



Original Article

Peer Bullying of Students in Inclusion Programs: A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Physical Education and Sports Teachers

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Abstract

Students in inclusion programs are more vulnerable to peer bullying due to their special educational needs and experience such behaviors more frequently than their typically developing peers. This study aims to explore peer bullying against inclusion students from the perspective of physical education and sports teachers. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected from nine male physical education and sports teachers through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that inclusion students are often subjected to various forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. These incidents predominantly occur during recess and in playground settings, where teacher supervision is limited. As a result, students may become socially withdrawn or display aggressive behaviors. Contributing factors to bullying include students' academic and social challenges, family and societal influences, and labeling attitudes exhibited by teachers. While individual efforts by teachers offer some support, the findings underscore the need for a comprehensive, multi-layered approach to address peer bullying. Such an approach should involve school-wide policies, enhanced teacher awareness, parental education, and greater societal sensitivity.

Keywords: Inclusion students, Peer bullying, Physical education and sports teaching.

Introduction

Peer bullying is a prevalent issue among children and adolescents. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (2023), 13.8% of children aged 6 to 17 report experiencing peer bullying at least a few times per month. This rate is 13.4% for boys and 14.2% for girls. Among children aged 6–12, the rate is 15.9%, whereas it drops to 10.7% among adolescents aged 13–17. Notably, the prevalence increases significantly among children with functional difficulties—27.2% for boys and 11.6% for girls.

Peer bullying refers to repeated physical or psychological harm caused by unjust aggression (Şahin et al., 2009). It can manifest in various forms. Preschool and primary school teachers often report physical bullying, whereas middle school subject teachers identify verbal bullying as the most common form (Akyol et al., 2018). Moreover, with the widespread use of the internet, cyberbullying has significantly increased (Gökkaya & Sütçü, 2020). Karabulut et al. (2023) identified teasing, exclusion, confiscation of belongings, and social isolation as typical forms of peer bullying.

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While existing research has explored different forms of peer bullying, most studies have focused on general school-based contexts (Çelenk & Yıldızlar, 2019; Şen & Doğan, 2021; Üstün & Şenyer, 2022). However, teachers' firsthand experiences with peer bullying remain underexplored, despite the fact that teachers are typically the first point of contact when managing student behavior problems. Bullying is one of the challenges teachers frequently face in school environments. Nevertheless, only a limited number of studies have focused on teachers' experiences in this regard (Bingölbalı et al., 2024; Çarkıt & Bacanlı, 2020; Doğan & Keleş, 2023).

In particular, there is a lack of research examining teachers' experiences with peer bullying directed at students in inclusion programs—those with special educational needs. Previous studies indicate that such students are frequently subjected to bullying and are often the victims of these incidents (Terzioğlu, 2022). Vuran (2005) found that typically developing students tend to exhibit negative attitudes toward inclusion students, often excluding them and struggling to accept them socially. Students diagnosed with learning disabilities or autism are frequently subjected to verbal abuse and social isolation in school settings (Girli & Atasoy, 2012). In a study by Sarı and Pürsün (2019), it was highlighted that emotional and verbal bullying is most common among inclusion students, often due to their introversion, difficulties in socialization, and challenges in self-expression.

Furthermore, Yılmaz and Malkoç (2020) identified family-related factors as significant contributors to peer bullying. They reported that students with intellectual disabilities are subjected to all types of bullying—physical, verbal, and social—with verbal bullying being the most frequent. It was also noted that such bullying typically originates from classmates.

Despite these findings, previous research has largely overlooked the perspectives of physical education and sports teachers regarding the bullying experiences of students in inclusion programs, particularly during physical education classes. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of physical education and sports teachers regarding peer bullying directed at students in inclusion programs during physical education classes.

Material and Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, chosen for its flexibility and exploratory nature, which is particularly valuable for gaining in-depth insights into a relatively underexplored topic and for developing new perspectives during the research process (Neuman, 2012). A case study approach was adopted, as it is a widely recognized qualitative method aimed at conducting a holistic and in-depth examination of a specific individual, group, institution, or event within its real-life context (Patton, 2002). This approach is particularly well-suited to capturing the complexity and uniqueness of the research focus. Ethical approval was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of İnönü University (Date: 13.03.2025, Session No: 6, Decision No: 31) prior to data collection.

Study Group

The study group consisted of nine male middle school physical education and sports teachers working at schools located in the central district of Malatya. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, which is commonly employed in qualitative research to identify individuals with rich and relevant experience (Patton, 2002). All participants

were certified teachers currently instructing students in inclusion programs. Their ages ranged from 25 to 60 years, and each had a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience.

Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) being a certified physical education and sports teacher, (b) having students with special educational needs in their classes, (c) having at least two years of professional teaching experience, and (d) volunteering to participate in the study.

