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Motivational aspects of bullying of children with special needs in the educational process

Aspectos motivacionales del acoso a niños con necesidades especiales en el proceso educativo


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Abstract

This study examines the key motivational factors that lead to bullying against children with special educational needs in both inclusive and special educational environments. The present study empirically examines the motivational aspects of bullying. The research employed a structured survey involving 40 participants with relevant experience in inclusive education: teachers, psychologists, school administrators, and parents of children with special educational needs. The thematic analysis method was used to analysis the data. The analysis revealed that aggressive behaviour in school settings is often shaped by external social influences, particularly peer dynamics and exposure to digital media. Additional contributing factors include psychological maladjustment among perpetrators and inadequate responses from adults in educational contexts. Victimization is frequently associated with the limited self-defence capacity and social integration challenges faced by students with special needs. The study found no significant difference in the prevalence of bullying across educational



models, suggesting that school culture and institutional support are more influential than the type of classroom setting. Effective prevention requires systematic communication among stakeholders and the early identification of bullying behaviours by trained professionals. The findings underscore the necessity of addressing the underlying motivations behind bullying in order to design sustainable intervention strategies. Hence, they are important for improving school policies and teacher training programs, as they contribute to the formation of a safer and more inclusive educational environment for children with special educational needs.

Keywords: bullying motivation, special education, inclusive education, children with special educational needs, family and school prevention.

Resumen

Este estudio examina los principales factores motivacionales que conducen al acoso escolar contra niños con necesidades educativas especiales, tanto en entornos educativos inclusivos como especializados. La investigación empleó una encuesta estructurada en la que participaron 40 personas con experiencia relevante en educación inclusiva. El análisis reveló que el comportamiento agresivo en el entorno escolar suele estar condicionado por influencias sociales externas, en particular la dinámica entre compañeros y la exposición a los medios digitales. Otros factores que contribuyen a este fenómeno son la inadecuación psicológica de los agresores y las respuestas inadecuadas de los adultos en el contexto educativo. La victimización se asocia frecuentemente con la limitada capacidad de autodefensa y los retos de integración social a los que se enfrentan los alumnos con necesidades especiales. El estudio no encontró diferencias significativas en la prevalencia del acoso escolar entre los distintos modelos educativos, lo que sugiere que la cultura escolar y el apoyo institucional son más influyentes que el tipo de entorno escolar. Para una prevención eficaz es necesaria una comunicación sistemática entre las partes interesadas y la identificación temprana de los comportamientos de acoso por parte de profesionales cualificados. Los resultados subrayan la necesidad de abordar las motivaciones subyacentes al acoso escolar para diseñar estrategias de intervención sostenibles.

Palabras clave: motivación del acoso escolar, educación especial, educación inclusiva, niños con necesidades educativas especiales, prevención familiar y escolar.

Introduction

Inclusive education, which is actively developing in the modern world as a separate pedagogical trend, involves providing education to children with special educational needs, including through joint learning with their peers in regular general education institutions. This approach is a common practice and an optimal step towards the humanization of society and the implementation of the principles of equal access to educational services. At the same time, along with the quite objective positive consequences of using this approach, such changes are accompanied by several challenges that must be overcome. One of the most common challenges is the problem of bullying, i.e., targeted, systematic harassment that manifests itself in psychological, physical or social influence (Filipenko et al., 2022; Kondratyuk et al., 2025). This challenge has become most acute in connection with the need to integrate children with special educational needs into normal society, as they are most vulnerable to discrimination, various kinds of stigmatization and negative social influence (Dovhopola et al., 2024). According to a number of international studies, children with special educational needs are 2–3 times more likely to be bullied than their peers without such needs. This indicates the critical vulnerability of this group (Fissel & Bryson, 2024). In addition, in the context of the Ukrainian education system, according to empirical research, more than 40% of parents of children with special needs report cases of social exclusion or aggressive behavior by peers (Byrko et al., 2022). This indicates the importance of analyzing the motivations of the aggressor. Moreover, according to some estimates, children with special needs are more likely to become victims of school bullying than their peers (Kapitanoff & Pandey, 2024). First, this situation is due to their behavioral characteristics, needs, and possible external manifestations of their health condition. However, more often than not, the reason is more prosaic: the lack of readiness of the educational environment (peers, teachers, and school administrators) to accept their differences. Conversely, an important gap in the current research literature is that researchers primarily focus on the practical field of bullying prevention (including victim protection mechanisms). At the same time, a deeper study of the motivation of perpetrators often does not



