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Bullying of Children with Special Educational Needs

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Abstract: Bullying remains a persistent and complex challenge in contemporary schools in Moldova and worldwide. Adolescents with special educational needs (SEN) may be particularly vulnerable to victimization because of cognitive, behavioral, or social differences. This study examines the prevalence and forms of bullying and victimization among adolescents with SEN, focusing on direct and indirect forms of aggression. The study analyzes empirical data on bullying and victimization among adolescents with SEN, examining the prevalence and intensity of direct and indirect forms of aggressive behavior and social exclusion. Active indirect bullying was not the predominant form of destructive interaction. However, moderate and, in some cases, pronounced tendencies toward indirect bullying were identified among certain participants. Regarding victimization, 50% of participants demonstrated weak and 50% moderate levels of direct victimization, suggesting that overt aggression occurred intermittently rather than systematically. Most participants reported rare experiences of social exclusion and indirect aggression. Nevertheless, gossip, deliberate ignoring, and social boycotts were periodically observed. Notably, 10% reported a high level of indirect victimization, indicating sustained exposure to covert aggression. The findings highlight the need for comprehensive and systematic prevention and intervention strategies involving schools, families, communities, and adolescents to promote inclusive peer relationships and protect the emotional well-being and psychological development of students with SEN.

Keywords: adolescents; aggressive behaviour; prevention efforts; victimization.

JEL Classification: JEL Classification: I21 – Analysis of Education; I24 – Education and Inequality

1. Introduction

The term *bullying* comes from the English *bully* and refers to a person who intimidates, harasses, or deliberately harms another person. In the school context, bullying is generally understood as repeated aggressive behavior directed toward someone who has difficulty defending themselves. It is therefore different from an occasional disagreement or conflict between peers. Bullying involves a certain imbalance of power and may take different forms, including physical or verbal aggression, social

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exclusion, spreading rumors, deliberate ignoring, and other behaviors that aim to hurt or isolate another person.

Although bullying is not a new phenomenon, it has received significantly increasing attention from psychologists, educators, and researchers over the past several decades. This growing interest is largely related to a better understanding of the consequences bullying can have on children and adolescents. Repeated exposure to aggression or exclusion can affect a young person's self-esteem, emotional well-being, relationships with peers, sense of belonging, and adjustment to school. For some adolescents, these experiences may extend beyond individual incidents and become a continuous source of stress and insecurity.

The Republic of Moldova is not an exception to this broader problem. Bullying has become an increasingly visible concern in Moldovan schools, drawing attention to the quality of relationships among students and to the need for safer and more inclusive educational environments. The issue is particularly important during adolescence, when acceptance by peers, friendship, and a sense of belonging become particularly meaningful. Understanding how bullying occurs and how adolescents experience victimization is therefore an important step toward creating school environments in which every student feels respected, accepted, and protected.

2. Related Work

Considering bullying as a complex process, D. Olweus, one of the leading experts in this field, identifies three key characteristics that distinguish it from isolated acts of aggression: a conscious intention to inflict harm, an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, and the systematic repetition of hostile actions. Olweus emphasizes that bullying is not a static phenomenon limited to a single form or episode. Typically, aggressors use a whole range of different methods aimed at establishing control over weaker children (ABIS, 2019, p. 23).

Important research in this area has been conducted by A. Pikas and P. Heinemann, as well as by British Scholars V. Begas and D. Lane. Between 1974 and 1988, the British Researcher D. Lane carried out an in-depth study of the phenomenon of bullying, focusing on the structure of this process and the factors that contribute to its emergence and development (ABIS, 2019, p. 139). The main theories that can be used to understand aggression through bullying include: psychoanalytic theories, the theory of internal tension, social information processing theory, theory of mind, low self-control theory, and primary socialization theory.

Primary socialization, based on A. Bandura's social learning theory, identifies the family process as the foundation for a child's acquisition of key elements of integration into society (speech, gestures, norms, values). The main mechanism of social learning is imitation, where the first models of behavior are adults in the family (Bandura, 1977). During adolescence, the importance of parents gradually decreases, while the influence of friends increases. Initially, adolescents observe the approval of sarcastic and mocking actions, remaining spectators, but may later display such behavior themselves. Family circumstances, such as a lack of affection in childhood, parental neglect, and child abuse, also contribute to the development of similar behavior, fostering dissatisfaction that is compensated for by inflicting pain on others (Tsyganenko, 2021).

