Research Article

Student-led strategies to counter bullying in inclusive schools for learners with special needs

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ABSTRACT

The literature supports that bullying is one of the significant psychological factors that hinder the successful implementation of inclusive education. The current study explores bullying interventions employed by special needs students in inclusive education settings in Pakistan. The study applied ecological systems, social learning, and social cognitive theories, highlighting the interplay of individual agency and socio-cultural context. The design of the present study was phenomenological. Twelve bullied students aged 12-16 participated in semi-structured interviews to identify strategies used to cope with and counter bullying. Thematic analysis revealed three main intervention approaches: peer support, self-advocacy, and avoidance. Findings illustrate the critical role of friendships, assertive communication, and withdrawal tactics. Family and teacher support, school environment, and prevailing social stigma significantly influenced students' intervention efforts. The results highlight the need for culturally informed, holistic anti-bullying interventions empowering special needs students and strengthening peer networks. This research fills gaps in the Pakistani context and guides inclusive education policies and practices.

Keywords: bullying interventions; special needs students; inclusive education; quality education; peer support

1. Introduction

Bullying in school is a serious social phenomenon that negatively impacts the physical, emotional, and academic health of students across the globe [1,2]. Students with special needs in inclusive learning institutions are especially susceptible to bullying because they are viewed as different and find difficulty in socializing with others [3]. The experiences of special needs students regarding bullying and interventions they use have not been well studied in Pakistan. This is why inclusive education has not yet been fully implemented. The

knowledge and intervention on bullying in a developing country are relevant in this case to promote safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments that allow every student to learn [4].

Against this backdrop, where resources are scarce, the government seeks to fulfill the dream of inclusive education. A few cases of students with special needs were studied. They were found to be experiencing several psychological factors. Bullying is one of those actions that is also known as a recurring aggressive action that is deliberately aimed at a weaker person, including physical, verbal, social, and web-based forms [5-7]. Research has shown that students with disabilities experience more cases of bullying than those without disabilities [8,9]. There are cultural norms, social stigma, and a lack of appropriate awareness that promote bullying of special needs students in Pakistan. Besides, even though diversity should be encouraged, inclusive classes do not always have impeccable designs to avoid or effectively respond to bullying [10].

Current studies in a resource-based nation, such as Pakistan, designate how peer support, teacher intervention, and school policies play a crucial role in reducing bullying [11]. Nevertheless, the interventions and strategies tailored to the Pakistani educational sector and the needs of special needs students in inclusive environments are not well-developed. Sohanjana Antibullying Intervention is an example of a culturally specific intervention created to target Pakistani teachers. It mainly targets general student groups, and it does not place much importance on special needs students and their active participation in intervention activities [12].

The current research will bridge this gap by investigating interventions of bullying used by special needs students in the inclusive education environment in Lahore, Pakistan. There are several ways and coping strategies that special needs students use to cope with bullying, and these have not been adequately recorded or examined within the local context [13,14]. But more productive, inclusive anti-bullying policies and practices can be achieved by identifying and knowing these self-initiated interventions, in addition to institutional supports. The present study aims at helping to help make education settings safe and more empowering and inclusive by paying attention to the voices and experiences of the students who are directly involved.

The current research is guided by the socio-cultural facts of the educational institution of Pakistan, such as gender dynamics, the visibility of disability, and peer interactions that influence the bullying experience and the effectiveness of interventions [9]. An in-depth study will provide essential clarifications on how special needs students overcome bullying in their peer groups and classrooms, and how schools can reinforce such endeavors. The objective of the study was to investigate the interventions used by special needs students in the inclusive learning environment in Pakistan to reduce bullying and to determine the factors affecting the outcomes of these interventions.

1.1. Research questions

The current study was guided by the following two research questions, which were developed based on the gaps in the literature from a resource-constrained country such as Pakistan.

1. What types of bullying interventions do special needs students employ in inclusive classrooms in Pakistan?

2. How do socio-cultural and educational factors in Pakistan influence the bullying interventions applied by special needs students in inclusive education?