become the subject of special scientific attention. The relevance of the scientific study of the motivational aspects of bullying is due to the need to understand the internal motivations and complex value orientations, individual social attitudes and psychological needs of those who initiate, carry out or join the bullying. The study of such mechanisms will allow not only the formulation of certain preventive measures but also the creation of a healthy microclimate in the school community in the future to adhere to the mood of empathy, social responsibility and tolerance among all participants in the educational process.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the main motivational factors that contribute to bullying among children with special needs in inclusive and special education and to develop specific recommendations for preventing and correcting this phenomenon. This goal involves the following tasks:

1. What are the social and psychological factors that stimulate bullying among children with special needs?
2. What are the differences in the motivational factors of bullying in inclusive and special education?
3. What practical strategies and pedagogical interventions can prevent bullying in educational institutions?

Literature Review

The issue of bullying in the modern educational environment has become a subject of active research discussion in contemporary pedagogy, psychology, and sociology. In particular, bullying is now understood as aggressive and often repeated, systematic behavior aimed at humiliating another person, dominating them and their feelings, and isolating them from other members of the team. Such cases often occur among children or adolescents, including within school groups. A classic and well-researched study demonstrated the existence of a solid theoretical basis for understanding and further studying this phenomenon (Thornberg et al., 2012). Defining the role of teachers and school administrators in preventing bullying (Liu et al., 2024) and analyzing the tangible long-term consequences that are important for the mental health of victims.

Much attention in modern scientific sources is focused on identifying and analyzing manifestations of bullying committed against children with special educational needs. This category of schoolchildren is the most vulnerable group, as they often have psychophysical characteristics, social stigma, or limited opportunities for self-defense. According to research, students with developmental disabilities, including those with various manifestations of the autism spectrum, language skills, intellectual development, or any other physical disabilities, are much more likely to become victims of systemic bullying by their peers (Hartley et al., 2015; Berchiatti et al., 2022). For example, international measurements have made it possible to confirm that the statement of compliance with inclusion norms in the school environment does not automatically guarantee that it will be implemented qualitatively (Berchiatti et al., 2020), especially without proper psychological and pedagogical support. The research emphasizes that the manifestations of aggressive students' social or psychological behavior are extremely important for effective counteraction to school bullying (Fissel & Bryson, 2024). First, such manifestations of negative behavior as unmet need for recognition, need for social comparison, frustration, lack of empathy, need to assert themselves at the expense of others, etc., were noted. Important aspects are manifestations, such as the reproduction of behavioral models projected by the family environment or external models (social networks, media, movies, etc.). In this context, the emergence of bullying in the educational process often acts as a reaction to the inability of children or adolescents to properly adapt to social norms or to the otherness of other students (to perceive it properly).

For example, bullying could often be a way to assert one's social status in the school community or another social group, a demonstration of strength or other influence, a means of transferring negative emotions, or even a consequence of a lack of knowledge about the norms of social communication. The study of children with special educational needs noted that their difference is sometimes perceived as a weakness or belonging to a "different nature" (Malisiova & Folia, 2024). This creates conflicts and provokes aggression



in those students who themselves have several internal complex psychological problems, lack attention or experience an extreme lack of emotional support. In the Ukrainian scientific context, the problem of bullying has been considered mainly from the standpoint of counteracting bullying and legal regulation (Chabursky et al., 2024; Moroz et al., 2023).

Moreover, Cabrera et al. (2022) compared traditional bullying and cyberbullying in rural and urban schools (Castilla-La Mancha, Spain). The authors used a survey method and interviewed students from urban and rural schools. Accordingly, the authors indicated that the frequency of roles in bullying (victims, aggressors, bullies/victims) is the same in urban and rural schools. However, physical bullying and victimization are more common in urban schools.

Gimenez et al. (2024) indicated the relationship between victimization of bullying and academic performance. In particular, they processed data from students from different countries and indicated that, as a rule, victims of bullying demonstrate low results in mathematics, reading and natural sciences.