Prior to data collection, participants received detailed information regarding the study's purpose, scope, and procedures. Informed consent was obtained from each teacher, and to protect confidentiality, each participant was assigned a code (e.g., P1, P2, P3).

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form developed based on a comprehensive literature review and expert consultation. To ensure content validity and alignment with the research objectives, the form was reviewed by two independent subject-matter experts. The questions were finalized, and six main questions were used in the in-depth interviews. The questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview questions.

Questions
How would you describe the overall relationships between inclusion students and other students in your school?
In what forms does peer bullying mostly?
In what situations or settings do bullying behaviours towards inclusion students generally take place?
What are your observations regarding the attitudes and motivations of students who engage in bullying?
When inclusion students are exposed to bullying, what types of reactions do they usually display?
Based on your experiences, do you have any additional suggestions for preventing bullying against inclusion students?

With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in neutral, comfortable settings to support open and honest responses. To maintain consistency, all questions were presented in the same order across interviews. The data collection process was carried out between March 15 and April 30, 2025.

Data Analysis

In this study, the audio recordings of each interview were transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. After transcription, the data were compiled and organized into a single document to facilitate systematic analysis.

Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (see Figure 1). Themes were developed using an inductive approach, remaining closely aligned with the participants' narratives. To enhance reliability, two researchers independently conducted the coding process. In cases of disagreement during theme identification, the researchers held in-depth discussions to reach a consensus, thereby ensuring inter-coder consistency.

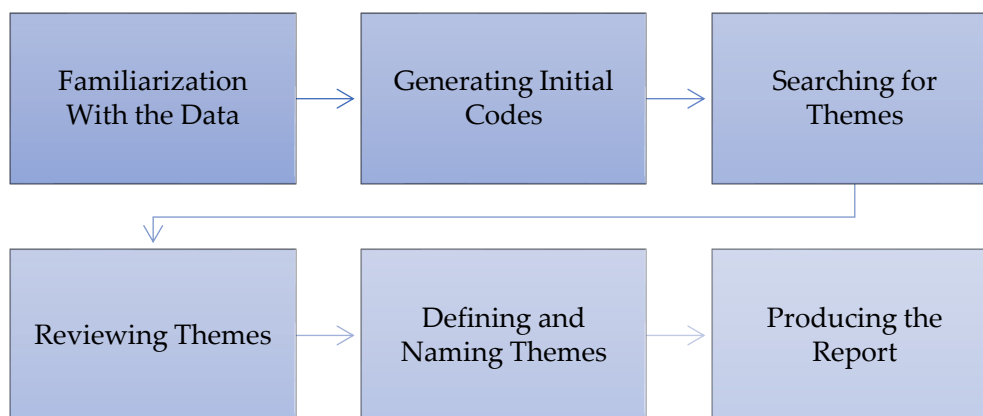


Figure 1. Phases of thematic analysis.

Results

Five themes were identified in the study. These are listed as follows: Forms of Peer Bullying, Students' Reactions to Bullying, Contexts in Which Bullying Occurs, Causes of Bullying, and Preventive Strategies Employed by Teachers.

Theme 1: Forms of Peer Bullying

The majority of participants indicated that inclusion students are exposed to various forms of peer bullying. Physical bullying is particularly common among male students and becomes more visible during physical education classes and in play environments. The statement by P2, *"When they include male inclusion students in the game, they usually put them in the goal; this is a way of excluding them,"* illustrates how bullying can become an indirect yet systematic means of exclusion. P1's remark, *"They constantly get into fights for no reason,"* and P9's observation, *"They get bullied by their peers for holding the group back during games,"* suggest that competition and performance expectations may trigger bullying. P4 added, *"Some students deliberately hit them with the ball and then say, 'It was just a joke',"* highlighting how violence can be normalized through gameplay.

Verbal bullying is often not directly noticed by teachers, yet it has a significant impact among students. P6 noted, *"They verbally abuse them by giving them names that damage their reputation,"* pointing to a systematic labeling process. P3 stated, *"They mock students with intellectual disabilities,"* and P5 observed, *"Even very quiet and calm students are verbally abused with profanity,"* illustrating the broad range of targeted student profiles. P8 shared, *"They kept calling a student 'retarded' behind his back, and when he heard it, he started crying,"* reflecting the emotional damage caused by verbal violence.

Social exclusion is more commonly observed among female students. P1 remarked, *"Among girls, peer bullying usually takes the form of exclusion,"* and P6 stated, *"They don't sit next to her, and when forming groups, they leave her out,"* showing how exclusion evolves into a passive yet persistent process of social isolation. P2 added, *"They are the last choice when it comes to selecting friends,"* emphasizing how exclusion affects a student's social status.

