

The Impact of Inclusion on Bullying Among Children with Autism

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Abstract

The inclusion of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream schools has been a subject of increasing interest. However, limited research has focused on the impact of such inclusion on bullying behaviors in children with autism. The present study explores the effects of inclusion on bullying among a sample of children with autism, comparing integrated children with autism, non-integrated children with autism, and neurotypical children. A total of 93 children aged 5-12 years from Hail City, Saudi Arabia, participated in the study. The **Bullying Behaviour and Experience Scale (BBES)** was used to measure bullying victimization and bullying behaviors. The results indicated that children with autism in inclusive settings experienced higher levels of bullying and were more likely to engage in bullying behaviors compared to both their non-integrated peers and neurotypical children. These findings highlight the potential risks associated with the inclusion of children with autism in regular schools and underscore the need for targeted interventions to reduce bullying in inclusive education settings.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Bullying, Inclusion, Special Education, Victimization

1. Introduction

The inclusion of children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in regular or inclusive schools is often regarded as a positive educational approach. However, it can also present significant challenges. Exposing students with autism to inclusive school settings without proper preparation not only fails to enhance their social skills and the development of peer relationships but can also be detrimental, increasing their vulnerability to peer victimization (Park et al., 2020). Therefore, students with disabilities cannot be integrated into general education settings without careful planning. Specialized support and services are essential to prevent bullying and victimization, as well as to equip children with autism to appropriately respond to bullying incidents if they occur (Chen & Schwartz, 2012).

Bullying can take several forms, including physical, verbal, or a combination of both. Recently, cyberbullying has emerged as a significant concern, utilizing technology such as mobile phones and the internet. Bullying and victimization are associated with a range of negative social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, including stress, depression, low self-esteem, as well as poor academic performance and school

absenteeism. These effects can persist long after the bullying has occurred (Fink et al., 2015; Lai et al., 2022).

Researchers have sought to explain the high rates of bullying among children with autism in an effort to understand how and why they become frequent targets. One suggested explanation is that children with ASD are often marginalized within peer groups, which makes them particularly susceptible to bullying. Additionally, these children often face difficulties in understanding and engaging in social interactions, hindering their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships with their peers (Schroeder et al., 2014).

Children with autism, whether integrated or non-integrated, may be perceived as easy targets by bullies due to their perceived inability to protect themselves or because their behavioral challenges make them more vulnerable to victimization. On the other hand, children with autism may also be labeled as bullies themselves, due to difficulties with emotional regulation or inappropriate coping strategies. Students with autism spectrum disorder may be especially prone to engaging in bullying behaviors due to deficits in social communication and challenges with empathy (Park et al., 2020).

Many studies have examined the relationship between bullying and inclusion in children with special needs, including those with autism. These studies have consistently shown that children with autism are more likely to be bullied than their neurotypical peers. This increased vulnerability is often linked to the diagnostic characteristics of autism, which can adversely affect their psychological and social well-being, contributing to conditions like anxiety and depression (Çulhaoğlu & Akmanoğlu, 2022). Given these findings, the current study aims to investigate the impact of inclusion on bullying among children with autism by examining how bullying experiences differ between children with autism in integrated and non-integrated settings.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have explored bullying among children with developmental disorders, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In a study by Zablotzky et al. (2014) that aimed to evaluate the risk factors associated with bullying in children with autism, a sample of 1,221 parents of children diagnosed with autism was surveyed using a questionnaire designed to assess bullying experiences. The results revealed that children exhibiting higher levels of autism-related traits were more likely to be victims of bullying, and that children in integrated classrooms were at a greater risk of being bullied compared to their peers in special education settings.