2. Literature review

Bullying among special needs students in inclusive education has gained increasing attention globally, with several studies highlighting the increased vulnerability of these students to various forms of bullying, including physical aggression, verbal abuse, social exclusion, and cyberbullying [8,15,16]. Pakistan is a resource-constrained country that spends a very minor amount on the education sector, and its educational institutions face particular challenges due to socio-cultural factors, lack of awareness, and limited resources, which exacerbate the risks for special needs students in inclusive classrooms.

The concept of inclusive education is still new to Pakistani mainstream school teachers. Thus, they are not very aware of the challenges associated with the implementation of inclusive education. Bullying of special needs students is a recognized global challenge impacting inclusive education effectiveness worldwide. Studies conducted in different settings around the world have documented that students with disabilities are more victimized than their peers without disabilities [17,18]. As an example, research in a variety of educational settings indicates that such students are at greater risk of verbal harassment, physical violence, and social exclusion in mainstream classrooms [19,20]. This form of victimization has adverse impacts on their academic performance, mental health, and general social integration [21].

Various models of intervention have been established globally to reduce bullying. Bullying prevention programs such as KiVa focus on abilities to empower bystanders, develop peer support, and develop teacher involvement, which means that the incidence of bullying can be reduced dramatically [22,23]. The programs integrate social learning and ecological approaches through treating individual, peer, school, and community factors that contribute to bullying behaviors. Adaptation to local cultural, social, and educational contexts, however, is also essential to succeed because bullying manifestations and effective interventions are different in various societies [24,25]. Literature, therefore, shows a need to adopt specific, multi-level strategies to help victims, educate their peers, and involve them in schools and families to develop inclusive, respectful settings. The findings provide a theoretical and practical background on the investigation into the interventions against bullying in the context of the inclusive education system in Pakistan where socio-cultural factors pose specific challenges and opportunities related to intervention.

One of the studies found that gender, disability type, and school environment play a role in determining the prevalence of bullying in Pakistani special education [26]. Boys who can be visibly disabled are more victimized than girls, and visible disability usually becomes a catalyst for bullying. These findings are consistent with international studies that show physical visibility of a disability is associated with higher chances of being victimized [27,28].

Since its emergence, Pakistan is experiencing a number of problems. Therefore, it puts in little investment in education. Nonetheless, its socio-cultural background is influential in determining the dynamics of bullying. Misconceptions and stigma of disabilities usually lead to social isolation or even negative peer interactions [29]. In addition, Pakistani schools often do not have extensive anti-bullying policies or anti-bullying training targeting special needs students specifically [30,31]. Teacher-based interventions such as the Sohanjana Antibullying Intervention have been promising in dealing with general bullying but require adjustment in order to confront the special needs of students [12].

These interventions can be classified as those that are facilitated by an adult (e.g., teacher, school counselor) and those that are caused by peers or students. Interventions involving students in the process of bullying prevention, where they actively encourage or intervene in bullying situations, have been proven to transform bullying patterns and create supportive school conditions [32]. The case of the KiVa and Step to Respect interventions depicts that involvement of bystanders and empowering victims can ease the bullying

cases [33]. Yet, most of the programs are taught in a Western oriented setting and need to be adapted to Pakistani culture.

Self-help initiatives of special needs students, including asking peers to support them, using coping mechanisms, or establishing boundaries assertively, are under-researched in Pakistan. This knowledge of the ways in which these students work around bullying can help us know how resilient they are and how informal support networks exist in inclusive classes [9,34].

Furthermore, inclusive education policies in Pakistan are crucial. Pakistan's inclusive education agenda aims to increase school access for students with disabilities. It also aims to provide appropriate and suitable accommodations and safer learning environments for such students. However, in practice, implementation is uneven and contradicts the policy agenda. Schools face limited specialist support, weak monitoring, and low disability awareness. These barriers can increase bullying risk and reduce reporting, especially for learners with visible or functional differences. Thus, such students typically do not support bullying incidents [35,36]. Although the purpose of inclusion is to bring the special needs students into regular classrooms, they are usually left vulnerable because the support structures are not sufficient [19,37]. This gap in policy intentions and implementation brings out the necessity of specific bullying interventions that allow the special needs students to have power and engage in active participation.

