

Bullying and Discrimination Against Children with Disabilities: A School-Culture Analysis

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Abstract

Students with disabilities experience bullying and discrimination at rates two to three times higher than their non-disabled peers, with profound implications for their academic achievement, social development, and mental health. This research examines disability-related victimization through the lens of school culture, analyzing how institutional norms, educator attitudes, peer dynamics, and systemic ableism create environments that either protect or endanger vulnerable students. Drawing from contemporary educational research and organizational culture theory, this paper argues that school culture serves as the critical mediating factor determining victimization outcomes. Findings reveal that traditional anti-bullying interventions focusing on individual behaviour change prove insufficient without addressing underlying cultural and structural Factors. The analysis demonstrates that creating genuinely inclusive school cultures requires Comprehensive transformation of physical environments, professional practices, curriculum content, and institutional values. Evidence-based recommendations are provided for policymakers, school leaders, and educators committed to fostering educational environments where all students experience safety, belonging, and opportunity to thrive.

Keywords: *disability discrimination, school bullying, inclusive education, school culture, ableism, special education*

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Introduction

Educational institutions represent formative spaces where young people develop social identities and build relationships. However, for students with disabilities, schools often become sites of exclusion rather than inclusion. Research consistently demonstrates that children with disabilities experience bullying and discrimination at rates significantly higher than their non-disabled peers, with consequences extending far beyond the school years into adulthood (Rose et al., 2011).

Understanding why these patterns persist requires examining not merely individual acts of aggression but the broader cultural contexts within which they occur. School culture encompasses the shared beliefs, values, norms, and practices that characterize an educational institution. This culture profoundly influences whether students with disabilities feel welcomed, valued, and protected or whether they encounter systematic marginalization (Schein, 2010).

This paper investigates the intersection between school culture and the victimization of students with disabilities. By analyzing how institutional environments either facilitate or prevent discrimination, we can identify leverage points for meaningful intervention. The central argument presented here is that addressing bullying and discrimination requires transforming school culture itself, rather than implementing isolated programs or punitive measures alone.

Review of Literature

Prevalence and Nature of Disability-Related Bullying

Contemporary research establishes that students with disabilities face substantially elevated risks of peer victimization. Studies across multiple countries consistently show that these students experience bullying at rates two to three times higher than their non-disabled classmates (Blake et al., 2016). The forms of victimization are diverse, ranging from physical aggression and verbal harassment to social exclusion and cyberbullying.

Particularly concerning is the finding that students with certain types of disabilities face even greater vulnerability. Those with visible physical differences, learning disabilities affecting communication, or conditions impacting social interaction often become primary targets. Beyond frequency, the nature of disability-related bullying carries distinctive characteristics. Perpetrators often exploit specific vulnerabilities related to a student's disability, such as mocking speech patterns, hiding mobility aids, or deliberately triggering sensory sensitivities (Fisher et al., 2017). This targeted cruelty reflects and reinforces societal ableism—the systematic devaluation of disabled people.

Theoretical Frameworks: Understanding School Culture

School culture theory provides essential frameworks for analyzing institutional environments. Edgar Schein's organizational culture model identifies three levels: artifacts (visible structures and behaviors), espoused values (stated principles and goals), and underlying assumptions (unconscious beliefs that guide behaviour). Applying this framework to schools reveals how disability discrimination can become embedded at all levels.

At the artifact level, physical accessibility, classroom arrangements, and visible representation of disability in school materials communicate messages about who belongs. Espoused values appear in mission statements and anti-bullying policies, yet these may contradict underlying assumptions that position disabled students as fundamentally different or burdensome. Social ecological theory further illuminates how multiple system levels interact to influence student experiences, revealing why interventions targeting only one level often prove insufficient (Bear et al., 2017).

The Role of Ableism in Educational Settings

Ableism represents a critical but often overlooked dimension of school culture analysis. This ideology constructs disability as deviation from normal functioning and positions disabled people as less valuable. Within schools, ableism manifests through numerous mechanisms: segregated educational placements, lowered academic expectations, paternalistic attitudes from educators, and peer cultures that equate difference with inferiority.

