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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bullying in special schools: Types, frequency and school staff's self-efficacy

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Abstract

Bullying is an education and health priority. The existing evidence has primarily focused on mainstream schools, with few studies conducted in special education schools. The present study aimed to quantify school staff's observations of bullying in special schools, also presenting by school specialism. The second part measured school staff self-efficacy when dealing with bullying. A total of 72 school staff sampled from special schools in England participated in an anonymous survey with closed- and open-ended questions. Results indicated that physical, verbal, and relational bullying were all evident in special schools, yet the observed frequency pattern changed when schools were split by specialism. Moreover, *t*-test showed no significant difference between classroom and non-classroom staff, gender or years of experience regarding self-efficacy when dealing with bullying, but significant differences were found showing higher self-efficacy for those who had received training on dealing with bullying. An understanding of bullying from the special school staff perspective provides insight for the development of anti-bullying programmes or training on dealing with bullying, specifically designed for learners or school staff in special schools.

KEYWORDS

bullying, school specialism, school staff, self-efficacy, SEND, special school

Key points

- Physical, verbal and relational bullying were all observed by special school staff, with verbal and physical bullying being observed most frequently.
- Schools with a specialism of social, emotional and mental health had significantly higher overall levels of bullying, and the level of physical bullying was particularly notable compared to the other school types.
- There was no significant impact of gender, school role or years of teaching experience on feelings of self-efficacy when dealing with bullying.
- Special school staff who had anti-bullying training reported higher self-efficacy in dealing with bullying situations, suggesting that staff would benefit from compulsory training on identifying and managing school-based bullying.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is an education and health priority. In 2006, the Education and Inspections Act 2006, enacted by the United Kingdom (UK) government, legally mandated all maintained schools to enforce a policy preventing bullying behaviours between school-aged students (Legislation.gov.uk, 2006). As a result, schools are more

aware of identifying and managing bullying incidents which has also led to an increasing demand for bullying-related research to design resources and programmes. Yet there is still no standardized definition of bullying across the existing literature (Badger et al., 2025; Chang, 2021). A literature review examining 901 studies uncovered diverse definitions of bullying, with more than half of the included studies without clear or specified definitions (Slattery et al., 2019). According to Olweus (1993), the definition of bullying emphasizes three major components: (1) An intention to harm, (2) Repeated bullying behaviour, (3) An imbalance of power. These components constitute the most accepted and cited definitions of bullying (Chang, 2021), although a more inclusive definition to acknowledge the experiences of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has since been proposed (Badger et al., 2025). This revised inclusive definition builds on Olweus' definition by including reference to bullying 'via digital device or platform' and by acknowledging that bullying can be 'from the same or different people, and in the same or different methods' (p. 269). However, after consultations with special school teachers and parents of students with SEND, Badger et al. also recognized that the imbalance of power (typically noted as being through size, strength or age difference) can present through 'intellectual capacity, social skill understanding and emotional stability' (p. 269). Finally, they acknowledge that a situation remains bullying even if the victim is 'unaware of being bullied' (p. 269). These additions ensure Olweus' bullying definition from the 1990's is up-to-date and better reflects the experiences of all students.

Bullying exists in four forms: (1) physical, (2) verbal, (3) relational, and (4) cyber (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Physical bullying generally involves using physical force to harm the victim, such as hitting, kicking, and pushing behaviours (Bradshaw et al., 2013). Verbal bullying is commonly known to involve name-calling and insulting behaviours, while relational bullying damages relationships and social status through spreading rumours or social exclusion (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). Finally, cyberbullying can be a combination of verbal and relational bullying, with unique characteristics of utilising digital platforms and happening in a virtual realm (Slonje & Smith, 2008). As cyberbullying occurs more outside the school environment, the present study primarily focused on the three traditional types of bullying: physical, verbal and relational (Slonje & Smith, 2008). A fair amount is known and understood about all four forms of bullying in mainstream schools; however, bullying research specifically focusing on special education schools is limited (Badger et al., 2024). In turn, this limits the evidence-informed support and resources available to this more vulnerable population.

Prevalence and consequences of bullying

Bullying has been widely documented globally (Biswas et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2023). A systematic review drawing data from 83 low-, middle- and high-income countries found that 30.5% of children and young people aged 12–17 had experienced bullying (Biswas et al., 2020); the most prevalent form is verbal, followed by physical, relational and then cyber (e.g., Chhabria et al., 2020). It has also been reported that bullying occurs more frequently in younger adolescents (Kennedy, 2021). In the UK, a recent systematic review of 23 studies reported the prevalence of various forms of violence, including peer bullying (13 studies), experienced among students (Nation et al., 2023) and also revealed that traditional bullying (i.e., physical, verbal and relational bullying) is more prevalent than cyberbullying (32.7% and 4.0%, respectively).