A study by Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) sought to understand the comprehension, experiences, and reactions to bullying among boys with autism spectrum disorder. The sample consisted of 48 children with autism and their mothers. An online survey was used to assess various aspects of bullying experiences. The results showed small discrepancies between mothers' and children's reports of bullying, with children

demonstrating an understanding of bullying behaviors, thus confirming the reliability of their responses. The sources of bullying primarily included peers, and bullying typically occurred in playground settings. Most of these boys exhibited ineffective coping strategies and reported significant negative physical and emotional reactions. Additionally, the majority kept their experiences to themselves until they returned home, fearing that reporting the bullying to adults would exacerbate the situation. Over half of the boys preferred to skip school as a strategy to avoid further bullying.

In a study by Hebron et al. (2015), the susceptibility of children with autism to bullying in mainstream schools in England was examined. The sample included five students aged 5-13 years (three boys and two girls). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the children, their parents, and teachers to explore their bullying experiences within the school context. The results indicated that none of the children were subjected to bullying to a dangerous degree, but they acknowledged the risk of bullying due to their vulnerabilities, particularly as they grew older. Behavioral problems were found to increase the likelihood of bullying and social isolation. The study concluded that schools play a critical protective role in reducing bullying through a positive environment and a zero-tolerance approach to bullying.

Hebron et al. (2017) conducted a study to assess the vulnerability to bullying among children with autism, taking into account a range of risk factors, not just the nature of the disorder itself. The study included 722 teachers and 112 parents of children with autism across 297 schools in England. A teacher questionnaire (WOST) with three subscales—bullying, behavioral difficulties, and positive relationships—was used alongside a parent questionnaire (WOSP) containing similar subscales, as well as additional measures for parental support and trust. The results revealed that the more risk factors children faced, such as behavioral challenges and poor peer relationships, the more likely they were to experience bullying.

Paul et al. (2018) investigated peer bullying in children and young people with autism. The sample consisted of 39 children and young people with autism and 53 neurotypical peers. A bullying scale and a questionnaire measuring demographic, social, and clinical symptoms (such as anxiety and PTSD) were employed. The study found that 72% of children with autism had been bullied during the previous year, and 94.9% had been bullied at some point in their lives. The rate of peer aggression was significantly higher in the autism group compared to the neurotypical group, with the bullying correlating with clinical factors such as social skills deficits and PTSD severity. Additionally, 80% of children with autism exhibited anxiety symptoms, as reported by their parents.

Lebrun-Harris et al. (2019) estimated the prevalence of bullying among children and adolescents aged 6-17 years in the United States using nationally representative data. The sample was divided by age groups (6-11 years, 12-17 years). The results revealed that 22.7% of children and adolescents had been bullied, with slightly higher victimization rates in the younger age group (24.1% in children aged 6-11 vs. 21.1% in

adolescents aged 12-17; $p = 0.011$). The bullying rate was 7.2% among children and 5.6% among adolescents, although the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.086$). The study also found that several health conditions and service factors, such as special healthcare needs, absorption issues, behavioral problems, other language disorders, and autism, were associated with bullying victimization or perpetration.

Eroglu and Kilic (2020) studied peer bullying among children with autism in formal education settings in Turkey. The sample consisted of 45 children with autism and 48 children with mild intellectual disabilities, all of whom were integrated into regular schools in Ankara. The results showed that both groups—children with autism and children with intellectual disabilities—were exposed to verbal and emotional bullying, with no significant differences between the two groups. Both groups were particularly vulnerable to bullying from male peers, especially in the absence of a teacher in the classroom. A positive correlation was found between bullying and the severity of autism.

Zhang and Chen (2021) examined bullying victimization among children with autism from the perspective of their parents. The study included 16 parents of children aged 7-15 years in China. The results indicated that most parents reported their children with autism experienced severe bullying in school. Bullying was a significant concern for children with autism, and many parents were also victims of bullying. The results also showed that parents often dealt with their children's bullying experiences independently, adopting a pessimistic view of their children's likelihood of being bullied.

Çulhaoğlu and Akmanoğlu (2022) conducted a comprehensive review of quantitative studies on bullying among children with autism, considering demographic characteristics, methodological procedures, and outcome-related variables. They reviewed 44 studies published between 2011 and 2021 from global databases such as Eric, ProQuest, Scopus, ScienceDirect, EbscoHOST, and Google Scholar. Their findings confirmed that children with autism are more likely to be bullied than their neurotypical peers, with this bullying often linked to the diagnostic characteristics of the disorder, affecting psychological and social outcomes such as anxiety and depression.

