

Research Article

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Bullying Experiences of Individuals with Special Needs

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Peer bullying is considered to be the most common type of violence in schools. Individuals with special needs are exposed to peer bullying more than their typically developing peers. For individuals with special needs, this situation can lead to more complex and destructive consequences. In this study, it was aimed to determine the peer bullying experiences of individuals with special needs in the school environment in line with the views of the participants.

Materials/methods. Phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs that focuses on explaining the participants' experiences in the context of the research topic, was used in the study. Five parents of individuals with special needs and five classroom teachers participated in the study. The research data collected through two focus group interviews were analyzed using content analysis.

Results. The findings of the research reveal that they are frequently exposed to various types of peer bullying in the school environment and that they have difficulty coping with peer bullying. It was determined that peer bullying negatively affects individuals with special needs, the classroom environment, and the family environment. While the participants utilize different strategies at home and school to prevent peer bullying, they suggest that detailed information on the subject should be included in parent and teacher training to reduce it.

Conclusion. As a result, peer bullying experiences frequently encountered by individuals with special needs should be reduced. In this process, it is important to increase the knowledge of classroom teachers, school counselors, and legal sanctions.

1. Introduction

Peer bullying is a common type of violence in schools (Pecjack & Pirc, 2017). Olweus' studies in Scandinavian countries in the 1970s pioneered research on this issue in many countries since the 1980s (Yurtal & Cenkseven, 2007). Today, it is one of the issues that both the media and academia are paying attention to (Berchiatti et al., 2021). Bullying is defined as an interpersonal aggressive behavior that expresses intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance between individuals (Olweus, 1991). Bullying is defined as a systematic abuse of power (Sharp & Cowie, 1994). Bullying can occur in many settings, including schools, workplaces, and online platforms (Al Akko & Airia, 2024; Dobry, Braquehais & Sher, 2013). The leading causes of bullying include bullies' desire to establish superiority, seeing violence as a solution method, and the false belief that the victim deserves pressure (Genç, 2007). When we look at bullying behaviors in definitions, some common points come to the fore. These are: (a) the aggression behavior is not one-time, but repetitive and long-term, (b) lack of power balance, (c) intentionality, (d) verbal, physical, and psychological (Lee, 2004; Olweus, 1994).

Behaviors related to peer bullying can occur in different ways in social environments. The literature distinguishes between direct bullying, which refers to overt attacks, such as physical contact or verbal attacks, and indirect bullying, which involves less visible social isolation and exclusion (Olweus, 1991). While direct bullying involves face-to-face interaction between the victim and the bully, indirect bullying involves aggressive behaviors directed at the victim through a third party. Cyberbullying, another type of bullying that has become widespread today, is considered a subtype of peer bullying. This form of bullying, which emerged with the increase in children's internet use, is defined as making humiliating posts, sending disturbing messages on social media, and performing various harassing actions targeting the victim in the digital environment (Korkmaz, 2016).

Individuals assume different roles in peer bullying, which involve complex social structures involving different individuals (Salmivalli et al., 1996). The leading roles in bullying are bully, victim, bully-victim, and bystanders. The bully who perpetrates bullying, the victim who is subjected to bullying, and the individuals who both perpetrate bullying and are subjected to bullying are defined as bully-victims, and other children who are present in that environment and witness the bullying are defined as bystanders (Sanders & Phye, 2004). It is essential to know these roles in preventing and intervening in bullying.

Peer bullying refers to systematic and continuous harassment among peers and leads to short and long-term harmful effects on the social, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the victims (Alikaşifoğlu, 2011). The psychological effects of peer bullying on children include increased risk of emotional and academic maladjustment, decreased self-esteem, and relationship problems with peers (Nansel et al., 2001; Rigby, 2003). The long-term consequences of peer bullying on mental health are slowly emerging, and evidence suggests that victims may experience developmental consequences in late adolescence and early adulthood (Triggs, 2014). Risk factors associated with peer bullying include demographic, health-related, and school-related characteristics such as grade level, academic achievement, and self-perceived health status (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Bullying of individuals with special needs can be defined as the deliberate, aggressive actions of one or a group of students against a specific student because of the student's disability or vulnerability (Rose et al., 2009). For individuals with special needs, this situation can lead to more complex and destructive consequences (Carter & Spencer, 2006; Peguero & Hong, 2020). The literature has revealed that the rates of peer bullying of individuals with special needs are higher than their peers with typical development (Eroğlu, 2018). The main reasons for this include the inadequacies of individuals with special needs in terms of social skills, communication skills, and

academic skills. Due to these characteristics, they are more likely to be victimized by peer bullying and social exclusion (Bejerot & Mörtberg, 2009; van Roekel et al., 2010).

Relationships with peers and teachers appear protective factors regarding bullying prevention (Longobardi et al., 2019; Saracho & Spodek, 2007). While establishing relationships with peers provides social competencies for students to overcome social difficulties (Guralnick, 2010), the relationship with teachers affects the outcome of students' behaviors. Suppose there is a conflictual relationship between the teacher and the student. In that case, it can lead to active bullying behaviors or victimization, while a warm and close relationship between the teacher and the student is a protective factor against bullying (Lotti et al., 2020). However, individuals with special needs are at higher risk of being victimized and excluded due to their inadequacies in social and communication skills.