Bystanders are a very important point in the bullying chain since they usually observe bullying and do not take any action. Research indicates that in Pakistan, bystanders would be less prone to report or intervene because of cultural beliefs or fear of retaliation [38]. Intervention effectiveness can be increased by training peers to identify and prevent bullying.

The literature mentions the intricacy of bullying through special needs students in inclusive education, conditioned by disability-related conditions, cultural inclinations, and school settings in Pakistan. The most effective interventions involve a holistic treatment of teacher training, peer empowerment, and the development of student self-efficacy based on the socio-cultural realities. The study is a contribution to the gap observed in policy, practice, and lived experiences of inclusive education in Pakistan, since the study specifically discusses the interventions used by special needs students in order to provide a bridging gap between policy, practice, and lived experiences of inclusive education in Pakistan.

3. Theoretical framework

The present research is carried out among special needs students and is based on the ecological systems theory, social learning theory, and social cognitive theory. Such theories can be applied to study the nature of bullying interventions by special needs students in inclusive learning. The ecological systems theory assumes that behavior is influenced by a sequence of interacting environmental systems such as immediate sources like peers and family to bigger societal systems and cultural systems [39]. The interpretation is significant in determining how the school climate, peer relationships, and cultural norms in Pakistan relate to bullying of special needs students and how to intervene.

The social learning theory is concentrated on learning by observing, imitation and modeling [40]. According to this theory, intervention measures against bullying can be adopted by special needs students through observation of peers, teachers, or the media. The two important aspects in the given theory, positive reinforcement and peer support, contribute toward minimizing the bullying behaviors and informing students about the way to intervene or cope with. In the same way, the social cognitive theory is constructed on top of social learning; the theorist adds the concept of self-efficacy in the ability to behave in many different situations. Improvement of self-efficacy by special needs students is a very crucial step to effective

intervention of bullying [41]. The combination of such theories shapes bullying as a socially-based phenomenon with the support systems and this view fits the realities of inclusive education in Pakistan.

4. Methods

4.1. Research design

The research philosophy used in the present study was interpretivism. It used a qualitative research design to develop a deep insight into bullying interventions that special needs students put into practice in inclusive educational establishments in Pakistan. The researchers used a phenomenological research design to learn the inner details of the underlying phenomenon. The design was especially appropriate in researching complicated social constructs like bullying, where the lived experiences, perceptions, and voices of the participants were captured [42]. The research involves open-ended, versatile data collection methods in an attempt to learn about the coping and intervention strategies that students employ in case of bullying situations, placed in perspective within the socio-cultural setting of Pakistani schools

4.2. Participants

The participants in the current study were the special needs students in secondary and elementary level mainstream schools in the Lahore district. Lahore is the capital of Punjab province. The researchers chose 12 special needs students in the urban centers in Pakistan for inclusive education classes. These students were specifically chosen based on their experiences of being bullied by their normal schoolmates. Out of these 12 participants, six were boys, and the other six were girls. They were all having special learning needs according to their physical or psychological capacity. The researchers attempted to represent different types of disabilities and both sexes to express different views. The age of the participants was 12-16 years. It is an age group that is highly identified with peer interactions and exposure to bullying [43,44]. Students' and parents' consent was received before taking part. The researchers used purposive sampling to understand and include variation in gender, age, grade level, and disability type. Disability type was recorded based on school documentation and parent/teacher confirmation. The researchers focused on the representation of common profiles in inclusive classrooms rather than on statistical comparison [35].

4.3. Instrumentation

For data collection, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview guide. The data were gathered in face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which gave the participants the opportunity to narrate their experiences and views at will and offer them a coherent set of comparative tools. The interview guide was created after reviewing the literature on bullying and consulting the experts in the field of inclusive education and psychology. The researchers piloted the interview guide with two students who matched the study age range and learning profiles. These students were not included in the final sample of the current study. The authors asked them to restate each question in their own words. The authors revised the wording and question order based on clarity and comfort [45]. The sample questions included: Can you describe an experience when you were bullied at school? What did you do to respond to or stop the bullying? Have you received any support from teachers, friends, or family in dealing with bullying? How do you think other students respond when they see bullying happening? What should schools do to help students like you who face bullying? The semi-structured format facilitated probing and follow-up questions to explore emerging themes.