Bullying is known to have the potential to negatively affect students' physical and mental health, and socio-academic development. Those involved in bullying are three to four times more likely to suffer from physical health issues including headaches, gastric pain and backache (Moore et al., 2017), are three times more likely to experience panic attacks, and victims are five times more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety disorders (Copeland et al., 2013). They have an increased likelihood of having poorer academic outcomes and school connectedness whilst experiencing increased peer rejection (Halliday et al., 2021). The consequences of bullying can also continue into adulthood: being a victim of bullying during childhood predicted more bodily inflammatory responses in adulthood (Copeland et al., 2014) and increased later suicidal-related issues and actions (Li et al., 2024; Takizawa et al., 2014).

Bullying and students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

The majority of bullying research has taken place in mainstream schools or where students with SEND have not been explicitly identified within the data. Yet the limited literature we have on bullying involvement of students with SEND suggests rates as high as 69% (Rose et al., 2011): students with SEND are two to four times more likely to be involved in bullying incidents compared to their non-SEND peers (Hartley et al., 2015).

Although students with or without SEND are bullied for many overlapping reasons, two large-scale studies sampled from 144 countries, found that simply 'being different' significantly contributed to the increased risk of bullying (World Health Organization, 2018a, 2018b). Therefore, students with SEND who displayed higher levels of atypical behaviours such as rocking or stimming, become more visible to their peers (Dasioti & Kolaitis, 2018).

Secondly, 'poor social and communication skills' can increase the vulnerability of students with SEND with research consistently revealing that students with SEND had more difficulties in social participation (e.g., Berchiatti et al., 2022). For example, they were less accepted by peers and did not integrate as well into social circles (Pinto et al., 2019). Banks et al. (2018) also reported that students with SEND reported fewer friends than their non-SEND peers and therefore had fewer positive experiences in peer relationships.

School Staff's self-efficacy in dealing with bullying

School staff are usually the first responders in bullying situations (Nickerson et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important to understand how special school staff perceive their capacity to deal with bullying incidents (i.e., self-efficacy). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy in the present study is defined as a person's belief in their capability to accomplish something effectively. In addition, four sources have been identified as fundamentals of self-efficacy: (1) mastery experiences (a person's successes and/or failures), (2) vicarious experiences (observing other people), (3) verbal and social persuasion (encouragement gained from others), and (4) physiological and affective states (interpreting one's own physical or emotional cues; Bandura, 1997). A high self-efficacy level is partially accounted for by having positive experiences associated with mastering challenges (Bandura, 1994). In the context of bullying, Wachs et al. (2019) reported that such positive experiences depended upon intervention strategies, bullying form, and students' bullying role. According to a systematic review of teachers' bullying-related self-efficacy, which included 36 publications between 2002 and 2019, teachers generally had high self-efficacy (Fischer et al., 2021). However, the authors criticized that 61.1% of the studies included in the review were of 'low' or 'very low' quality because they did not include clear definitions of constructs and were based on relatively small sample sizes (Fischer et al., 2021). Although some previous studies reported a close resemblance in self-efficacy levels between teachers working in different school types—either in special education or general education (e.g., Collier et al., 2015)—the present study would enhance the existing literature by examining self-efficacy of special school staff specifically in the England context.

A high level of teachers' self-efficacy was associated with higher degree of job commitment and lower risk of burnout (Fathi et al., 2021). This is particularly important in the context of school bullying as more self-efficacious teachers were found to be more actively involved with their students (Granziera & Perera, 2019). When stronger bonds were established between teacher and students, those students were more mentally healthy and experienced stronger sense of safety and wellbeing, which often is a protective factor towards bullying incidents (Jamal et al., 2013; Kidger et al. 2021). With closer relationships, bullied students were also more willing to seek help from trusted teachers (Eliot et al., 2010). Moreover, teachers with high self-efficacy also tended to have more mental resources and were more flexible during setbacks, such as when struggling to deal with complicated bullying incidents (Shu, 2022). They were able to proactively intervene with bullying incidents efficiently and therefore preventing the incidents to develop into a more intense form (Låftman et al., 2017). It is also possible that they are more receptive to any anti-bullying training provided. Nevertheless, when teachers perceived themselves as incapable (i.e., low self-efficacy), they were found to form less supportive relationships with students and were less ready in managing classroom behaviours (Harding et al., 2019). Such worsen classroom atmosphere (e.g., due to poorer leadership or teacher-student relationships) had the potential to provoke more bullying incidents between students (Ertesvåg & Roland, 2015; Harding et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the current levels of school staff's self-efficacy in relation to dealing with bullying helps also inform their wellbeing, which in turn affects their support to students involved in bullying situations.