Saigh and Bagadood (2022) examined bullying patterns and levels of parental support for children with autism. The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods, employing a questionnaire to assess bullying patterns, frequency, and parental support. The results showed the prevalence of all types of bullying among children with autism, as well as widespread parental involvement in supporting children through peers and teachers to prevent bullying.

From the studies above, it is clear that bullying affects not only neurotypical children but also children with autism. Despite the growing interest in studying bullying and victimization behaviors among children with autism in foreign contexts, the Arab world, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, lacks such studies. Moreover, both foreign and Arab studies have not yet specifically explored the impact of inclusion in

regular schools on the rates of bullying and victimization among children with ASD. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies have provided evidence that children in inclusive classrooms are at greater risk of bullying compared to children in special education settings (Zablotsky et al., 2014). Therefore, there remains a critical need to understand bullying among children with autism, the associated risk factors related to inclusion, and the effectiveness of necessary interventions.

Problem Statement:

Research has shown that children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are more vulnerable to bullying behaviors and victimization compared to children with other disabilities or neurotypical children (Eroglu & Kilic, 2020; Hsiao et al., 2022; Matthias et al., 2021). While there are variations in prevalence estimates across studies, these rates are always concerningly high (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015). Based on the above, the current study aims to investigate the impact of inclusion on bullying and victimization behaviors among children with autism. Previous studies clearly indicate that children with autism are the most at risk for bullying.

Research Questions:

This study seeks to answer the following main research question: "Does the inclusion of children with autism in regular schools affect their exposure to or participation in bullying?"

Sub-questions include:

1. Do children with autism in integrated and non-integrated settings, as well as neurotypical children, differ in terms of bullying victimization?
2. Do children with autism in integrated and non-integrated settings, as well as neurotypical children, differ in their level of bullying behavior?

Study Hypotheses:

1. Are there statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level between children with autism in integrated and non-integrated settings, and neurotypical children, in terms of victimization?
2. Are there statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level between children with autism in integrated and non-integrated settings, and neurotypical children, in terms of bullying behavior?

Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in two aspects:

- **Theoretical:** This is the first study in the Arab world, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, that compares bullying among children with autism in integrated and non-integrated settings, as well as neurotypical children, to

understand whether children with autism in integrated settings are more vulnerable to bullying.

- **Practical:** The practical significance lies in reducing the harm of bullying and improving interventions within schools to limit bullying, while also providing access to learning and social activities.

Key Concepts:

- **Bullying:** Any aggressive behavior (physical, verbal, electronic, direct, or indirect) that occurs repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, where the victim struggles to defend themselves (Morton et al., 2019).

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):** A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by a set of social impairments, difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, and excessive behaviors that are restricted, repetitive, and stereotypical (Flowers et al., 2020).

Operational Definition:

The study adopts the following operational definition of autism: a persistent deficit in communication and social interaction across multiple contexts (e.g., deficits in emotional reciprocity, non-verbal communication used in social interactions, and developing and maintaining relationships). It also includes restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (e.g., repetitive movements, use of objects, speech, insistence on sameness, inflexible routines, or highly focused, abnormal interests). Symptoms typically appear early in development, as outlined in the DSM-5.

Research Methodology

Research Design:

This study adopted a correlational descriptive approach, specifically a comparative descriptive method, to compare three groups: neurotypical children, children with autism in integrated settings, and children with autism in non-integrated settings. The study aimed to examine experiences of bullying exposure and engagement in bullying behaviors.

Sample:

The study sample consisted of 93 children from Hail City, aged between 5 and 12 years. The sample was divided as follows: 31 children in each of the three groups (neurotypical children, children with autism in integrated settings, and children with autism in non-integrated settings). The sample was selected purposively.