Zapata-López et al. (2024) indicated the relationship between physical inactivity (sedentary lifestyle) and bullying among adolescents in Colombia. Accordingly, the authors' results showed that there is a connection between a sedentary lifestyle and a higher probability of becoming a victim of bullying. Accordingly, this indicates that there is a correspondence between a healthy lifestyle and the detection of bullying.

At the same time, Sarancha et al. (2022) identified the existence of mutual supportive parental support and socialization of children with special needs in rehabilitation centers. Accordingly, the study indicated that mutual emotional and methodological support of parents improves the socialization of their children and promotes the development of empathy.

The emphasis in such studies is on the formation of safe, educational environments, the creation of separate anti-bullying programs, and increasing the levels of psychological competence of teachers and school administrators. In addition, the research works of Ukrainian researchers usually focus on the needs for the socialization of children with special needs, the creation of appropriate tolerant environments in general classes, or the formation of inclusive classrooms. Such research works primarily focus on the mechanisms of adaptation of children with special needs to study and continue their studies at universities. The psychological aspects of bullying are often on the margins of such research. However, some studies that focus exclusively on the motivational aspects of bullying against children with special educational needs are still relatively few (Byrko et al., 2022). In particular, in the modern scientific discourse there are few works that deal with the empirical verification of the state of the problem of bullying. This situation creates prerequisites for a broader disclosure of the issues proposed in the article, which ultimately led to the scientific novelty of the proposed study.

Thus, the study of the current state of scientific research on the proposed topic indicates the need to form both a theoretical and empirical basis in the field of general analysis of the issues of bullying and inclusion. It is worth noting that the motivational component of such bullying in inclusive educational environments will require a deeper study, which has determined the main direction of further research.

Methodology

The present study empirically examines the motivational aspects of bullying of children with special educational needs in the modern educational environment. The basis for collecting empirical material was a survey of people directly involved in inclusive and special education, including teachers, psychologists, school administrators, and parents of children with special educational needs. This approach made it possible to identify the underlying motives, social and psychological preconditions, and barriers to preventing bullying against children.

Sample

The purposive sampling method was used to implement the proposed study. This method made it possible to involve respondents with relevant experience working with children with special educational needs. A total of 40 respondents from the above categories participated in the survey. At the same time, special criteria for inclusion in the sample were used (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Criteria for including respondents in the survey

No	Criterion	Description
1	Experience	To participate in the survey, candidates were considered who had experience working or raising children with special educational needs for at least 3 years.
2	Inclusivity	Availability of the necessary level of knowledge (or performance of professional tasks) in the field of inclusive education in Ukraine.
3	Technological Capability	Availability of technical capabilities to complete the survey within the specified period (January-February 2025)
4	Voluntariness	Providing voluntary consent to participate in the survey, which was confirmed in the appropriate manner.

This sample size is optimal for a qualitative study, the purpose of which is to identify typical behavioral patterns, motivational factors, and contextual features, rather than to form statistical generalizations.

The number of 40 people allowed to ensure professional and functional diversity of respondents (teachers, psychologists, administration, parents of children with special needs) and at the same time to maintain analytical depth when conducting thematic analysis. According to recommendations in the field of qualitative research, a sample of this size is sufficient to achieve data saturation - the moment when new interviews do not add new significant themes or categories. This indicates sufficient completeness and representativeness within the framework of a qualitative approach.

Thus, the sample size of 40 people provides a balance between the variability of responses and the possibility of their analysis.

Data collection procedure

The collection of empirical data took place in several important stages. First of all, it was important to collect permission from the administrations of educational institutions to conduct a socio-psychological study with the participation of employees. The survey was supposed to be conducted in person or remotely, lasting up to 45 minutes. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed to collect data, containing 10 open-ended questions grouped into four thematic blocks:

- Prevalence and perception of bullying in inclusive education.
- Motivational factors of bullying behavior.
- Features of the school environment and inclusive interaction.
- Strategies for preventing and responding to bullying.

The questions were as follows:

- In your opinion, why do children with SEN most often become the object of bullying?
- What do you think are the social or psychological factors that most influence the occurrence of bullying against children with SEN?
- What practices do you consider effective in preventing aggression in an inclusive classroom?

