interviews. The interviewees consisted of four male teachers and three female teachers who served in grades three to six. Besides, a semi-open interview was also conducted with the parents of three intellectually disabled students who had experienced campus bullying.

2.3. Research data collection process

Relevant literature was reviewed, a pre-interview outline was prepared, and two college experts and a normal teacher were asked to revise the outline to form a standard interview outline. Seven teachers were then interviewed separately for about one hour. With the consent of the interviewees, the interviews were audio-recorded and organized into verbatim scripts afterward.

3. Coding and analysis

3.1. Theoretical modeling

This research was centered around school bullying, in which the current research progress was reviewed and qualitative analysis was performed on the interview data. The model constructed in this research was as follows: the influencing factors of school bullying towards students with intellectual disabilities showed hierarchy and correlation, forming a “four-factor” conceptual model covering: school environment factors, individual factors, family factors, and peer factors. Insufficient consciousness of anti-bullying, social barriers and lack of communication between the parents and schools were also the influencing factors (**Figure 1**).

3.2. Coding process

Grounded theory was the basis for coding and analyzing the interview data. The first level of open coding was to create nodes and free-code textual content. Secondly, open-ended, free coding and automatic coding were combined with preliminary coding material for questions to form 22 coded nodes that fit the research theme. Thirdly, the preliminary nodes were reviewed and summarized to form secondary spindle coding. The final step was to select the codes and analyze the secondary codes to form the primary indicators.

3.3. Data analysis

The interview data were coded according to the three-level coding of “open coding→major axis coding→selective coding” through MAXQDA 2022 software. Firstly, the interview data were sequentially numbered and read level by level, and 22 free coding nodes were extracted and named. Secondly, the semantics and context of each free node were analyzed, the frequency of different nodes was examined, 10 secondary codes were summarized, and a tree node was formed. Finally, the logical relationships of the tree nodes were sorted out, the core categories were identified, and the first-level indicators were constructed.

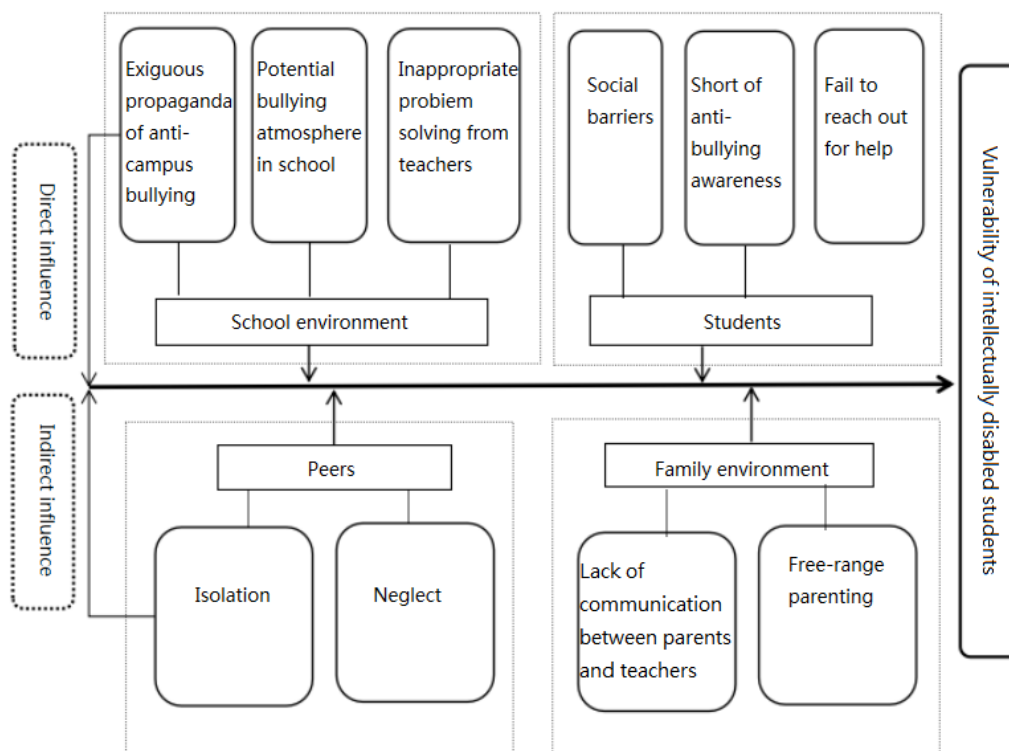


Figure 1. Mechanism model of factors influencing school bullying among children with intellectual disabilities

3.4. Research reliability and validity

The reliability of this study was ensured by employing a co-researcher, and the seven teachers who were interviewed were asked to verify the analyzed data, and only the results that were agreed upon by the interviewees were retained.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Results analysis

Upon analyzing the frequency matrix detailing the distribution of core attribute codes within interview scripts from seven ordinary teachers, it was revealed that bullying, attributed to school environment factors, held the highest frequency at 85 occurrences, accounting for 37.8% of the total instances. This was followed by factors associated with the students themselves (individual factors), representing 27.7% of the total instances, and family-related factors, which accounted for 19.2% of the occurrences. The least mentioned were factors attributed to peers, accounting for 15.2% of the total instances. It can be seen that individual factors, peer factors, school environment factors, and family factors are the main factors affecting school bullying among students with intellectual disabilities in classes, with school environment factors being particularly prominent.

