School Staff Perspective of Bullying in Special Schools: Types, Frequency and Self-Efficacy

LEE, Wing Tung Nicolette

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School Staff Perspective of Bullying in Special Schools: Types, Frequency and Self-Efficacy

LEE, Wing Tung Nicolette

Department of Education, University of Oxford

Master of Science in Education (Child Development and Education)

Dr Julia Badger

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Abstract

Bullying is not a new phenomenon but an education and health priority. Extensive literature suggests that bullying manifests in different forms and has negative consequences on children. Accordingly, anti-bullying programs have been developed. However, the existing evidence has primarily focused on mainstream schools, and only a few studies have been conducted with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in special schools. Therefore, the present study examines bullying in special schools and how special school staff feel when dealing with bullying. These insights could better inform the development of anti-bullying programs or bullying training specifically designed for learners or school staff in special schools. A mixed method design was adopted to address four research questions: *(1)* What are the types and frequencies of bullying behaviours observed in special schools? Do they differ by age group? *(2)* What levels of self-efficacy are seen in special school staff, in relation to dealing with bullying? Are there any differences when considering school staff of different roles? *(3)* Is the self-efficacy of special school staff associated with demographic factors? *(4)* What are the driving forces for children with SEND to target others, with negative behaviours?

The quantitative component included 72 school staff sampled from special schools across the United Kingdom, and the qualitative component included seven school staff (two school staff participating in two separate interviews and five school staff participating in a focus group). Results showed that physical, verbal, relational and pupil-to-staff bullying were evident in special schools. Verbal bullying was found to be most prevalent, and most bullying happened in the age group 12- to 14-years-old. Besides, special school staff had high self-efficacy about dealing with bullying, with a t-test showing no difference between classroom and non-classroom staff. The chi-square tests showed a significant association between high self-efficacy and receiving bullying

training, but not gender or years of work. Finally, children with SEND bully others for both intentional and unintentional reasons. All findings were compared with the documented mainstream school bullying findings. Limitations of the present study included convenience sampling, lack of children's self-measure, and dichotomous coding. Future research is suggested to better adapt bullying scales for children's self-report, to include more variables, and to examine underlying self-efficacy factors. An understanding of bullying from special school staff perspective provides insights for developing new anti-bullying programs that are specifically relevant to the special school context. This study also highlights the need to mandate bullying training in schools and to re-define bullying, inclusive to children with SEND.

Keywords: Bullying, special school, self-efficacy, special needs, school staff

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Bullying is not a new phenomenon but an education and health priority. In 2006, the Education and Inspections Act 2006 was enacted by the United Kingdom (UK) government, acknowledging the seriousness of school bullying (Legislation.gov.uk, 2006). This Act legally mandated all maintained schools to enforce a policy preventing bullying behaviours between school-aged children. Since then, schools have been more aware of bullying incidents, increasing the demand for rigorous bullying-related research. Consequently, we now know a fair amount about bullying in mainstream schools. However, research specifically focusing on special schools is scarce, and we still know very little about bullying in special schools. Hence, the current study aims to unveil past and current work surrounding the field of school bullying, which informs a research project on understanding bullying in special schools from the perspectives of school staff.

Chapter 1 provides background information and engages with relevant theories in relation to what bullying is, what the consequences of bullying are and how to prevent it. To begin with, the theoretical definition of bullying **(1.1)** is followed by types of bullying **(1.2)**, prevalence statistics **(1.3)**, consequences of bullying **(1.4)**, and anti-bullying programs observed in mainstream schools **(1.5)**. Then, a focus on bullying and children with special educational needs and disabilities, SEND **(1.6)**, which reveals research gaps **(1.7)**. Finally, the research aims and research questions of the present study **(1.8)**.

1.1 Theoretical Definition of Bullying

1.1.1 Inconsistent Definitions

The phenomenon of bullying has received heightened awareness in recent decades, with the first study on bullying traced back to the 1970s in Norway (Olweus, 1974). Despite years of research focusing on understanding bullying behaviours and developing bullying theories, there has yet to be a standardised definition of bullying across the existing literature (Chang, 2021). A recent literature review examining 901 studies

uncovered diverse definitions of bullying and suggested that more than half of the included studies were without clear or specified definitions (Slattery et al., 2019). Several reasons were accountable for the ambiguity. First, deciding whether a behaviour is perceived as bullying is personal (Slattery et al., 2019). For example, a person's attempt at humour could be without intention to harm, yet perceived as something hurtful by the recipient. Second, bullying is often confused with playful teasing or peer aggression as they share certain features, such as causing distress (Cornell et al., 2006; Rodkin et al., 2015). Therefore, the subjective perceptions of bullying hinder formulating a universally accepted definition.

1.1.2 Definition of the Present Study

For the present study, the theoretical definition of bullying is taken from the work of Dr. Dan Olweus, a pioneer in bullying research who conducted much initial research in the field of bullying (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). According to Olweus (1993), the definition of bullying emphasises three major components: 1. An intention to harm, 2. Repeated bullying behaviour (i.e., victim being targeted multiple times), 3. An imbalance of power (e.g., being outnumbered or less physically strong which makes it very difficult for the victim to defend themselves). These components constitute the most accepted and cited definitions of bullying (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006; Chang, 2021). Later work has attempted to support this definition with theoretical evidence, one of which is the Dominance Theory of Bullying (DTB; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001; Pellegrini et al., 2007). The DTB states that bullies target others for status, resources or reputation. In the case of children, they may show bullying behaviours, attempting to be the class leader and establishing domination. This explains the potential 'intention' of bullying behaviours. The DTB also suggests that children tend to initiate bullying to less powerful peers due to a perceived higher success in gaining status, explaining the 'power imbalance' criterion.

1.2 Types of Bullying

1.2.1 Four Major Types of Bullying

Bullying exists in four theoretical forms: 1. Physical, 2. Verbal, 3. Relational, and 4. Cyber (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Physical bullying is generally agreed to involve 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 by spreading rumours or socially excluding someone (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). Finally, cyberbullying, the newest form of documented bullying, has received increased attention due to technological advancements (Slonje & Smith, 2008). This form of bullying can be a combination of verbal and relational bullying, with unique characteristics of cyberbullying utilising electronic tools and happening in a virtual realm (Li, 2007; Slonje & Smith, 2008). It is important to understand that these four types of bullying often co-occur with each other and, therefore, form complex patterns of bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2015). As cyberbullying was found to happen more outside of school environments than at schools, the present study primarily focused on three traditional types of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational bullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

1.2.2 Direct and Indirect

Apart from classifying bullying as physical, verbal, relational, or cyber, certain literature suggests a different theoretical categorisation of bullying as either direct or indirect (e.g., Arseneault, 2018; Waasdorp et al., 2011). According to Sullivan et al. (2004), direct bullying describes blatant, face-to-face behaviours such as physical and verbal bullying. In contrast, indirect bullying involves less blatant, covert behaviours such as relational bullying. Baldry (2004) justified the separation of direct and indirect bullying by illustrating their differential prediction power. In one of Baldry's studies, it

was found that, in terms of the bullies, directly bullying others showed a non-significant prediction of poor mental and physical health, whilst indirectly bullying others significantly predicted emotional disorders and withdrawal behaviours (Baldry, 2004). Therefore, it is worth noting that bullying exists in various forms.

1.3 Prevalence of Bullying

1.3.1 Overview and in the United Kingdom

Different prevalence rates were reported in research studies because the inconsistent definitions of bullying have led to variability in the assessment and recording of bullying behaviours (Vivolo-Kantor et al., 2014). To examine bullying prevalence rates, Modecki et al. (2014) reviewed 80 studies that included children aged from 12 to 18 years and captured bullying behaviours with children's self-report. Results showed great variability across the reported prevalence rates. In particular, studies that provided respondents with bullying *definitions* (i.e., the three theoretical bullying criteria) were more likely to report higher prevalence rates than studies that only included bullying *examples* (i.e., illustrations of targeted behaviour). This finding challenged the representativeness of any pooled prevalence rates of the existing literature as children across many bullying studies were not given a standardised prompt. It is unclear whether the reported variability was from appropriate estimates of the 'true' prevalence or purely a research design or measurement error. The results were also uninformative of prevalence among younger children and those unable to complete self-report measures, such as children with SEND. Besides, Xie et al. (2022) found that among the 75 measurement tools included in their systematic review, 36 tools (48%) did not specify a timeframe for recording the frequency of bullying behaviours, and there was no standardised timeframe across the remaining studies. For example, seven studies had a timeframe of 'the last 30 days' while six assessed experiences in 'the recent school year'. This, in turn, limited the precision of prevalence rates because different timeframes can affect memory recall accuracy and

representativeness (Xie et al., 2022). For example, a shorter timeframe (i.e., a week) may have yielded better recall yet lower representativeness of the general school experience, and vice versa.

Despite the varied prevalence estimates among studies, bullying has been widely documented in numerous developed and higher-income countries such as Australia, Canada, Finland, Japan, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). However, more recent studies also reported a significant prevalence of bullying among low- and middle- income countries (Biswas et al., 2020; World Health Organisation, 2017). In particular, Biswas et al. (2020) found the highest rates of bullying in the Eastern Mediterranean (45.1%) and African regions (43.5%). To synthesise research findings from around the globe, a systematic review drawing data from 83 low-, middle-, and high- income countries found the pooled prevalence of bullying for children aged 12 to 17 across the globe to be 30.5% (Biswas et al., 2020). The countries involved, for example, were Bangladesh, Egypt, Ghana, Macedonia, Mongolia, and Peru.

In the UK, a recent systematic review with 23 studies reported the prevalence of various forms of violence, including peer bullying (13 studies), experienced among children (Nation et al., 2023). It was found that the pooled prevalence estimates of bullying among UK children aged under 18 years were as high as 22.75%, ranking second amongst most common self-reported experiences of childhood violence, slightly less prevalent than community violence at 27.33%. The systematic review continued to reveal that traditional bullying (i.e., physical, verbal, and relational bullying; 32.66%) was more prevalent than cyberbullying (3.98%) which was very similar to the global average for traditional bullying (30.5%). The finding that approximately one-third of mainstream children experienced traditional school bullying is, therefore, an alarming issue in the UK.

1.3.2 Prevalence by Types and Age Groups

Prevalence rates also vary with types of bullying. Consistent across the existing literature, the most prevalent form of mainstream school bullying is verbal bullying, followed by physical, relational and cyberbullying (Chhabria, 2020; Veldkamp, 2019). The prevalence of bullying also depends on the age group. Eslea and Rees (2001) presented results from two retrospective studies that examined the ages at which bullying commonly occurred. It was reported that bullying was most frequent around the age group 11 to 13, while incidents remembered in earlier and later age groups were rare. Two reasons were potentially accountable for the observation (Sharp & Smith, 1994). First, when bullies age, they can better estimate the negative consequences (i.e., risks) for them to bully their peers, such as being punished by adults, discouraging them from bullying others. Second, victims of bullying developed more social skills as they grew and, therefore, avoided bullying due to ineffective communication. Besides, according to Cappadocia et al. (2012), physical bullying dominates in younger children, while verbal and relational bullying are major types of bullying among older children. This was attributed to the fact that children acquired better language and social skills as they reached adolescence, allowing them to use more 'advanced' tactics instead of physical attacks as a form of bullying (Craig et al., 2001). The high prevalence rates of bullying, consequently, resulted in a wide range of negative outcomes.

1.4 Consequences of Bullying

1.4.1 Overview

Recent systematic review and meta-analysis studies have shown statistically significant associations between bullying involvement and a wide spectrum of health and socio-academic problems (Moore et al., 2017; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Amongst reviewed literature, there has been 'convincing' strength of evidence supporting a causal relationship between bullying and mental health problems, and a 'possible' strength of

evidence suggesting relationships between bullying, other health outcomes, academic achievement and social functioning (Moore et al., 2017). These negative consequences affected not only children's current health status but also had a long-lasting effect on adulthood (Lidberg et al., 2023; Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

The consequences are different between different theoretical bullying roles (Badger et al., 2023b). Early research centred the discussion of school bullying around two major roles: 1. Bully (who harms one or more of the victims), and 2. Victim (who is harmed by the bully). Therefore, most studies discussing the consequences of bullying were from the perspectives of the bully and the victim. Subsequently, Salmivalli et al. (1996) noted that every child surrounding a bullying situation was involved and identified five more theoretical roles: 3. Assistant (who helps the bully), 4. Reinforcer (who encourages the bully), 5. Defender (who helps the victim), 6. Bystander (who witnesses the bullying behaviours but is not actively involved), and 7. Bully-victim (who is both a bully and a victim). Since then, more studies examined the differential consequences of bullying on children involved in any of these seven roles (e.g., Rivers, 2012; Rivers et al., 2009).

The following sub-sections discuss the short- and long-term consequences of bullying on children's physical health, mental health and socio-academic development with examples from different bullying roles.

1.4.2 Bullying and Physical Health

Children involved in bullying are three to four times more likely to suffer from physical health issues (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Nevertheless, no consistent finding showed increased health services or medication use for these vulnerable children (Moore et al., 2017). Among different roles, bullies experienced the least physical health problems, while bully-victims manifested the highest level of difficulty (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). The most common somatic disturbances included headaches, gastric pain, dizziness, and backache (Moore et al., 2017). Moreover, Wolke and Lereya (2014) added

sleep-related disorders to the list of negative consequences of bullying. In some cross-sectional studies, associations between being bullied and being overweight were also found (Moore et al., 2017).

Consequences on physical health can continue to affect individuals into adulthood. For example, being a victim of bullying during childhood predicted more bodily inflammatory responses in later life stages (Copeland et al., 2014). Moreover, victims and bully-victims were found to have poorer general health, increased frequency of bodily pain, and slower recovery from illness when they reached adulthood (Takizawa et al., 2014; Wolke et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the effect of childhood bullying seemed to decline with age among bullies. The systematic review by Moore et al. (2017) showed no association between being a bully and somatic problems at age 18 or above.

1.4.3 Bullying and Mental Health

Bullying also affects children's mental health, with many studies focusing on the victim and the bully (Bowes et al., 2015). In terms of the victims, Copeland et al. (2013) reported that they were three times more likely to experience panic attacks and five times more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety disorders. Similarly, Siegel et al. (2009) reported that bullying, especially verbal bullying, was strongly associated with social anxiety. Besides, victims were more vulnerable to depression diagnosis (Copeland et al., 2013). Twin studies involving identical twins revealed a relationship between being bullied (as a victim) and an increased risk of depression (Arseneault et al., 2008). Twin studies also provided strong evidence that bullying was an environmental factor, instead of a biological predisposition, that affected children's development (Arseneault et al., 2008). Regarding the bully, relatively fewer studies were included in systematic reviews (e.g., Wolke & Lereya, 2015). However, one study found that being involved as a bully differentially predicted depression based on gender. The role of a bully predicted depression among boys but not girls (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Despite the victim and the bully, existing literature also suggests an elevated risk of developing poorer mental health among children involved in other participant roles (Badger et al., 2023b). For example, 'reinforcers' of bullying were found to experience discomfort (i.e., cognitive dissonance) when they encouraged bullies to harm others while protecting themselves from being bullied (Rivers, 2012). This discomfort resulted in self-blame and anger (Badger et al., 2023b; Rivers, 2012). Taking up the role of a 'bystander' was found to predict even higher risks of mental health problems when compared to those involved as bullies or victims (Rivers et al., 2009). Finally, because of a double-role involvement, 'bully-victims' were one of the most vulnerable groups which struggled psychologically (Badger et al., 2023b). These findings suggested a broad range of bullying consequences on children's mental health regardless of their roles.