- What do you think are the most common reasons or motives that encourage children to bully in an inclusive environment?
- What measures do you think are most effective in preventing bullying in the school environment?
- What practices have you used or observed in your professional activities to overcome bullying?
- What prevents an effective response to bullying in educational institutions?
- What are the main difficulties, in your opinion, that prevent teachers, administrations or parents from combating bullying?
- How important is staff training in dealing with bullying?
- What changes would you suggest to reduce the level of bullying against children with special needs in schools?

The survey was conducted in person or remotely, depending on the capabilities and wishes of the respondents. The average duration of participation was 45 minutes. Before the start of the study, official permissions were obtained from the administrations of educational institutions to conduct a socio-psychological survey among employees and parents. The survey was conducted from December 2024 to January 2025 in three inclusive educational institutions located in Kyiv and Poltava.

Data analysis

The thematic analysis method was used to further work with the collected material. The thematic analysis, was carried out in six stages:

- Getting acquainted with the data (transcription, rereading).
- Initial coding using open coding.
- Formation of themes through axial coding.
- Verification and generalization of themes.
- Description and naming of key themes.
- Formation of conclusions.

After transcribing the text, key themes repeated in the responses were identified: motivational factors of aggressive behavior, the role of the school environment, practices for preventing and responding to bullying, and barriers to implementing inclusive approaches. The data obtained were manually codified due to the conscious use of open and axial coding.

The selected categories included, in particular:

- Motivational factors of aggressive behavior;
- Barriers to inclusion in the educational environment;
- Successful bullying prevention strategies;
- The role of the school and the team in supporting children with SEN.

To increase the reliability of the analysis, the transcripts were checked by two independent researchers, after which the final structure of the categories was agreed.

After transcribing the interviews and discussing them, key themes repeated in the responses were identified: motivational factors of aggressive behavior, the role of the school environment, practices for preventing and responding to bullying, and barriers to implementing inclusive approaches. The data obtained were manually codified due to the conscious use of open and axial coding. Individual recurring patterns and content blocks were summarized into categories, which were then interpreted based on the needs of conducting the study and solving the proposed research questions. To increase the reliability and validity of the analysis, all transcripts were analyzed by two independent researchers. Each researcher conducted the open and axial coding stages separately, after which the codes and themes were compared and discussed, which allowed to eliminate subjective interpretations and achieve a consistent category



structure. In cases of disagreement, additional verification of the primary sources (interview texts) was carried out to ensure that the codes corresponded to the context of the responses.

This approach allowed to ensure transparency of the procedure, tracing the analytical process (from the statements of the participants to the conclusions)

Ethical aspects of the study

The principles of compliance with all modern ethical standards were laid at the heart of the study. Participants completed an appropriate questionnaire, thanks to which the inclusion criteria were applied to the number of respondents. Later, they filled out the appropriate informed consent (before the survey began). All respondents were guaranteed anonymity (personal data, names or place of work are not subject to publication). Everyone was guaranteed the right to refuse to participate in the experiment at any stage of its conduct, with the ability to completely delete previously provided information. The data obtained are stored in a protected environment and used exclusively for research.

Results and Discussion

The relevance of analyzing the motivational aspects of bullying against children with special educational needs is due to the need to better understand the socio-psychological factors that cause aggressive behavior in the school environment. Despite the active use of inclusive education, bullying is quite common, which can significantly complicate the process of socialization and education of children (Murillo-Moraño et al., 2024). The peculiarity of the study is that it aims to identify the opinions and experiences of teachers, psychologists and parents about the causes, forms and mechanisms of bullying, as well as to identify effective pedagogical interventions to counteract such phenomena. First, the socio-psychological factors of bullying against children with special needs were noted. In particular, during the analysis of the responses of 40 respondents (teachers, psychologists, parents of children with special educational needs), several main factors contributing to the emergence of bullying were identified. In particular, borrowing models of aggressive behavior from the social environment became important. According to the responses, one of the main causes of bullying is the influence of external models of behavior that children adopt in informal school groups, among friends, as well as from social networks and the media. Such influence forms aggressive patterns, which are then embodied in the bullying of children with special educational needs. A school psychologist with 8 years of work experience said: "Children often copy what they see on social networks or among friends, where aggression has become the norm. This also gets into the school environment, especially towards children who are different." The second important factor is the psychological problems of the bullies themselves — a feeling of insecurity, fear of social rejection, the need to assert themselves. Bullies often use aggression as a means of confirming their status in the team. Teacher 3 indicated: "Some children who bully feel isolated themselves, and therefore try to show their strength to others." Respondents also noted that the lack of appropriate response or intervention from adults (parents, teachers, administration) increases the aggressive behavior of bullies. The school administrator indicated that "Bullies often feel impunity because they do not see the consequences of their actions due to the passivity of adults." Other important factors were the low ability of children with SEN to protect themselves. In addition, the lack of support from peers and problems in establishing friendships contribute to the isolation of children and increase their risk of bullying.