2. Literature Review

It is important to create appropriate educational environments for individuals with special needs, to increase teachers' awareness of peer bullying, and for families to cooperate with the school to prevent peer bullying (Swearer et al., 2012). In this context, the opinions and suggestions of teachers and families about this problem are critical for developing effective intervention strategies. There are many studies on peer bullying towards individuals with typical development in the literature. However, it is seen that studies on peer bullying towards individuals with special needs are limited. The studies on peer bullying in the field of special education in Turkey address the bullying experiences of students in different disability groups, teacher and parent views, influencing factors, and intervention strategies. Bullying experienced by students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive classrooms by their peers with normal development was examined through the teacher (Yılmaz & Malkoç, 2020) and parent views (Cincioğlu & Ergin, 2023). Similarly, the factors affecting the bullying behaviors faced by students with special needs in inclusive settings have also been investigated (Cincioğlu, 2023). Teachers' views on the peer bullying experiences of students with special needs in preschool education institutions (Mutlu, 2022) and the effects of peer bullying prevention training for teachers (Ergin, 2024) were examined. At the secondary school level, the differentiation of peer bullying according to demographic variables and the differences between mainstreaming classes and other classes were discussed (Aydar, 2019). At the high school level, the bullying of students with an intellectual disability or autism was evaluated from the perspective of students, teachers, and parents (Bacık, 2022). The roles of adolescents diagnosed with ADHD in peer bullying were analyzed within the framework of symptom severity, parental attitudes, and sociocultural factors (Özyavuz, 2024; Yaşöz, 2021). In addition, the exposure to bullying of mainstreaming students and students with normal development was compared (Özdemir, 2020). There are also studies focusing on protective strategies against bullying and teaching bullying prevention skills to students diagnosed with moderate intellectual disability through digital social stories (Pekince-Koç, 2024). In general, studies on peer bullying in special education in Turkey are limited to studies that address both the dimensions of victimization and prevention and intervention methods. However, increasing the number of studies on peer bullying for individuals with special needs will be a beacon of hope for teachers, families, and individuals with special needs. In this context, this study aims to determine the peer bullying experiences of individuals with special needs in the school environment in line with the views of the participants. In this context, answers to the following research questions were sought.

- What is the peer bullying experiences of individuals with special needs in the school environment?

- What is the role played by peer bullying experiences of individuals with special needs on their academic and social development?

- What strategies are used by teachers and families to prevent peer bullying towards individuals with special needs?

- What are the participants' suggestions for preventing peer bullying towards individuals with special needs?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Model

Phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research designs, was used in the study. This design, which aims to examine the participants' perspectives on the research topic in-depth, focuses on explaining phenomena based on people's experiences by rejecting the lack of objectivity regarding phenomena (Langridge, 2007). Therefore, the experiences of the research participants in the context of the research topic are tried to be explained by seeking answers to what, how, and why questions (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, Osborn, & Jarman, 1999). Considering that the purpose of the research was to determine the peer bullying experiences of individuals with special needs in the school environment in line with the views of the participants, it was decided that the phenomenology design was the most appropriate design to be used while seeking answers to the research purpose and questions.

3.2. Participants of the Study

The purposive sampling method is frequently preferred when determining the participants participating in qualitative research processes. This method requires the selection of people related to the subject in order to obtain detailed information on the research topic (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2014) Criterion sampling, which is one of the various sub-types of purposive sampling, refers to the selection of participants who will take part in the research from the sample using the criteria determined by the researcher (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013) Accordingly, criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used in the study considering the purpose of the research. Parents of individuals with special needs and teachers who provide education to these individuals were included in the study. Different criteria were determined for both participant groups. The criteria determined for the parents of individuals with special needs were having a child with special needs and their children receiving education in a public school. The criteria for teachers were that they were graduates of a classroom teaching program, were teaching students with special needs at any level in a school affiliated with the Ministry of National Education and had at least five years of experience. Ten participants, five parents and five teachers who met these criteria participated in the study. Demographic information about the participants is given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Information on Parents

Participant	Gender	Age	Graduation	Child Diagnosis	Child Age
Parent 1	Female	43	High School	Intellectual Disability	13
Parent 2	Female	35	High School	Autism	9
Parent 3	Female	37	Undergraduate	Learning Disability	11
Parent 4	Male	44	High School	Intellectual Disability	18
Parent 5	Female	40	High School	Learning Disability	15

As seen in Table 1, four of the five parents in the study were female, and one was male. Four of the participants, whose ages ranged between 35-44 years, were high school graduates, while one of them had a bachelor's degree. The diagnosis of two of the participants with special needs was intellectual disability; two had learning disabilities, and one had autism. The ages of the children of

the participants ranged between 9-18. Demographic information about the teachers who participated in the study is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Information on Teachers

Participant	Gender	Age	Graduation	Branch	Experience
Teacher 1	Male	36	Undergraduate	Primary School Teaching	15 Years
Teacher 2	Female	44	Undergraduate	Primary School Teaching	22 Years
Teacher 3	Male	41	Undergraduate	Primary School Teaching	19 Years
Teacher 4	Female	29	Master's Degree	Primary School Teaching	6 Years
Teacher 5	Female	37	Undergraduate	Primary School Teaching	14 Years

Three of the five teachers in the study were female, and two were male. The teachers' ages ranged between 29 and 44, and all were classroom-teaching graduates. Four teachers had bachelor's degrees, and one had a master's degree. Teachers' professional experience ranged between 6-22 years.

3.3. Data Collection Method

Focus group interviews, among the frequently preferred data collection tools in qualitative research, are based on the researcher seeking answers to the research question by answering the questions prepared in advance by the researcher to the participants in the group (Greenbaum, 1998). This type of interview, which enables the participants to give expanding answers to the interview questions because it includes group interaction, stands out in phenomenology studies with its saturated data (Carey & Asbury, 2016). For this reason, focus group interviews were preferred as the data collection tool in the study, and the process was carried out by conducting two separate focus group interviews with parents and teachers.