Childhood bullying also leads to worsening mental health in young and middle adulthood: disorders such as anxiety and depression continue to affect young adults (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). An increased risk of suicidality received great attention due to its relevance to death: Takizawa et al. (2014) demonstrated the lasting effects of bullying in their review, showing increased suicidal ideations, attempts and completion among adults who were victims and bully-victims. Hence, the association between school bullying and poorer mental health is well-documented.

1.4.4 Bullying and Socio-Academic Development

Bullying affects children's social development in school and at home as well. According to Sentenac et al. (2011), victims had elevated rates of social isolation and lower involvement in school activities. They were also found to encounter problems with school adjustment, such as displaying more disruptive behaviours (Juvonen et al., 2011; Rothon et al., 2011). Copeland et al. (2013) also found that children involved in bullying were more likely to have family hardships, for example, low socioeconomic status, maltreatment, and unstable family structure. When they reached adulthood, those who

experienced bullying involvement, regardless of role, were found to face difficulties in making and keeping friends, were less likely to meet up with friends, and were more likely not to have a best friend (Takizawa et al., 2014; Wolke et al., 2013). Therefore, bullying can be negatively associated with a person's social development.

Poor academic performance can be another negative impact of bullying. Some children who experienced bullying have been shown to obtain lower average scores in standardised tests than their peers (Juvonen et al., 2011; Rothon et al., 2011). Also, victims of bullying often experience challenges in attending school (i.e., school avoidance or refusal), resulting in higher rates of absenteeism (Mehta & Cornell, 2011). It is possible, therefore, that these children struggle with academic materials and have stagnant learning progress. Generally, they also achieve lower educational qualifications in adulthood (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). It is clear that bullying can have both short- and long-term negative impacts on children. Therefore, anti-bullying programs have been developed in an attempt to reduce bullying incidents and their associated consequences.

1.5 Anti-Bullying Programs in Mainstream Schools

The earliest examples of anti-bullying work were observed in Norway and Sweden, with their pioneer success influencing subsequent research on interventions in other Western countries (Olweus, 1993). Since then, countries, including the UK, have started developing programs targeting a reduction of bullying in schools (Smith & Brain, 2000). These early works were evaluated and modified, which informed the development of more current programs.

Existing mainstream anti-bullying interventions were found to reduce school bullying effectively, with victimisation reduced by 15-16% and perpetration reduced by 19-20% (Gaffney et al., 2019). In particular, interventions with a theoretical foundation of a 'whole school' approach (i.e., all parts of the school being involved and committed) have been suggestive of the best outcome in preventing and responding to bullying (e.g.,

Lindsay & McPherson, 2012; Raskauskas & Modell, 2011). By involving all people within the school, this approach could educate everyone about their roles in handling bullying situations and create a secure environment for children to report bullying incidents safely (Mishna, 2003). In terms of school staff, they are responsible for recognising signs of bullying such as a child being isolated intentionally (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). They are also trained to support children in developing social skills, such as self-regulation strategies (Cappadocia et al., 2012). In terms of children, they are reassured that school staff know about bullying and support their well-being (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011). Therefore, mainstream schools are encouraged to implement anti-bullying intervention with a 'whole school' theoretical foundation that increases bullying awareness and enhances skills building (Little, 2002; Raskauskas & Modell, 2011).

Among existing anti-bullying programs, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Plan (OBPP; Olweus, 1991) was the most used programme (Gaffney et al., 2021). Other frequently reported approaches included the Viennese Social Competence Program (Strohmeier et al., 2012), No Trap! (Palladine et al., 2012) and KiVa (Salmivalli et al., 2010). KiVa is currently the most globally accessed programme (23 countries). In the UK, KiVa has been recently used as a part of a randomised controlled trial in England and Wales to evaluate its effectiveness and cost-effectiveness in reducing bullying among mainstream primary schools (Clarkson et al., 2022).

1.6 Bullying and Children With Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

1.6.1 Overview and Prevalence

As illustrated in sections (**1.1**) – (**1.5**), research on bullying has extensively focused on mainstream schools with typically developing children. However, researchers have become more interested in understanding bullying among children with SEND, including those receiving inclusive education in mainstream schools and those receiving special education in special schools (Badger et al., 2024). A literature review reported that rates

of bullying among children with SEND were as high as 69%, while that of children without SEND was approximately 20%-30% (Rose et al., 2011). Similarly, Hartley et al. (2015) found that, over a one-month period, children with SEND were two to four times more likely to be involved in bullying incidents than their non-SEND peers. Therefore, the overrepresentation of children with SEND in bullying involvement is worrying (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Besides, it is worth noting that children with SEND experienced more frequent bullying compared to their non-SEND peers, regardless of their SEND conditions, whether it was overt or covert (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). When examining these two SEND groups, Sweeting and West (2001) reported that children with an overt type of SEND encountered bullying twice as much as children with covert SEND.

1.6.2 Vulnerability in Children With SEND

Children with and without SEND are bullied for many overlapping reasons, yet the SEND condition itself explains additional vulnerability (Whitney et al., 1992).

Firstly, according to two large-scale studies sampled from 144 countries, 'being different' was a significant factor contributing to the increased risk of bullying (World Health Organisation, 2018a, 2018b). For example, children with SEND who displayed atypical behaviours, such as rocking over chairs, were perceived as 'different' from their peers, which became risk factors for bullying (Gray, 2004). Besides, children with SEND were 'different' due to physical or learning disabilities (World Health Organisation, 2018a, 2018b). For instance, it was common for children with physical disabilities to receive extra help (e.g., wheelchair support) in school, which made them distinct from others (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). Moreover, children with learning disabilities could achieve 'different' academic outcomes (usually lower), which was also proved to be associated with an increased bullying rate (Cook et al., 2010).

Secondly, ‘poor social and communication skills’ increased the vulnerability of children with SEND (Kaukiainen et al., 2002). Research consistently revealed that children with SEND struggled with peer and social interactions because they hardly understood other’s experiences and were unable to express their feelings (e.g., Brown et al., 2001; Kaukiainen et al., 2002). Hence, it was common to observe these children with SEND playing alone and having fewer than two quality friendships (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). In particular, Little (2002) reported that children with Asperger’s Syndrome and Non-verbal Learning Disorders were ‘perfect victims’ due to their significant impairment in social communication. The inability to communicate effectively resulted in fewer friends and social isolation, which increased the risk of bullying (Little, 2002). Besides, having poor communication skills also hindered these children from reporting bullying incidents to adults (Whitney et al., 1992). Therefore, it could be foreseen that children with SEND had more difficulties in handling bullying situations and were placed in higher-risk positions.

Some other factors were also shown to increase the risk of bullying among children with SEND. These include, but are not limited to, poorer psychological health and emotional control (e.g., Gumpel, 2008; Rosen et al., 2012), lower self-esteem (Kumpulainen et al., 2001), poorer family life (Bernstein & Watson, 1997), and an inability to follow socially valued qualities (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010).

1.7 Current Research Gaps

Despite more recent attempts to understand bullying amongst children with SEND, some areas are worth further research and justification. Three gaps in knowledge were identified, and the considered reasons for having these gaps informed the formulation of the present study’s research questions (to be explained in Section 1.8). The research questions aim to provide foundational information necessary for addressing the gaps.

1.7.1 Standardisation and Effectiveness of Anti-Bullying Program for Children With SEND

The first research gap is the lack of standardisation of anti-bullying programs or interventions for children with SEND, consistently reported in three systematic reviews (Badger et al., 2024; Houchins et al., 2016; Maxfield et al., 2022). In 2016, among only six studies included, Houchins et al. (2016) identified a large discrepancy between interventions used with children with SEND. These interventions were found to differ in terms of characteristics, setting, and outcome measures. For example, some programs targeted the specific needs of children with SEND, such as emotional disturbance, while others included all types of SEND conditions (Houchins et al., 2016). Similar findings were again reported in the most recent systematic review by Badger et al. (2024), which aimed to explore school-based anti-bullying strategies. Overall, the 15 included studies showed great variations regarding their approaches, dosage, outcome measures, deliverer, and targeted type of children (Badger et al., 2024). For example, these programs could be delivered by teachers, external consultants, researchers, or even school nurses. Also, there was no overlap between anti-bullying approaches used in these 15 studies, except that the *Second Step* was used twice (Espelage et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2015). The inconsistency in delivering anti-bullying work among children with SEND was no surprise, given that similar observations were found in reviews sampled from mainstream schools (Badger et al., 2024). Therefore, these findings unveil a gap in the field to standardise anti-bullying programs, especially for children with SEND, which in turn could effectively reduce bullying incidents.

The second research gap is the uncertain effectiveness of these unstandardised programs in reducing bullying involvement among children with SEND, supported by systematic reviews (Badger et al., 2024; Houchins et al., 2016; Maxfield et al., 2022). After finding variability between anti-bullying interventions, Houchins et al. (2016)

stated that results from these studies were mixed and difficult to reproduce. Therefore, no results showing a particular program being effective were conclusive. Likewise, Maxfield et al. (2022) described wide ranges of effect sizes (i.e., small to large) for their reviewed successful anti-bullying programs. These effect sizes were also subject to future fidelity checks, showing uncertainty among reported effect sizes. Most recently, Badger et al. (2024) confirmed the findings of the two papers, illustrating uncertainty in program effectiveness. Among the 15 studies examined, only 10 reported positive outcomes and effectively reduced bullying perpetration or victimisation among children with SEND. In other words, 20% of the studies were found ineffective in school-based anti-bullying. Moreover, these studies were criticised for having small sample sizes and lacking comparison groups (Badger et al., 2024). In terms of sample sizes, only five studies had more than 20 children with SEND included in the 'intervention' group; consequently, three studies could only provide descriptive statistics. Regarding comparison groups, only two studies had strategically determined comparison groups within their randomised controlled trials. Therefore, the effectiveness of anti-bullying approaches for children with SEND could not be accurately determined due to the imprecise experimental design (Hariton & Locascio, 2018). This identified another research gap in the field: to understand better 'what works' as an anti-bullying intervention.

1.7.2 Lack of Anti-Bullying Programs in Special (Education) Schools

The third research gap, most relevant to the present study, is the lack of an anti-bullying program *specifically* designed for children with SEND in *special (education) schools*. For clarity, anti-bullying work could be classified as targeting children from three different groups: 1. Typical children in mainstream schools (as in Section 1.5), 2. Children with SEND in mainstream schools (as in Section 1.7.1), and 3. Children with SEND in special schools. According to Badger et al. (2024), developments of anti-bullying programs for children with SEND, either in mainstream schools or special

schools, were not encouraging. Even worse, no anti-bullying approach has been specifically designed for use with children with SEND in special schools, despite one recent attempt showing the potential of the KiVa-SEND programme to be embedded in the special school curricula (Badger et al., 2023b). However, even in this case, it was only a pilot of the first two adapted lessons, neither of which included the topic of bullying. These findings emphasised the urgency to have more anti-bullying approaches carefully adapted from mainstream schools or designed specifically for children with SEND, especially those in special schools.

1.8 Research Questions and Research Aims

1. ***What are the types and frequencies of bullying behaviours observed in special schools? Do they differ by age group? (RQ1)***

It is likely that the lack of an anti-bullying program specifically designed for children with SEND in special schools is due to the lack of general knowledge, such as the type and frequency of bullying in special schools. The transferability of findings between typical children in mainstream schools and children with SEND in special schools is unknown. For example, as discussed in Section 1.5.2, with a 'whole school' anti-bullying approach, bullying incidents were found to be reduced in mainstream schools. However, it is unknown whether a whole-school approach would suit a special school without first researching the dynamics and patterns of bullying (e.g., types, prevalence and age groups) observed in special schools. Therefore, a more complete understanding of what bullying looks like in special schools may help address the research gaps of 1. not having standardised and effective anti-bullying programs for children with SEND and 2. not having anti-bullying programs specifically designed for special schools.

2. ***What levels of self-efficacy are seen in special school staff, in relation to dealing with bullying? Are there any differences when considering school staff of different roles? (RQ2)***
3. ***Is the self-efficacy of special school staff associated with demographic factors (gender, years of work, and bullying training received)? (RQ3)***

Anti-bullying programs aim to provide school staff with adequate bullying-related knowledge, such as promptly detecting signs of bullying, confidently handling bullying incidents, reducing potential negative effects, and maximising positive outcomes. Without specific programs for special schools, it would be interesting to see how special school staff perceive their capacity to deal with bullying incidents, as they are usually the first responders (Nickerson et al., 2013). Understanding this could help to identify any future training and support needed for UK special school staff when dealing with bullying. According to Bandura (1977), *self-efficacy* in the present study is defined as a person's belief in their capability to accomplish something effectively.

4. ***What are the driving forces for children with SEND to target others with negative behaviours? (RQ4)***

The final research question concerns the underlying reasons for children with SEND in special schools to target others with bullying behaviours. This research question was inspired by and formulated from the open responses collected from the quantitative component and then addressed by the qualitative work.

Overall, previous literature reveals gaps in knowledge concerning the full context of bullying in special schools. This bullying study, a foundational work to set the context in UK special schools, reveals the frequency, types, and age group differences in bullying in special schools while also showing how special school staff feel when dealing with bullying. The final part of the study examines why a child with SEND would bully someone else. Gathering knowledge from school staff perspectives is an essential first

step in understanding the special school bullying phenomenon. By supplementing and extending what has been documented for mainstream schools with a close examination in special schools, the study provides practical implications for developing new and relevant bullying materials. It ensures that any anti-bullying programmes or additional resources designed are most appropriate and effective for the vulnerable children with SEND in special schools. The findings also have the potential to be translated, to some degree, to all the children with SEND, even in mainstream schools, illustrating a bigger and more comprehensive picture of bullying. Ultimately, this study contributes to a positive change in the special school environment by reducing bullying incidents and positively impacting the personal development of children with SEND.

Chapter 2: Method

This chapter is devoted to the methodological aspects of the present study. First, the overall design **(2.1)**, followed by sampling information and participant demographics **(2.2)**. Then, details of the quantitative **(2.3)** and qualitative **(2.4)** materials used, the procedures followed **(2.5)**, and the analysis plan **(2.6)**. Finally, information about ethical approval **(2.7)**.

2.1 Design

The current study adopted a cross-sectional, mixed methods design to investigate bullying situations in special schools from a school staff perspective. The first part involved an anonymous quantitative survey with data collected between March and June 2024. The second part involved secondary data analysis of qualitative data: opinions from two anonymised teacher interviews and one teacher focus group. Both parts were thoughtfully designed to maximise methodological rigour. This ensures credibility and legitimacy of the whole research study, which yields authentic results (Coryn, 2007). In other words, conclusions could be drawn more confidently from the data collected and analysed, given the carefully planned methodology and study design.

2.1.1 Quantitative Design

Collecting quantitative data with questionnaires was advantageous as all participants were given the same fact-driven questions and were not influenced by interviewer bias (Parajuli, 2004). Consequently, objectivity, a conventional ‘quality criterion’ of quantitative rigour, is achieved because the researcher’s opinions did not alter the credibility of collected data (Stamenkovic, 2023). Also, the questionnaire achieved anonymity, encouraging honesty in answers (Marshall, 2005). Utilising questionnaires was justified in the current study based on several guidelines provided by Marshall (2005): First, it was possible to ensure that participants who completed the anonymous questionnaire were eligible for the present study. This is because target participants were

specified in the email invite sent to special schools. Also, participants had to confirm their eligibility by ticking a box after reading the participant information sheet. Second, the participants were school staff who were literate in understanding our information sheet and questionnaires. Therefore, the questionnaire yielded high-quality quantitative data (Marshall, 2005).