Table 2.
Factors of bullying against children with special needs

Topic (Factor)	Code	Example quote
Borrowing aggressive behavior patterns	Influence of social environment	School Psychologist 2: "Children copy behavior from social media and friends, where aggression has become the norm."
Psychological difficulties in the adaptation of bullies	Insecurity, need for self-affirmation	Teacher 4 "Aggression is a way to show strength when a child feels insecure."
Feeling of impunity	Adult passivity towards bullying	Administrator 2 "Bullies feel impunity because of the lack of reaction from teachers and parents."
Low ability to self-defense in children with OOP	Vulnerability, inability to defend oneself	Inclusive classroom teacher 1 Children who cannot stand up for themselves become easy victims.
Difficulties in social adaptation	Lack of friends and support	Parent 8 "The lack of friends increases the risk of bullying."

Source: author's development

The most dangerous factors that contribute to aggressive behavior of bullies can be identified as borrowing behavioral models from third-party resources. First of all, we are talking about informal school groups or the destructive influence of social networks that form aggressive behavioral patterns towards children with special educational needs. The survey also found that bullies often have psychological difficulties adapting to school groups and therefore need to assert themselves, sometimes by humiliating others.

At the same time, the survey asked respondents to identify the behavioral characteristics of students with special educational needs that lead to bullying (see Figure 2).

The findings indicate that the formation of bullying against children with special needs can be equally formed in any form of education. 23 respondents (56% of all respondents) gave this assessment. This response is also confirmed by the fact that other respondents could not convincingly identify which education system has a higher risk of bullying (8 and 7 respondents, respectively, for inclusive and remedial education). Bullying is equally widespread, as it probably depends more on the environment of students, teachers, and administrators than on the form of education. The motivational reasons for bullying in inclusive classes and special educational institutions may differ (Table 3).

Table 3.
Motivational reasons for bullying in inclusive classes and special institutions

Nº	Reason	Practical quotes
1	In inclusive classrooms, bullying is often caused by students' lack of awareness of the specifics of the development and behavior of children with special educational needs	Teacher 12: Children don't always understand why an inclusive student reacts differently or takes longer to complete a task. Parent 2: My son is in an inclusive class, and I see how other children can be insulting to him because they don't understand why he needs an assistant.
2	For special institutions, the emergence of bullying is mainly based on the background of deepening internal competition between children with similar disorders	Administrator 2: We have children with the same or similar diagnoses, and this sometimes creates competition for the teacher's attention or for leadership in the group. Psychologist 4: There is an internal hierarchy: who speaks better, who writes better — and this can develop into rivalry, accompanied by bullying.

3	In special educational institutions, the motivation for the emergence of bullying is the probable desire to dominate all those who are "weaker" or "different".	<p>Teacher 14: Sometimes children who have better socialization skills begin to look down on those who are quiet or have other difficulties</p> <p>Parent 3: Everyone wants to be 'the boss' - even if they have problems themselves, they may make fun of those they think are 'weaker'</p>
4	In an inclusive environment, bullying may be associated with the presence of certain social stereotypes that are developed in families or cultivated through various media channels.	<p>Teacher 9: Often, a child repeats what they hear at home: that children with special needs are 'not like that'</p> <p>Parent 7: The media and parents sometimes give children the idea that a special child is a 'not-so-good' student.</p>
5	In both inclusive classrooms and special institutions, the motivations for the emergence of bullying are similar, but its level may be different due to the existence of different contexts of the development of the school community and the characteristics of staff training.	<p>Administrator 4: The mechanisms are similar — the need for self-affirmation, family influence, but the level of conflicts depends very much on the preparedness of the staff.</p> <p>Teacher 6: Even if the reasons are similar, an inclusive classroom with a trained teacher performs better than a specialized school without systemic support.</p>

Source: author's elaboration

The respondents, continuing the previous trend, determined that bullying is equally possible in both inclusive classes and special educational institutions and that the motivation for its occurrence is the characteristics of the local school community and the level of training of teachers and administrators. At the same time, also respondents also believe that in an inclusive environment, there are more threats due to unfavorable upbringing or negative media channels than in special educational institutions. Other variants of the emergence and spread of bullying generally received approximately identical scores.