4.4. Data collection

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participants' schools in a quiet and private setting to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-

recorded with permission for accuracy. The researchers ensured simple, clear language and culturally appropriate communication strategies to accommodate participants' needs. The researchers used short questions that focused on one idea at a time. The authors allowed extra time and breaks when participants asked. The authors used visual prompts when helpful. The researchers accepted responses through speaking, writing, or pointing. If a student needed communication support, a trained support person provided minimal prompting. Field notes were also taken to understand non-verbal cues and contextual details.

4.5. Data analysis

After collecting data, the co-authors immediately transcribed it. The transcriptions were read again and again and validated with the recorded interviews. These transcriptions were read multiple times for familiarization. Initial codes were generated inductively to understand significant features related to the participants' bullying interventions. Two coders independently coded 10 transcripts (about 90% of the dataset). The researchers compared coding and resolved differences through discussion. The authors updated the codebook before coding the remaining transcripts. The agreement was estimated using Cohen's kappa. These codes were then organized into broader themes reflecting patterns across the dataset. The analysis was iterative, involving constant comparison within and between transcripts to refine themes. Member checking was conducted with a subset of participants to validate interpretations.

4.6. Research ethics

The current study was approved by the ethics committee of the School Education Department, Government of Punjab. The principles that were discussed in the Declaration of Helsinki were observed. To safeguard the rights of the participants and their well-being, the study was conducted according to strict ethical principles. It was on a volunteer basis and there was a right to withdraw without punishment. Anonymity of data ensured confidentiality which was upheld by storing recordings and transcripts with passwords. The researchers included information about counseling and support services that the participants can receive considering the sensitivity of bullying. Several measures were also made to ensure that the interview process caused no distress such as pausing or ending of the sessions. Informed consent was obtained from the parents of such students. The researchers also obtained assent from each student. For students with cognitive disabilities, we used a supported-assent process. We read a short assent script aloud in simple language. We checked understanding using a brief teach-back question. We reminded students that they could pause or stop at any time [45]. A staff member was available nearby for safety. They were not in the room unless the student requested support.

5. Results

After collecting the data through semi-structured interviews, it was transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. To address the research questions, the data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis framework [46]. Two main themes emerged, reflecting the bullying interventions applied by special needs students and the contextual factors influencing these interventions. Each theme consists of three sub-themes. The coding process is summarized in **Table 1**, and the thematic map illustrating themes and sub-themes is shown in **Figure 1**.

Table 1. Coding Process

Stage	Description	Application Examples
1. Familiarization	Immersing in transcripts through repeated readings.	Listening to and reading participants' interviews multiple times.
2. Generating codes	Initial codes identifying meaningful data segments.	Codes like "seeking peer help", "assertive communication".
3. Searching themes	Grouping codes into broader patterns (sub-themes).	Organizing codes into "Peer support" and "Self-advocacy"
4. Reviewing themes	Refining themes by reviewing data coherence.	Combining overlapping codes under "Avoidance Strategies"
5. Defining themes	Naming and finalizing themes and sub-themes.	Final themes are "Intervention Strategies" and "Contextual Factors".
6. Producing a report	Writing results integrating data extracts and interpretations.	Developing a narrative around theme findings.

Table 1 provides details of the coding process following Braun and Clarke's [46] six stages. **Figure 1** provides details of identified themes and sub-themes.