Research Tools:

The research utilized the following tools:

• **Bullying Behaviour and Experience Scale (BBES)**, developed by Fink et al. (2015). The scale was designed to measure bullying/victimization behavior in children with developmental disabilities. It includes 13 items, divided into 8 questions measuring victimization (exposure to bullying), and 5 questions measuring bullying behavior. Responses are rated as: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, or Always.

The researcher translated the scale into Arabic through a bilingual researcher (Arabic and English), followed by a re-translation into English by another specialist to ensure the accuracy of the translation. The following points were considered during translation: the use of monosyllabic words, simple and non-complicated sentences that do not allow for multiple meanings, and words and phrases that are familiar and understandable to children. The validity and reliability of the scale were tested using multiple methods on a pilot sample.

Validity and Reliability Checks:

The validity of the scale was verified through **discriminant validity**: The scale was applied to two groups of children (18 with autism, 20 neurotypical children). The differences between the two groups were calculated by performing a t-test to compare the means between them. As shown in **Table 1**, there were statistically significant differences between the two groups (children with autism and neurotypical children).

Table 1: Results of the t-test for Differences in Means Between the Two Groups (Autistic vs. Neurotypical Children)

Dimensions	Neurotypical Children (N = 20)		Children with Autism (N = 18)		t	Sig.
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation		
Exposure to Bullying	2.65	3.703	10.56	6.205	4.827	0.001
Bullying Behavior	0.90	2.292	3.33	3.068	2.746	0.008

These results indicate significant differences between the two groups (children with autism and neurotypical children) in both exposure to bullying and engagement in bullying behaviors, with children with autism showing higher levels of both.

Reliability Check:

The reliability of the scale was verified using **Cronbach's Alpha** for two groups: children with autism and neurotypical children. The results showed high reliability coefficients of 0.910 for the autism sample and 0.941 for the neurotypical children, indicating that the scale has a high degree of reliability and can be considered dependable.

Data Collection Procedure:

Data were collected after obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the Health Cluster in Hail. The scale was applied to a sample of children with autism in integrated and non-integrated settings, as well as neurotypical children, for comparison. The data collection process was conducted on an individual basis.

Data Analysis:

Data were analyzed quantitatively using means and standard deviations, along with **One-Way ANOVA** to identify differences between the groups in terms of bullying.

Results:

This study compared bullying among children with autism in integrated and non-integrated settings, as well as neurotypical children. The results showed significant differences in bullying victimization and perpetration between the three groups, with children with autism in integrated settings being the most affected. It was also found that the level of exposure to bullying was higher among the three groups compared. The nature and direction of these differences will become clearer through multiple analyses that will be conducted to verify the actual significance of the differences.

Table 2: Results of Means and Standard Deviations for the Three Groups in the Study Variables

Variables	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation
Victimization / Exposure to Bullying	Neurotypical Children	2.42	3.413
	Non-Integrated Autism	8.71	5.054
	Integrated Autism	11.81	7.291
Bullying	Neurotypical Children	0.81	1.957
	Non-Integrated Autism	2.23	2.418
	Integrated Autism	3.45	3.880

Table 3: Results of One-Way ANOVA Test for Differences Between the Three Groups in Bullying and Victimization

Variables		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Bullying	Between Groups	108.645	2	54.323	6.590	0.002
	Within Groups	741.935	90	8.244		
	Total	850.581	92			
Victimization	Between Groups	1418.516	2	709.258	23.548	0.000
	Within Groups	2710.774	90	30.120		
	Total	4129.290	92			

The results indicate statistically significant differences between the three groups in terms of both bullying and victimization. Referring back to the means in Table 2, it is clear that children with autism in integrated settings are more exposed to bullying and victimization compared to both non-integrated children with autism and neurotypical children.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that children with autism, whether in integrated or non-integrated settings, experience higher levels of bullying victimization and engage in more bullying behaviors than their neurotypical peers. Specifically, children with autism in integrated settings were found to be at a greater risk of both victimization and perpetrating bullying behaviors compared to children with autism in non-integrated settings and neurotypical children.