2.1.2 Qualitative Design

Studies using a quantitative approach alone have been found to be less informative in explaining the underlying meaning of their findings (O'Cathain et al., 2010). Therefore, the idea of the present study was first to explore the bullying situation with a quantitative questionnaire, then to use qualitative information to expand on the quantitative data collected and to help explain some of the findings with additional context (McKim, 2017).

A mixed method design provides a more comprehensive understanding and yields a more rigorous conclusion of any studied phenomenon because having both quantitative and qualitative data allows the integration and synthesis of information (McKim, 2017). It is interesting to examine whether responses collected from the questionnaires are supported by or contradictory to what is found in the interviews or the focus group. In the case of inconsistency, the appropriacy of the items included in the quantitative questionnaire should be examined, and more qualitative work should be conducted to check for the representativeness of using a questionnaire. It is also possible that interview questions and prompts are leading, which results in bias. Flaws could be in either or both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Therefore, a mixed method design is more informative for any conclusion drawn.

2.2 Participants

2.2.1. Sampling

The target sample is specific. Participants had to fulfil several criteria to be eligible

to participate in the present study: 1. Being a member of school staff, 2. Working with children with SEND (e.g., special education teachers), 3. Working in special schools. According to the literature search, previous studies that recruited school staff from special schools in the UK and utilised a survey for data collection included approximately 58 to 70 participants in their final sample (e.g., Arnold & Reed, 2016; Hastings & Brown, 2002; Nind, 2000). Therefore, the intended sample size deemed feasible and appropriate for the present study ranged between 60 to 65. Convenience sampling was applied to include special schools known to the researcher and supervisor. To examine bullying in special schools with an exploratory focus, convenience sampling was common among studies of similar research designs and aims (Bhuyan & Manjula, 2017; Neser et al., 2004).

2.2.2. Recruitment

The initial recruitment was attempted within Oxfordshire. Email invites were sent to seven special schools within Oxfordshire, of which three schools responded and were interested in participating. The intended data collection method was via an online questionnaire. However, one school requested paper copies of the questionnaire, and therefore, an amendment of the ethics approval was submitted to include data collection via paper copies.

During the survey circulation stage, one school dropped out of the study, which resulted in only two schools remaining on board. Therefore, to secure enough sample size, a second round of recruitment was completed with a network of 60 special schools across the United Kingdom. These schools were only provided with the online survey option, with the survey link sent by a contact person who was connected with these 60 special schools.

2.2.3. Participants for Quantitative Component

The final sample consisted of 72 special school staff, slightly more than the intended

sample size. The special schools were sampled from across the UK and clustered within seven categories (i.e., specialisms), following the UK special school categorisation. Table 1 shows information on participants' gender; years working in an educational setting; participants' roles; whether they have received formal training on dealing with bullying; and specialisms of schools. It should be noted that participants were recruited from special schools with multiple specialisms and were allowed multiple selections on the 'specialism' question. Therefore, the total number of responses to this question was expected to be more than 72 combined.

Table 1

Demographic Information

Variables	**N = 72**	**%**
Gender		
Male	19	66.7%
Female	48	26.4%
Prefer not to Say	5	6.9%
Years in Educational Setting		
1-3 years	29	40.3%
4-10 years	21	29.2%
11-20 years	14	19.4%
21+ years	7	9.7%
Prefer not to Say	1	1.4%
Role in School		
Teacher	22	30.6%
Teaching Assistant	27	37.5%
Office / Administrative Staff	3	4.2%
Senior Leadership Team	10	13.9%
Others (Clinical Team / Therapist / Pastoral Support Worker)	5	6.9%
Prefer not to Say	5	6.9%
Formal Training on Dealing With Bullying		
Yes	39	54.2%
No	31	43.1%
Prefer not to Say	2	2.8%
Variables	**N = 162**	**%**
Specialisms of School		
Speech, Language & Communication	17	10.5%
Cognition & Learning (Significant Learning Difficulties)	10	6.2%
Cognition & Learning (Moderate Learning Difficulties)	14	8.6%
Social, Emotional & Mental Health	54	33.3%
Sensory	15	9.3%
Autism	47	29.0%
Physical	5	3.1%

2.2.4. Participants for Qualitative Component

The qualitative part did not involve any participants recruited for the quantitative questionnaire. Secondary anonymous data was collected by the supervisor for a project investigating bullying in special schools. Participants included a total of seven school staff: two participated in two separate individual interviews and five participated in a focus group. These participants came from three different special schools.

2.3 Quantitative Materials

A three-section questionnaire (1. demographics, 2. bullying situations observed, and 3. school staff self-efficacy) created with Microsoft Forms was completed by school staff to generate quantitative data (See Appendix A for the full questionnaire). All questions included a 'prefer not to say' option should any participants decide not to answer a particular question. For confidentiality, participants were asked to neither provide their names nor the names of their schools on the questionnaire.

2.3.1 Basic Demographic Information

The first section of the questionnaire consisted of five demographic questions. As seen in Table 1, Participants were asked about their gender, years of work in an educational setting, role in school, whether or not they have had formal training on bullying, and the specialism of their current school. For later statistical analysis, 'years in educational setting' was recoded into a dichotomous variable: school staff who have worked in an educational setting for 1-3 years were classified as 'new' school staff, while those who have worked for 4 years or above were classified as 'mature' school staff. Likewise, 'Role in school' was recoded dichotomously with 'teachers' and 'teaching assistant' grouped into 'classroom staff' while 'office / administrative staff', 'senior leadership team' and 'others' grouped into 'non-classroom staff'. For participants who answered 'prefer not to say' in a particular question within this demographics section, their data were excluded *only* for analyses relevant to that specific demographic

information.

2.3.2 Bullying Situation Observed in Special Schools

This section consisted of 10 tick-box questions related to bullying observed by school staff in special schools, including type, frequency, and age group. The questionnaire was formed from items taken and adapted from previous research studies (Olweus, 1996; Waters & Mashburn, 2017). Items were previously proven reliable, contributing to the overall methodological rigour (Shadish et al., 2002). Besides, taking items from previous studies was advantageous because comparisons of research results were more direct (Punch, 2005).

Items and Response Options. Questions 1 to 6 on types of bullying were taken from Part II of the questionnaire used by Waters and Mashburn (2017). The questionnaire was originally derived from Bush (2011), who examined teachers' bullying perceptions based on Olweus' (1993) definition of bullying. According to Bush (2011), all items within the questionnaire had a Cronbach's α of .75 or above, which was an acceptable level of reliability (Dillman, 2007).

Questions 7 to 8 were taken and adapted from the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, which assessed specific bullying behaviours (OBVQ; Olweus, 1996). The OBVQ was among the few bullying questionnaires with well-established psychometric properties (Kyriakides et al., 2006).

Questions 9 to 10 were newly developed for the present study, aiming to extend our understanding of bullying which was not found in the previous eight questions. Many studies revealed that the most prevalent type of bullying was verbal bullying in the form of name-calling and teasing (Chhabria, 2020; Veldkamp, 2019). Name-calling was also found to be a stressful event unavoidable for most children in school, with its negative impacts underestimated by adults (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). Therefore, the two newly developed questions focused on aspects of verbal bullying. Complementary to one

of the previous questions (i.e., Question 8) capturing verbal bullying with skin colour or race content, Questions 9 and 10 offered alternative perspectives of verbal content related to intellectual and physical ability, respectively. These aspects might also be important in the special school context.

Same frequency response options, also taken from the OBVQ, were applied to all questions for clarity and ease of answering (Olweus, 1996). As this section was developed based on parts of different questionnaires, it was more appropriate and least confusing to have a standardised response format for all questions. Having the same sets of response options also facilitated scoring the responses for later analyses. Each question had a scale of 1 to 5 indicating frequency, 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'*.

Categorisation and Scoring. Among the ten questions, Q1 to Q7 were categorised into one of the three possible bullying types: physical, verbal, and relational (Waters & Mashburn, 2017). Two questions represented physical bullying (*'A student hits, kicks, pushes or shoves another student'* and *'A student threatens another student with physical harm'*). Two questions represented verbal bullying (*'A student is being teased by another student'* and *'A student is being called hurtful names'*). Three questions represented relational bullying (*'A student is deliberately being left out of a group of other students'*, *'A student is having rumours or gossip spread about him or her', and 'A student is made to do something they don't want to do'*).

The frequency scores of these seven questions were used in two ways. Firstly, as a continuous score highlighting the amount of bullying overall, with a maximum score of 35. As this 7-item scale was newly developed by combining items from previous studies, it was important to ensure the items consistently measured the same construct (i.e., bullying; Yilmaz, 2013). In the current sample, this 7-item scale had an excellent level of

internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .90; Field, 2018). Secondly, clustered within the same bullying type (i.e., physical, verbal, or relational), scores were summed and averaged respectively, resulting in three average frequency scores, with a possible range of 1-5, where higher scores indicated more frequent observation of a particular type of bullying. The sub-scales that measured physical, verbal, and relational bullying had Cronbach's α of .85, .86, and .80, respectively, which also showed high internal consistency (Field, 2018). Overall, the bully scale had high reliability, as shown by the high internal consistency measure, contributing to the methodological rigour.

The remaining three questions were categorised as sub-domains of the verbal bullying question: *A student is being called hurtful names*. These three questions further explore whether the student is being called hurtful names about their *skin colour or race*, *intellectual ability*, or *physical ability*. The average frequency scores of these three questions were compared between themselves to examine the most common content of hurtful names.

Age Group and Open Responses. After each frequency question, participants indicated all applicable age groups for the observed bullying behaviour (i.e., Ages 4-8; 9-11; 12-14; 15-18). These age groups were adapted for the school age range. Finally, an optional open box was provided at the end of the section to allow participants to indicate any other types of negative behaviours observed in a special school and their frequency.

2.3.3 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), which measured the efficacy of special educators in dealing with challenging behaviours. 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. A score of the

difficulty in dealing with bullying behaviours. Each item was scored on a 7-point Likert scale.

The scores of these questions were used in two ways. Firstly, the scores on the five items were summed, which generated a total self-efficacy score with a possible range of 7-35, where higher scores indicated higher self-efficacy in tackling bullying behaviours. The scale was previously found to have an excellent level of internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .94) and, therefore, was considered appropriate for the present study (Hastings & Brown, 2002). In the current sample, this scale also had a high level of reliability (Cronbach's α = .87; Field, 2018), which showed scale items were consistently measuring the same construct, self-efficacy, and the collected data would be deemed rigorous (Yilmaz, 2013). The total self-efficacy score was used as a continuous variable for parts of the statistical analysis. Secondly, for some statistical analysis, the continuous total self-efficacy score was recoded into a dichotomous variable: Participants having self-efficacy scores above the mean of the current sample (M = 26.81) were classified into the 'high' self-efficacy group (i.e., scores of 27 and above), while those having scores below mean were classified into the 'low' self-efficacy group (i.e., scores of 26 and below). The mean was an appropriate central tendency measure, as no outliers were observed.

2.4 Qualitative Materials

Three transcripts were used as the qualitative materials: two transcripts were generated from individual interviews with two different school staff, and one transcript was generated from a focus group. The interviews and the focus group followed the same interview schedule (See Appendix B for the full interview schedule). This research strategy fulfilled the 'dependability' rigour criteria of qualitative studies, ensuring consistency among interviewers (Forero et al., 2018). Specifically, all meetings started with a brief introduction of the various definitions of bullying and the purpose of the

meeting. Then, the core part of the meeting consisted of three major sections with open questions: 1. What does bullying look like for pupils with SEND; 2. Intent to Bully; 3. Power Imbalance. Each section included the same topic prompts to initiate conversations covering more specific issues. Finally, ending with a conclusion to see if participants had any extra input.

2.5 Procedure for Quantitative Data Collection

2.5.1 Piloting of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was piloted with six people. The pilot sample was drawn from the MSc in Education (Child Development and Education) program at the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. Respondents with experiences within an educational context were invited to participate in the pilot study. This maximised the resemblance of the target population, school staff in special schools (Marshall, 2005). The pilot was conducted before the actual project data collection to see any specific areas for improvement, to ensure the questions were applicable to respondents of different roles within the educational context, and to get an accurate 'time-to-complete' estimation (Marshall, 2005). Piloting was also intended to remove ambiguity in the framing of words that confused (Marshall, 2005). Together, the piloting was instrumental in addressing the content and face validity of the questionnaire by ensuring items were relevant to the research aims (Allen et al., 2023).

All respondents completed the questionnaire within 10 minutes. Responses were collected smoothly without any respondents reflecting technical difficulties or problems with content clarity. Therefore, the questionnaire remained unchanged.

2.5.2 Main Data Collection

Special schools known to the researcher or supervisor were emailed and invited to participate in the current study. For special schools that expressed interest in the current study, the main contact from the school was sent the survey link, which included the

information sheet and consent form. The main contact circulated the survey link with school staff within their school. The researcher did not directly invite participants due to confidentiality issues regarding accessing email addresses. In one school, paper copies were requested as well as the online link.

School staff interested in participating were asked to read through a participant information sheet and consent form embedded within the online survey and then to complete the online questionnaire. The participant information sheet was prepared to provide participants with the information they need to make an informed decision about whether or not to complete the questionnaire. Consent was given by school staff by ticking the consent box at the end of the information sheet. On average, participants spent 6 minutes completing the online survey (2 – 16 minutes). Data was automatically sent to the researcher via Microsoft Forms and was stored securely on the University of Oxford Nexus365 OneDrive for Business file storage service, which the University approved for all research data storage.

As mentioned above, in one school, paper copies of the anonymous survey were provided to encourage responses. Paper copies were distributed in the school office by the school's main contact. Upon completion, school staff returned the anonymous survey to the school office to be kept in a secure envelope provided by the researcher. The main contact emailed the researcher whenever responses were available for collection. Collected paper copies of questionnaires were destroyed after being digitalised and treated securely as with the online data.

2.5.3 Data Withdrawal

School staff could stop participating at any time during the data collection process before they clicked the "submit" button in the online questionnaire or before returning their paper copies. Since no names were collected from the questionnaire, once it was submitted, participants could not withdraw their data because all data was anonymous.

2.6 Analysis Plan

2.6.1 Quantitative Analysis

To answer Research Question 1 (*What are the types and frequencies of bullying behaviours observed in special schools? Do they differ by age group?*), descriptive data were presented in tables, graphs, and figures.

For Research Questions 2 and 3, assumption checks for each statistical test, such as normality and homogeneity of variances, were conducted before running the main statistical analyses. P-value of .05 was adopted based on conventions of psychological and educational research to indicate statistically significant results (Cohen, 1992a; Cohen, 1992b).

To answer Research Question 2 (*What levels of self-efficacy are seen in special school staff, in relation to dealing with bullying? Are there any differences when considering school staff of different roles?*), an independent samples t-test was used to compare classroom staff with non-classroom staff.

To answer Research Question 3 (*Is the self-efficacy of special school staff associated with demographic factors (gender, years of work, and bullying training received)?*), three separate chi-square association analyses were conducted. Demographic variables included the number of years in an education setting (recoded dichotomously as 'new' staff and 'mature' staff), whether or not school staff received bullying training (yes or no), and gender (male or female). All statistical analyses were conducted in Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 29.

2.6.2 Qualitative Analysis

To answer Research Question 4 (*What are the driving forces for children with SEND to target others with negative behaviours?*) and to expand on Research Question 1 (*What are the types and frequencies of bullying behaviours observed in special schools? Do they differ by age group?*), thematic analyses were conducted with the secondary qualitative

data.