In the first stage, the draft interview questions for focus group interviews were prepared by reviewing the literature in line with the research purpose. Then, draft questions were sent to three field experts working as faculty members in special education, and their opinions were obtained. Considering the expert opinions, the questions were finalized, and the data collection process started.

3.4. Data Collection Process

In qualitative research, interviews can be conducted face-to-face or remotely via online platforms, depending on the research process. Researchers frequently prefer online interviews due to their flexibility, efficiency, and time and cost advantages (Creswell, 2019; Hanna, 2012; Sullivan, 2012). In the studies, focus group interviews were conducted online using the Zoom program since the participants resided in different cities. While planning the interview schedule, the participants were informed about the research topic, and the days and times they were available for the focus group interview were determined. Then, by evaluating the responses of all participants on the topic, a separate focus group interview schedule was determined and conducted for parents and teachers. Information about the focus group interviews is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Information on Focus Group Interviews

Interview No	Participant Group	Interview Platform	Number of Participants	Interview Duration
1	Parents	Zoom	5	02:25:21
2	Teachers	Zoom	5	02:54:38

Two focus group interviews with 10 participants lasted five hours and 30 minutes. After the interviews were completed, the data analysis process began.

3.5. Data Analysis

Considering the purpose of the research, there was a need to present the findings obtained from the data more qualifiedly. For this reason, the content analysis method, frequently preferred in qualitative research, was used to analyze the data obtained through focus group interviews. Content analysis focuses on the origin of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2013; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). This process is carried out by transcribing the data and revealing the codes, creating themes and sub-themes using the codes, organizing the codes, themes, and sub-themes, and then reporting the findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In this process, computer-aided analysis programs are frequently used today, saving researchers a significant amount of time (Kuş, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 2014).

In the current study, as the first stage of the data analysis process, the data obtained from the focus group interviews were transferred to the computer environment using the Microsoft Word program. Then, these documents were examined by the second researcher, and the transfer to the computer environment was evaluated to determine whether it was carried out correctly. Spelling mistakes were corrected, and the raw transcript file was finalized. Then, the data were uploaded to the NVIVO analysis program, and the process of obtaining codes from the data was started. At this stage, 42 codes were reached. Then, similar codes were brought together in the third stage, and appropriate themes and sub-themes were determined and placed under them. At this stage, a reliability study was conducted to determine research reliability. The other researchers meticulously checked the codes, themes, and sub-themes prepared in an essay. In the calculation of the reliability percentage, the formula of $\text{consensus}/\text{consensus} + \text{disagreement} \times 100$ was used (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In the calculation, the reliability percentage in data analysis was calculated as 95%. The researchers came together for the codes with disagreement and reached a common opinion, and the data analysis was completed.

3.6. Research Ethics

In qualitative research, conducting studies by research ethics is directly related to the researchers taking a series of measures (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). At this stage, first of all, an application was made to the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, and an ethics committee decision was made to show that the study was ethically appropriate. As another ethical measure, a voluntary participation form was used, which included information that the participants in the study were included in the study with their consent, that they could examine the data at any stage they wanted, and that they could withdraw at any stage of the study without giving any reason. All the study participants examined and signed the form and sent it to the researcher via cargo. Participants were informed in detail at every study stage, and possible problems were prevented.

4. Results

The data obtained in the study, which aimed to determine the peer bullying experiences of individuals with special needs in the school environment in line with the participants' views, were analyzed by content analysis method, and six themes, eight sub-themes, and 40 codes were reached.

