

Elementary School Staff Perspectives on Bullying Experiences Amongst Students with Disabilities

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Plain English Summary

Introduction

Students with disabilities experience bullying and other forms of victimization more often than those without disabilities in the United States. Both general and special education teachers can create a safe learning environment for all students. They need to recognize and address bullying to prevent it. However, teachers often do not get focused professional development on how to prevent bullying about students with disabilities. Counselors can also play an important role in assisting bully prevention efforts. This focus group study examined teachers and counselors experiences with bullying to guide prevention efforts.

Methods

Given the high bullying rates among students with disabilities, two focus groups with a total of 17 educators and counselors from two schools from a large school district in the United States were conducted in spring 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, using a semi-structured protocol. Questions focused on definitions of bullying, warning signs for bullying, experiences with bullying (specifically including students at-risk or with disability identification), school bullying policies, and perceptions of professional development. Our qualitative inquiry used multiple perspectives from the researchers, continuous data analysis and incorporation of additional data collection (e.g., observation notes). This study explored the competencies teachers considered necessary for recognizing/responding to bullying and to provide real-world bullying examples from two elementary schools in a large urban school district in the southeastern United States.

Main Findings

The discussions in the focus groups shed light on how educators perceive and handle bullying, especially concerning students with disabilities. Participants generally agreed on the definition of bullying. They also noted how bullying can target individuals based on identity differences, and how perceptions of bullying can vary among students and parents. There was a concern that some parents and students may misinterpret normal conflicts as bullying, leading to overreporting and confusion about if something was bullying or not. This confusion, they felt, came from societal influences and media portrayal of bullying. Additionally, participants observed that communication between students and parents could contribute to this misinformation, potentially leading to misidentification of true instances of bullying. But, teachers and counselors did not use any approaches to notice or respond to bullying that were specifically used for students with disabilities. This was an important finding because students with disabilities spend more and more time in the regular general education classroom, but need helpful strategies to respond to bullying issues that come up. This information provided the foundation for future work to develop a professional development program to fill this gap. In terms of interventions, educators discussed various

strategies at the classroom, school, and district levels. These included educating students about disabilities, promoting inclusion, and implementing anti-bullying programs.

Main Implications

Students with disabilities are more likely to be bullied than students without disabilities. Even though more students with disabilities are being included in regular classrooms alongside non-disabled peers as opposed to segregated instruction, many teachers do not feel confident in handling bullying issues involving them. One way to tackle this is by having a team approach where special education teachers work together with regular teachers and counselors. This teamwork can help everyone better address bullying issues involving students with disabilities. It is really important for teachers and counselors to get training in dealing with students who are at risk. The findings of this study can help improve how we prevent bullying involving students with disabilities. It is important for both research and practice to focus on helping regular teachers and counselors better understand and respond to bullying involving students with disabilities. This is not just about education; it is a social justice issue. It is important to make sure students with disabilities are included and have access to a fair education which includes teachers and counselors creating safe spaces in classrooms, with support from colleagues who are trained in special education.

Find out more

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Additional coverage of the overall project this study was a part of:

- <https://showme.missouri.edu/2023/mu-researcher-combats-bullying-of-students-with-disabilities/>