Previous literature from mainstream schools has identified certain characteristics that may impact staff self-efficacy in relation to dealing with bullying. Firstly, differences in work experience: according to Fischer and Bilz (2019), teachers' self-efficacy improved with their work experience, possibly due to experiencing bullying situations more often. These encounters might be sources of mastery experiences which allowed teachers to learn from dealing with bullying situations, having an increased sense of confidence when successfully handling an incident. Secondly, staff role: for instance, Kennedy et al. (2012) reported that administrators felt significantly more confident in discussing bullying incidents with parents of children who were either the victim or the bully. This could be an influence of the differential focus of the respective professional development, during which administrators could have increased perception of their skills in handling communicative issues while teachers had more in classroom practices. Thirdly, staff with bullying training were more self-efficacious in dealing with bullying (Fischer et al., 2021). These trainings could be in the form of absorbing information on bullying, methods for bullying prevention, and strategies for intervention, during which school staff were able to bridge research into their practical real-life experiences by discussing alternative responses in bullying situations or reflecting on professional behaviours, increasing their self-efficacy via vicarious experiences (Fischer et al., 2021). Finally, the systematic review by Fischer et al. (2021) reported high consistency in the *null* difference in self-efficacy between male and female school staff. Seven out of eight

studies indicated school staff's gender did not influence their self-perceived ability in intervening in a bullying incident.

Special schools in England

In England, over 1.7 million students (19.5%) have special educational needs (SEN; Gov.uk, 2025a). Of which, 14.2% have a SEN support plan (a document written by the child's school to identify specific support, strategies and outcomes for a child with additional educational needs) and 5.3% have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP: a legal document for students with higher support needs, which details a child's educational, health and care support requirements). Students who are unable to progress academically in a mainstream school, and who have an EHCP, can attend a special school equipped to support specific needs and/or disabilities. To date, approximately 160,000 students attend special schools. England has seven categories of primary need special schools: (1) speech, language and communication, (2) cognition and learning (significant learning difficulties), (3) cognition and learning (moderate learning difficulties), (4) social, emotional and mental health, (5) sensory, (6) autism, (7) physical. Every English special school will have a primary specialism, but they may cater to two or more of the listed categories of need.

Special school classes are smaller than in mainstream classes. It is typical for a special school to have between 5 and 12 students per class, with anything from one teacher and one support staff per class, up to one teacher and one support staff per student, depending on need. Whereas, the average number of students in a mainstream primary school is 27 and the average number of students in a mainstream secondary school is 23 (Department for Education, 2025). It is unknown whether this difference in classroom dynamic may impact classroom dynamics and teacher efficacy.

The current study

The current study firstly aimed to gather up-to-date information on the types and frequency of bullying observed in special education schools in England and whether there were any differences between school specialisms, from the perspective of special school staff. It is possible that the lack of an anti-bullying programme specifically designed for special schools as suggested by Badger et al. (2024) is due to the lack of general knowledge around bullying behaviours in special schools and the transferability of findings between students in mainstream schools and students in special schools. Secondly, the current study aimed to explore the levels of self-efficacy in special school staff—who are often the first responders in bullying situations—in relation to their capacity to deal with bullying. Current literature focuses on teachers in mainstream schools and therefore it is unclear whether the same patterns will be found for teachers in special schools, which can be very different in terms of pupil numbers and needs, school structure and support. Understanding this could help to identify any future training and support needed for special school staff when dealing with bullying. The following research questions guided the current study:

> Research Question 1. What are the types and frequency of bullying behaviours observed in English special schools by school staff, in relation to the schools' specialism?
>
> Research Question 2. Do school staff of different roles have different levels of self-efficacy in relation to dealing with bullying?
>
> Research Question 3. Is the self-efficacy of special school staff associated with demographic factors (gender, years of work and bullying training received)?

METHODS

The current study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional design with an anonymous survey to investigate bullying in special schools from the school staff perspective.

Participants

The target sample is specific. Participants had to fulfil the following two criteria to be eligible to participate in the present study: (1) Be a member of school staff, (2) Work in a special school.

Our final sample consisted of 72 special school staff from schools across England (67% female, 26% male and 7% undisclosed) categorized as either classroom staff (68%) or non-classroom staff (25%), with 7% undisclosed. Since each school could specialize for more than one need, participants were allowed multiple selections on the 'school specialism' question. Therefore, the total number of responses to this question was expected to be more than 72 combined: (1) Speech, Language & Communication (17 responses), (2) Cognition & Learning (Significant Learning Difficulties) (10 responses), (3) Cognitive & Learning (Moderate Learning Difficulties) (13 responses), (4) Social, Emotional & Mental Health (54 responses), (5) Sensory (15 responses), (6) Autism (47 responses), and (7) Physical (5 responses).

A recent UK Government report (Gov.uk, 2025b) discussed teacher retention and provided 4 key duration statistics: 90% of teachers are still teaching 1 year after qualifying; 73% are still teaching after 3 years; 68% after

5 years and 57% after 10 years. The attrition between 1 and 3 years is the largest (17%). When considering our categorization options, we found that our sample was split almost equally when considering those who had been teaching more (58%) or less (40%) than 3 years, with only 2% undisclosed. Finally, of all participants, 54% noted having received formal anti-bullying training, 43% noted no formal anti-bullying training, with 3% undisclosed.