The thematic analyses followed the six-phase process defined by Braun and Clarke (2012) to achieve better data quality control. First, the anonymised transcripts were read and re-read several times. This process of 'repeated reading' resulted in data familiarity and immersion (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It ensured that all parts of the transcripts were given full attention and that it was possible to identify repeated patterns. Second, initial codes were applied to relevant sentences that could address the research questions. Third, the codes that were similar or considered within the same aspect were combined into themes. Fourth, all the themes were reviewed by examining relationships between codes, themes, and the entire dataset. Themes that were loosely connected or without sufficient evidence were removed. Fifth, meaningful themes were defined and named. The final stage involved selecting example quotations from the transcripts to support individual themes. Carefully following this six-phase process increased coding accuracy which yielded higher dependability, aiming to achieve qualitative rigour (Forero et al., 2018).

2.7 Ethics

The current study was conducted ethically, following sensitive planning and careful review by research ethics committees (Fisher & Anushko, 2008). Ethical approval (Appendix C) was granted by the Department of Education's Departmental Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford [Ref: EDUC_C1A_24_036].

Chapter 3: Quantitative Results

This chapter presents the questionnaire results. Sections **(3.1)**, **(3.2)**, and **(3.3)** answer RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, respectively. Each section starts with an overview of the analysis strategy and, when appropriate, is followed by descriptive statistics, assumption checks, and the results. Then, Section **(3.4)** presents open responses collected from questionnaires, which informed the formulation of RQ4. Finally, a summary of all the quantitative results **(3.5)**.

3.1 Research Question 1: What are the types and frequencies of bullying behaviours observed in special schools? Do they differ by age group?

3.1.1 Analysis Strategy

To answer RQ1, ten descriptive statements were used to ask the participants about the different types of bullying observed (i.e., physical, verbal, and relational) and their respective frequencies. For each participant, the raw scores were processed to generate an overall bullying frequency score and three average frequency scores for each type of bullying. Comparisons were made between the scores. Moreover, separate frequency counts indicated the age groups of children involved in each bullying behaviour.

3.1.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 shows the frequency of each bullying *behaviour* observed, the average frequency of each *type* of bullying, and the average *total* bullying score. Response options are as follows: [1]: I have not seen this type of behaviour; [2]: Once or twice in the past couple of months; [3]: Two or three times a month; [4]: About once a week; [5]: Several times a week. All participants selected only one response among the above response options, with no ‘prefer not to say’ response selection. The total number of responses per question was 72 (one for each of the 72 participants).

Table 2

Type and Frequency of Bullying Behaviours

Type of Bullying	Bullying Statement	No. of Responses (N = 72)					Mean	SD
	A student …	**[1]**	**[2]**	**[3]**	**[4]**	**[5]**		
Physical	Q1. … hits, kicks, pushes, or shoves another student.	2	16	10	14	30	3.75	1.29
	Q2. … threatens another student with physical harm.	4	12	10	18	28	3.75	1.29
							3.75	**1.20**
Verbal	Q3. …is being teased by another student.	3	8	9	26	26	3.89	1.15
	Q4…. is being called hurtful names.	6	11	9	17	29	3.72	1.36
							3.81	**1.18**
Relational	Q5. …is deliberately being left out of a group of other students.	14	22	13	14	9	2.75	1.32
	Q6. … is having rumours or gossip spread about him or her.	25	21	11	7	8	2.33	1.34
	Q7. … is made to do something they don't want to do.	29	21	10	7	5	2.14	1.25
							2.41	**1.10**
Total							**22.33**	**7.13**

3.1.3 Results

Overall, school staff in special schools observed a moderate level of bullying over the academic year, scoring an average of 22.33 out of a possible 35 (seven questions scored 1-5). In other words, most school staff rated a frequency of 3.19 out of 5 for most bullying behaviours, approximately representing observations of bullying behaviours two or three times a month. The most observed bullying behaviour was '*A student is being teased by another student*' (M = 3.89, SD = 1.15), while the least observed was '*A student is made to do something they don't want to do*' (M = 2.14, SD = 1.25; see Table 2). When comparing the types of bullying, the average frequency score of verbal bullying ranked highest (M = 3.81; SD = 1.18), followed by physical bullying (M = 3.75; SD = 1.20) and relational bullying (M = 2.41; SD = 1.10). In other words, verbal bullying was

most common in special schools, with approximately two-thirds of the school staff (64% - 72%) witnessing verbal bullying behaviours at least once a week. In contrast, relational bullying was least common, indicated by most school staff (68%-83%) reporting relational bullying less than two or three times a month.

To examine verbal bullying behaviours further, school staff were asked about details of children being called hurtful names (See Table 3). All participants selected only one response among the given response options. Therefore, the total number of responses per question was 72 (one for each of the 72 participants). It was found that although '*A student is being called hurtful names*' was frequently observed (M = 3.72; SD = 1.36), when provided options regarding whether children were called hurtful names about skin colour or race, intellectual ability, or physical ability, many school staff (33%-47%) reported that they had not seen this type of behaviour. Nevertheless, among those who reported observations, most instances were about intellectual disability (M = 2.49; SD = 1.41), followed by physical disability (M = 2.18; SD = 1.30) and lastly, skin colour or race (M = 1.89; SD = 1.10).

Table 3

Frequency of Verbal Bullying Behaviours

Type of Bullying	Bullying Statement	No. of Responses (N = 72)						Mean	SD
	A student is being called hurtful names about their…	**[1]**	**[2]**	**[3]**	**[4]**	**[5]**	**[6]**		
Relational	Q8 …skin colour or race.	34	21	9	4	3	1	**1.89**	**1.10**
	Q9 …intellectual ability.	24	17	13	8	10	0	**2.49**	**1.41**
	Q10 …physical ability.	30	18	11	7	6	0	**2.18**	**1.30**

Note. [1]: I have not seen this type of behaviour; [2]: Once or twice in the past couple of months; [3]: Two or three times a month; [4]: About once a week; [5]: Several times a week; [6]: Prefer not to say

Besides, school staff indicated the age groups of children involved in the bullying behaviours (See Table 4). The number of responses for each bullying statement in the table can total more than 72 respondents because school staff were asked to indicate all involved age groups (i.e., select all that apply). Overall, all types of bullying behaviours (physical, verbal, and relational) were observed across all age groups. Regarding age distribution, school staff reported an increasing pattern of bullying frequency from age group 4 to 8 to age group 12 to 14. The frequency count peaked at children aged 12 to 14 and then declined beyond. This pattern was similar across physical, verbal and relational bullying. In other words, the age groups of children involved in each type of bullying behaviour did not differ (See Figure 1).

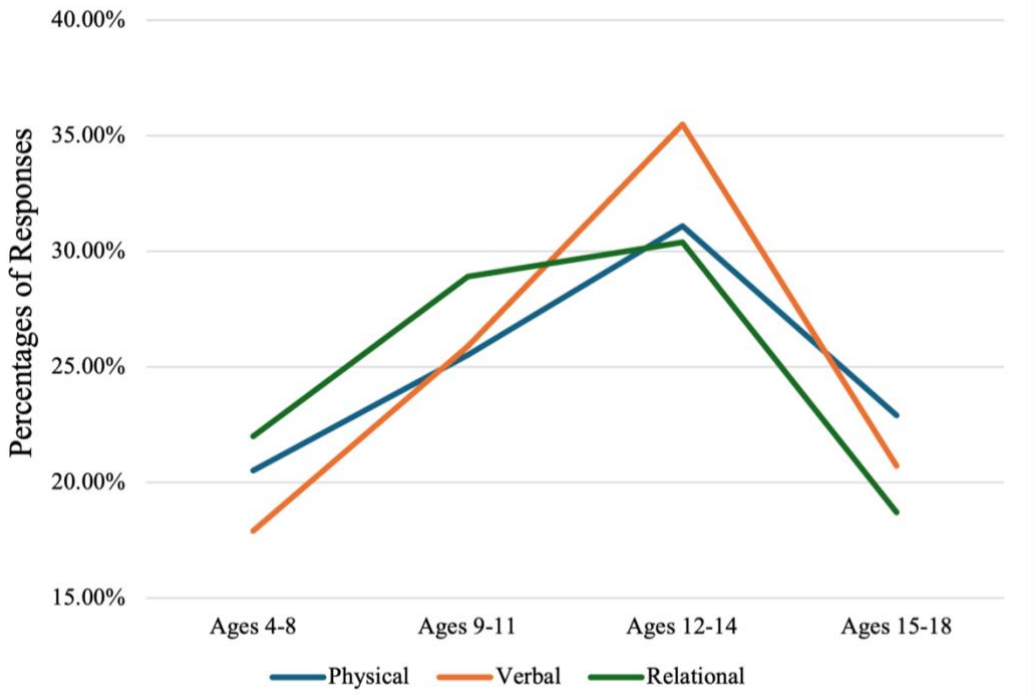
Table 4

Age Group Distribution of Bullying Behaviours

Type of Bullying	Bullying Statement	No. of Responses	Count / Percentage (N / %)			
	A student …		**Ages 4-8**	**Ages 9-11**	**Ages 12-14**	**Ages 15-18**
Physical	Q1. … hits, kicks, pushes, or shoves another student.	139	32 (23%)	35 (25.2%)	42 (30.2%)	30 (21.6%)
	Q2. … threatens another student with physical harm.	128	23 (18%)	33 (25.8%)	41 (32%)	31 (24.2%)
		Mean	**20.5%**	**25.5%**	**31.1%**	**22.9%**
Verbal	Q3. …is being teased by another student.	126	23 (18.3%)	32 (25.4%)	45 (35.7%)	26 (20.6%)
	*Q4…. is being called hurtful names.	125	22 (17.6%)	33 (26.4%)	44 (35.2%)	26 (20.8%)
		Mean	**17.9%**	**25.9%**	**35.5%**	**20.7%**
Relational	Q5. …is deliberately being left out of a group of other students.	95	20 (21.1%)	29 (30.5%)	28 (29.5%)	18 (18.9%)
	Q6. … is having rumours or gossip spread about him or her.	77	14 (18.2%)	19 (24.7%)	26 (33.8%)	18 (23.4%)
	Q7. … is made to do something they don't want to do.	79	21 (26.6%)	25 (31.6%)	22 (27.8%)	11 (13.9%)
		Mean	**22%**	**28.9%**	**30.4%**	**18.7%**

Figure 1

Age Group Pattern of Bullying Behaviours



3.2 Research Question 2: What levels of self-efficacy are seen in special school staff, in relation to dealing with bullying? Are there any differences when considering school staff of different roles?

3.2.1 Analysis Strategy

To answer RQ2, school staff were asked to self-evaluate their responses to bullying behaviours displayed by children. The total scores obtained generated an overview of school staff self-efficacy. Then, a comparison was made between classroom and non-classroom staff with an independent samples t-test. Classroom staff included teachers and teaching assistants, while non-classroom staff included office / administrative staff, senior leadership team, and others. The null hypothesis (H_0) stated, 'school staff of different roles do not differ in self-efficacy', while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) stated, 'school staff of different roles differ in self-efficacy'.

3.2.2 Descriptive Statistics

A total of 67 school staff were included in the analysis, and five were excluded

because they preferred not to disclose their role in school. The average scores of the five domains measuring school staff self-efficacy were as follows:1. Confidence (M = 5.76, SD = 1.22); 2. Difficulty (M = 5.40, SD = 1.40); 3. Positive effect (M = 5.29, SD = 1.17); 4. Satisfaction (M = 5.36, SD = 1.28); 5. Control (M = 5.01, SD = 1.45). In general, school staff showed a relatively high level of overall self-efficacy, scoring 26.81 out of 35. All five domains had average scores above the theoretical mean, with school staff reporting the highest scores in being *confident* in dealing with bullying and the lowest scores in being in *control* of bullying behaviours. When comparing classroom and non-classroom staff, non-classroom staff had a slightly higher self-efficacy (M = 27.24; SD = 6.42) than classroom staff (M = 26.51; SD = 4.70). Further analysis with a t-test was required to see whether the difference was statistically significant.

3.2.3 Assumption Check for an Independent Samples T-Test

To examine self-efficacy between school staff of different roles, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare classroom and non-classroom staff. An independent samples t-test was deemed appropriate because it was suitable for comparing two means derived from two conditions with different entities (Field, 2018). Besides, the basic assumptions of conducting a t-test (i.e. appropriate scale types, independence of observation, no outliers, normality, and equal variances) were either satisfied or treated appropriately (Field, 2018).

Firstly, the dependent variable (DV; self-efficacy) was a continuous variable because the total score was calculated and combined from five domain measures, and participants could score any value from the measurement scale, which assumed equal intervals (Field, 2018). Moreover, the independent variable (IV; role of school staff) was a binary categorical variable formed by having two different groups of participants. Secondly, participants belonged either to the classroom or the non-classroom group, and there was no relationship between participants in each group. Hence, fulfilling the

assumption of independence of observation. Thirdly, the visual inspection from two boxplots showed no significant outliers within each IV group (See Appendix D). Fourthly, the DV was normally distributed for each of the IVs. For both IV groups, the skewness value was between -1 and +1 (Classroom staff: -.28; Non-classroom staff: -.21), while the kurtosis value was between -3 and +3 (Classroom staff: -.27; Non-classroom staff: -1.11). The normality cut-off for skewness and kurtosis values were taken from Field (2022). Also, the Shapiro-Wilk tests for normality were non-significant, meaning that normality assumptions were not rejected for both the classroom ($p = .49$) and the non-classroom group ($p = .13$). Finally, Levene's test of quality of variances showed a significant result ($p = .04$), which rejected the homogeneity assumption. Therefore, SPSS results from the independent samples test would be interpreted with equal variances not assumed.

3.2.4 Results

An independent samples t-test was conducted to investigate the difference in self-efficacy between 50 classroom staff and 17 non-classroom staff. There is no significant effect for the role of staff, $t(22.14) = -.43$, $p = .67$, despite non-classroom staff reporting a higher mean of self-efficacy than classroom staff. The null hypothesis (H_0) that 'school staff of different roles do not differ in self-efficacy' was not rejected. Therefore, it was found that classroom staff and non-classroom staff did not differ in self-efficacy value.

3.3 Research Question 3: Is the self-efficacy of special school staff associated with demographic factors (gender, years of work, and bullying training received)?