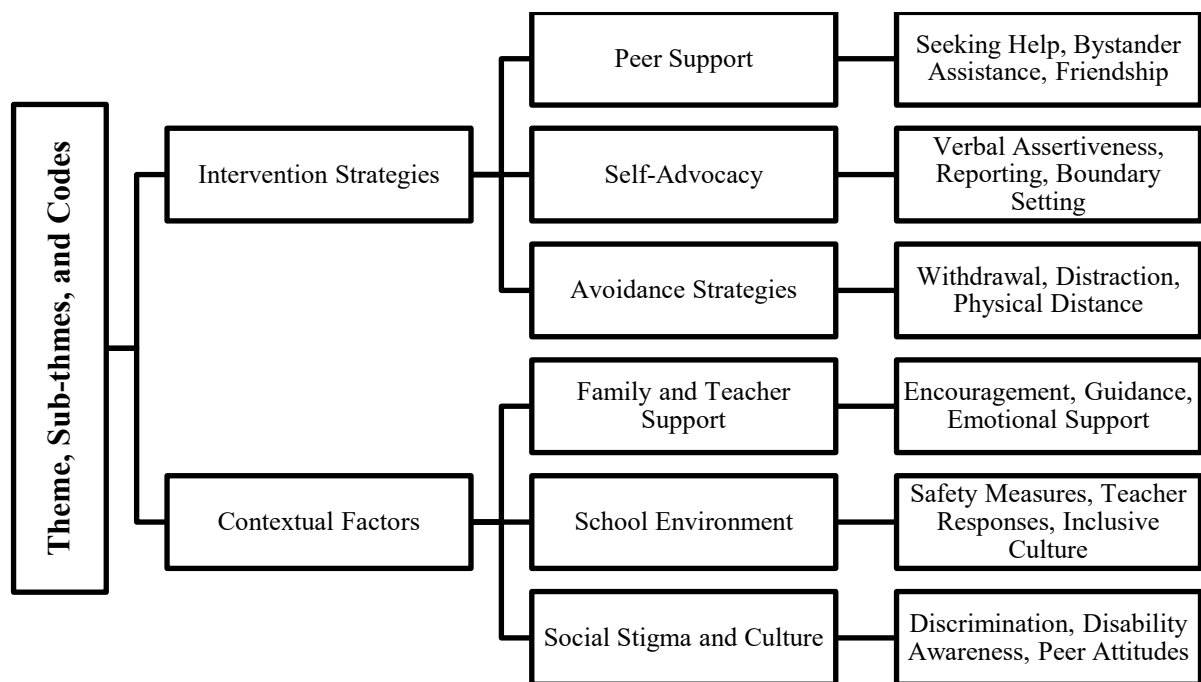**Figure 1**. Themes and Sub-themes of the Study

Figure 1 provides details of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interview data, which are explained below.

Theme 1: Intervention Strategies

Theme 1 has the following sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1.1: Peer Support

To answer Research Question 1 about the types of bullying interventions special needs students employ, the data were analyzed, and from the data, we emerged this sub-theme: Peer Support. The codes identified from participant responses were seeking peer help, reliance on bystanders to intervene, and the importance of

friendships as protective buffers. These describe how participants often leverage peer networks to counter bullying. In response to the questions, the participants responded like,

"When others start teasing me, I usually look for my friends to stand next to me because they make the bullies stop. I feel safe with them (P4)."

"Sometimes, classmates who see someone bullying me come and tell the teacher. That makes the bullies quiet quickly (P9)."

- *"My friends also attempt to protect me in case somebody says something bad. We even play together, thus I am not alone as much (P1)."*

- *"When I get annoyed by another person, I seek the assistance of a classmate. In some occasions, they confront the bully and explain to them to quit it (P7)."*

"Good friends are better than having none. It feels like having those who are supporting and protecting you (P12)."

The responses above show that peer support is an effective and timely intervention of bullied special needs students. Friends offer emotional security, become allies against bullies, and help bystanders to report cases. This implies that peer empathy and active bystander behavior as interventions can reinforce inclusive education settings.

Sub-theme 1.2: Self-Advocacy

The other sub-theme was Self-Advocacy, which is the strategies where participants take the initiative of themselves to react to bullying. The codes consist of speaking out, reporting bullying to the teachers, and defining personal boundaries. The respondents responded to interview questions such as,

"When somebody teases me, I tell him or her to stop in a high-tone voice. I tell them I do not like it and keep off of me (P3)."

"It is sometimes I tell the teacher what happened because I want the problem to be over (P11)."