Materials

Bullying in special schools

This section consisted of six tick-box questions; two each related to perceived physical, verbal and relational bullying. The questions were taken from Part II of the Teachers' Perceptions on Bullying questionnaire (Waters & Mashburn, 2017). Participants were asked: '*How often have you seen this type of behaviour this academic year?*'. Sample item for physical bullying was '*A student hits, kicks, pushes, or shoves another student*', for verbal bullying was '*A student is being teased by another student*', for relational bullying was '*A student is deliberately being left out of a group of other students*'. All six questions were presented alongside the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ) Likert scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicated '*I have not seen this type of behaviour*', 3 indicated '*two or three times a month*', and 5 indicated '*several times a week*'.

The questions were summed to create a total bullying score with a score range of 6–30 where a higher score equates to more observations from school staff perspective. In the current sample, this 6-item bullying scale had an excellent level of reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). The physical, verbal, and relational subscales also had good internal reliability of Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$, 0.86 and 0.70, respectively.

After indicating the frequency for each of the six questions, an optional open box was provided at the end of the section to allow participants to indicate any other types of negative behaviours observed and the frequency.

School staff self-efficacy

The final section of the questionnaire consisted of five questions measuring school staff self-efficacy in dealing with bullying situations. These questions were taken from Hastings and Brown (2002). The five efficacy items measured feelings of (1) confidence, (2) control, (3) satisfaction in dealing with bullying behaviours, (4) a perception that they have a positive impact on the encountered bullying behaviours, and (5) the difficulty in dealing with bullying behaviours. Sample items were '*How confident are you in dealing with unkind behaviours or bullying among children in your class or school?*' and '*To what extent do you feel that the way you deal with unkind behaviours or bullying among children in your class or school has a positive effect?*'. Each item was scored on a 7-point Likert scale creating a scoring range of 5–35 where higher scores indicated higher self-efficacy in tackling bullying behaviours. In the current sample, this scale had a high level of reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford: Reference EDUC-C1A_24_036.

Email invites were sent to 60 English special schools to distribute to staff. These special schools were also invited to circulate the online survey link to other special schools.

Interested staff read through a participant information sheet and consent embedded within the online survey and then if they consented to participate, they were able to access the online questionnaire. Data was automatically sent to the research team. Upon request, paper copies were distributed to schools, collected, digitalised and then destroyed securely. Once a survey was submitted, participants could not withdraw their data because all data was anonymous. Survey completion took approximately 10 min. Due to anonymisation, it is unknown how many schools were represented in this data, but all seven categories of special school primary need have been represented.

Data analysis

For participants who answered 'prefer not to say' for a particular personal demographic question, their data were excluded *only* for analyses relevant to that demographic information. No participants answered 'prefer not to say' for any of the bullying questions or the self-efficacy questions.

Firstly, we examined our data descriptively, looking at types and perceived frequency of bullying for an initial overall picture. Secondly, we conducted statistical analyses to further examine the overall bullying patterns when schools were split by specialism. A one-way ANOVA (and post-hoc tests) was conducted to investigate differences between different school specialism categories and the frequency of bullying. A MANOVA (and post-hoc tests) was then conducted to explore the types of bullying reported by school specialism categorization. Lastly, for the section concerning school staff self-efficacy, we reported descriptive statistics for quantifying the five domains of self-efficacy. Then, four independent *t*-tests were conducted to examine the differences in self-efficacy between school staff of dichotomous groupings of (1) gender, (2) school role, (3) years of work, and (4) anti-bullying training.

RESULTS

Types and perceived frequency of bullying behaviours

Overall, school staff scored an average of 20.19 out of a possible 30 for the 6-item bullying observation measure including all physical, verbal, and relational bullying statements, suggesting that they observed any kinds of bullying incidents approximately 'two or three times a month' to 'about once a week'. Verbal and physical bullying were similar in frequency observed ($M=3.81$; SD=1.18 and $M=3.75$; SD=1.20, respectively), with relational bullying less frequently observed ($M=2.54$; SD=1.17).

School specialism

Participants could record their school as having single or multiple specialisms from: (1) Speech, Language & Communication, (2) Cognition & Learning (SLD), (3) Cognitive & Learning (MLD), (4) Social, Emotional & Mental Health (SEMH), (5) Sensory, (6) Autism, and (7) Physical. Based on the combination of responses, we further categorised these into (1) schools that cater to students with the primary specialism of autism ($N=14$), (2) schools that cater to students with the primary specialism of SEMH ($N=24$), (3) schools that cater to students with the dual-specialism of autism-SEMH ($N=12$), (4) schools whose students have any combinations of three or four specialisms ($N=9$), (5) schools whose students have any combinations of five, six or seven specialisms ($N=13$; see Figure 1). A one-way ANOVA identified significant differences between the five groupings and the overall reported bullying: $F(4, 67)=4.986$, $p=0.001$. Tukey post-hoc tests found significant differences between the amount of reported bullying between the SEMH schools ($M=24.08$; SD=5.28) and the autism schools ($M=16.42$; SD=4.70): $p=0.001$, and between the SEMH schools and the schools with 5–7 differing needs ($M=18.50$; SD=6.23): $p=0.049$. There were no other significant differences.