3.3.1 Analysis Strategy

To answer RQ3, three separate chi-square tests were conducted to examine whether demographic variables (i.e., gender (M / F), years of work (1-3 years 'New' / 4+ years 'Mature'), and bullying training received (Y / N) were related to self-efficacy measures. Self-efficacy was split by group mean into High or Low. Three pairs of statistical

hypotheses were formulated:

1. H_0: Self-efficacy is not associated with gender;

   H_1: Self-efficacy is associated with gender

2. H_0: Self-efficacy is not associated with years of work;

   H_1: Self-efficacy is associated with years of work

3. H_0: Self-efficacy is not associated with bullying training received;

   H_1: Self-efficacy is associated with bullying training received

3.3.2 Descriptive Statistics

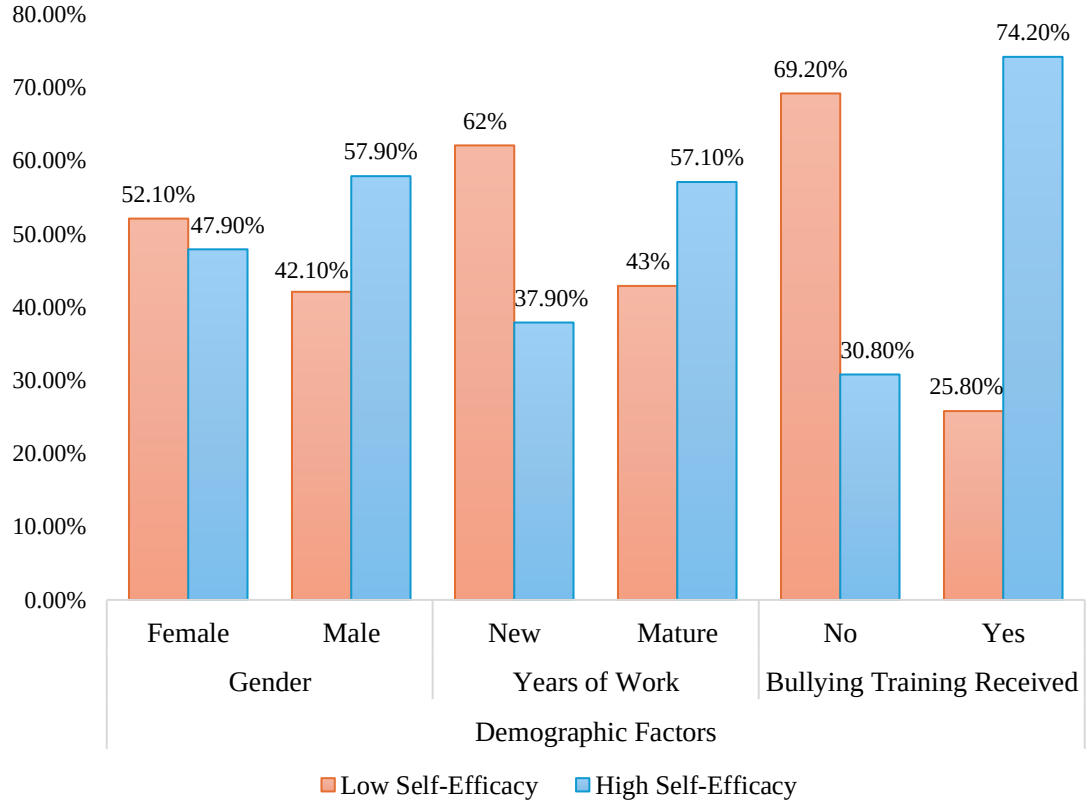
As shown in Figure 2, school staff with different demographic backgrounds scored differently for self-efficacy (using the dichotomous scale) in dealing with bullying. Sixty-seven valid responses for gender (female: 48; male: 19), seventy-one valid responses for years of work (new: 29; mature: 42), and seventy valid responses for whether bullying training had been received (39: no; 31: yes). Those who did not provide their demographic information were excluded by pairwise deletion.

From the visual inspection of the bar chart (Figure 2), the percentages of female school staff who scored themselves as having low and high self-efficacy were approximately equal, both around 50%. This was also reflected in the male group (42.1% versus 57.9%, respectively). In terms of years of work, percentages of mature school staff who showed low self-efficacy were also similar to those who reported high self-efficacy levels (43% versus 57.1%, respectively). Having a slightly larger gap, almost two-thirds of those new to the school environment had low self-efficacy, while slightly more than one-third had high self-efficacy. The largest discrepancy in self-efficacy measures was observed among school staff with and without bullying training received. Of those who did not receive any bullying training, almost 70% had low self-efficacy. In contrast, 74.2% of school staff who received bullying training rated themselves high in self-efficacy. Given the differential patterns observed, three separate chi-square tests were

conducted to examine possible statistical associations between self-efficacy levels and demographic factors.

Figure 2

Self-Efficacy of School Staff with Different Demographic Background



3.3.3 Assumption Check for Chi-Square Tests

Chi-square tests were deemed appropriate because they were suitable for investigating relationships between pairs of categorical variables (Field, 2018). 'Gender' and 'Bullying training' were in their original binary forms taken from questionnaire results. Besides, 'Self-efficacy' and 'Years of work" were recoded from their continuous and ordinal variable types for analysis (refer back to Section 2.3). Therefore, as shown in Figure 2, all variables involved in the analyses (i.e., self-efficacy, gender, years of work, bullying training received) were binary variables. In addition, the basic assumptions of conducting a chi-square test (i.e., independence and expected frequencies) were satisfied (Field, 2018).

Firstly, to fulfil the independence requirement, each participant belonged only to one of the two groups of the dichotomous variables. In other words, each participant contributed to only one of the cells within the contingency table (Field, 2018; See Appendix E Table E1-3). Secondly, no cells had an expected frequency lower than 5 (See Appendix E Table E1-3). Therefore, chi-square tests were conducted as proposed.

3.3.4 Results

The first chi-square test examined the relationship between gender and self-efficacy. The association between this pair of dichotomous variables was insignificant, X^2 (1, N = 67) = .54, p = .46. The result did not reject the null hypothesis (H_0) stating 'self-efficacy is not associated with gender', showing no relationship between gender and self-efficacy level.

The second chi-square test investigated whether there was an association between years of work and self-efficacy. The results were also statistically insignificant, X^2 (1, N = 71) = 2.53, p = .11. The null hypothesis (H_0) that 'self-efficacy is not associated with years of work' was again not rejected. Results indicated no association between years of work and school staff self-efficacy.

The final chi-square test examined whether bullying training was associated with self-efficacy. Results showed a significant relationship between the two variables, X^2 (1, N = 70) = 13.03, p = <. 001. The null hypothesis (H_0), which stated that 'self-efficacy is not associated with bullying training received', was rejected. It was found that school staff who received bullying training were more likely than those who did not receive it to have a high self-efficacy level for dealing with bullying.

3.4 Open Responses from Questionnaires

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked about other negative behaviours seen in schools. A total of 11 open responses were collected. Seven responses were about other types of negative behaviours, such as cyberbullying and using

homophobic language. Three responses suggested potential reasons for children displaying negative behaviours, such as peer pressure and inability to communicate. One response was less informative because all negative behaviours mentioned were already included in the questionnaire. These open responses informed the formulation of RQ4, which explored driving forces for children with SEND to target others with negative behaviours. Thematic analyses were conducted on secondary qualitative data to explain these open responses better and to expand on the quantitative results (See Chapter 4).

3.5 Summary of the Quantitative Results

Quantitative results showed that school staff observed a moderate level of bullying in special schools, with verbal bullying most frequently observed, followed by physical and relational bullying. The age group distribution was similar across all types of bullying. Children aged 12 to 14 were most involved in bullying incidents. Moreover, a relatively high self-efficacy level was reported when school staff were asked how they perceived their ability to handle bullying. There was no significant difference between the self-efficacy levels of classroom and non-classroom staff. Finally, results showed no relationship between gender, years of work and self-efficacy. However, receiving bullying training was significantly associated with higher self-efficacy in special school staff.

Chapter 4: Qualitative Results

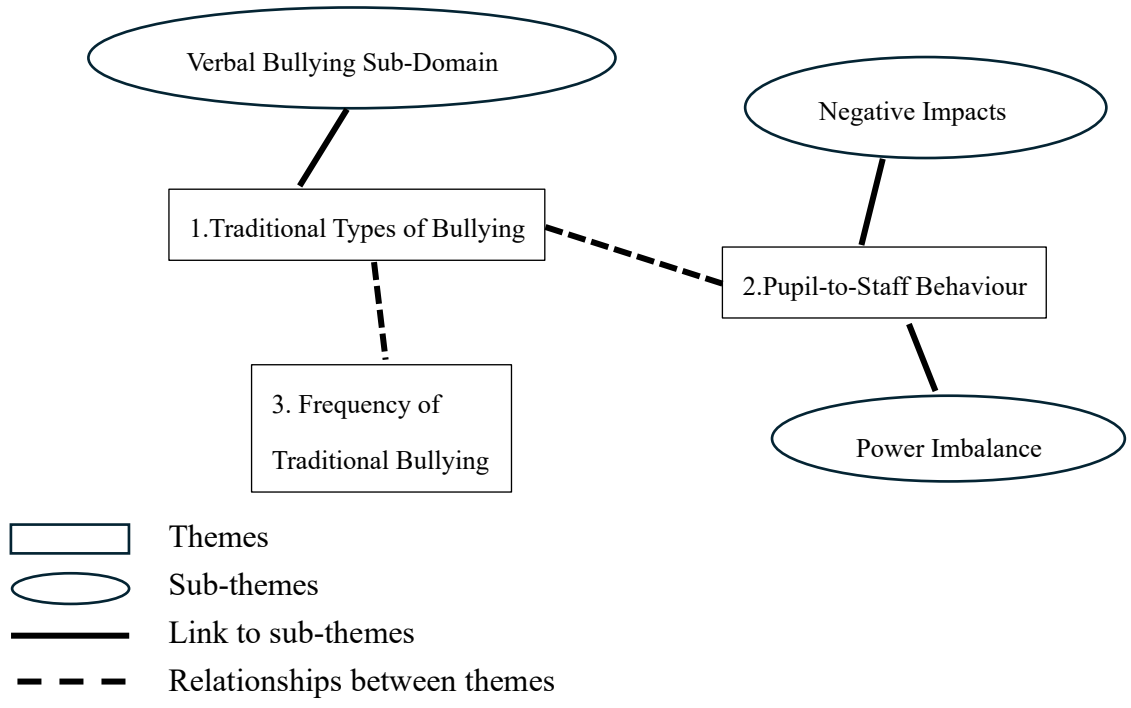
This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis conducted with secondary qualitative data (i.e., transcripts of two interviews and one focus group). The results supplemented quantitative findings in relation to RQ1 **(4.1)** and expanded on open responses collected from the questionnaires, answering RQ4 **(4.2)**. Finally, a summary of qualitative results **(4.3)**.

4.1 Expanding on Research Question 1: What are the types and frequencies of bullying behaviours observed in special schools?

Codes (n=22) were applied to sentences exploring types and frequencies of bullying behaviours observed in special schools. Then, themes were assigned to codes that shared similarity. Three main themes and three subthemes were identified from the analysis. Figure 3 shows a thematic map of the themes relevant to RQ1.

Figure 3

Thematic Map of Themes (RQ1)



4.1.1 Theme 1 – Traditional Types of Bullying

When teachers were asked about the types of bullying observed in special schools, they believed the situation "looks the same as what would be in a mainstream school" (Teacher 5). This theme, therefore, captured lots of content describing traditional types of bullying, including physical, verbal and relational bullying. Teachers were able to give concrete examples of each type of bullying, and they highlighted that bullying behaviours spanned across a wide spectrum, as illustrated by Teacher 1.

> We're talking about more physical attempts of, like, you know, someone grabbing a hair …a small pocket of pupils …would have more understanding of leaving someone out game and essentially making name calling, those sorts of things, and it's just flagging that there's such a variety. (Teacher 1)

In terms of verbal bullying, a few discussions were about *calling others hurtful names*. Teacher 5 described a misused way of name-calling about skin colour or race because the victim was not even the race that the child was targeting.

> Racial language has happened … in our class, and you kind of go, 'Well, why are you saying this?' Because what? The slur isn't even relevant to that person's race. You're completely wrong there. (Teacher 5)

In contrast, Teacher 6 mentioned, 'We've got quite an ethnic mix, and we don't see an awful lot of discrimination in that sense'. Combining the above two instances, it is counter intuitive that children used racial language when it was irrelevant to race, but such language was rarely observed in more ethnically diverse schools. Teacher 5 continued to recall what the hurtful names were usually about and responded that the content of names was 'not physical disability' because there were no physically disabled children; instead, 'it's all SEMH (Social, Emotional, Mental Health)'. As can be seen, the content of hurtful names also depended upon the school's specialism.

4.1.2 Theme 2 – Pupil-to-Staff Negative Behaviour

While traditional types of bullying involved peer-to-peer interactions, there was a strong theme that bullying could have a pupil-to-staff directionality. This theme included all codes mentioning how children with SEND could target a staff member. Teacher 6 mentioned that 'There are staff here who feel that physically reactive children have targeted them'. Likewise, Teacher 1 described that when staff were targeted, 'power imbalance is completely the opposite way: the pupil is targeting adults'. A possible reason was that teachers were bound by school protocols and restricted by procedures, potentially unable to defend themselves. The struggle encountered by school staff was illustrated by Teacher 5.

> We follow certain scripts and procedures when these kids play out to kind of minimise our risk and their risk…you want to, kind of, model your responses in a way that's going to be positive and constructive…It's kind of you can't defend yourself the way you defend yourself against a traditional bullying circumstance…you're restricted to being a bigger person, in a way, because …you're the role models. (Teacher 5)

Such pupil-to-staff negative behaviour was also indirectly supported by having observable negative impacts on school staff. When a staff member was targeted more often, it resulted in 'burnout and needing a break away from pupils' (Teacher 1). Sometimes, the school would have a 'staff swap' or 'move a staff member out because it's getting too intense and targeted' (Teacher 1). Therefore, this pupil-to-staff targeting behaviour was evident, and the negative impacts on staff were worth attention.

4.1.3 Theme 3 – Frequency of Traditional Bullying Behaviours

In relation to Theme 1 about *types* of bullying, Theme 3 was generated from codes that described the *frequency* of bullying. When asked about the most frequent type of bullying, some teachers perceived verbal bullying as the most common. Teacher 5 also

believed verbal bullying was one of the factors that increased physical bullying frequency.

> Definitely verbal. Verbal, yeah, there's a lot of verbal altercations which sometimes leads to physical retaliation…Most of it, from what I've seen personally, is being verbal. (Teacher 5)

However, other teachers mentioned that physical bullying was most prevalent in their schools. This observation was attributed to the fact that most children with SEND were having behavioural management issues, which *unintentionally* resulted in physical aggression (to be explored in Section 4.2.2). Also, children were 'not at the stage where they would understand about starting rumours' and 'their verbal communication is much lower than that' (Teacher 1). As seen, results were mixed regarding which bullying type had the highest frequency, and again, seemed to differ depending on the primary need supported by a school.

In terms of relational bullying, Teacher 6 said their autistic children were 'not exactly drawn to interacting in friendships or relationships per se', resulting in minimal observable cases of relational bullying.

Finally, although the frequency of cyberbullying was not measured in the quantitative questionnaire, content related to cyberbullying was also coded within this theme. This is because cyberbullying is typically considered a major type of bullying in existing literature (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2015; See Section 1.2.1). Frequency descriptions provided by all participating teachers showed that cyberbullying was not seen among the three special schools where the teachers were affiliated. For example, Teacher 5 has not "heard anything or seen or been made aware of" online bullying.

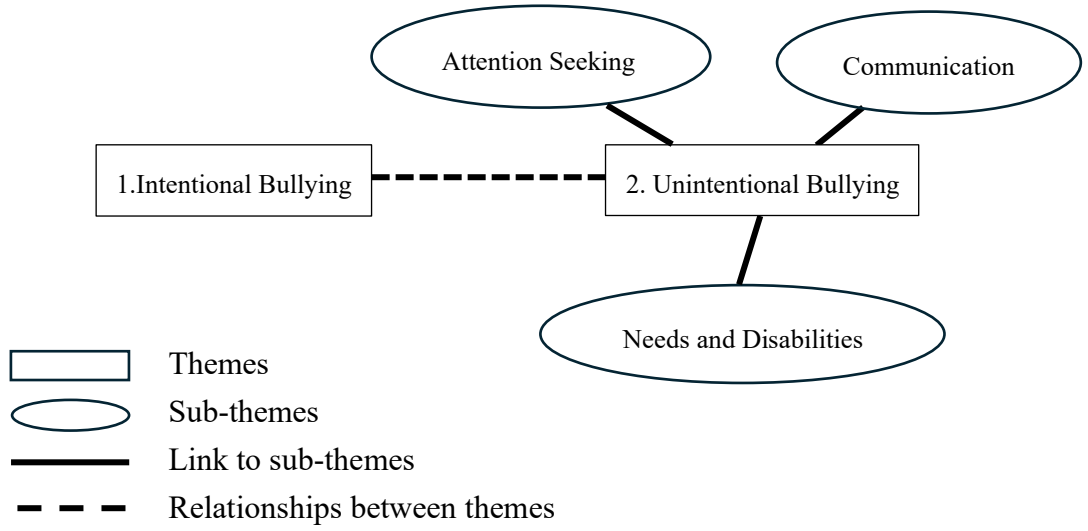
Therefore, this theme shows that frequency counts of different types of bullying could vary and potentially depend upon the children's ability or SEND condition.