Cyberbullying, although independent of physical settings, poses a serious threat in terms of its social impact. P6 shared, *"They take inappropriate photos of them and mock them in their peer groups,"* demonstrating how violence is perpetuated through digital platforms. Similarly, P3 noted, *"They share it on social media and laugh,"* P2 said, *"A parent showed me what was written about the student in a WhatsApp group,"* and P7 remarked, *"They recorded a*

video of the student and later made fun of him," all of which reveal the vulnerability of students in spaces beyond teacher supervision.

Theme 2: Students' Reactions to Bullying

The reactions of inclusion students to bullying were categorized into two main groups: withdrawal and aggressive responses. Withdrawal tendencies manifest as emotional retreat in the face of bullying. P7 noted, *"We can immediately tell which students are being bullied—they don't go out during recess, they withdraw,"* while P5 observed, *"They cry to seek sympathy, but even if they're in the wrong, they become silent,"* indicating a passive reaction both emotionally and behaviorally. P6 emphasized the internalization of bullying by stating, *"Some even blame themselves. One child said, 'I'm bad'."* Similarly, P8 remarked, *"They avoid eye contact and act as if they are invisible."*

The second group of reactions includes anger, physical aggression, and retaliatory behavior. P2 stated, *"Even though they are physically weak, they fight,"* and P5 noted, *"They pick fights to defend themselves and sometimes become aggressive."* P3 recounted, *"I saw one student yelling at another during recess. He wants to be seen highlighting the student's desire for attention".* P4 added, *"He throws the ball on the ground, pulls the chair—exhibiting passive aggression,"* indicating that suppressed anger is redirected toward objects.

Theme 3: Contexts in Which Bullying Occurs

Participants indicated that bullying behaviors predominantly occur in physical environments where teacher supervision is limited. Recess periods, hallways, restrooms, and areas without camera surveillance were identified as the most frequent settings for bullying. P3 stated, *"They are generally exposed to more peer bullying during recess,"* while P6 remarked, *"Students bully others in places where there are no cameras."* P1 emphasized the role of lack of supervision, saying, *"These kinds of incidents usually happen when students are left on their own."*

In addition, physical education classes are dynamic environments where various forms of bullying can be observed. P5 noted, *"When they are not successful in games, they exclude the student,"* while P1 stated, *"During football, they either put the inclusion student in the goal or leave him on the bench."* P9 added, *"They don't pass the ball to him, and when he makes a mistake, they mock him,"* illustrating how social interaction in sports contexts can turn into a threat.

Theme 4: Causes of Bullying

The causes of bullying are associated with both individual and environmental factors. Student-related conditions such as academic failure, inability to communicate, and social differences often lead to being targeted by bullying. P1 summarized this by stating, *"Difficulties in perception, failure in lessons, and inability to adapt to peers are the main reasons for bullying."* P4 emphasized the role of academic performance in social acceptance, saying, *"No one wants to be on the same team with a child who has attention deficit."*

In addition, teacher attitudes, family structure, and societal perceptions are among the contributing factors that reinforce bullying. P8 drew attention to an institutional issue by stating, *"Teachers call inclusion students by labeling them, which causes students to label them as well."* P3 noted, *"I've heard parents tell their children, 'Don't play with him',"* while P1 added, *"Low-income families don't accept them; the parents are in conflict, and it reflects on the child."* These accounts indicate that bullying is not confined to the school environment but is, in fact, a reflection of broader societal structures carried into the school setting.

Theme 5: Preventive Strategies Employed by Teachers

Participant teachers stated that they have developed various individual strategies to cope with bullying. The most common strategy involves assigning responsibilities to inclusion students and making them more visible within the classroom environment. P4 explained, *"I asked them to bring the class logbook or fetch materials from the storage room. By giving them responsibilities, we help them integrate into society."* P7 shared, *"I give the keys to the sports room to inclusion students. It builds trust and makes them more social,"* while P6 added, *"I made one of them the class president. The other students had to communicate with him,"* emphasizing the effectiveness of assigning responsibilities in reducing bullying.

Some teachers also suggested the need for systemic change. P2 questioned the current inclusion model by stating, *"They need to have a separate class... they can't learn at the same pace."* P2 further noted, *"Families and society need to be educated on this issue,"* underlining that the solution should not be limited to the school setting but should also address the broader social context.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine peer bullying experienced by students in inclusion programs within the context of physical education and sports teachers' experiences and to qualitatively analyze the forms, causes, and effects of such bullying in depth. The findings reveal that peer bullying against inclusion students is a multidimensional phenomenon with complex dynamics. According to the data obtained, peer bullying manifests in the forms of physical, verbal, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. These findings are in line with previous studies (Berchiatti et al., 2022; Horton et al., 2025). In the study by Ručman and Šulc (2025), it was noted that inclusion students are particularly subjected to psychological bullying, teasing, name-calling, and social exclusion. Similarly, Sarı and Pürsün (2019) reported that emotional and verbal bullying are the most common forms experienced by these students. The research conducted by Sivrikaya and Çetin (2023) also revealed that inclusion students can be targets of cyberbullying.