To summarize the above, it can be argued that the phenomenon of bullying has multiple explanatory causes, each of which makes a significant contribution to understanding the psychological mechanisms that determine aggressive behavior in adolescent children. The study of the phenomenon of bullying

requires an interdisciplinary approach, and theories from various fields such as psychology, sociology, and education are important for understanding the complexity of this phenomenon and developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

According to the definitions provided by K. Rooney in the *Encarta World English Dictionary*, “bullying,” “aggression,” and related terms such as “intimidation,” “persecution,” “abuse,” and “violence” describe forms of destructive behavior (Rooney, 1999). These actions are aimed at causing harm or discomfort to another person. Intimidation often includes threats to establish control. Persecution manifests as obsessive behavior that induces fear. Abuse implies improper or cruel treatment, often involving the use of power. Violence represents a physical or verbal action whose goal is to inflict harm. Thus, K. Rooney identifies various aspects of aggressive influence on an individual. Eric Debarbieux argues that bullying is a serious form of violence requiring immediate and adequate responses from schools and other responsible parties in order to protect victims and prevent future situations (Ministerul Educației și Cercetării [Republica Moldova], n.d., p. 89)

3. Problem Statement

Modern society strives to create an inclusive and safe environment for all children, regardless of their individual characteristics and needs. However, despite ongoing efforts, the problem of bullying remains relevant and poses a serious threat to the physical well-being of the younger generation. Of particular concern is the situation of children with special educational needs (SEN), who, due to their vulnerability and differences from their peers, often become targets of aggressive behavior. For children with SEN, the consequences of bullying can be particularly severe, exacerbating existing difficulties in learning, social adaptation, and emotional development. In this regard, the study of the phenomenon of bullying against children with special educational needs (SEN) acquires particular significance. Understanding the specifics of this problem, identifying the factors that contribute to the emergence and development of bullying in this category of children, as well as developing and implementing effective intervention measures, are necessary conditions for ensuring their right to safe and quality education.

Thus, the chosen topic represents an important and timely object of study. Empirical results can make a significant contribution to identifying the prevalence and specific features of bullying against children with SEN, assessing its negative impact on their psycho-emotional state, and describing the problem of insufficient public awareness. They will also provide an informational basis for educators, parents, and decision-makers with the aim of creating a more inclusive, safe, and supportive environment for children with SEN.

Despite the limited direct statistical data on this problem in Moldova, there is a well-founded assumption about their increased risk. The aim of this analysis is to identify and structure the factors that determine the vulnerability of children with SEN to bullying, drawing on available national and international research. Direct statistical data on the prevalence of bullying among children with special educational needs in the Republic of Moldova are fragmentary. However, a UNICEF study based on reports from parents and guardians recorded that about 14% of them reported cases of bullying and physical violence against children with special needs by their peers (Ministerul Educației și Cercetării [Republica Moldova], n.d., p. 20). Due to the lack of national statistics, to obtain a more complete picture, we turned to the results of studies conducted in other countries. For instance, a study of students with SEN attending specialized schools found that 28.1% of respondents acted as aggressors, and 39.3% became victims of traditional bullying (PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center, 2012). In the realm of cyberbullying, 13.5% of students with SEN displayed aggression in the online environment, while

23.3% experienced cyberbullying as victims (Aslan & Erdur-Baker, 2025). Although these studies were conducted outside Moldova, they provide valuable comparative insights indicating a general trend of increased vulnerability among students with SEN.

The increased risk of exposure to bullying among children with special educational needs is due to a complex interaction of individual child characteristics and environmental factors (Aslan & Erdur-Baker, 2025).

Individual factors:

- *Visible differences:* The presence of physical characteristics, such as speech impediments, motor disorders, or other noticeable differences, can attract negative attention from peers and become a target for ridicule and harassment.
- *Difficulties in communication and social interaction:* Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) often find it very difficult to interpret social cues, establish and maintain friendships, and effectively resolve conflict situations, which makes them more vulnerable to bullying.
- *Emotional vulnerability:* Some children with SEN may exhibit heightened emotional sensitivity, a tendency toward anxiety, or difficulties with self-regulation, which can provoke aggressive behavior from peers.
- *Reduced capacity for self-defense:* A child with SEN may have difficulty recognizing bullying situations, seeking help from adults, or offering adequate resistance to a bully.
- *Impulsivity and unpredictable behavior:* Some conditions, such as ADHD or Tourette syndrome, can manifest in impulsive actions or involuntary movements and sounds, which may be misinterpreted by peers and provoke negative reactions.