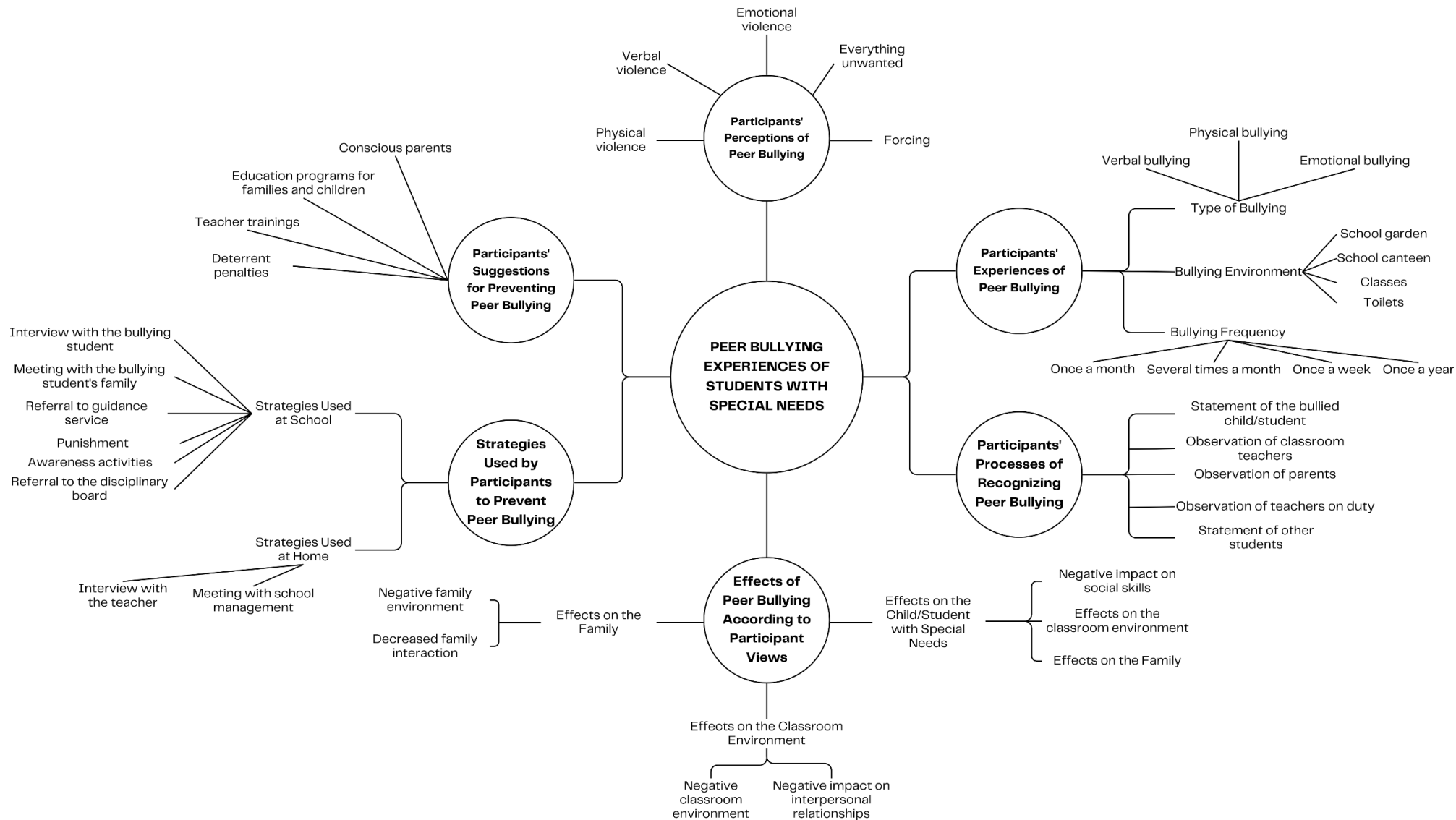


Figure 1. Themes, Subthemes and Codes Related to Peer Bullying Experiences of Individuals with Special Needs

4.1. Participants Perceptions of Peer Bullying

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis was the participants' perceptions of peer bullying. In the theme, the codes created from the information given by teachers and parents about how they evaluate the concept of peer bullying are listed as physical violence, verbal violence, anything unwanted, emotional violence, and coercion. The frequency levels of the participants' perceptions of peer bullying are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Participants' Perceptions of Peer Bullying

Codes	f
Physical violence	7
Verbal violence	4
Emotional violence	3
Everything unwanted	2
Forcing	2

When Table 4 is analyzed, it is seen that the participants perceived peer bullying as a concept mainly related to physical violence. Teacher 3 stated, "The child hits his/her weaker friend to look cooler and be dominant in front of his/her other friends, and then they start laughing. The level of this hitting behavior can sometimes be very harsh. I have had students with bloody noses because of this." While Parent 2 emphasized the physical violence dimension of peer bullying with the words "Hodja, violence is actually what we see in this regard. The child comes from school with a bruise on his arm. I say, "What happened, son?" and he says, "My friend hit him. Similarly, Parent 1 said, "Beatings happen the most, teacher. Our children may not always be able to defend themselves. As such, they may be subjected to violence from their other friends. Especially if the teacher does not see them, as nothing happens to the other side." Parent 1 emphasizes the physical violence dimension of peer bullying.

On the other hand, Parent 4 said, "The ones I come across are usually swearing. There are incidents of swearing during recess with their friends. They cannot do it in class, probably because they are teachers, but we experienced it very often last year." While Teacher 4 emphasized the verbal violence dimension of peer bullying with his opinion, Teacher 4 said, "The dimension of bad words and insults is actually at the forefront for me. We encounter it very often in children of this period."

Although relatively fewer in number, some participants also associated peer bullying with emotional violence, everything that is unwanted and coercion. "Children are ruthless sometimes. You think they will be more compassionate at a young age, but this is not always true. They do many things to make my child feel bad." With these words, Parent 5 emphasizes the emotional violence of peer bullying.

On the other hand, Teacher 1 expressed her opinion that peer bullying includes a broader group of behaviors by saying, "It is difficult to limit it as just this, teacher. We need to look wider. Everything that the other person does not want but is forced is included. Sometimes it is hitting, and sometimes bad words, but everything unwanted is included here." Parent 3 presented a different perspective and said, "They force their friends to do things my child does not want to do. However, they try to force them to do it. My child, who already has a diagnosis, is not good at defending himself; he has to do it." emphasized the dimension of peer bullying as forcing the other party.

4.2. Participants' Peer Bullying Experiences

In the theme related to the peer bullying experiences of the participants regarding their students or children with special needs, the participant views include the sub-themes of the type of peer bullying, the environment in which peer bullying occurs, and the frequency of peer bullying. Although the type of peer bullying sub-theme mainly includes verbal bullying, physical and emotional bullying were also among the experiences. In the context of the environment where peer bullying took place, participant experiences were concentrated in the schoolyard, followed by the school canteen, classrooms, and toilets in schools. The last sub-theme refers to the frequency of peer bullying incidents. While a significant portion of the participants stated that they experienced bullying once a month, a significant number emphasized that they experienced it several times a month. A small number of participants stated that they experienced peer bullying once a week or once a year. Table 5 shows the sub-themes and codes related to the participants' experiences of peer bullying.