These findings align with previous research indicating that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are more vulnerable to repeated bullying and victimization than neurotypical children (Eroglu & Kilic, 2020; Hsiao et al., 2022; Matthias et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2018). Hebron and Humphrey (2014) found that children with ASD are particularly susceptible to bullying compared to children with other special educational needs and those without educational needs. Similarly, other studies have reported a significantly higher risk of victimization for children with autism compared to neurotypical children and those with other disabilities (Park et al., 2020). Additionally, Çulhaoğlu and Akmanoğlu (2022) conducted a comprehensive analysis of quantitative studies on bullying among children with autism. Their findings confirmed

that children with autism are more likely to be bullied than their peers, with this vulnerability strongly linked to the diagnostic characteristics of autism.

Regarding the higher levels of bullying and victimization observed in children with autism in integrated classrooms, these results are consistent with those of Zablotzky et al. (2014), who found that children in inclusive classrooms are at greater risk of being bullied compared to children in special education settings. Furthermore, Eroglu and Kilic (2020) studied children with autism and intellectual disabilities integrated into regular schools in Ankara and found both groups were subjected to verbal and emotional bullying. Similarly, Ismail (2022) identified several risk factors affecting the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education schools, with verbal bullying being the most common form of bullying in integrated settings.

However, the results of this study contrast with those of Hebron et al. (2015), who found no significant risk of bullying for children with autism in regular schools. This discrepancy may be explained by differences in the inclusive school environments and how bullying incidents are addressed. It is possible that the level of bullying varies depending on the school's policies, staff training, and the overall school climate.

One possible explanation for the increased vulnerability of children with autism to bullying is their lower social skills, along with increased difficulties in processing external stimuli (Toseeb et al., 2018). Children with autism often struggle to understand and engage in social interactions, making it harder for them to develop and maintain positive relationships with their peers (Schroeder et al., 2014). These social communication deficits may lead to children with autism being perceived as easy targets by peers. Moreover, the difficulties in social interactions can make children with autism more likely to engage in bullying behaviors as a maladaptive coping mechanism to deal with aggression and repeated victimization (Rose et al., 2011). These challenges may be amplified in inclusive school settings, where children with autism may face additional pressures. This is supported by the fact that deficits in social interaction, communication, and externalizing behaviors in children with autism, when combined with an inclusive educational environment, often lead to higher rates of victimization.

Conclusion

Given the significant concerns expressed by many parents and caregivers of children with developmental disorders, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), regarding bullying, it is not uncommon for parents to report that their children are either victims of bullying or at risk of becoming targets. This study sought to understand the extent to which children with autism are involved in bullying, either as perpetrators or victims, and emphasized the importance of developing strategies to prevent or mitigate these behaviors.

The results of this study indicate that children with autism in integrated school settings are more likely to experience bullying and engage in bullying behaviors compared to their peers in non-integrated settings and neurotypical children. These

findings have important implications for intervention strategies aimed at addressing bullying among students with autism, particularly younger children and those in inclusive educational environments, who face greater social difficulties and exhibit higher levels of internal or external symptoms.

Developing effective strategies to support and improve the social interaction skills of children with autism is critical. Such interventions can help children build and maintain meaningful friendships, avoid harm, and reduce bullying. Moreover, providing appropriate educational and psychological support services within schools is crucial for ensuring the well-being and academic success of children with autism in inclusive settings.

Despite the growing body of research on bullying among children with developmental disabilities, including autism, there is still a significant gap in studies that examine bullying experiences among children with autism in Arab countries. This study underscores the need for further research in this area. The current study suggests investigating the impact of inclusion on bullying experiences, taking into account both protective and risk factors related to inclusion in regular schools. Future research should focus on examining victimization and bullying experiences among children with developmental disabilities in general, and children with autism specifically, both before and after inclusion, to assess the long-term impact of inclusion on bullying experiences.

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