4.2 Research Question 4: What are the driving forces for children with SEND to target others, with negative behaviours?

The thematic analysis procedures were similar to Section 4.1, except that codes (n=28) were applied to sentences exploring reasons for children with SEND to be involved in negative or bullying behaviours towards others. Two main themes and three subthemes were identified. These themes explored driving forces in terms of intentionality. Figure 4 shows a thematic map of the themes relevant to RQ4.

Figure 4

Thematic Map of Themes (RQ4)



4.2.1 Theme 1 – Intentional Bullying

The first theme captured all bullying behaviours with the intention to cause individualised harm and was illustrated by a quote from Teacher 5.

> They did not like each other, but one of them is a lot more mentally able than the other…the other person's sister has cancer, and one of the main things she always says is, "I hope she dies of cancer" … she's fully aware of what she's saying…It's very specific, right? (Teacher 5)

Teacher 5 explained that a child from their class targeted another child by repeatedly mentioning a hurtful personal event of the victimised child. The important point was the content specificity; the child who initiated bullying was conscious of the behaviour. Therefore, it could be seen that the intention here was to cause distress to the victim. The teacher attributed the ability to target others intentionally to a sufficient level of mental capability. Similarly, Teacher 2 also described a scenario when two children were relationally bullying another peer.

> They can socialise with a trio … there's definitely some behaviours which might be excluding one of them to be able to… have that strong relationship between the two. (Teacher 2)

In this scenario, Teacher 2 perceived the repetitive behaviour of leaving one person out of a trio as bullying behaviour. The intention was to socially exclude a certain child on purpose, possibly causing emotional and social harm to the victimised child.

4.2.2 Theme 2 – Unintentional Bullying

Despite bullying with an intention to harm, there was a strong theme that children with SEND could unintentionally bully others. This theme captured why some children target others apart from causing them personal harm. Three possible driving forces were found: 1. Needs and disabilities; 2. Attention seeking; 3. For communication.

Needs and Disabilities. Unintentional bullying was observed in special schools because teachers were managing children with different needs, and sometimes, that need resulted in negative ‘bullying’ behaviour over time. Teacher 1 illustrated an example of a teacher perceiving these negative behaviours as unintentional due to children’s SEND conditions.

> …that's only because, I think, within their behaviour repertoires…within their behaviour profiles…It's not the intent that they're only going to physical aggression or physical interactions with someone else, but it's because that's part of what we're managing, and that's why they're here with us… (Teacher 1)

This teacher explained the negative behaviours as a natural consequence of the child's needs. Every time the child was aggressive towards others, such aggression seemed to have no intention of causing harm. Therefore, the teacher perceived the unintentional negative behaviours as a reason for the child to attend special schools, so that those behaviours could be better managed and controlled.

Another example of unintentional bullying was to have a child respond towards certain environmental stimuli as a form of sensory response instead of intentionally meaning to harm their peers. This situation was described by Teacher 6.

> For some of the very physically reactive children, it seems to be almost an undefinable, meaningless impulse when they see that particular child that they're reacting to…all of our students are autistic…they have lots of sensory needs. (Teacher 6)

This teacher described the negative behaviours as a kind of sensory response. Those children were repeatedly reactive when they saw a specific 'target'. This is especially true for children with autism because unusual sensory impulses are one of their behavioural symptoms (O'Neill & Jones, 1997). The teacher continued to explain that children "don't appear to have the cognitive understanding of what they're doing" (Teacher 6). Therefore, the negative bullying behaviours could be unintentional. Teacher 2 illustrated a similar situation:

> It might be more related to something if you're uncomfortable about … someone else might make noises that they particularly don't like, so they might start specifically targeting that individual…in a way that's intentional, but it's just trying to make something stop. It's not intentionally trying to hurt someone (Teacher 2)

Teacher 2 provided another instance of children with SEND targeting others with reasons irrelevant to causing harm. The illustrated child with SEND was so reactive to what was happening because the SEND conditions heightened sensory sensitivity (Nieman & Wood-Nartker, 2019). It was not about deliberate harm.

Attention Seeking. Another subtheme included instances when children sought for attention, both at a peer and at a staff level. Teacher 6 provided an overview of how attention-seeking behaviours manifested as unintentional bullying.

> I've seen (it) targeted at students and staff. I think from our school, a lot of these kids just want some form of attention back…If they can do an action that's going to get someone's attention, that's great because they're lacking…I just want eyes on me. I want to be heard no matter what I'm doing. (Teacher 6)

Teacher 6 described children wanting to get attention from peers and adults. Therefore, children were eager to get involved in any kind of behaviour that attracted attention, regardless of whether it was right or wrong. The teacher also believed that this was due to a lack of attention, typical of children with SEND (Garbarino, 2017). Similarly, in an example illustrated by Teacher 2, physical aggression was performed to get attention from peers.

> …pupil who persistently is trying to grab and throw things at another pupil, targeted towards the same pupil all the time, but actually, they, that pupil actually just wants that pupil's attention … and actually, they really like that other pupil. (Teacher 2)

It is worth noting that the negative behaviours were an attempt to form positive peer relationships but were unintentional to manifest as a form of physical bullying which caused harm. Selecting an appropriate way to express desire, including attention, might be difficult for children with SEND.

For Communication. Another possible reason explaining repeated unintentional bullying behaviour is to communicate with others. Children with SEND might not be capable of communicating verbally due to selective mutism, speech and language disorders, or even limited verbal language. While those with less severe conditions are usually placed in inclusive classrooms in mainstream schools, special schools accommodate children with more severe conditions. Therefore, children with SEND in special schools are more likely to be limited by their SEND conditions and choose to, perhaps, communicate with negative behaviours instead of seeking alternative ways of communication, such as drawing or using hand gestures. Teacher 2 and Teacher 6 provided examples in this regard.

> You've got your bully who might be communicating a need…that's their only way of communicating that need, and they don't have any other behaviours. Then, from their point of view, they're not being a bully… (Teacher 2)

> Most of our students here are non-verbal. For some of those students, we know that they're… trying to communicate something, and it may be a want or a need... (Teacher 6)

As can be seen from the two excerpts, some teachers believed that children with SEND were not deliberately targeting others. It was just the SEND conditions constraining their ability to display appropriate communication behaviours. Therefore, children with SEND potentially engage in negative behaviours whenever they have to convey a message, as a form of communication.

4.3 Summary of Qualitative Results

To summarise, the qualitative findings effectively expanded on the quantitative results and open responses collected from the questionnaire (Categories of responses: 1. Type and frequency of bullying; 2. Driving forces for children with SEND to bully others). Firstly, to understand what bullying in special schools looks like from a qualitative perspective, the types and frequencies of bullying behaviours were explored. Results showed that types of bullying in special schools included physical, verbal, relational, and, most importantly, pupil-to-staff negative behaviours, but not cyberbullying. However, from the interviews, it was unclear which bullying type was the most frequent. Secondly, to understand what the driving forces for children with SEND to target others were, two major themes were found. It could be due to an unintentional behavioural manifestation or with an intention to cause harm.

Results from Chapter 3 (quantitative) and Chapter 4 (qualitative) were compared in the next chapter, leading to a discussion of the similarities and differences between what was found in the current study with special schools and the existing literature with mainstream schools.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses key findings in answering the research questions (**5.1 – 5.3**). Then, the implications of these findings are explored **(5.4)**. Finally, the limitations of the current study are addressed **(5.5)**, guiding future research directions **(5.6)**.

5.1 Type, Frequency, and Age Group of Special School Bullying (RQ1)

5.1.1 A Comparison of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The present study adopted a mixed method design, which included a quantitative component (See questionnaire results in Chapter 3) and a qualitative component (See interview results in Chapter 4). The results from the questionnaires illustrated an overview of what special school bullying looked like and provided insights for exploring some perspectives qualitatively. Then, the interviews acted as a follow-up for school staff to share their opinions in more detail. By comparing the two components, the consistency of findings in answering some of the research questions was examined.

In terms of *similarity* between the quantitative and qualitative findings, both components showed that all traditional types of bullying (physical, verbal, and relational; Bradshaw et al., 2015) were evident in special schools. On the one hand, questionnaire responses reflected observations of hitting, kicking or threatening others with physical harm (physical bullying), teasing or calling hurtful names (verbal bullying), and being left out or spreading rumours (relational bullying). On the other hand, school staff described many real-life examples of traditional bullying in special schools during interviews. These included grabbing others' hair (physical bullying), name-calling (verbal bullying) and leaving someone out of the game (relational bullying). Together, questionnaires quantified bullying incidents observed in special schools while interviews provided more details of these behaviours. Therefore, the results from questionnaires and interviews consistently confirmed the existence of traditional types of bullying in special schools.

In terms of *differences*, the first difference was that all interviews presented a

prominent type of bullying, pupil-to-staff negative behaviour, yet it was only mentioned once in the open responses collected in questionnaires. A few reasons potentially explain the difference. First, pupil-to-staff negative behaviour was not considered a traditional direction of bullying in the existing literature and, therefore, was not included as a compulsory questionnaire item (Bradshaw et al., 2015; See Section 2.3.2). Besides, school staff might be *uncertain* if these negative behaviour directions should be treated or even categorised as bullying due to the seemingly wrong direction of a power imbalance. According to Patten (2016), when it is difficult to explain uncertain thoughts with questionnaires, participants may solely provide a 'snapshot' of the most common incidents that first come to mind. They tend to move through provided items quickly instead of discussing other possibilities. Therefore, optional open questionnaire responses might not capture the occurrence of pupil-to-staff negative behaviour. In contrast, when rapport was established during interviews, school staff could comfortably provide these uncertain behaviours with more context, yielding richer and more in-depth data (Patten, 2016). Overall, the qualitative component seemed more appropriate in capturing *new* phenomena and when *contexts* were crucial for explanation and understanding. Hence, pupil-to-staff behaviours were recorded more extensively in interviews than in questionnaire responses.

The second difference concerned how racial verbal bullying behaviours were differentially observed and interpreted in quantitative and qualitative analyses. In questionnaire analysis, racial verbal bullying was found to be the least common, possibly implying lower priority in tackling the behaviours. However, in the interviews, a very detailed description of bullying scenario related to racial language was provided. It could be seen that the quantitative component provides shallower frequency information of behaviour, while the qualitative component illustrates more in-depth the manifestation of an instance of the behaviour. In this case, if only questionnaire results were reported, then

it could be interpreted that racial verbal bullying was not a pressing issue in special schools due to its low frequency. However, given the capability for school staff to recall details of the rarely occurring behaviour from the qualitative input, it indirectly suggests that special school staff are especially aware of racial verbal bullying. Therefore, having both quantitative and qualitative components was important to understand the bullying situation in special schools. Together, they guided a better interpretation of results: despite the low occurrence (reflected by quantitative input), racial verbal bullying, once observed, could receive special attention from school staff (reflected by qualitative input).

The third difference was apparent when participants were asked about the most prevalent type of bullying in quantitative and qualitative components. In the questionnaire analysis, there was a clear pattern of verbal bullying being the most prevalent, which supports the literature from mainstream schools (Chhabria, 2020; Veldkamp, 2019). However, in interviews, school staff each considered different types of bullying the most common. It was initially speculated that the respective specialism of the special schools recruited for the quantitative or qualitative components might be most influential when it comes to explaining differences in the frequency of bullying type. However, as reported in Chapter 2 Table 1, the primary needs of schools that completed the questionnaires were SEMH (33%) and autism (29%). Similarly, participants of interviews and focus group were also recruited from schools with SEMH and autism specialism. Therefore, the difference in the most frequent type of bullying reported in the quantitative and qualitative component was not attributed to the specialism of the special schools. Instead, this difference could be explained by the nature of the data collection methods. Questionnaires facilitated efficient data collection from many participants, and the frequency pattern shown (i.e., verbal bullying being most prevalent) had higher generalisability (Patten, 2016). However, interviews involved only a few participants. Therefore, the answers could be biased based on their school experience rather than

generalised towards all special schools (Cobern & Adams, 2020). Overall, the quantitative component seemed more appropriate in examining the frequency or numerical patterns of the special school bullying situation.

As discussed, both the quantitative and qualitative components verified the existence of traditional types of bullying in special schools. Nevertheless, a few differences (i.e., pupil-to-staff behaviour, verbal racial bullying, and the most frequent bullying type) were found. Hence, a mixed method design was deemed appropriate for the present study because it ideally captured bullying in special schools from different perspectives while holistically and critically answering the research questions.

5.1.2 Consistency Between Mainstream and Special School Bullying

Considering results from the quantitative and qualitative components, some bullying behaviours observed in *special schools* are consistent with what is known in the existing literature focusing on *mainstream school* bullying.

Firstly, both mainstream and special schools have evident bullying incidents in the form of traditional bullying types (physical, verbal, and relational). Extensive literature sampling from mainstream schools has documented these forms of bullying as major bullying types (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2015; Olweus, 1996; Waters & Mashburn, 2017). The present study reported the same, supported by both questionnaire results and interview themes (See Section 5.1.1 above).

Secondly, comparing the prevalence of these bullying behaviours, quantitative data collected in special schools showed that verbal bullying was the most common, followed by physical and relational bullying (See Section 3.1.3). Again, this is consistent with the existing literature showing the highest prevalence rates of verbal bullying and lower rates of physical or relational bullying among mainstream school samples (Chhabria, 2020; Veldkamp, 2019).

Lastly, the age group pattern of bullying behaviours observed in special schools is

similar to that documented in mainstream schools. According to Eslea and Rees (2001), bullying is most prevalent among children aged 11 to 13, and fewer bullying incidents were observed below age 11 and beyond age 13. This pattern was similar to the current study sampled from special schools. An increasing frequency pattern was found from ages 4 to 14 (with most incidents observed in ages 12 to 14), and the number of bullying incidents dropped beyond age 14 (See Section 3.1.3).

5.1.3 Inconsistency Between Mainstream and Special School Bullying

Nevertheless, two aspects of bullying in special schools are different from those observed in mainstream schools. These relate to an additional type of bullying (peer-to-staff) found in special schools and cyberbullying.

To begin with, pupil-to-staff negative behaviours were evident in special schools, as reported by school staff during interviews. Nevertheless, such behaviours have received minimal attention in existing literature surrounding mainstream schools. According to Espelage et al. (2013), Student Bullying of Teachers (SBT; i.e., pupil-to-staff bullying) is a phenomenon that is 'rarely defined, empirically studied, or meaningfully discussed within academic circles'. This is because SBT is seldom considered bullying in mainstream school contexts as it fails to fulfil the 'power imbalance' criteria (Garrett, 2014; See Section 1.1.2 for bullying definition). Garrett (2014) explained that teachers were perceived to have greater power than the pupils due to their maturity and school position; therefore, they were less likely to be 'bullied'. This power imbalance (i.e., staff having greater power) is common in mainstream settings because typically developed children can cognitively understand the hierarchical structure in schools, which grants teachers authority.