The respondents were also asked to identify specific practices and interventions that would prevent the spread of bullying in the school environment, including against children with special needs. According to the respondents, the survey focused on the most effective strategies for preventing bullying (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Coding matrix of practical bullying prevention strategies: interventions, codes and participant quotes

Strategy / Intervention	Code category	Quotes
Strengthening communication between teachers, parents and administration	Strengthening communication	<p>Teacher 13: "Regular dialogue between all participants in the educational process helps to notice and stop bullying in time."</p>
Training teachers and psychologists to identify bullying at an early stage	Early detection training	<p>Administrator 3: "Teachers should clearly understand how to notice early signs of bullying and have an algorithm of actions."</p>
Training for students aimed at developing empathy and tolerance	Empathy and tolerance development	<p>Teacher 9: "It is necessary to develop empathy, talk to children about differences and teach them not to be indifferent."</p>
Group classes aimed at improving the adaptation of children with special needs	Adaptation of children with SEN	<p>Psychologist 1: "Extracurricular work, joint games or projects are a chance for children with special needs to better integrate into the classroom team."</p>
Introducing stricter sanctions for bullies	Not specified (critical rating)	<p>Psychologist 4: "Punishment is not always the solution. Often it only increases resistance, rather than changing behavior."</p>

Source: author's elaboration

Respondents noted that strengthening communication and information exchange among teachers, parents, and school administrators is important to counter bullying. At the same time, the importance of training teachers and school psychologists to identify bullying at the early stages of its occurrence was also emphasized. It is also worth noting the high appreciation of special training for schoolchildren that would develop empathy and tolerance, emphasizing the possible negative impact of social media, the Internet in general, family relationships, etc. Other strategy options are less popular, although measures to improve the adaptation of children with special educational needs can also be justified additions to existing practices. As for the effectiveness of toughening the punishment of bullies, the effectiveness of this approach is debatable. Respondents also identified some difficulties in preventing bullying among children with special educational needs (see Table 5).

Table 5.

Coding matrix: from quotes to generalized categories (example of axial coding)

Open coding (quotes/ideas)	Axial coding	Code
"We are constantly being forced to do some tests, papers, and the children are left alone." Teachers: 2, 5, 8	Teacher overload	Overload of school staff
"Not all teachers know how to detect bullying or work with the aggressor." Teachers: 9, 10	Low professional training	Need for teacher training
"Bullying of children with special needs does not always fall under clear legal categories, and this is a problem." Teachers: 19, 22	Insufficient legal protection	Weak legal protection for children with SEN
"Children do not know what bullying is - they think it is just a joke." Teachers: 24	Insufficient awareness	Low awareness among students
"If there is no teamwork - there will be no result. One teacher will not change the system." Teachers: 21	Lack of cooperation between parents and school	Lack of systemic cooperation

Source: author's elaboration

Thus, the respondents identified the problem of being overloaded with outside tasks as a major obstacle to combating bullying in school teams. Respondents also noted the need to improve the level of training of teaching staff. Insufficient legal protection of children with special needs, low awareness of the problem among schoolchildren, and lack of systematic work by parents and school administrators were recognized as less significant phenomena. Identifying these factors allows us to consider them in the future when planning measures to prevent bullying in schools.