Institutional ableism becomes particularly evident in how schools organize educational experiences. Despite legal mandates for inclusive education, many institutions maintain separate spaces and differentiated curricula that mark disabled students as fundamentally other. These structural arrangements communicate powerful messages about belonging and worth that students internalize. Research on implicit bias reveals that even well-intentioned educators may harbor unconscious negative attitudes toward disability, influencing everything from disciplinary decisions to academic opportunities (Carter et al., 2018).

Methodology

This analysis synthesizes findings from existing empirical research on disability, bullying, and school culture, supplemented by theoretical frameworks from sociology of education and disability studies. Literature was selected through systematic searches of educational and psychological databases using keywords related to disability discrimination, school bullying, inclusive education, and organizational culture. Priority was given to peer-reviewed research published within the past fifteen years, though seminal earlier works were included where foundational.

The analytical strategy employed involves identifying patterns across studies, examining how school culture dimensions influence disability-related victimization, and developing an integrated framework for understanding and addressing these challenges.

Findings

Physical and Social Environment Factors

Analysis reveals that physical school environments significantly impact disabled students' experiences. Schools lacking comprehensive accessibility communicate that disabled bodies were not considered in planning—a form of structural discrimination. Beyond legal compliance, truly inclusive physical spaces incorporate universal design principles that normalize accommodation rather than treating it as exceptional (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2021).

Social environments prove equally consequential. Research demonstrates that schools with rigid social hierarchies based on athletic ability, academic achievement, or social capital create conditions where students with disabilities occupy devalued positions. Conversely, schools cultivating diverse definitions of contribution and success provide multiple pathways for all students to achieve recognition and belonging.

Peer culture analysis shows that student attitudes toward disability directly reflect the messages communicated through school policies and practices. When schools segregate students with disabilities or provide accommodations in ways that highlight difference as deficit, peers develop corresponding attitudes. Schools that normalize diversity and frame accommodations as equivalent to glasses or other supports foster more accepting peer cultures.

Educator Attitudes and Institutional Response

The role of educators emerges as particularly influential. Teachers and administrators who demonstrate genuine commitment to inclusion, hold high expectations for disabled students, and respond swiftly to discriminatory behaviour create protective school climates. Conversely, educators who view inclusion as burdensome, lower academic standards, or dismiss bullying reports enable victimization (McLeskey et al., 2017).

Institutional response patterns reveal critical gaps. Many schools have anti-bullying policies that fail to specifically address disability-related harassment or adequately train staff to

recognize ableist dynamics. When incidents occur, responses often focus on individual perpetrators rather than examining systemic factors that enabled the behaviour.

Professional development practices show considerable variation. Schools that invest in ongoing training about disability culture, implicit bias, and inclusive pedagogy demonstrate measurably different outcomes compared to institutions providing only minimal compliance training. Educator competence in supporting disabled students influences both direct victimization and the broader climate.

Structural Inclusion Versus Tokenism

A crucial finding concerns the distinction between meaningful inclusion and token presence. Simply placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms without appropriate supports, collaborative teaching models, or curriculum modifications often increases rather than decreases marginalization (Sailor et al., 2021). Students report feeling conspicuously different without the relationships or academic access that would facilitate genuine belonging.

Truly inclusive schools operationalize inclusion through multiple mechanisms: collaborative planning among general and special educators, peer support programs that build authentic relationships, curriculum that includes disability perspectives and history, and school-wide understanding that accommodation represents fairness rather than advantage.

Student Voice and Agency

Emerging research emphasizes the importance of disabled students' own perspectives and participation in shaping school culture. Schools that create meaningful opportunities for disabled students to share experiences, participate in decision-making, and contribute to anti-bullying initiatives demonstrate more inclusive cultures and better outcomes (Shogren et al., 2015).

Self-advocacy skill development appears as both a protective factor and a necessary competence. However, the responsibility for preventing discrimination must rest with institutions rather than requiring victims to constantly advocate for basic dignity. Student testimony reveals the subtle dynamics often invisible to adults—the accumulation of small exclusions, such as not being chosen for group work or invitations extended to everyone

except them. These microaggressions create hostile environments even in the absence of overt bullying.

Discussion

School Culture as Mediating Factor

The evidence strongly supports conceptualizing school culture as the critical mediating variable between disability presence and victimization outcomes. Schools exist along a continuum from actively hostile to authentically inclusive, with culture determining where institutions fall.