However, the situation in special schools appears otherwise. Qualitative analysis from special schools suggested that teachers were especially restricted by protocols and could not defend themselves (See Section 4.2.2). They were 'very concerned about

safeguarding' as school staff specialised in SEND (Teacher 6). Besides, some teachers said that when a pupil was bulling a teacher, the most common response was to move that staff member to a different class. Two reasons were reported in the interviews. Firstly, it was possible that the pupils did not understand that they were bullying someone. Secondly, it could be that the children became too fixated on a staff member that nothing other than removing the staff member would work to stop the behaviours. Therefore, teachers in special schools recognised that power imbalance can sometimes be observed in the opposite way (i.e., pupils having greater power) and considered pupil-to-staff negative behaviour presenting a unique directionality of bullying in special schools.

Another difference was that cyberbullying appeared to be less common in special schools recruited in the present study than in mainstream schools. With increased technological accessibility, cyberbullying has been documented as the newest form of bullying in mainstream literature (Slonje & Smith, 2008). However, teachers reported no cyberbullying observed in special schools during their respective interviews, and no teacher mentioned cyberbullying in the focus group. This finding contradicts the existing literature showing that children attending special education classes were more likely than their peers who attend general education classes to be cyber-victims and cyber-perpetrators (Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015). A recent study also reported that cyberbullying primarily concerned children with SEND who had lower affective and cognitive empathy than children without SEND (Touloupis & Athanasiades, 2022). The lower empathy levels were found to predict more engagement in cyberbullying. It should be noted that, in the present study, cyberbullying was only examined in the qualitative interviews with *only* seven teachers from three special schools. It could be that cyberbullying was indeed not evident in these special schools. However, such finding (no observation of cyberbullying) should not be generalised to all the special schools due to the limited number of schools involved. Future quantitative work measuring the

frequency of cyberbullying in special schools could be more informative.

As discussed, the dynamics and patterns of bullying observed in special schools do not completely resemble those in mainstream schools. This leads to the first implication of the current study: to design an anti-bullying program *specifically* for special schools (to be explored in Section 5.4.1).

5.2 Special School Staff Self-Efficacy in Relation to Bullying (RQ2 and RQ3)

In addition to exploring the types, frequencies, and age groups of bullying behaviours in special schools, the present study also examined school staff self-efficacy regarding dealing with bullying.

5.2.1 Overall Self-Efficacy Level - the Existing Literature and the Present Study

The current study found that special school staff had a relatively high self-efficacy level (See section 3.2.2). This finding is consistent with a systematic review of teachers' bullying-related self-efficacy, which included 36 publications between 2002 and 2019 (Fischer et al., 2021). According to the review, among the 20 studies that reported a quantitative mean of teachers' self-efficacy, all had an overall mean above the theoretical mean of the measurement scale, and seven studies explicitly interpreted the level as 'high'. Hence, it was concluded that teachers generally were confident in dealing with bullying (i.e., high self-efficacy). However, the authors of the review also criticised that most of the studies included were of 'low' or 'very low' quality because they did not include clear definitions of constructs and were based on relatively small sample sizes. In this regard, the present study would be first graded as 'high' quality because both bullying and self-efficacy were clearly defined in Chapter 1, and research questions focused explicitly on self-efficacy about bullying. Despite potentially downgrading to a 'moderate' quality due to a sample size smaller than 300, the present study nevertheless provides additional evidence supporting the claim that school staff bullying-related self-efficacy is relatively high, as it replicated the results of most studies in the review.

Besides, most studies included in the review were sampled from mainstream schools (Fischer et al., 2021). Therefore, the self-efficacy levels in the present study sampled from special schools are very similar to those from mainstream schools. This interpretation is not surprising because two previous studies also reported a close resemblance in self-efficacy levels between teachers working in different school types – either in special education or general education (Collier et al., 2015; Doherty, 2009).

The high self-efficacy levels among special school staff in the present study could be explained by their positive experiences associated with mastered bullying incidences (Bandura, 1994). As reported in Section 3.1.3, with a moderate frequency of bullying observed in special schools, it could be assumed that most school staff have encountered bullying at some point in their years of work, and they were, by protocols, responsible for reacting in certain appropriate ways which usually resulted in positive outcomes (Wachs et al., 2019). It is this positive experience of mastering challenges which rewards them with a feeling of confidence when dealing with bullying (Bandura, 1994).

5.2.2 Group Comparisons

Apart from measuring overall self-efficacy levels, special school staff were also categorised into different groups according to 1. roles in school, 2. gender, 3. years of work, and 4. whether they have received bullying training. The first three factors were found to have non-significant relationships with self-efficacy levels.

The null result from ‘gender’ was consistent with the existing literature. In the present study, there was no significant association between gender and self-efficacy (See Section 3.3.4). This was similar to the existing literature, which collectively showed no difference between male and female staff in self-efficacy level in managing bullying (e.g., Collier et al., 2015; Fischer & Bilz, 2019).

However, the null result from ‘role in school’ deviated from what was expected based on the existing literature. In a previous study examining bullying perceptions,

Kennedy et al. (2012) found that administrators had higher levels of self-efficacy than teachers. Therefore, in the present study, it was expected that non-classroom staff (including administrative staff) would show higher self-efficacy levels than classroom staff (including teachers). Despite such prediction, no significant difference was found between classroom and non-classroom staff (See Section 3.3.4). Two possible reasons were accountable. Firstly, the bullying self-efficacy measurements involved different stakeholders. In Kennedy et al. (2012), the reported self-efficacy level indicated how confident the participants were when communicating *with parents* about bullying incidents, whilst in the present study, the reported self-efficacy level measured more generally responses *towards children*. Secondly, there was an imbalance in group size in the present study, with 50 classroom staff and 17 non-classroom staff. This resulted in a violation of the homogeneity assumption for a t-test (See Section 3.2.3), and therefore, a non-significant relationship was found without assuming equal variances.

Likewise, the null result from 'years of work' contradicted the existing literature. When reviewing existing literature, Fischer and Bilz (2019) reported that teachers with more experience had higher self-efficacy than their less experienced colleagues. Therefore, it was expected that in the present study, 'mature' teachers should be more confident than 'new' teachers. However, results from the present study did not support it. Years of work were found to have no relationship with self-efficacy level (See Section 3.3.4). This counter-intuitive observation was potentially explained by two reasons. First, the cut-off of inexperienced and experienced school staff differed between studies. In Fischer and Bilz (2019), work experience was categorised using the sample median (years of work = 29 years), resulting in 'inexperienced' staff working for 1 to 28 years and 'experienced' staff working for 29 to 46 years. This is very different from the cut-off of the present study: ''inexperienced (new)' staff worked for 1 to 3 years and 'experienced (mature)' staff for 4 years or more. It is possible that the 'experienced' staff

in the present study was still ‘not experienced enough’ to have very high confidence as most of them would have been classified as ‘inexperienced’ by Fischer and Bilz (2019), blurring the difference between self-efficacy levels. Second, the null relationship between self-efficacy and years of work might be attributed to the uniqueness of bullying in *special schools*. With all students having SEND conditions that could complicate the bullying situation, even ‘mature’ school staff might not be very confident because they might have to handle bullying differently from those that happened in mainstream schools. This explanation is supported by a study showing teachers feeling inferior when managing ‘disablist bullying’ compared to ‘typical bullying’ in mainstream schools (Purdy & McGuckin, 2015).

The insignificant results from these three factors (i.e., the role of school staff, gender, and years of work) reflected that the differences in self-efficacy level should be attributed to another factor, bullying training.

5.2.3 Significance of Bullying Training on Self-Efficacy

Among all the group comparisons, ‘bullying training’ was the only significant factor related to self-efficacy level. It was found that school staff who had bullying training were more likely to have high self-efficacy (See Section 3.3.4). This is an encouraging finding because a high self-efficacy level is associated with many positive outcomes, such as reducing the number of bullying incidents and minimising its consequences. For example, Fischer (2018) reported that children whose teachers have high self-efficacy bully their peers less often than children whose teachers have low self-efficacy. Also, Gregus et al. (2017) suggested that children of high self-efficacy teachers have experienced less verbal bullying. Existing literature has consistently reported that school staff with higher self-efficacy intervene more often in bullying situations (e.g., Boulton et al., 2014; Collier et al., 2015). The willingness to intervene promptly whenever bullying behaviours are observed is crucial. It prevents the bullying incident from developing

more intensely and avoids severe negative consequences.

Therefore, ensuring higher school staff self-efficacy via bullying training is important to achieving positive outcomes. This leads to the second implication: to mandate staff bullying training (to be explored in Section 5.4.2).

5.3 Driving Forces of Bullying (RQ4)

The final research question explored why children with SEND target others. Results from teacher interviews suggested two major contributing factors in special schools: 1. with an intention to cause harm, and 2. without an intention to cause harm *yet* causing negative consequences on the 'victim'.

The first driving force, an intent to harm, is observed in both mainstream and special school bullying. This motivational force is well documented in the existing literature and has been widely adopted as a definition of bullying (e.g., Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006; Chang, 2021; Olweus, 1993). One of the major reasons why typical children intend to harm others is to gain better 'social positioning' (Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). In special schools, children without cognitive impairment (e.g., physically disabled children) or with relatively advanced cognitive ability are also competent in targeting others by causing personal harm. They achieve this by mentioning specific personal, hurtful events (See Section 4.2.1). Slightly differently, though, teachers suggested that children in special schools intended to harm their peers mostly because of 'personal gripe' but not because of social status (Teacher 5).

The second driving force, unintentional harm, is perhaps more uniquely found in special schools. This is attributed to the fact that special schools *only* accommodate children with SEND (usually in more severe conditions), and therefore, are vulnerable to neither accurately understanding what is happening around them nor reacting appropriately. Consequently, children with SEND in special schools may unintentionally 'harm' others more frequently without themselves noticing the negative impacts. In

contrast, ‘unintentional bullying’ is relatively rare in mainstream schools. Although some children with SEND are placed in mainstream schools, most of them have milder conditions. Most children in mainstream schools are typically developing and are cognitively capable of behavioural control. It can be assumed that these children in the mainstream have better awareness and judgement of their behaviours, and therefore, most behaviours that target others are intentional.

Interestingly, ‘unintentional harm’ as a driving force of special school bullying does *not* fit into the current bullying definition, which includes ‘an intent to harm’ as a criterion. This leads to the third implication: to develop an inclusive bullying definition that applies to children with SEND in special schools (to be explored in Section 5.4.3).

5.4 Implications and Significance of Study

5.4.1 Implication 1: Anti-Bullying Program Specifically for Special School

As reported in Section 5.1, some perspectives of special school bullying (e.g., types) are inconsistent with those documented in mainstream schools. It is important to note, again, that there is currently no anti-bullying program specially designed for special schools (Badger et al., 2024). Therefore, educators and policymakers should be cautious about the transferability of mainstream school anti-bullying tactics to special school contexts. It is ideal for developing new anti-bullying programs for special schools which cater to all the unique aspects of bullying behaviours displayed by children with SEND. For example, special awareness should be given to pupil-school staff relationships because pupil-to-school staff negative behaviours were evident in special schools.

It is also essential to design programs according to the capability and receptiveness of children with SEND. Instead of passively providing information, as in most ordinary anti-bullying programs for typical children, changes should be made towards programs for children with SEND in special schools. A study that adapted two lessons of an anti-bullying program (i.e., KiVa) in UK special schools suggested that new programs should

include more communication methods alongside texts, such as role-play (Badger et al., 2023a). By including more interactive and ability-appropriate elements, these adjustments increase comprehension among children with SEND and ensure they understand the abstract concept of 'anti-bullying'. Consequently, these programs are more effective in reducing special school bullying.

5.4.2 Implication 2: Compulsory Bullying Training for Special School Staff

As discussed in Section 5.2.3, bullying training is effectively associated with high self-efficacy and multiple positive outcomes. Nevertheless, the present study sampling from special schools revealed that only slightly more than half (54.2%) of the special school staff have ever received bullying training, limiting the number of staff confident in handling bullying incidents. Therefore, actions should be taken to ensure special school staff receive sufficient and appropriate bullying training to secure higher self-efficacy, especially as children with SEND are more likely to experience bullying (Hartley et al., 2015). For example, a school policy that mandates all special school staff to attend bullying training should be implemented. It is also important to have regular checks to ensure school staff are updated with the most current effective bullying tactics and they are confident in implementing them.

Nevertheless, as no complete anti-bullying program has been designed for special schools, special school staff who reported receiving bullying training were likely attending training primarily developed for dealing with bullying among typical children in mainstream schools. Whenever possible, school staff should be encouraged to attend bullying training specifically designed for special schools once it is developed. Consequently, they can be better equipped with the knowledge and skills to recognise and manage bullying among children with SEND. It is foreseen that this would result in an even higher self-efficacy level, improving the school environment by reducing the number of bullying incidents.

5.4.3 Implication 3: Redefine Bullying in Special Schools

As explored in the present study, bullying in special schools differs from that in mainstream schools. Consequently, two aspects of the traditional bullying definition (1. An intention to harm, and 2. An imbalance of power) should be re-examined. The most used definition of Olweus (1993) in mainstream schools may only partially apply or transfer to special schools.

Firstly, 'an intent to harm', as a traditional criterion of bullying, is relatively less relevant for special school bullying. If strictly adhered to this traditional bullying criterion, all 'unintentional bullying' aiming to seek attention, communicate or as a form of SEND manifestation should not be considered 'bullying'. However, as discussed in Section 5.3, *harm* could be done to 'victims' of bullying regardless of the *intentions* of the 'bully' in special school contexts. Therefore, school staff in special schools recognised these 'unintentional behaviours' as a type of 'bullying'. It is likely that special school staff focus more on the personal *harm* caused by such behaviours than whether children with SEND are intentionally doing so. It is possible that special school staff diminished the importance of *intent* as a bullying criterion because it is very difficult to judge it from the surface of bullying behaviours.

Secondly, 'an imbalance of power' manifests differently in special school contexts. Traditionally, 'power' in mainstream schools is associated with the *physical strength* or *status* of 'bullies' (Garrett, 2014). If strictly adhered to this traditional bullying criterion, then school staff who are physically larger and responsible for classroom discipline should indeed be potential 'bullies'. However, in special schools, school staff are more concerned about their ability to *defend* themselves. They responded in interviews that the inability to defend due to protocol restrictions resulted in less 'power' than their children with SEND, who can potentially manipulate teacher's behaviours. It is likely that different factors are contributing to the power differences in mainstream and special

schools - be it physical strength, status, ability to defend, or any other possible factors.

Therefore, the components constituting a definition of bullying should be re-examined. Ultimately, the definition should be accurate and inclusive for children with SEND in special schools.

5.5 Limitations

Despite having meaningful and practical implications, several limitations were found in the current study which result in lapses in rigour.

Firstly, the convenience sampling method is often criticised for its inability to generalise findings beyond the included sample, reducing the external validity of the present study (Lodico et al., 2010). In the first stage of recruitment, only two special schools in Oxfordshire participated. This was undesirable because special schools in Oxfordshire may be systematically different from special schools in other geographical regions within the UK. Only having data from two schools makes it difficult to generalise findings to all special school bullying situations. This limitation was addressed by attempting a second round of recruitment, targeting schools beyond Oxfordshire across the UK. Nevertheless, email invitations were sent by a contact person and the contacted schools could voluntarily choose whether or not to participate in the research. Therefore, it is unknown *exactly* which areas of the UK were represented by our final quantitative sample. Despite this, the final sample consisted of 72 participants and resembled the sample sizes in existing literature adopting a similar research design. Overall, the external validity of the present study could be deemed moderate because the sample size was acceptable according to past literature, and an attempt was made to recruit more special schools beyond the two schools from the first stage of recruitment, yet of uncertain geographical representativeness.