Bullying against children with special educational needs is a complex problem that requires detailed consideration. The proposed purpose of this study was to analyze the main motivational factors that contribute to bullying among children with special needs in inclusive and special education and to develop specific recommendations for preventing and correcting this phenomenon. In order to fulfill this main task, it was decided to consider more specific issues, in particular, the identification of socio-psychological factors that stimulate the occurrence of bullying among children with special needs, the characteristics of differences in the motivational factors of bullying observed in inclusive and special education, and the recommendation of practical strategies and pedagogical interventions that can be effective in preventing bullying in educational institutions. Considering the most dangerous factors that contribute to the aggressive behavior of bullies, several destructive elements were identified, including the borrowing of behavioral models from third-party resources (informal school groups or the destructive influence of social networks that form aggressive behavioral patterns towards children with special educational needs). The presence of psychological difficulties of bullies with adaptation in school groups and impunity, which is the result of the inaction of parents or teachers, were identified as less dangerous. On the other hand, children with special educational needs are identified as victims of bullying due to their low capacity for self-defense and problems with social adaptation.

The results obtained confirm previous study by Afuzova et al. (2022) on the complexity of the phenomenon of bullying in inclusive education. However, our study not only confirms, but also clarifies specific socio-psychological mechanisms, in particular through the prism of the professional experience of various participants in the educational process.

At the same time, researchers also note that children with special needs are targeted by bullies because of their low ability to defend themselves, including due to a lack of social contact with other students (which prevents them from being perceived as “their own”) (Kocaj et al., 2018; Horton et al., 2025). Identifying such motivating factors for bullying will help to overcome such situations in the future (Bilavych et al., 2022). The proposed results show that bullying of children with special needs is equally likely to occur in any form of education (inclusive and remedial). This prevalence depends more on the environment of students, teachers, and administrators than on the form of education. Continuing the previous trend, respondents identified that bullying is equally likely to occur in inclusive classes and special educational institutions, and that it is motivated by the characteristics of the local school community and the level of training of teachers and administrators. However, many respondents also believe that in an inclusive environment, there are more threats due to unfavorable education or negative media channels than in educational institutions.

One of the most important conclusions is that bullying is not the prerogative of only general or specialized educational institutions. At first glance, respondents tend to conclude that bullying is equally prevalent in all types of educational institutions. However, this position requires careful interpretation: such answers may not indicate a real equal frequency, but an awareness of the systemic nature of the problem (Menéndez Santurio et al., 2020; Popel et al., 2023). In this sense, it is important to refer to the study, which indicates that it is the school culture, and not its type, that shapes background aggression. Thus, the statement about the equal prevalence of bullying should not be considered as a quantitative generalization, but as the participants' interpretation of the sources of risk, which emphasizes the role of internal factors: the level of staff training, relationships in the team and support from the administration.

Some researchers emphasize the need to use the position of a social moderator in special educational institutions to support the socialization of children with special needs (Mayhew et al., 2018). This idea is quite original, although it does not have sufficient empirical evidence. More reasonable are the views of those scholars who point to the need to counteract the motivation to bully as part of the fight against this phenomenon in general (Arifni & Firman, 2023). While the creation of separate administrative and pedagogical positions is more of a response to the consequences of the spread of bullying in student groups (Falla et al., 2021; Zhuravlova et al., 2021).

The proposed results also identify that strengthening communication and information exchange among teachers, parents, and school administrators is an important component of countering bullying. At the same time, the importance of training teachers and school psychologists to identify bullying in the early stages of its occurrence is also emphasized. At the same time, the problem of being overloaded with other tasks is a major obstacle, including in combating bullying in school groups. Respondents also noted the need to improve the level of training of teaching staff. The results correlate with the findings of other scholars that communication and discussion of the problem is an important step for its potential neutralization (Rochma, 2024; Charania et al., 2022). Therefore, an appropriate level of communication will allow for a prompt response to bullying, in particular at the early stages of its detection. Researchers also note that the heavy workload of teachers and school psychologists does not allow them to counteract bullying in a timely manner or to identify and remove the conditions for its occurrence (Boychuk et al., 2023; Milevska et al., 2022). This problem is universal and occurs in many educational institutions (Forber-Pratt et al., 2022; Abregú-Crespo et al., 2024). Some scholars suggest using digital teaching methods for children with special educational needs, which will significantly reduce contact with bullies (Drăghici, 2024). Such views are also still under-researched. In addition, bullying in the digital environment is an urgent problem for all age groups of students, which makes digital teaching methods a separate field for research experimentation.