"I attempt to address the bully and tell them that I would not like to play when he/she is mean to me (P6)."

"To my classmates, I ask them in a nice and firm manner not to refer to me by names. Sometimes they listen (P5)."

"I also clarify that I am upset and request other people to leave me alone (P10)."

These reactions show that a good number of special needs students will seek to take control by confronting bullies verbally or through the intervention of adults. Self-advocacy disclosed the agency and empowerment of students and may be influenced by their confidence or even fear of retaliation. It means that communication skills should be developed and a favorable environment provided.

Sub-theme 1.3: Avoidance Strategies

The third sub-theme that was generated out of the data was the one that was correlated to the intervention strategies. The strategies involve giving up of bullying situations, distraction, and keeping off bullies at a physical distance. The participants were also asked various questions and in response, they answered such questions as, Whenever I see a peer bullying me at school, I would avoid staying with it, and by any means possible.

"The academic activities cannot be avoided, yet, I have to cope with a distance (P2)."

"I do not want any bigger trouble, so at times I remain silent and walk away when a person laughs at me (P8)."

"I believe that I think about other things or play with toys to forget when people are mean (P5)."

"I do not sit with students who play tricks on me to make me angry (P1)."

"In case of trouble, I go to the teacher and find some peace in his room or library until things settle down (P9)."

These quotations depict that avoidance is a similar coping strategy among students with special needs who have experienced bullying. Such responses show that avoiding may reduce immediate harm and reliance. However, avoidance can increase social isolation and impede inclusion. Thus, teachers and bullied students should understand these strategies that can help them develop more proactive support.

Theme 2: Contextual Factors

Theme 2 has the following three sub-themes.

Sub-theme 2.1: Family and Teacher Support

To address the study's second research question, the researchers asked various questions regarding the contextual factors. They answered various points of view regarding socio-cultural and educational factors influencing bullying interventions. This sub-theme provides details on the role of family and teacher involvement. The researchers identified several codes, such as emotional encouragement, guidance on bullying, and support network facilitation. A few of their responses are listed below.

"I have family support and my mother always encourages me to stand strong and talk to teachers if anyone bothers me (P6)."

"Teachers listen to me and sometimes stop the bullies when I tell them (P10)."

"My family always encourages me in sad situations. They ask me not to feel sad and to make friends to help me (P3)."

"When I feel upset in class, I often talk to my teacher, which helps me feel better (P7)."

"Sometimes, if I am more tense, my parents come to school to talk about my problems so teachers know and help (P11)."

The participants mentioned various aspects regarding the support they received from their teachers and family members. These responses indicate that family and teacher support are crucial in empowering students to intervene or seek help. The researchers witnessed that emotional backing strengthens students' confidence and encourages active coping.

Sub-theme 2.2: School Environment

The responses to the second research question are also discussed in this sub-theme. It is a reflection of the effect of school climate, safety, and teacher response on intervention opportunities. The codes identified by the authors included the existence of safety measures, teacher vigilance, and inclusive atmosphere. The answers of the participants are given below.

"It is good because at my school there are policies preventing any kind of bullying, and teachers encourage us to be nice (P4)."

"In the event that a teacher notices any form of bullying, including bad names, physical or psychological, etc., he or she will come to stop it (P8)."

"Even when the attitude of peers is negative, I believe my classroom is safe since everyone is taught to respect each other (P12)."

"We hold character building activities on Fridays on how to be nice to whoever we interact with (P2)."

"In cases of bullying, or when students report about it, the school personnel discuss the issue with the students to correct the situation (P5)."

The responses of the participants above are regarding the school and classroom setting. These reactions demonstrate that a favorable school climate where the anti-bullying policies are clear and the teachers are involved in the process makes intervening with students and minimizing the risk of bullying possible. The encouragement of the inclusive culture facilitates the safety and empowerment of special needs students.

Sub-theme 2.3: Social Stigma and Culture

The answer to the second research question is also provided in the current sub-theme. This sub-theme entails the views of the participants with regards to social stigma and culture. It discusses wider societal and cultural factors that are associated with disability stigma, peer attitudes, and discrimination that affect bullying relationships. When the participants were asked about the present sub-theme they gave answers such as, I have observed that we have students who lack the understanding of our special needs and problems.