Secondly, participation in the study was voluntary and vulnerable to the voluntary response bias. Due to the opt-in nature of answering questionnaires, it is possible that

participants had particular interests, strong opinions, or unique experiences in the bullying topic. For example, when asking about bullying training, those who have attended one were more likely to answer. Therefore, they might report bullying observations differently from the overall UK school staff population due to greater awareness. This again threatens the generalisability (i.e., external validity) of findings and would have been better if all school staff responded regardless of their interest in the bullying topic.

Thirdly, the overview of special school bullying was solely drawn based on school-staff-reported data. No responses were collected from the children with SEND. This was undesirable because existing research has found differences between school staff and children's perceptions towards bullying. For example, Naylor et al. (2006) reported significant differences in bullying definitions as reported by teachers and children. A recent article also concluded that teachers perceived bullying less frequently than children (Khanolainen et al., 2021). Therefore, it is uncertain if the target construct (i.e., bullying situation in special schools) was fully measured by solely using a school staff questionnaire, causing lapses in overall research validity and rigour. However, due to practical reasons (i.e., children's SEND conditions, time pressure, and availability of school staff), it was difficult and impractical to ask children with SEND to report bullying situations by filling in existing questionnaires developed for typical children. Currently, there are no bullying questionnaires for children with SEND with appropriate clarity and well-established psychometric properties. Therefore, school-staff-reported data was deemed the most appropriate method to capture bullying situations in special schools.

Lastly, some continuous or ordinal data were recoded dichotomously. This was not ideal because information was lost, and the statistical power was reduced (Altman & Royston, 2006). For example, two participants with scores one just above and one just below the 'categorisation cut-off' (i.e., mean value) might be classified into two different

groups and interpreted as distinct instead of very similar. Besides, dichotomising data also limited the possibility of observing linear or non-linear patterns between the variables. However, the advantages of recoding it in the present study were aiding easier interpretation with the simpler chi-square tests and visually presenting descriptive statistics or results in graphs or tables.

5.6 Future Directions

The current study provides a foundation for future research work. As well as suggesting the development of anti-bullying programs specifically for special schools (See 5.4.1) and redefining bullying in special schools (See 5.4.3), some aspects revealed in the current study are worth more in-depth exploration.

Firstly, it is recommended that special school bullying be captured also from the children's perspective, improving overall construct validity. To achieve this, bullying scales should be developed specifically for children with SEND. One possibility is to have the current questionnaires adapted for children with SEND and reviewed by relevant professionals such as speech and language therapists. Then, research should be conducted to validate the modified questionnaires. Upon success, the new questionnaire will be comparable to the existing questionnaires while catering for the ability of children with SEND. It would be ideal if a specific questionnaire would allow children with SEND to self-report their perceptions. Alternatively, more qualitative research, such as interviewing children with SEND, is suggested. This serves as a complementary input towards understanding special school bullying from the first-person perspectives of children.

Secondly, more variables could be included in future studies. 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 (e.g., verbal racial bullying explored) can be

given more context and better explained. A low frequency of racial behaviours could be due to schools not having much ethical diversity and vice versa.

Lastly, future qualitative research could expand on school staff self-efficacy. It is still being determined whether there are particular aspects that school staff feel less or more confident about. School staff may show differential confidence when handling various types of bullying (e.g., more confident in dealing with physical than relational bullying), children 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 these underlying factors contributing to the overall self-efficacy level, bullying training targeting school staff could be more precise and effective. Consequently, higher self-efficacy levels can be achieved, together with the associated positive impacts.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study aimed to explore what bullying looks like in special schools from school staff perspectives and to understand how school staff feel about their ability to handle bullying incidents. The research revealed that frequency, types, and age group patterns observed in special schools were similar but not completely identical to those documented in mainstream schools. Nevertheless, most school staff, especially those who have had bullying training, were confident in dealing with the bullying behaviours of children with SEND. Besides, when asked why children with SEND target others, school staff suggested several possibilities focusing on intentionality. These findings informed three significant implications: 1. To develop anti-bullying programs specifically for children with SEND in special schools; 2. To mandate bullying training for special school staff; and 3. To redefine bullying in special school contexts.

Despite thoughtful planning and ethical execution of the research process, several limitations must be acknowledged. These included flaws in participant sampling, construct measurement, and data coding. Future research should carefully avoid these limitations to maximise the rigour of the study. Moreover, when attempting to explain and expand on findings, gaps were found to still exist in bullying research targeting special schools. Therefore, more bullying research should be conducted on the population of children with SEND in special schools, focusing on modifying existing scales, including more variables, and uncovering underlying aspects.

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 our children.

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Appendix A

Quantitative Material - Questionnaire

Section 1 - Basic Demographic Information

Q1. What is your gender?

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say

Q2. How many years have you been working in an educational setting?

☐ 1-3 years ☐ 4-10 years ☐ 0-20 years ☐ 20+ years ☐ Prefer not to say

Q3. What is your role in school?

☐ Teacher ☐ Teaching Assistant ☐ Pastoral Support Worker

☐ Office / Administrative Staff ☐ Support / Site Staff

☐ Safeguarding Lead ☐ Senior Leadership Team

☐ Other: [_Please write here:_____] ☐ Prefer not to say

Q4. Have you received any formal training on dealing with bullying (not including Restorative Justice)?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Prefer not to say

Q5. What is the specialism of your current school? (You can select more than one)

☐ Speech, Language & Communication

☐ Cognition and Learning (Significant Learning Difficulties)

☐ Cognition and Learning (Moderate Learning Difficulties)

☐ Social, Emotional & Mental Health

☐ Sensory

☐ Autism

☐ Physical

Section 2 - Bullying Situation Observed in Special Schools

How often have you seen this type of behavior this academic year:
1 = I have not seen this type of behaviour
2 = Once or twice in the past couple of months
3 = Two or three times a month
4 = About once a week
5 = Several times a week

How often have you seen this type of behavior this academic year (select only one option):						**In your school, you see this with (tick all that apply):**
Q1. A student hits, kicks, pushes, or shoves another student. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18
Q2. A student threatens another student with physical harm. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18
Q3. A student is being teased by another student. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18

Q4. A student is being called hurtful names. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18
Q5. A student is deliberately being left out of a group of other students. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18
Q6. A student is having rumors or gossip spread about him or her. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18
Q7. A student is made to do something they don't want to do. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18

Q8. A student is being called hurtful names about their skin colour or race. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18
Q9. A student is being called hurtful names about their intellectual ability. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18
Q10. A student is being called hurtful names about their physical ability. ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ N/A	☐I have not seen this type of behaviour	☐Once or twice in the past couple of months	☐Two or three times a month	☐About once a week	☐Several times a week	☐ Ages 4-8 ☐ Ages 9-11 ☐ Ages 12-14 ☐ Ages 15-18
Please let us know about any other type of negative behaviour seen in school (if any), including frequency: ☐ Prefer not to say						

Section 3 – School Staff Self-Efficacy

Below are several questions that ask about your responses to unkind behaviour or bullying that may sometimes be displayed by children in your class or school. Please read each question and place a circle around the number on the scale that reflects your own views. If your views are described best by the end points of the scale, please circle either number 1 or number 7. If your views are somewhere in between the two end points, please select a position on the scale that reflects where you feel your views should be placed. Please select a response for all of the questions.

Q1. How confident are you in dealing with unkind behaviours or bullying among children in your class or school? ☐ Prefer not to say

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all confident						Very confident

Q2. How difficult do you personally find it to deal with unkind behaviours or bullying among children in your class or school? ☐ Prefer not to say

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very difficult						Not at all difficult

Q3. 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? ☐ Prefer not to say

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Has no positive effect at all						Has a very positive effect

Q4. How satisfied are you with the way in which you deal with unkind behaviours or bullying among children in your class or school? ☐ Prefer not to say

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not satisfied at all						Very satisfied

Q5. To what extent do you feel in control of unkind behaviours or bullying among children in your class or school? ☐ Prefer not to say

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not in control at all						Very much in control

-End of questionnaire-

Appendix B

Qualitative Material – Interview Schedule

Teacher Interview Schedule

Introduction (3 mins)

There isn't a standardised definition of bullying used in schools, and we believe that the most commonly used definition may not be inclusive for children and young people with SEND.

At the moment, the various definitions of bullying focus on these main areas:

- A pattern of behaviour repeated over time
- Harmful negative actions from one or more other people
- An imbalance of strength or power between the bully and victim
- The victim has difficulty defending themselves
- Harm is inflicted intentionally by the bully

We're hoping to develop a new, more accurate definition of bullying, which incorporates what bullying involvement might look like for pupils with SEND. We also want to ensure though the definition reflects that whilst children with SEND get bullied more, they do also bully others.

Development of a new inclusive definition can then inform how bullying in school is identified, and how children who are bullied (and bully others) are best supported.

With an accurate and inclusive definition and understanding of bullying, we hope to significantly reduce the occurrence of bullying involvement for all pupils, including those with SEND.

What does bullying look like for SEND pupils? (5 mins)

- We'd like to know, from your perspective, what does bullying look like for children with SEND?
  Prompt: How might a child with SEND be victimised? How might a child with SEND bully others?
- Of the four types of bullying - verbal, physical, relational and cyberbullying, which do you feel is most common for children with SEND?

Examples:

Verbal – name calling, teasing, talking down
Physical – punching, shoving, kicking
Relational – spreading rumours, deliberately excluding people
Cyberbullying – making negative social media posts about someone

Intent to Bully (4 mins)

- Traditional bullying definitions state that intent to harm is a core aspect of bullying. Do you think that this is true for pupils with SEND? Do they always intend to harm when they bully?

Prompt 1: Some children with SEND may not recognise they are bullying others, or are being bullied.

Prompt 2: There can be other factors driving the bullying – these include being a result of being triggered by someone else's behaviour or reaction, responses to perceived threats, or as a means of self-regulation.

- Traditionally, a lot of bullying is motivated by a desire to achieve a certain 'status' in school - how much of a factor do you feel 'status' is for pupils with SEND?
- What do you think are the driving forces / reasons for children to get involved in bullying?
- Apart from peer-to-peer bullying, have you observed any peer-to-teacher negative behaviour / bullying?
- Apart from skin colour / race, intellectual disability, or physical disability, have you heard of any other verbal bullying instances with more obvious verbal contents / themes?

Power Imbalance (4 mins)

A power imbalance is when something prevents a victim's ability to stop the bullying behaviour.

- What might a power imbalance look like in a bullying situation with SEND pupils?
- Is it always due to differences in age or physical size? Or are there other factors (e.g., cognitive capacity, baseline aggression)?
- Is the specific SEND status of a child a factor in whether they are victimised or bully others?

Conclusion (2 mins)

Is there anything else that we've not discussed, that you feel might be important to consider in regards to bullying victimisation and perpetration by SEND pupils?

Appendix C

Ethical Approvals

First Approval

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk
LEE Wing Tung Nicolette

Department of Education, Social Sciences Division

University of Oxford 26 February 2024

Dear LEE,

Research ethics approval

Research title: Teacher perspective of bullying in special schools: Type, frequency and self-efficacy

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_036

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:
Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's website.

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely
Aliya Khalid
DREC member

Amendment Approval

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk

Lee Wing Tung Nicolette
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

19 April 2024

Dear Nicolette,

Research ethics approval

Research title: Teacher perspective of bullying in special schools: Type, frequency and self-efficacy

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_036
Date of amendment: 12/04/2024
Amendment number: 01

The above amendment has been considered on behalf of the Department of Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this amendment.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's website.

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any further amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

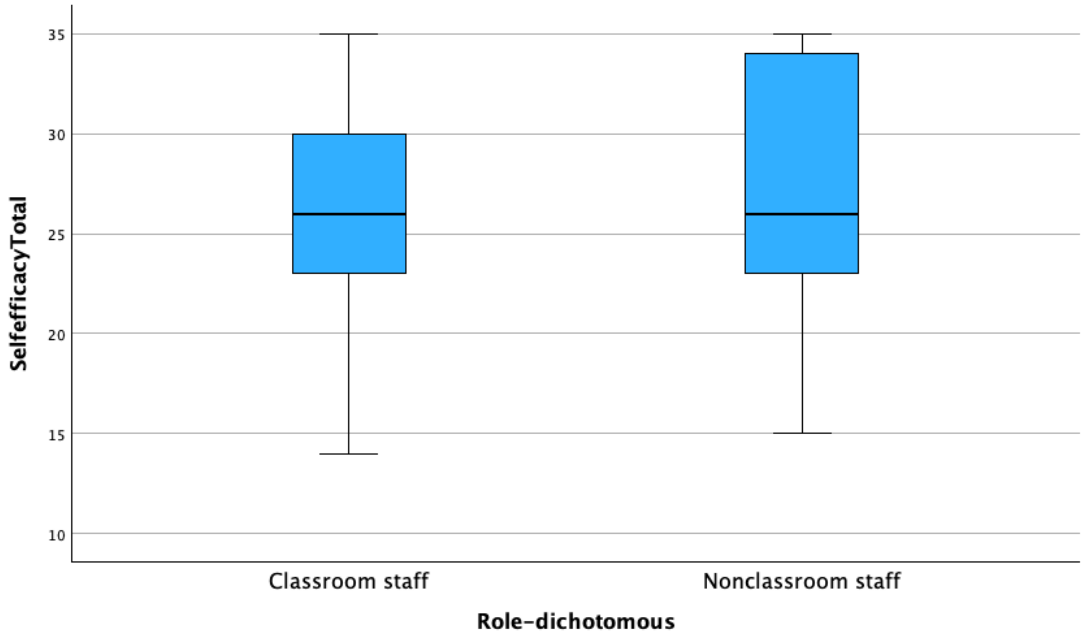
We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely
Aliya Khalid
DREC member

Appendix D

Assumption Check for an Independent Samples T-Test

Two boxplots showed no outliers for both the ‘classroom staff’ and ‘non-classroom staff’ variables.



Appendix D. Boxplots of variables ‘classroom staff’ and ‘non-classroom staff’

Appendix E

Contingency Tables of Self-Efficacy and Demographic Factors

The first table shows number of female and male school staff who score low and high self-efficacy respectively. Also, no expected frequency is lower than 5, satisfying the assumption for conducting a chi-square test.

		Low Self-Efficacy	High Self-Efficacy	Total
Female	**Observed**	25	23	**48**
	Expected	23.6	24.4	
Male	**Observed**	8	11	**19**
	Expected	9.4	9.6	
Total	**Observed**	**33**	**34**	**67**

Table E1. Contingency table of gender and self-efficacy

The second table shows number of new and mature school staff who score low and high self-efficacy respectively. Similarly, having no expected frequency lower than 5 satisfies the assumption for conducting a chi-square test.

		Low Self-Efficacy	High Self-Efficacy	Total
New	**Observed**	18	11	**29**
	Expected	14.9	14.1	
Mature	**Observed**	18	24	**42**
	Expected	21.6	20.4	
Total	**Observed**	**37**	**35**	**72**

Table E2. Contingency table of years of work and self-efficacy

The third table shows number of school staff with and without bullying training received who score low and high self-efficacy respectively. All expected frequencies are higher than 5, satisfying the assumption for conducting a chi-square test.

		Low Self-Efficacy	High Self-Efficacy	Total
No	**Observed**	27	12	**39**
	Expected	19.5	19.5	
Yes	**Observed**	8	23	**31**
	Expected	15.5	15.5	
Total	**Observed**	**35**	**35**	**70**

Table E3. Contingency table of bullying training received and self-efficacy