We further explored the bullying observations by splitting the three bullying types by the same school specialisms. When split by primary need specialism, the only categorization with a much higher rate of verbal bullying was the autism-SEMH school. All other schools showed similar rates between verbal and physical bullying (see Figure 2). Relational bullying was observed least often across all schools.

Results from the MANOVA conclude that the type of bullying experienced is significantly dependent on the specialism(s) of the school: $F(12, 172)=2.331$, $p=0.009$; Wilks' Lambda=0.672, partial $\eta^2=0.124$. An alpha (Bonferroni) correction was made with a new statistical significance level of $p=0.017$. When considering physical bullying, Tukey post-hoc tests found significant differences between the SEMH ($M=4.54$; SD=0.89) and autism schools ($M=3.11$; SD=1.06; $p=0.001$), and between the SEMH and the autism-SEMH schools ($M=3.17$; SD=1.25; $p=0.004$). When considering verbal bullying, Tukey post-hoc tests found no significant differences. When considering relational bullying, Tukey post-hoc tests found significant differences between the SEMH ($M=3.12$; SD=1.23) and autism schools ($M=1.89$; SD=0.49; $p=0.012$).

Self-efficacy of school staff

School staff's self-efficacy around dealing with bullying was measured across five domains: (1) self-confidence, (2) feeling in control, (3) satisfaction in dealing with bullying behaviours, (4) a perception that they have a positive impact on the encountered bullying behaviours, and (5) the difficulty in dealing with bullying behaviours. Overall, school staff scored an average of 26.81 out of a possible 35, with all five domains averaging above 5 on the 1–7 option

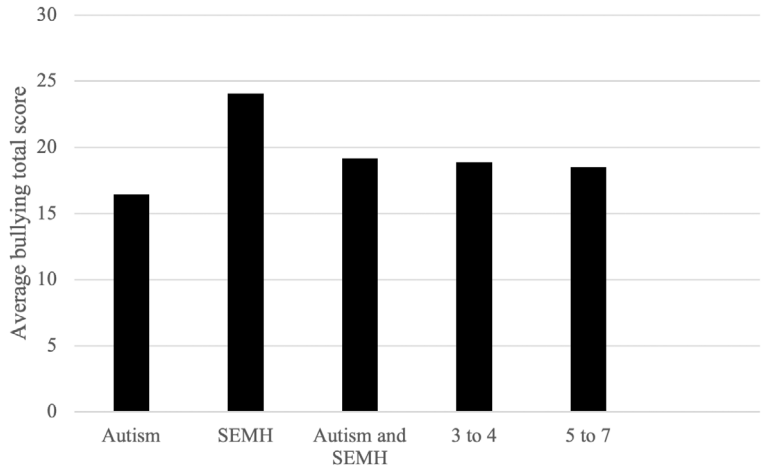

FIGURE 1 Average total bullying score (combining verbal, physical and relational) by school specialism (possible scores range from 5 to 30).

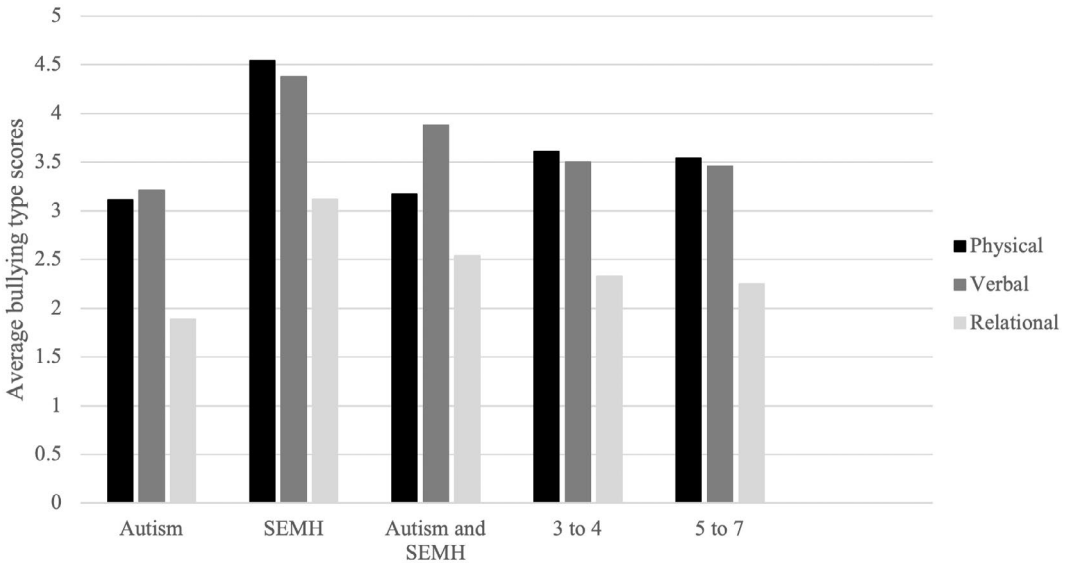

FIGURE 2 Physical, verbal and relational bullying score averages by school specialism (possible scores range from 1 to 5).