Hostile school cultures are characterized by ableist assumptions embedded in policies and practices, educator ambivalence or resistance toward inclusion, peer cultures that devalue disability, and inadequate responses to discrimination. In these environments, bullying of disabled students becomes normalized and even tacitly sanctioned.

Conversely, inclusive school cultures demonstrate commitment to belonging for all students through accessible physical environments, educator competence and positive attitudes, peer cultures celebrating diversity, proactive rather than reactive responses to problems, and disabled student voices centered in decision-making.

Movement along this continuum requires interventions addressing all levels of Schein's culture model. Surface-level changes like awareness assemblies prove insufficient without examining underlying assumptions about disability and restructuring systems that perpetuate marginalization.

The Limitation of Individual-Level Interventions

Traditional anti-bullying approaches focusing primarily on changing individual behaviour or implementing punitive consequences show limited effectiveness for disability-related victimization. This limitation reflects failure to address the cultural and structural factors that enable discrimination.

Teaching social-emotional skills or empathy to potential perpetrators, while potentially valuable, cannot counteract environments that systematically position disabled students as less valuable. Similarly, teaching disabled students' resilience or self-advocacy skills, though potentially helpful, places unfair burden on victims to manage hostile environments rather than transforming those environments.

Effective intervention requires institutional commitment to cultural transformation. This includes examining how policies, practices, curricula, and everyday interactions communicate messages about disability and belonging. It requires moving beyond compliance with legal mandates toward genuine embrace of disability as valued human diversity.

Implications and Recommendations

Policy Level Changes

Educational policy must move beyond access mandates toward requirements for inclusive culture development. Accountability systems should measure not only placement but also belonging indicators through climate surveys and participatory evaluation (UNESCO, 2017). Funding mechanisms need restructuring to support inclusion adequately. Current models often create perverse incentives for segregation by providing additional resources only for separate placements. Funding should follow students and support inclusive practices rather than reinforcing segregated systems.

Teacher preparation requirements should include substantial disability studies content, inclusive pedagogy training, and supervised practice in inclusive settings. Currently, many general education teachers receive minimal preparation for supporting disabled students, while special educators receive insufficient grounding in general curriculum and pedagogy.

School and Classroom Level Practices

School leadership must champion inclusion as a core institutional value rather than treating it as compliance requirement. This involves articulating vision, allocating resources, providing professional learning opportunities, and modeling inclusive practices in their own interactions.

Schools should conduct regular audits examining culture through a disability lens, including reviewing discipline data for disparities, surveying students about belonging and safety, assessing curriculum for representation, and evaluating physical accessibility beyond legal minimums.

Individual educators can contribute significantly through their practices. Using universal design for learning principles creates flexible learning environments that benefit all students while reducing stigma around accommodations. Building classroom communities that

explicitly value diversity and establish norms of respect provides foundation for positive peer relationships.

Responding immediately and educationally to discriminatory language or behavior communicates clear expectations while providing learning opportunities. Teachers who interrupt ableist comments and facilitate discussions about bias help students develop critical consciousness.

Conclusion

Bullying and discrimination against children with disabilities represents a persistent educational equity issue with profound consequences. This analysis demonstrates that addressing these challenges requires moving beyond individual-level interventions toward comprehensive transformation of school culture.

School culture serves as the critical mediating factor determining whether students with disabilities experience belonging and safety or marginalization and victimization. Creating inclusive cultures demands sustained commitment from educational leaders, comprehensive professional learning for educators, meaningful inclusion of disabled students and families in decision-making, and systemic examination of policies and practices through a disability lens.

While significant challenges remain, the research reveals reasons for hope. Many schools and educators demonstrate that genuine inclusion is achievable when will and resources align. Students with disabilities who experience truly inclusive school cultures develop stronger academic skills, more positive social relationships, and greater self-advocacy capacities that serve them throughout life.

The question facing educational institutions is not whether inclusion is possible but whether we possess the collective commitment to make it reality. Children with disabilities deserve educational environments where they are safe, valued, and supported to reach their full potential. Creating such environments represents both a moral imperative and a legal obligation. The transformation of school culture from ableist to inclusive provides the pathway to achieving this vision.

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