According to the findings, bullying behaviors are most frequently observed in settings with limited or no teacher supervision, such as recess periods, school corridors, and especially during unstructured activities in physical education classes. These times and spaces, due to inadequate adult oversight, allow negative social interactions based on power imbalances among students to emerge more freely. The occurrence of bullying in such unsupervised environments not only prevents teachers from detecting incidents in a timely manner but also reduces the likelihood of victimized students seeking help. Consequently, bullying incidents often continue unnoticed, increasing the risk of these behaviors becoming normalized or chronic. In this regard, it can be said that unsupervised school areas constitute critical risk zones that perpetuate and conceal bullying.

Another finding shows that the reactions of inclusion students to bullying vary and include passive withdrawal, aggressive behaviors, or reporting the incident to teachers. As a result of the negative interactions they experience, these students develop intense feelings of sadness, social withdrawal, a sense of detachment from peer groups, and thus a feeling of exclusion. In some cases, they display strong emotional responses such as anger, frustration, and irritability (Sivrikaya & Çetin, 2023; Yılmaz & Malkoç, 2020). These findings highlight the psychological toll of peer bullying and point to the emotional vulnerability of inclusion students.

Another important finding of the study is that individual limitations of students play a significant role in the emergence of bullying. In addition, deficiencies in academic and social skills, family-related issues, and teachers' unintentional labeling attitudes stand out as triggering factors in the formation of bullying environments. Research focusing on teacher competencies regarding inclusive education supports these findings. For instance, Özaydın and Çolak (2011) noted that teachers lack the necessary qualifications for inclusive education, which leads to various problems in practice. In another study conducted by Doğanoglu and Dümenci (2015), it was found that although preschool teachers had positive attitudes toward inclusive education, their knowledge level on the topic was insufficient. A study by Cincioğlu and Ergin (2023) with the parents of inclusion students revealed that a lack of interest from school administrators and teachers is an influential factor in the emergence of peer bullying. Additionally, according to the findings of Kurt and Tomul (2020), one of the primary problems experienced by inclusion students stems from some parents' refusal to accept their children's special conditions.

The final finding of the study relates to the strategies developed by teachers to cope with bullying. The most commonly employed strategies by participant teachers include assigning responsibilities to inclusion students, increasing their visibility in the classroom, and supporting their social participation. These strategies enhance students' sense of belonging and create a protective effect against bullying. The study by Yüksel et al. (2023) also indicates that teachers adopt strategies such as assigning responsibilities, fostering socially inclusive environments, and ensuring family cooperation. Similarly, in Ergin's (2022) research, physical education and sports teachers were found to demonstrate positive attitudes toward inclusive education and to take on supportive roles in the process. These findings reinforce the role of teacher-led initiatives in mitigating peer bullying and promoting inclusion.

This study has several limitations. As it was designed using a qualitative methodology, the findings cannot be generalized to all contexts or populations. The participant group consisted exclusively of male physical education and sports teachers, limiting the diversity of perspectives and potentially failing to capture the experiences of female teachers in similar settings. Moreover, the views of inclusion students themselves and their parents were not included, which restricts a more comprehensive understanding of peer bullying dynamics from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study reveals that the peer bullying experienced by students in inclusion programs is both multidimensional and complex, manifesting in physical, verbal, social exclusion, and cyberbullying forms. The concentration of bullying behaviors in areas with limited teacher supervision highlights structural vulnerabilities and supervision gaps within the school environment. The responses of inclusion students range from emotional withdrawal to aggressive reactions, leading to adverse psychosocial consequences, including social isolation, a sense of exclusion, and emotional trauma. Among the primary causes of bullying are individual challenges, social and academic difficulties, family-related problems, and teachers' unintentional labeling behaviors—all of which underscore the need for multi-level intervention across the school ecosystem. Teachers' limited preparedness for inclusive education emerges as a significant barrier to both the prevention and effective management of peer bullying. Nevertheless, the strategies developed by teachers—such as assigning responsibilities, enhancing students' visibility, and

promoting social participation—stand out as effective and supportive practices for mitigating peer bullying. These findings emphasize the necessity of restructuring inclusion practices not only at the individual level, but also at institutional and pedagogical levels, in order to create safer and more equitable school environments for all learners.

Future studies could address these limitations by incorporating larger and more diverse samples, including both male and female teachers, as well as students in inclusion programs and their parents. Employing mixed-methods designs could enhance the generalisability of results while capturing both the depth and breadth of bullying experiences. Furthermore, exploring the perspectives of school administrators and support staff may provide a more holistic understanding of institutional practices in preventing bullying against students in inclusion programs.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this study.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting this study is available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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