4.1.1. School environment factors

By analyzing the frequency matrix of the code distribution of the school environment factors, it was found that teachers' mishandling of the problem was mentioned 28 times, accounting for 40%; followed by the existence

of a bullying atmosphere in the school 23 times, accounting for 32.9%; and then by the insufficiency of anti-school bullying publicity (19 times), accounting for 27.1%. Some schools were yet to carry out anti-bullying-related publicity activities, and school teachers never dealt with school bullying in a scientific and proper way. This shows that a negative school climate is an important risk factor for most students with intellectual disabilities in terms of experiencing school bullying.

4.1.2. Individual factors

In terms of individual factors, it was found that social barriers was mentioned 21 times, accounting for 44.7%; followed by not being able to seek help (15 times), accounting for 31.9%; and the lack of anti-bullying consciousness (11 times), accounting for 23.4%. Therefore, it is clear that the problem of school bullying among children with intellectual disabilities learning in regular classrooms is mainly due to their lack of social skills and inability to call for help and seek help.

4.1.3. Family factors

In terms of family factors, it was found that parents' ignorance towards their children was mentioned 20 times, accounting for 60.6%, while the lack of communication between family and school was mentioned 13 times, accounting for 39.4%. Parents of intellectually disabled students who were bullied seldom took the initiative to communicate with teachers and failed to keep abreast of their children's situation at school, which also led to this group of children having to endure bullying in silence. Poor parenting also makes children with intellectual disabilities more vulnerable to bullying.

4.1.4. Peer factors

In terms of peer factors, it was found that peer isolation was mentioned 13 times, accounting for 56.5%, and peer neglect was mentioned 10 times, or 43.5%. Students with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be neglected and isolated by their peers in the class, which leads to further exacerbation of school bullying among special students.

4.2. Current situation

Given the above qualitative analyses, it is clear that school bullying is prevalent among students with intellectual disabilities in regular elementary schools and that there is much room for improvement.

4.2.1. School environment being the primary factor of school bullying

The influencing factors of school bullying among children with intellectual disabilities enrolled in regular classrooms included individual factors, their peers, the school environment, and their families, with the school environment having the greatest impact on the occurrence of school bullying. The school environment was specifically manifested in the teachers' mishandling of the problem, the existence of a bullying atmosphere in the school, insufficient anti-school bullying publicity, and isolation and neglect by peers. The results are consistent with another study in that bullying is the result of constant interaction between students with intellectual disabilities and the environment in which they live, and that the main factor influencing bullying behavior is the level of school adjustment ^[14].

4.2.2. Relationship between school bullying and the inadequacies of children with intellectual disabilities

Due to the impairment of physical and mental function and few social skills, students with intellectual

disabilities are incapable of identifying bullying behaviors; on the other hand, they suffer from school bullying but fail to seek help. This is consistent with the findings of several studies in that children with intellectual disabilities often suffer from low self-esteem and are more likely to be subjected to school bullying, and to be ridiculed, teased, and intimidated.

4.2.3. Relationship between school bullying and the negative influences from bad parenting and family environment

Some families lack concern for their children with intellectual disabilities and do not even know that their children are being bullied in school. For some parents, even if they know that their children are being bullied in school, they believe that it is their children's fault for being different. The permissive attitude of the parents and the lack of communication with classroom teachers can lead to the worsening of school bullying.

5. Countermeasures

5.1. Advocating integrated education to create a favorable campus atmosphere

One of the key factors involved in the bullying of students with intellectual disabilities in the classroom is the difference in terms of physical abilities, emotions and behaviors, and academic performance between intellectually disabled students and normal students. Therefore, children with intellectual disabilities will often be discriminated against and bullied. In addition, although integrated education is gradually being developed, the public still lacks a comprehensive understanding of classroom education, special education, and children with intellectual disabilities. Knowledge about integrated education should be actively publicized, and thematic activities related to anti-bullying in schools should be carried out, so as to enhance the public's awareness of special needs children, integrated education, and the inclusiveness and acceptance of children with intellectual disabilities. In this way, a harmonious and friendly school environment can be created so that children with intellectual disabilities can grow up safely.

5.2. Strengthening the family support

Family factors play a crucial role in instances of school bullying involving students with intellectual disabilities. It is imperative for parents to give considerable attention to and address any incidents of bullying experienced by their children promptly. Additionally, fostering active communication with teachers is essential. Parents should be attentive to their children's speech and behavior, promptly taking necessary measures when they detect signs of bullying, and aiding their children in resolving such adverse situations. Secondly, children should be educated on how to deal with provocations and conflicts, and they should learn how to protect themselves from bullies. Thirdly, parent-child communication should be strengthened to enhance family cohesion. Good parent-child relationships, enhancing family cohesion, and building self-confidence are effective ways to prevent school bullying among students with intellectual disabilities. Family education plays a pivotal role in shaping children's character and values.

5.3. Empowering students to improve their ability to cope with school bullying

Schools can provide intellectually disabled students with counseling to help them enhance their self-confidence and improve their psychological resilience so that they can better cope with bullying. All students with special needs, including those with intellectual disabilities, should be equipped with the necessary skills, not only for social integration, but also for dealing with school bullying. Awareness of the concept of bullying should be fostered so that students are able to determine what constitutes bullying, how to seek help in the event of

bullying, and how to cultivate social skills.

Funding

2023 Guangdong Provincial Education Science Planning Project (Higher Education Special Project): Research on the High-Quality Training Path of Public Funded Special Education Teacher Trainees Under the Background of New Normal Universities (2023GXJK383).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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