Environment-related factors:

- *Lack of awareness and understanding:* Peers' lack of sufficient knowledge and understanding of the developmental characteristics of children with SEN can lead to misinterpretation of their behavior, ridicule, and social isolation.
- *Insufficient inclusion:* If children with SEN do not feel like full and equal members of the school community, they may be more isolated and, consequently, more vulnerable to bullying.
- *Insufficient vigilance from adults:* Lack of adequate attention from teaching staff and school administration to the signs of bullying, as well as the absence of effective prevention and response strategies, can contribute to the exacerbation of the problem.
- *Influence of negative stereotypes and prejudices:* Negative stereotypes and prejudices existing in society towards people with special needs can shape biased attitudes among peers and contribute to manifestations of bullying.

It is important to emphasize that exposure to bullying is not a universal experience for all children with SEN; many successfully integrate into the school environment. Nevertheless, the presence of the above factors determines an increased risk, which requires targeted efforts to create a safe and inclusive environment for all students.

4. Solution Approach

The experience of bullying suffered in childhood can leave a deep and lasting mark on a person's mental health and social adaptation in adulthood, increasing the risk of developing depressive and anxiety disorders, difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships, and a general deterioration in quality of life (Bandura, 1977, p. 399). Taking into account the full seriousness and multidimensionality of the psychological impact of bullying on children with special educational needs (SEN), it is extremely important to detect cases of harassment in a timely manner, provide the necessary psychological support to victims, and implement comprehensive prevention programs in the educational environment aimed at creating a safe and respectful atmosphere (Bandura, 1977, p. 8). The present study aims to establish ***the prevalence and specific forms of bullying and victimization experienced by adolescents with SEN***, with particular attention to direct and indirect forms of aggression. Identifying the extent to which adolescents are exposed to different forms of bullying can provide a clearer understanding of the interpersonal difficulties they may encounter within the school environment and can help identify those who may require additional psychological and educational support. At the same time, examining patterns of victimization may contribute to the development of more targeted prevention and intervention measures adapted to the specific needs of students with SEN.

In this context, addressing bullying should not be limited to responding to individual incidents after they occur. Effective prevention requires the involvement of the entire educational community, including teachers, psychologists, parents, school administrators, and students themselves. Particular attention should be given to strengthening positive peer relationships, encouraging empathy and mutual respect, developing students' social and emotional skills, and creating opportunities for meaningful inclusion. Early identification of problematic interactions, combined with appropriate psychological and educational interventions, may help reduce the risk of repeated victimization and contribute to a more supportive school climate.

Therefore, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence that can serve as a basis for improving preventive practices and psychological support for adolescents with SEN and for promoting a more inclusive and psychologically safe educational environment.

Hypothesis of the ascertaining experiment: There is a statistically significant level of bullying against children with special educational needs in the studied educational environment, which manifests in various forms (physical, verbal, social) and has a significant negative impact on their emotional state. At the same time, it is assumed that the level of awareness among teachers and parents about the problem of bullying against such children is insufficient for effectively counteracting this phenomenon.

The study involved 100 adolescents aged 14–17, including ten children with SEN. Adolescents with various special needs participated in the study. Written informed consent for each child's participation was obtained from their parents before the start of the study. Individual work with each student ensured the most accurate application of research methods, taking into account their cognitive abilities. Analysis of the obtained data will not only assess the scale of the bullying problem but also identify factors that contribute to or hinder its emergence, which has practical significance for the development of targeted prevention and intervention measures.

Research methods:

1. *Survey "What is bullying?"*: A questionnaire about knowledge and understanding of bullying.
2. *D. Olweus Bullying Questionnaire*: Used to determine the frequency and forms of bullying experienced by students. The questionnaire was adapted to account for the cognitive characteristics of the participants (use of simplified language, visual cues).
3. *Individual interview*: This method was used for an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and their perceptions of bullying situations. Interviews with students were conducted considering their communication abilities, using leading questions and support from a psycho-pedagogue.

The main method used was the D. Olweus Bullying Questionnaire, as it allowed for the determination of the presence of bullying in the group selected for the study.

5. Analysis of Results

According to the survey results, it was established that 60% of adolescents demonstrated a minimal tendency toward direct active bullying, which corresponds to their responses that they “practically never” displayed aggressive behavior. At the same time, 40% of the study participants showed a moderate tendency toward this type of bullying, indicating that they were “episodically” involved in situations of offense and aggression.