Likert scale. The average scores of the five domains from highest self-efficacy to lowest self-efficacy in relation to dealing with bullying were: (1) self-confidence (M=5.76, SD=1.22); (2) not finding it difficult (M=5.40, SD=1.40); (3) satisfaction of own approach (M=5.36, SD=1.28); (4) having a positive impact (M=5.29, SD=1.17), and (5) feeling in control (M=5.01, SD=1.45).

Gender, school role, years of work, anti-bullying training

Four independent t-tests were conducted looking at whether there were significant differences between school staff groupings and their scores of self-efficacy. Due to undisclosed information, a total of 67 school staff were included in the gender and the school role t-tests, 71 were included in the years of work t-test, and 70 were included in the anti-bullying training t-test. An alpha (Bonferroni) correction was made; with a new statistical significance level of p=0.013.

Gender

A non-significant difference was found between overall self-efficacy of females (N=48; M=26.56, SD=5.55) and males (N=19; M=27.89, SD=4.42): t (41.34)=−1.03, p=0.31.

Classroom and non-classroom staff

A non-significant difference was found between overall self-efficacy of classroom staff (N=50; M=26.51, SD=4.70) and non-classroom staff (N=17; M=27.24, SD=6.42): t (22.14)=−0.43, p=0.67.

Years of work

Due to the Bonferroni correction, a non-significant difference was found between overall self-efficacy of those who had been teaching for less than 3 years (N=29; M=25.29, SD=5.04) and those who had been teaching for more than 3 years (N=42; M=27.95, SD=5.26): t (62.04)=−2.15, p=0.04.

Anti-bullying training

A significant difference was found between overall self-efficacy of those who had not received training (N=39; M=24.47, SD=4.86) and those who had received training (N=31; M=30.10, SD=4.00): t (67.90)=−5.31, p<0.001.

Open responses from questionnaires

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked about other bullying behaviours seen in schools that had not been mentioned already in the survey. A total of 10 open responses were collected. Seven responses were about other types of negative behaviours: (1) one participant mentioned student-to-teacher bullying, (2) four participants mentioned cyberbullying, (3) one participant mentioned homophobic language (although this is a form of verbal bullying, it was not an option given in this study's questionnaires) and (4) one participant mentioned extremist views. Three responses suggested potential reasons for students displaying bullying behaviours: (1) peer pressure, (2) inability to communicate and (3) emotional dysregulation.

DISCUSSION

Results showed that school staff observed all three types of bullying (i.e., physical, verbal and relational) in special schools, with verbal and physical bullying being most frequently observed overall, and relational

bullying less so. There was no difference overall in levels of verbal bullying across the school types, but there was significantly more physical and relational bullying in the SEMH schools than the autism schools, and significantly more physical bullying in the SEMH school than the autism-SEMH schools. Schools with a specialism for SEMH did tend to score highest for bullying overall, and significantly more so than the autism schools and schools catering to 5 to 7 specialisms of need. A relatively high self-efficacy level of dealing with bullying was reported overall by school staff yet those who had received anti-bullying training were significantly more likely to note higher self-efficacy than those who had not received training. There appeared to be no significant impact of gender, school role or level of teaching experience on feelings of self-efficacy to deal with bullying.

Type, frequency and school specialism

Overall, bullying patterns observed in English special schools partially resembled those reported in the existing literature focusing on mainstream school bullying. Extensive literature from mainstream schools has documented physical, verbal and relational bullying among students (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2015; Olweus, 1996; Waters & Mashburn, 2017); all three types were also found within English special schools. Comparing the frequency of these observed bullying types, the present study showed that verbal and physical bullying were the most commonly observed, followed by relational bullying, which is similar to the existing literature documenting bullying among mainstream school samples (e.g., Chhabria et al., 2020), although in mainstream schools the frequency of verbal bullying tends to be higher than physical bullying.

Schools with a primary specialism of SEMH tended to report higher total bullying on average, and significantly more so than autism schools and schools catering to 5 to 7 specialisms of need. Students with SEMH often struggle to manage or communicate their emotions and behaviour, which can lead to internalizing such as, withdrawal, anxiety or low mood, or it can lead to externalizing, such as anger, aggression or difficult social interactions. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that teachers of SEMH schools reported more bullying between the students, and especially compared to schools where the primary specialism is autism whereby there may be either less sustained social contact between students or where there are 5–7 different specialisms which could result in more separation of students during the school hours or more school staff presence. When these data were broken down into bullying type, it was interesting to see that the SEMH schools reported significantly more physical and relational bullying than the autism schools, and significantly more physical bullying in the SEMH school than the autism-SEMH schools. For schools whose primary specialisms were autism-SEMH, verbal bullying tended to be most frequently observed, but for all other schools, and contrary to previous literature focusing on mainstream school data, physical and verbal bullying were on par.