Table 5. Participants' Experiences of Peer Bullying

Codes	f
<i>Type of Bullying</i>	
Verbal bullying	8
Physical bullying	5
Emotional bullying	4
<i>Bullying Environment</i>	
School garden	7
School canteen	5
Classes	4
Toilets	2
<i>Bullying Frequency</i>	
Once a month	7
Several times a month	4
Once a week	2
Once a year	1

The first sub-theme regarding the peer bullying experiences of the participants is related to the types of bullying experienced. In this sub-theme, it is seen that the bullying incidents experienced were primarily verbal bullying. Parent 4 stated, "My child was bullied verbally the most. You cannot do it; for example, they are playing a game, and we do not want you to come to recess." While Teacher 4 emphasized verbal bullying, Teacher 4 said, "It has increased significantly in recent years due to the parent profile. Children do not care much about what their friends think anymore. Because they grow up in a self-centered way, when this happens, they use words that will hurt the other child too much." Parent 2 stated, "My child has autism. He also has mental deficiency at a low level. Of course, his friends are also aware of this. We had a problem with our previous teacher; she could not organize the order well. Uh ... once a week, my child was beaten and came home. Of course, when it happened a few times, we went to the school, met with the administration and the teacher, and tried to take precautions." With her experience, she emphasized the experiences related to the physical dimension of peer bullying. Teacher 5, on the other hand, stated that the emotional dimension of

peer bullying can also be experienced frequently,"... not only that, of course. The behaviors of the children we call normal in quotes cause these special children to be excluded from their friends. This was one of the situations in which I had difficulty in the first years of my profession and did not know what to do."

In the context of the environment in which the participants' peer bullying experiences took place, it is seen that the incidents predominantly took place in the schoolyard, followed by the school canteen, classrooms, and toilets in order of intensity. Teacher 2 stated, "Inevitably, the process is more uncontrolled in the schoolyard during breaks. Therefore, incidents happen more in the garden. There are teachers on duty, of course, but fewer than the number of students. There are not enough teachers; when children are not raised well, unfortunately, it is not what it looks like from the outside." In his opinion, he emphasizes that peer bullying is mostly experienced in the schoolyard. Parent 1 said, "This kind of thing does not happen much in the classroom. Schools are very crowded; the gardens are like a pandemonium during recess. One hits the other while the teacher is looking at him/her. It is tough for them, too." Teacher 4 said, "There are inevitably many incidents in the canteen. Since all the children are running simultaneously, they bully each other to get to the front of the line, and so on." Teacher 4 emphasizes school canteens among the environments where peer bullying occurs. Parent 5, on the other hand, describes the peer bullying that her child experienced in the school restroom as follows: "When I was in the fifth grade, the kids in my child's class pinched him in the restroom. When my son came home in the evening, he said, "Mom, they took him to the restroom and hit me. Of course, he could not explain exactly what happened."

In the last sub-theme, the frequency of peer bullying, participant opinions vary as once a month, several times a month, once a week, and once a year. Parent 3 said, "My child goes to high school. In this period, puberty also comes into play. Unfortunately, we experience it frequently. There is always a problem once a month. His friends say something. They have done something." Teacher 3 said, "Unfortunately, this situation has become very, very frequent in recent years. I think I manage my class well; I act authoritatively. Despite this, there is at least one incident every month. I call the parents or I call them and talk to them about what they need to do, but there has been no decrease." Parent 4 said, "If one week goes smoothly, the second one does not, unfortunately. The child has these problems very often" and expressed that they experience peer bullying several times a month.

On the other hand, Teacher 2 said, "I am in a very rough school in a neighborhood that is considered a bit of a suburb. The family profile is not very good, so the profile of the children is not very good. As such, every week, there is an incident at our school. Our guidance counselor organizes training for parents from time to time, but parents do not even come, so how can it be fixed?" and revealed that their peer bullying experiences were relatively high. Unlike the other participants, Parent 5 stated, "It was very dull in the first years, but I changed the neighborhood I lived in for my child. In his current high school, the teachers and the class are good. The small number of students also affects this, but we either have a problem once a year or do not." She emphasized that her peer bullying experiences were at a very low level compared to other participants.

4.3. Participants' Processes of Recognizing Peer Bullying

In the process of recognizing the peer bullying experiences of the children/students of the participants in the study, the codes of the statement of the bullied child/student, the observation of the classroom teachers, the observation of the parents, the observation of the teachers on duty and the statement of other students were reached. The frequencies of the codes are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Participants' Processes of Recognizing Peer Bullying

Codes	f
Statement of the bullied child/student	5
Observation of classroom teachers	4
Observation of parents	4
Observation of teachers on duty	2
Statement of other students	1

The first step in recognizing the incidents of peer bullying was for the child/student who was frequently bullied to report the incident to the Teacher or parents. Teacher 1 said, "Teacher, you know, it is usually noticed upon a complaint that Ahmet did this to me. My class is 43 people, and sometimes it is impossible to realize Everything instantly. When that happens, the student himself comes and tells us what happened. And we intervene." With these statements, she states that the realization process occurs when the victimized student expresses what happened.

On the other hand, Teacher 5 said, "We always keep an eye on the class. When I do quiet work during the lesson, it is easy to see who is talking and doing what to his/her friend. Of course, I can notice it directly in this way." She argues that the process emerges through teacher observation. On the other hand, Parent 2 said, "I inevitably notice when there is the slightest difference in my child. When he comes home in the evening, he is calm and does not talk much when he has a problem. I try to get the words out of his mouth, such as What did you do today? What did you talk about with your teachers? What did you do with your friends?" and states that the parent notices the peer bullying process. Teacher 4 said, "When we are on duty, we inevitably have all the burden. When there is a problem during recess, we intervene directly. Afterward, we inform the class teacher that the student is applying peer pressure to his/her friend who is causing trouble before entering the classroom." She exemplified the realization process through the observations of the teachers on duty at the school. As for the discovery of the situation upon the complaint of other students, Teacher 3 said, "Sometimes the student who is being pressured remains passive. He/she has difficulty defending himself/herself or hesitates to come and say, "Teacher, this is what happened. The one next to him or another friend can come and tell us about the situation, saying, "My Teacher told me that this happened.