Notably, none of the ten surveyed adolescents with SEN (0%) showed a pronounced tendency toward direct active bullying. However, episodic aggressive behavior was noted in 4 participants, while the majority (6 individuals) demonstrated a low level of involvement in direct active bullying.

Analysis of the results regarding the degree of tendency toward active indirect bullying revealed the following distribution: 60% of respondents showed a weak expression of this type of aggressive behavior. This indicates that the majority of study participants are generally not inclined to use indirect forms of bullying, such as spreading rumors, ignoring, boycotts, and other forms of social isolation. At the same time, a moderate tendency toward active indirect bullying was recorded in 20% of adolescents. This fact indicates that these participants may episodically resort to indirect aggressive actions. Although such behavior is not systematic, it can nevertheless negatively affect interpersonal relationships within the group.

Furthermore, 20% of respondents exhibited a pronounced tendency toward active indirect bullying. This means that these adolescents demonstrate a tendency to regularly use indirect forms of aggression. Thus, summarizing the obtained data, it can be concluded that in the studied group, active indirect bullying is not the predominant form of destructive interaction. However, the presence of moderate and, to a lesser extent, pronounced tendencies toward this type of behavior among some adolescents underscores the need for preventive measures aimed at fostering a healthy psychological climate within the group.

Equal proportions of participants (50% each) demonstrated both weak and moderate levels of direct victimization. Specifically, 50% of adolescents showed a weak level, indicating that they rarely experience direct aggression, such as insults or physical violence. At the same time, 50% of participants showed a moderate level of direct victimization. This indicates that this group of adolescents occasionally encounters manifestations of direct aggression.

It was found that the majority of study participants (70%) exhibited a weak level of indirect victimization. This means that these adolescents generally rarely experience situations in which they are subjected to social isolation or become victims of indirect forms of aggression. This fact may indicate the predominance of relatively favorable interpersonal relationships within the group, where cases of exclusion or ignoring are isolated. However, certain manifestations of indirect victimization were identified in 20% of participants, corresponding to a moderate degree of severity. This indicates that these adolescents may periodically experience such forms of aggressive influence as the spreading of rumors, boycotts, or deliberate ignoring. Although such behavior is not systematic, it can create discomfort and negatively affect the emotional state of participants. In addition, 10% of participants exhibited a pronounced level of indirect victimization. This means that these adolescents are regularly and systematically subjected to indirect forms of aggressive influence. Such a situation is the most unfavorable, as constant social isolation can lead to serious psychological problems for the victim. The study showed that no cases of systematic direct bullying or direct victimization were recorded in the studied group. However, episodic manifestations of aggressive behavior and indirect victimization are present, indicating the need for preventive measures.

6. Conclusions

Analysis of the forms of bullying experienced by adolescents with SEN revealed the predominance of psychological harassment, including ridicule, social isolation, and verbal insults, which are perceived as particularly painful due to their direct connection to health-related characteristics. Although direct physical violence occurs less frequently in most cases, psychological bullying can inflict deep and lasting emotional wounds, leading to decreased self-esteem, the development of anxiety states, and depressive moods. It is important to recognize that the consequences of psychological bullying can be as destructive as those of physical aggression.

The deep emotional experiences of adolescents, such as feelings of being misunderstood, constant fear, and reluctance to attend school, are a direct consequence of experienced bullying and testify to its destructive impact on their psychological state. The consequences of bullying can range from temporary emotional disturbances to long-term and irreversible conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorders, deterioration of physical and mental health, decreased academic performance, difficulties in social interaction, and general maladjustment.

Thus, the study reveals the multifaceted and serious problem of bullying among adolescents with special educational needs (SEN). The empirical findings show that while active indirect bullying is not predominant, a notable minority of adolescents exhibit moderate to pronounced tendencies toward indirect aggression. Although most participants experience low levels of victimization, a concerning 10% report regular exposure to covert aggressive behaviors such as social exclusion and rumor spreading. Direct victimization remains episodic for half of the participants, and psychological bullying prevails over physical violence, underscoring the need to address subtle but emotionally damaging forms of harassment.

The results underscore the need for a comprehensive and systematic approach involving educational institutions, families, community organizations, and the children themselves. Prevention efforts should focus on fostering a positive psychological climate, training teachers to recognize indirect aggression, and combating negative stereotypes about SEN. Creating a truly inclusive, safe, and supportive environment is a necessary condition for the well-being of this vulnerable group. Further research,

particularly longitudinal and intervention studies, remains essential for developing evidence-based prevention strategies tailored to adolescents with SEN.

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