Special school staff self-efficacy in relation to bullying

The current study found that special school staff had relatively high levels of self-efficacy overall, consistent with a previous systematic review of teachers' bullying-related self-efficacy which included 36 publications between 2002 and 2019 (Fischer et al., 2021). According to the review, of the 20 studies that reported a quantitative mean of teachers' self-efficacy, all had reported an overall mean above the theoretical mean of the measurement scale, and seven studies had explicitly interpreted the level as 'high'. However, most of the 20 studies included in the review were sampled from US mainstream schools with only three studies reporting from the UK, and only three studies examining differences for students with special needs (Fischer et al., 2021). Therefore, this study adds the perspective of school staff from a range of English special schools.

Our study showed no significant relationship between level of self-efficacy and gender. This is consistent with previous research of mainstream schoolteachers (Fischer & Bilz, 2019). However, the non-significant relationship with job role in school (classroom vs. non-classroom staff) deviated from what was expected based on the existing literature on mainstream schools. Kennedy et al. (2012) found that mainstream school administrators (non-classroom staff) had higher levels of self-efficacy than teachers (classroom staff) which was potentially attributed to the differential provision of professional development which altered the perceptions of their skills. However, under the context of the present study, special schools tend to be smaller in student number than mainstream schools and therefore school staff, regardless of their role, tend to be much more involved and familiar with each child. It is possible therefore, that all staff have more exposure to a range of behaviours from students, and also know the background and history of each student, which leads them to feel an equal level of efficacy when faced with challenging situations with these students. We also found no significant difference in relation to the number of years an individual had worked in the profession, which again, does not align with previous mainstream research (Fischer & Bilz, 2019) reporting that more experienced teachers had higher levels of self-efficacy than their less experienced colleagues. It should be noted that although our results were non-significant, once we had corrected for multi-testing of self-efficacy using

the Bonferroni correction, the scores for those who had been in the teaching profession for more than 3 years were still higher than those who had been in teaching for less than 3 years. It is possible that with more participants and therefore more statistical power, the result may have been significant. The present study also used a different cut-off number of years in classifying school staff as experienced (more than 3 years) compared to Fischer and Bilz (more than 29 years). Our findings therefore add a new insight to the work of Fischer and Bilz by suggesting that even being in the education profession for over 3 years may be enough to increase feelings of self-efficacy.

Significance of anti-bullying training on self-efficacy

Anti-bullying training was significantly related to level of self-efficacy. It was found that school staff who had undertaken training on anti-bullying were more likely to have high self-efficacy when dealing with bullying situations. This is an encouraging finding: high self-efficacy level is associated with many positive outcomes, such as intervening more often in bullying situations (Collier et al., 2015) and reducing the number of bullying incidents (Fischer, 2018). The willingness to intervene promptly prevents the bullying incident from developing more intensely and avoids severe negative consequences. Besides, Gregus et al. (2017) also suggested that students with high self-efficacy teachers have experienced less verbal bullying. It is unclear from the current study which anti-bullying training was experienced by members of staff, but the survey did state that anti-bullying training could not include courses solely on restorative justice. Knowing what training is available for schools would be useful to better understand the positive elements from these training courses and whether they can be made more widely available.

Limitations and future directions

First, due to the optional nature of participation, it is possible that participants who chose to take part had particular interests, strong opinions or unique experiences in the bullying topic. For example, when asking about anti-bullying training, those who have attended a training session were perhaps more likely to want to participate in this research and they may observe and report bullying differently.

Second, the overview of bullying at special schools was based on school-staff-reported data, yet existing research has found differences between school staff and student perceptions towards bullying. For example, teachers have been found to perceive bullying less frequently than students (Khanolainen et al., 2021). However, there are currently no suitable bullying questionnaires for special school students with appropriate clarity, language and well-established psychometric properties. Therefore, school-staff-reported data was deemed the most appropriate method. Future work should adapt current bullying questionnaires to be suitable for special school students to ensure student voice and experience are also heard and recognized.

Third, additional variables such as student-level socio-economic status, ethnicity, race and primary need could also be collected to better explore any differences in types and observations. For example, collecting postcode information would better estimate the natural diversity or ethnicity pattern in any participating special school. With the additional information, bullying behaviours related to race or skin colour can be given more context and better explained. A low frequency of racial behaviours, for example, could be due to schools having limited ethical diversity rather than it not being an aspect of special schools themselves.