4.4. Effects of Peer Bullying

The theme of the effects of peer bullying was divided into three sub-themes: the effects on students with special needs, the classroom environment, and the family. Participants think that peer bullying hurts the social, emotional, and academic skills of children/students with special needs. On the other hand, research findings show that incidents of peer bullying cause a hostile classroom environment and damage the relationship between individuals in the classroom. In the context of the family environment, peer bullying causes a hostile family environment and decreases family interaction. Participant views on the subject are presented in Table 7 in frequency format.

Table 7. Effects of Peer Bullying According to Participant Views

Codes	f
<i>Effects on the Child/Student with Special Needs</i>	
Negative impact on social skills	5
Negative impact on emotional development	4
Negative impact on academic skills	2
<i>Effects on the Classroom Environment</i>	
Negative classroom environment	6
Negative impact on interpersonal relationships	4
<i>Effects on the Family</i>	
Negative family environment	6
Decreased family interaction	5

In the context of the effect of peer bullying on children/students with special needs, all of the participants stated that it caused adverse effects on various developmental areas. Teacher 2 stated, "When peers constantly bully a student, he/she inevitably becomes a more withdrawn child. We see that children who are normally very social and want to do something with their friends become quiet and calm children after a while if there is no intervention. They start to communicate with their friends at the minimum level." Emphasizing the effect of peer bullying on social skills, Parent 1 said, "I had many problems in the first years. My child was a child who could express emotions. In the first year, adaptation had many problems; his friends had terrible words. After a while, my child became unable to express his/her feelings even to me.", exemplifying the negative impact of peer bullying on emotional development. Teacher 4 said, "We inevitably have difficulty adapting special children to lessons. As these incidents occur, children may exhibit a low performance in lessons. Therefore, it is necessary to intervene on time. Otherwise, all that effort can be wasted, and there is such a dimension to it.", expressing that peer bullying can lead to a decline in academic skills.

In the context of another sub-theme, the effect of peer bullying on the classroom environment, the participants stated that in addition to creating a hostile classroom environment, it also harms the interpersonal relations of the students in the classroom. Teacher 1 said, "For example, he hit his friend, and sometimes we raise our voices to control the class. Other students get nervous in this situation. Sometimes, believe me, there is nothing left to do." Teacher 5 exemplifies the negative impact on the classroom environment with her words, "Someone bullies a friend, I change his/her place or ask him/her to apologize, but at a young age, other children think that the Teacher will be angry with me too." Parent 3, on the other hand, approached the issue from a different perspective and emphasized the adverse effects of peer bullying on interpersonal relationships by saying, "When a friend says a bad word, the child starts spending less time with other favorite friends."

In the context of the effects of peer bullying on the family, the participants expressed opinions on the dimensions of causing a hostile family environment and reducing family interaction. Parent 1: "If one of us gets hurt, it affects us all. The child comes home, and his friends beat him up. He does not talk; he retreats to his corner; how can we feel good in this situation? We all lose our taste inevitably. It seems small, but unfortunately, it has a terrible effect on our home." Parent 5 exemplifies the negative family environment with the words, "At that time, Mert becomes more timid. Usually, he and his sister get along very well, but when there is a problem, he starts to spend

time on his own and isolates himself. "She emphasized the negative reflection of peer bullying on sibling relationships.

4.5. Peer Bullying Prevention Strategies

The strategies used by the participants to prevent peer bullying differ according to the role of the participant group. The sub-theme of the strategies used at school, which emerged from the data obtained from the teachers, varies as meeting with the bullying student and his/her parents, referral to the guidance service, punishment, awareness activities, and referral to the disciplinary board. On the other hand, the strategies used by parents in this context were determined by meeting with teachers and school administrators. The frequency levels of the participants' views are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Strategies Used by Participants to Prevent Peer Bullying

Codes	f
<i>Strategies Used at School</i>	
Interview with the bullying student	5
Meeting with the bullying student's family	4
Referral to guidance service	2
Punishment	2
Awareness activities	1
Referral to the disciplinary board	1
<i>Strategies Used at Home</i>	
Interview with the teacher	5
Meeting with school management	2

In interviewing the bullying student, the most preferred strategy at school, Teacher 3 said, "Of course, we stop the incident during the lesson. However, afterward, I meet with the students individually during the break. I mean, I try to find out if there is something I did not see. I talk about the negative parts and try not to do it again, frankly." Similarly, Teacher 2 said, "I try to solve it by meeting individually, Teacher. I teach the correct behavior by saying that we do not treat our friend like this, emphasizing that she prefers to meet individually with the bullying student. Teacher 5, however, preferred a different way and said, "I call the family directly. After all, Everything starts in the family. The family will know and treat the child accordingly. It is not a situation that can be solved only in the classroom. The family needs to take responsibility." She stated that she preferred to meet with the parents of bullying students.