"They tease us with offensive language (P9)."

"People have frequently referred to me as a bad name or even said bad things since they believe that being different is wrong. (P1)"

"Some of my classmates do not wish to play with me due to my disability, which prevents me to run and play with them (P7)."

"People here are not aware much on how to treat special students well (P11)."

"Yes, it makes me sad. I am lonely at other times as other people do not accept me. I have changed, yet they do not realize me as an individual person (P10)."

Based on the above reactions of special needs students, it is evident that the students revealed the social stigma, which is deeply rooted as a source of peer acceptance and propagation of bullying behaviors. Nevertheless, cultural attitudes need to be touched upon to enhance the inclusiveness better, and enhancing the experiences of the special needs students cannot be done without the awareness about disability. The findings indicate that there is a complicated relationship between personal tactics and the situational factors that have an impact on bullying intervention by special needs students in Pakistani inclusive schooling. This combination aligns with ecological systems theory. Social stigma operates at the macro level. It normalizes exclusion and reduces peer empathy. This can weaken school-level protections, even when rules are in place. Family support functions at the micro level. It helps students persist with reporting and coping, even when stigma discourages help-seeking. Peer support and self-advocacy have emerged as key internal resources, while family, teachers, school policy, and cultural attitudes critically modulate intervention effectiveness and safety.

6. Discussion

The current qualitative research was aimed at investigating the interventions of bullying used by special needs children in inclusive education contexts in Pakistan. The aim was to define the socio-cultural and educational aspects that affect such interventions. The respondents were interviewed (semi-structured) to gather information on 12 respondents. Upon analysis, it was found that a combination of peer support, self-

advocacy, and avoidance strategies is used by the special needs students as strategies of coping with bullying. Moreover, their efforts in intervention are greatly influenced by family and teacher support, school environment, the existing social stigma, and cultural attitudes.

The current study was based on two research questions. The findings in the first research question showed that peer support plays a huge role in dealing with the effects of bullying. This observation was in line with the results of the earlier studies, which establish that the protective factors are friendships and assistance, which help such students to repel bullying and feel safer emotionally [33,44]. The results complete the literature gap and empirically prove the need for special needs students as allies in the general classroom in the Lahore district. Similarly, self-advocacy strategies such as verbal assertiveness and reporting are a reflection of international statistics that provide students with the capacity to address bullying [47]. However, the Pakistani situation may impose some limits on these efforts because of the cultural issues of respect and hierarchy and the fear of being retaliated. The switch to avoidance strategies is in line with the international research, which identified withdrawal and physical distancing as general yet potentially isolating coping processes [28].

The second research question was designed to respond to the effects of socio-cultural and educational determinants. The existing qualitative studies prove the importance of family and teacher assistance as the conditioners of effective bullying interventions [48]. The report channels and emotional reinforcement are provided by the family and teachers, which are in tandem with the ecological systems theory that lays an emphasis on interactions within the immediate social settings [39].

Good school climates with well-documented policies on anti-bullying and responsive teachers were also essential, confirming past criticisms of the poor inclusion records of Pakistani schools [30]. The current study's findings can strengthen the Sohanjana Anti-bullying Intervention by adding a disability-focused layer. First, the peer-training module can include short content on disability respect and inclusive language. Second, it can train peers to offer safe support to bullied students with disabilities. Third, it can teach teachers how to scaffold student self-advocacy in culturally acceptable ways. This aligns with the Sohanjana implementation evidence and whole-school capacity work [12,48].

The present research contributes to knowledge on the widespread presence of social stigma and cultural impediments, which make intervention challenging. The experiences of discrimination and peer exclusion by participants are consistent with the existing literature on the subject of disability stigma in Pakistan, highlighting the necessity of awareness creation and cultural shift [49-51]. The results confirm that such theoretical perspectives as social learning and social cognitive theories can be used in this case. Students acquire the modeled peer and adult responses to learn intervention behaviors and have the self-efficacy to get involved in assertive actions, but socio-cultural restrictions might influence their confidence. Comparing the findings of the current study to prior research that is mostly done in a Western setting in the global context, it was discovered that the current study provides valuable Pakistan-specific knowledge [28,33].