Fourth, although similarities and differences can be drawn between our data on special schools, and previous data about mainstream schools, this must be done with some caution due to differing methodologies and approaches. Future work should make a more direct comparison between the two educational settings by using the same methodologies and questionnaires.

Lastly, future quantitative or qualitative research could expand on school staff self-efficacy. School staff may show differential confidence when handling various types of bullying (e.g., more confident in dealing with physical than relational bullying), students with different bullying roles (e.g., more confident in dealing with 'bullies' than 'bystanders'), or bullying observed in different venues (e.g., more confident in dealing bullying occurring within classrooms than in playgrounds). By examining the underlying factors contributing to the overall self-efficacy level, anti-bullying training targeting school staff could be more precise and effective. Consequently, higher self-efficacy levels could be achieved, together with the associated positive impacts.

Compulsory anti-bullying training for special school staff

Attending training on how to deal with bullying was positively associated with higher levels of self-efficacy. Previous research has also shown how effective training can be in terms of staff intervening in bullying situations, reducing the number of incidents and ultimately reducing bullying (Collier et al., 2015; Fischer, 2018). Therefore, it was concerning to see that only 54% of staff in this study had received any anti-bullying training but reassuring that the training

led to an increase in feelings of self-efficacy in managing bullying. Action should therefore be taken to ensure special school staff receive sufficient and appropriate anti-bullying training as part of their professional development. Moreover, as reflected in the open responses of our questionnaires, bullying in special school is not an exact replica of mainstream school bullying. The directionality, for example, could be different (i.e., student-to-staff) and behaviours that appear as bullying may in fact be a type of 'counter-connecting' (Badger et al., 2025) whereby an attempt at a positive connection is being made which instead results in the victimization of another (e.g., repeatedly hitting someone to initiate friendship). The driving forces for students with SEND to be involved in negative behaviours should also be further examined, as it could be distinct from that observed in mainstream schools. Therefore, although mainstream training would be beneficial, next steps should identify the most effective training available designed specifically for students with SEND.

Implications and significance of the study

It is important to note that there is currently no evidence-based anti-bullying programme specifically designed for special schools (Badger et al., 2024). Therefore, educators and policymakers should be cautious about the transferability of mainstream school anti-bullying approaches to special school contexts. The present study has confirmed that special school bullying is similar to that previously observed in mainstream schools (e.g. Chhabria et al., 2020). However, this study also noted that whilst in mainstream schools, verbal bullying is always the most common type of bullying, followed by physical bullying, in this study of special schools, physical bullying and verbal bullying were on par. The only instance in which verbal bullying was seen more often was when a school catered to students of the primary specialism of autism-SEMH.

It is also essential to design programmes according to the capability and receptiveness of students with SEND. The wide variety of school specialisms listed by participants in this study shows the breadth of need and potential learning support and style for any new anti-bullying programme. A recent study that adapted and trialled two lessons of a mainstream anti-bullying programme (KiVa into KiVa SEND) for use in special schools, suggested that new programmes should include more interactive and communication methods such as role-play, music, drama and visual aids (Badger et al., 2023). By including more interactive and ability-appropriate elements, these adjustments increase comprehension among students with SEND and ensure they understand the abstract concept of 'anti-bullying'. In addition, our results have shown that training had a significant impact on self-efficacy to manage bullying situations. Therefore, anti-bullying training should be specifically developed for teachers in special schools to ensure accurate recognition, reporting and managing of bullying. This could not only reduce bullying but could also improve teacher wellbeing as they will feel more comfortable and confident dealing with these difficult situations.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore what bullying looks like in special schools in England from school staff perspectives and to understand how school staff feel about their ability to handle bullying incidents. The research revealed that types and frequency of bullying observed in special schools were similar to those previously documented in mainstream schools: verbal, physical and relational bullying were all observed in special schools. However, when split by SEND categorization, schools with a specialism for SEMH did tend to score higher for bullying overall than the autism schools and schools catering to 5–7 specialisms of need. There was also significantly more physical and relational bullying in the SEMH schools than the autism schools, and significantly more physical bullying in the SEMH school than the autism-SEMH schools. Nevertheless, most school staff, especially those who have had anti-bullying training, were confident in dealing with the bullying behaviours of students with SEND.

By supplementing and extending what has been documented previously, this study highlights the need for standardized anti-bullying training for all educators and school personnel, and training that accurately depicts bullying experienced in special schools and with students of differing primary needs. The more efficacious staff can be in dealing with and managing bullying situations, the greater the reduction in bullying instances. Evidence-informed support needs to be targeted and available for one of the most vulnerable populations of students.

Overall, bullying in special schools is evident, and the negative impacts are far-reaching. This field of study calls for immediate awareness and collaborative efforts from researchers, educators, and parents to support a healthy and safe school environment for students.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nicolette W. T. Lee: Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; data curation. **Julia R. Badger:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The questionnaire and methodology for this study were approved by the Department of Education's Departmental Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford: EDUC_C1A_24_036.

CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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