On the other hand, Teacher 1 said, "I sometimes give small punishments in a non-violent way to make them understand how their friends feel. We also refer them to our guidance counselor, who helps them see Someone different." Teacher 1 stated that she appropriately punishes the student or refers the student to the guidance service. Teacher 4, in addition to similar views to those of the other teachers, stated, "... but sometimes these do not work. There can be very problematic children; in this case, I asked for a referral to the disciplinary board once. The family takes the situation more seriously when that happens." She stated that the school disciplinary board can also resolve the process.

The strategies used by parents in combating peer bullying were limited to meeting with teachers and school administrators due to their roles. Parent 4 stated, "There is not much you can do as a

family. You cannot go and talk to the other child's family or do the same to the child. We call the Teacher, explain the situation, and ask him to do something. Thank God our Teacher is good; I know he always does his best in this regard. "Parent 2 stated that he resorted to meeting with the Teacher, while Parent 2 said, "... I went to the school principal and told him that I would file a complaint after the incident. The principal talked to the other parent and said that they apologized. I did not file a complaint because I thought it would not happen again. "He stated that he preferred to manage the process through the school administration.

4.6. Suggestions for Preventing Peer Bullying

Participant suggestions for preventing peer bullying are listed as creating conscious parent profiles, increasing awareness activities for families and children, combating peer bullying more effectively through teacher training, and reducing bullying incidents with deterrent punishments. The frequencies of the participants' views on preventing peer bullying are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Participants' Suggestions for Preventing Peer Bullying

Codes	f
Conscious parents	7
Education programs for families and children	5
Teacher trainings	4
Deterrent penalties	4

Many participants stated that creating conscious parent profiles is the most effective way to prevent peer bullying. Parent 3: "I have a dream of a world where people who are qualified to be parents have children, not everyone who wants to have children. If decent people have children, children will grow up properly. Everything can be solved in this way. "Teacher 2 said, "Everything ends in the family, Teacher. The child is what the family is. If sane and knowledgeable families are formed, children will grow up properly. Then we will not have to talk about these things ". Teacher 5 said, "The Ministry of National Education has guidance units. These units need to explain in detail to all families what peer bullying is and what happens if your child practices this or if this is applied to your child." pointed out the importance of family education programs in preventing peer bullying. Parent 1 said, "Not all teachers know what to do. I mean, I can tell the child not to do that. However, isn't there another way? Can't teachers do something more effective? "emphasized the importance of teacher training in the process.

On the other hand, Teacher 4 said, "Schools avoid implementing the discipline regulation. Usually, there are penalties for every offense in the regulation. There are penalties up to suspension from school. However, sometimes teachers and sometimes school administrators say, "Let us not spoil it. It should not be solved in this way. "He stated that deterrent punishments can be an effective way to prevent peer bullying incidents.

5. Discussion

In this section, the findings obtained from the participant's views on the peer bullying experiences of individuals with special needs in the school environment are discussed and evaluated with the support of the existing literature on the subject.

Looking at the first finding of the study, it was seen that teachers and parents expressed the participants' perceptions of peer bullying with elements such as physical violence, verbal violence, anything unwanted, emotional violence, and coercion. This result reveals that the participants' perceptions of peer bullying vary. While some of the participants associate bullying more with

physical and verbal violence, others emphasize emotional and psychological types of bullying more. This shows that the perception of peer bullying is shaped by individuals' professional experiences and personal perspectives (Pellegrini & Long, 2002).

According to the findings obtained from the participants in the study, the participants stated that most common type of peer bullying was verbal bullying and that they also experienced physical and emotional bullying. The findings of this study regarding the types of peer bullying are similar to the findings of many other studies. It is stated that verbal bullying is the most common type of peer bullying (Bear et al., 2015; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Zeedyk et al., 2014). According to the studies conducted by Çinkır and Karaman-Kepenekçi (2003) and Kapçı (2004), it was determined that students who were exposed to peer bullying in Turkey were most frequently subjected to physical and verbal bullying and most rarely to emotional and sexual bullying. Sarı and Pürsün (2019) concluded that the majority of teachers frequently observed emotional and verbal bullying types among students, while physical bullying occurred less frequently. Kabasakal et al. (2008), in their study on peer bullying applied to mainstreaming students, concluded that children with special needs were mainly exposed to physical bullying by their peers with typical development, followed by verbal bullying. Eroğlu (2018) concluded that students with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities were mainly exposed to verbal and emotional bullying. Kloosterman et al. (2013) found that adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were exposed to more social and physical bullying than adolescents with typical development. Alımcı (2018) concluded that students were exposed to verbal bullying, such as teasing; Bacık (2022), Bourke and Burgman (2010) and Aydemir (2024) concluded that students were exposed to verbal bullying such as swearing from their peers; Bourke and Burgman (2010), Bacık (2022), Mutlu (2022), and Özdemir (2020) concluded that students experienced physical bullying. These findings show that different types of peer bullying are common among students, and both verbal and physical bullying are frequently experienced. These results suggest that a more comprehensive and holistic intervention strategy for peer bullying should be implemented in schools.

Teachers and parents who participated in the study stated that peer bullying occurs most frequently in the schoolyard, followed by the school canteen, classrooms, and restrooms, respectively. Considering the results regarding the environments where students with special needs are exposed to peer bullying, it can be stated that bullying occurs in similar environments to other studies. Andreou et al. (2015), Bacık (2022), Çinkır and Karaman- Kepenekci (2003), Langevin et al. (1998), Sarı and Pürsün (2019), Ünal (2017) and Yılmaz and Malkoç (2020) also concluded that peer bullying occurs mainly in the schoolyard, classroom, canteen and restrooms. These findings reveal that peer bullying is concentrated in some regions of the school environment and occurs more frequently in places where there is less supervision. This shows that students may exhibit more bullying behaviors when they are away from supervision. Therefore, it may be recommended that supervision be increased in areas such as school gardens, canteens, and restrooms and that teachers and school staff be made more aware of bullying. In addition, Yöndem and Totan (2007) emphasize that more research on bullying is necessary due to the increase in violence and aggression incidents.