Other scientists have drawn attention to the fact that ensuring effective counteraction to bullying requires innovative approaches, which include not only improving the qualification level of teaching staff but also creating conditions for reducing their professional workload (Oliinyk et al., 2023). One promising area may be the introduction of multidisciplinary support teams, which include specialists of various profiles and mediators (Pranintasari & Wachidah, 2021; Babych et al., 2022). In addition, it is advisable to develop a system of regular monitoring of the psychological climate in classrooms and the school environment as a whole, which will contribute to the timely identification of problems and intervention (Petrenko, 2021). Expanding social and emotional learning programs for students can also contribute to the formation of empathy, peaceful conflict resolution skills and responsible behavior (Schütz et al., 2022). Taken together, these measures can significantly increase the effectiveness of bullying prevention and provide a safe and supportive environment for all participants in the educational process. Moreover, in contrast to the generalized presentation, this section differentiated the responses according to the professional profile of the respondents. For example, it was shown that psychologists more often paid attention to the need to work with students' value orientations and empathy training. At the same time, teachers emphasized the lack of time and support. Parents demonstrated greater sensitivity to the issue of social isolation of children with special needs, and the administration more often mentioned the main difficulties in coordinating between services and implementing formalized procedures. This analysis avoids generalizations and emphasizes different perspectives on the problem depending on the role in the school community.

Therefore, although the study does not claim to create a new theory of bullying, it allows us to significantly expand the awareness of the problem in the context of inclusion. In particular, it demonstrates that bullying of children with special needs is the result not only of stereotypes or ignorance, but also of institutional helplessness - when the school lacks the resources or training to systematically counteract.

The methodology used in the study has certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the information obtained. First, it is important to emphasize the sample of 40 people, which allows us to outline general directions. Obviously, involving a larger number of respondents in the experiment would make it possible to clarify many aspects of determining the motivation of bullies' actions against children with special educational needs.

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify socio-psychological factors that stimulate bullying of children with special educational needs and formulate practical pedagogical strategies that can effectively prevent such behavior.

First, the results of the study confirm that the main social triggers of aggression were internalized behavioral patterns obtained from informal adolescent groups and the digital environment (in particular, social networks), where aggression and humiliation are often romanticized or normalized. This observation coincides with the results of previous studies in the field of digital socialization.

Second, the psychological complexity of bullying lies in the aggressors' desire for self-affirmation against the background of their own inability to social integration. The feeling of impunity, reinforced by passive or inadequate reactions of adults (parents, teachers), creates a favorable environment for repeated aggression.

At the same time, children with SEN often become victims due to limited self-defense abilities, atypical behavior, and difficulties in social adaptation. These features can increase the risk of stigmatization and complicate the timely detection of bullying.

An important contribution of this study is the establishment that the form of the educational institution (inclusive or specialized) is not a determining factor in risk. Instead, the cultural climate of the institution, the level of empathy in the school community, and the preparedness of the staff play a decisive role. This

vision is consistent with modern theories of the school environment as a social microcosm, where stable patterns of behavior are formed.

The study also identified a number of effective pedagogical interventions, including: 1. formation of a stable channel of communication between teachers, administration, and parents; 2. implementation of targeted training for students on developing empathy; 3. professional training of teachers and psychologists on early diagnosis of bullying; 4. group practices that facilitate the adaptation of children with SEN to the school environment.

The main limitation is the small sample size and the predominance of a qualitative approach, which does not allow for statistically valid generalizations. In addition, not all categories of respondents were represented evenly, and the use of self-reporting could have affected the sincerity of the answers.

However, this study made a significant contribution to the understanding of bullying as a systemic phenomenon, rooted not only in the behavioral attitudes of children, but also in the structural and organizational conditions of the educational environment. It also emphasizes that effective counteraction to bullying requires institutional responsibility, multidisciplinary interaction, and a change in the pedagogical paradigm towards inclusion.

In further research, it would be advisable to combine qualitative and quantitative methods to test the hypotheses put forward, as well as focus on a thorough comparative analysis of different school environments.

Declarations

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the author.

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Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and participant confidentiality.



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Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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Since the authors are not native speakers of English, which is their second language, this text has been linguistically optimized using an artificial intelligence-based tool (ChatGPT, OpenAI) and then carefully edited by experts in academic writing to ensure compliance with the standards of scientific English.

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