But, unlike them, we also pointed out some challenges, such as increased cultural stigma and less institutional support, that limit the capability of students to depend on formal interventions only. Consequently, the informal peer support, networks, and self-initiated strategies have a more significant role. It indicates the importance of culturally sensitive anti-bullying programs that empower special needs students and their peers. In addition, this phenomenological study justifies the relevance of the earlier literature, showing that bullying interventions for special needs students in inclusive education are complex and contextual. However, they work effectively when integrated with ecological, social learning, and cognitive

theories, which rely on grounded cultural knowledge, which is a general guideline in designing effective interventions in Pakistani schools.

7. Conclusion

Bullying is one of the major issues that influence the success of inclusive education. The present qualitative research examines the bullying interventions implemented by the special needs students in the inclusive education in Pakistan showing a complicated interaction between personal strategies and the context factors. The findings indicate that students employ peer support, self-advocacy, and avoidance to manage bullying experiences. Peer relationships emerge as crucial protective factors, providing emotional safety and bystander assistance. Self-advocacy highlights students' agency to confront bullying despite cultural barriers, while avoidance reflects coping in environments where confrontation may risk escalation. The study highlights the instrumental role of family encouragement and teacher responsiveness in empowering students, consistent with ecological systems theory emphasizing proximal influencers. Positive school climates with anti-bullying policies and an inclusive culture further facilitate intervention efforts. However, the pervasive social stigma surrounding disability in Pakistan poses significant challenges, affecting peer attitudes and acceptance, which can exacerbate bullying experiences. These findings advocate for holistic, culturally grounded approaches to bullying prevention that elevate student voices, strengthen peer networks, train educators in responsive interventions, and engage families. Disability awareness and cultural change are important to make education environments safer and more inclusive. The current study provides useful evidence on bullying intervention in inclusive education and helps develop policies and practice in the future by providing valuable evidence within the Pakistani context.

8. Implications

Some implications of the current study were evident in terms of practice, theory, research, and policy. As an illustration, teachers and school leaders have been advised to focus on instituting peer support systems that will enable students to be active bystanders and help bullied special needs students. Teacher training on how to sense bullying and in order to respond sensitively can improve the safety of the students. Family involvement programs are also required in strengthening both intervention strategies at home and school. This paper confirms the usefulness of ecological systems, social learning and social cognitive theories in the context of Pakistani education, with focused on the interaction of individual agency and environmental factors. These theories are further developed by the findings as they identified cultural factors affecting intervention effectiveness. According to the findings, further studies are recommended to examine the long-term efficacy of particular peer- and self-advocacy-based interventions in Pakistan and how the issue of gender and disability type influences intervention selection. Mixed-method research can be used to have quantitative validation as well as qualitative depth. In addition, policymakers are proposed to come up with holistic anti-bullying policies which require teacher training, inclusive curricula and disability awareness. The special needs students should be empowered by having support structures and reporting mechanisms that are readily available and culture sensitive.

9. Limitations and future directions

Although the present study has a number of implications, it has its limitations as well. To example, the qualitative nature of the study and the small sample size of 12 participants presented in the study restricts the relevance of the results to a wide range of regions and disability groups in Pakistan. The resources and culture of schools in cities might not be the same as they are in rural settings which were not considered. The

self-report interviews have a high level of social desirability bias and recall which may underrepresent more extreme episodes of bullying or those interventions that fail. These limitations can be overcome in future research by incorporating bigger and more versatile samples that consider a variety of provinces and rural schools to learn about a greater contextual variation. The longitudinal designs might follow up any change in interventional strategies with time and determine results. A combination of the teacher, parent, and peer perspectives would give a complete picture of the dynamic of bullying and the success of intervention. There is a need to have experimental research that tests culturally adapted interventions to form evidence-based practices of Pakistani inclusive education.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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