Regarding the frequency of peer bullying incidents, a significant portion of the participants stated that they experienced bullying once a month. In contrast, many stated that they experienced it several times a month. In a study conducted by Fekkes et al. (2005), the reasons and frequency of peer bullying of students with special needs were examined, and it was concluded that the majority of them experienced bullying at least once a week. In a study conducted by Yılmaz and Malkoç (2020) on teachers' opinions on peer bullying applied to students with intellectual disabilities attending inclusive classes, teachers concluded that physical bullying is applied every lesson/recess, every day, and 2-3 times a week; verbal bullying is applied 2-3 times a week, 1 time a week and very rarely; social bullying is applied every day and 2-3 times a week. These findings indicate that the frequency of peer

bullying is high. Teachers should make more careful observations and develop intervention strategies to prevent students from encountering such incidents more frequently.

Participant teachers and parents, in their findings regarding the processes of recognizing their children's/students' experiences of peer bullying, expressed factors such as the statement of the bullied child/student, observation of classroom teachers, observation of parents, observation of teachers on duty, and statements of other students. In Cincioğlu and Ergin's (2023) study on the evaluation of peer bullying towards mainstreaming students according to parents' views, it was found that most parents noticed peer bullying when their children told them. Similar to the results of the research, Andreou et al. (2015), Ünal (2017) and Yılmaz and Malkoç (2020) stated that most of the students shared the bullying with their teachers. These findings emphasize the importance of raising awareness about bullying and conducting compelling classroom observations. In addition, teachers and parents need to strengthen communication channels so that they can recognize children's bullying experiences earlier.

Regarding the findings on the effects of peer bullying, teachers and parents stated that they think that peer bullying has adverse effects on the social, emotional, and academic skills of children/students with special needs. In addition, research findings show that incidents of peer bullying lead to a hostile classroom environment and damage the relationship between individuals in the classroom. Social exclusion and peer bullying negatively affect the student's interactions in the classroom and participation in group work, leading to a decrease in academic achievement (Gökler, 2009). In the context of the family environment, peer bullying leads to a hostile family environment and a decrease in family interaction. These findings show that peer bullying has widespread and profound effects not only on the individual but also on classroom and family dynamics. Therefore, interventions to prevent peer bullying should not be limited to individual support but should be addressed holistically to strengthen school climate and family-school cooperation.

Among the strategies used by the participants to prevent peer bullying, according to the findings obtained from the teachers, they stated that they interviewed the bullying students and their parents, referred them to the guidance service, punished them, conducted awareness activities, and referred them to the disciplinary board. In parallel with this research finding, Bourke and Burgman (2010) reported that teachers of students with disabilities who were exposed to bullying emphasized that bullying students should be warned or disciplined to prevent peer bullying. In addition, Ünal (2017) and Yılmaz and Malkoç (2020) stated that teachers warned students who bullied students with disabilities in order to prevent peer bullying. These findings show that teachers develop various strategies against peer bullying and are mostly discipline-oriented to correct students' behaviors. However, in addition to these approaches, it is thought that longer-term programs that provide emotional and psychological support, such as getting to the root of bullying and developing empathy, are also important. When the strategies used by parents to prevent peer bullying were examined, it was seen that parents preferred methods such as meeting with teachers and school administration. Mishna et al. (2006) emphasize that parents should seek solutions by contacting teachers and school administrators when their children are bullied. However, the effectiveness of these strategies can be increased by raising parental awareness of bullying and a more comprehensive supportive approach to be implemented by the school.

When the participants' suggestions for preventing peer bullying were examined, it was stated that measures such as conscious parents, educational programs for families and children, teacher training, and deterrent punishments should be taken by the participants. Aydemir (2024) states that to create a more positive atmosphere during the school period and increase the quality of life, very comprehensive programs are needed to prevent children with special needs from being exposed to peer bullying. Similar to the research result, Bacık (2022) states that in order to prevent bullying faced by students with special needs in schools, peer bullying awareness training should be given to

students, teachers, and parents. Intervention training should be provided to teachers about combating bullying, and in-service training programs should be prepared and implemented. In contrast to these results, Tüzün-Bayram (2022) stated that families of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) receiving mainstreaming education would positively evaluate the cooperation of teachers and school administration in intervention and prevention in order to prevent peer bullying experienced by their children at school. In addition, Ünal (2017) emphasized that teachers should meet with parents and inform them about bullying. Hebron et al. (2015) found that school communication with parents is important in mitigating the risk of bullying. While these findings reveal the need for a multifaceted and collaborative approach to prevent peer bullying, they also suggest that long-term strategies and sustainable policies should be developed to increase the effectiveness of these interventions.

6. Conclusion, Suggestions and Implications

This study revealed that individuals with special needs are mostly exposed to verbal and physical bullying at school and that these incidents usually occur in areas where there is little supervision. In addition, peer bullying negatively affects students' social, emotional, and academic development. It was concluded that teachers and parents should try to prevent bullying through awareness activities, disciplinary practices, and guidance services. Based on the results of this research, it can be recommended that training programs for students, teachers, and parents be developed, as well as special intervention training for teachers, to prevent peer bullying in the school environment.

The data obtained in this study are limited to the views of the participants in the study. It is assumed that the participants responded sincerely to the quantitative data collection tools in the research.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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