



PEER BULLYING AND COPING STRATEGIES IN CHILDREN: INSIGHTS FROM MAINSTREAM PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

While peer bullying has become one of the most critical issues that today's education systems must address, the bullying experiences of primary school children and their coping strategies remain insufficiently understood. The present study sought to explore in depth whether mainstream primary school students are exposed to peer bullying and, if so, how they cope with this problem. Interviews were held with 13 Turkish primary school students (Mage=10.76), the majority of whom were victims, and one of them was a bully. The study group consisted of nine boys (Mage=10.88) and four girls (Mage=10.5). Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. Among participants, physical bullying is experienced the most. It is followed by verbal and emotional bullying. No sexual bullying case was reported. Victims employed various coping strategies, most of which were individual-oriented, such as ignoring the bullying or warning the bullies. However, the most frequently reported strategies were adult-oriented, particularly involving class teachers. Familial (e.g., parental divorce), psychological (e.g., feelings of maternal abandonment), and socio-economic (e.g., financial hardship) challenges may underlie the emergence of bullying behaviours.

Keywords: behaviour problems, children, coping strategies, peer bullying, primary school

Introduction

According to the most recent report published by UNICEF, around half of 13-15-year-old students (approximately 150 million students) all over the world are exposed to peer bullying in and around schools (UNICEF, 2018). Many definitions addressing the various aspects of "bullying" have been produced over decades. Bullying is defined as a form of aggressive behaviour that intentionally and repeatedly causes harm and distress to another person over time, involving an observed or perceived power imbalance (APA, 2022; Gladden et al., 2014; Gutiérrez et al., 2008). Olweus (1994) emphasized that bullying refers to the repeated and prolonged exposure to negative actions, whether physical, verbal, or psychological. Glew et al. (2008) defined bullying as any repetitive negative activity or aggression aimed at harming or disturbing someone who is perceived as physically or psychologically weak by the aggressor peer. Consequently, there is a consensus that bullying behaviour includes three defining characteristics: the action must be intentional and continuous, it involves an imbalance of power, and it harms the victim verbally, physically, or psychologically.

It is important to clarify the distinction between aggression and bullying in the literature. Bullying is characterized by three core elements: intentionality, repetition, and an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1994; Smith, 1997). While aggression may be a single or occasional act of harm, bullying involves systematic and repeated harm directed from a more powerful individual to a

less powerful victim. This conceptual clarity is essential to avoid confusing general aggressive acts with bullying behaviours, which require specific criteria to be met.

On the other hand, the victims often struggle to defend themselves and feel helpless against peer bullying. To consider a behaviour as bullying, it must be deliberately intended to cause harm, it must be persistent, and there must be an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim. Therefore, peer bullying commonly includes physical contact (*i.e.*, *kicking, pulling hair, hitting*), verbal teasing (*i.e.*, *swearing, nicknaming*), making obscene gestures (*i.e.*, *touching their private parts*), and deliberately excluding others from a group. (Graham, 2016; Mapes et al., 2020; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Rigby, 2003; Smith, 1997).

Individuals who initiate and perpetuate bullying behaviour are defined as bullies. Because they often have poor problem-solving skills, they tend to externalize their internal problems (Sarzoza & Urzua, 2021). In general, the bullies have low academic achievement and take pleasure in inflicting pain and harm on their victims. Their lack of empathy also contributes to the development of defence mechanisms that justify their behaviour, often by blaming the victim for provoking the situation (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; van Noorden et al., 2015). In addition, such students are often antisocial children who tend to disobey school rules (Gürhan, 2017). Bullying can cause psychological, social, or educational harm or distress to the victim, and it may result in victims becoming more isolated from their environment day by day. Peer bullying, which can occur both in school and out of school, can also cause victims to feel powerless, intimidated, and humiliated, and can lead to low academic achievement (Feyzi Sezen & Murat, 2018; Uysal & Dinçer, 2012).

Peer bullying is considered to be an important issue at any grade of primary school, with serious consequences for both bullies and victims (Salmivalli, 2010; Zerillo & Osterman, 2011). This is because bullying among school-age adolescents affects their well-being, social functioning, and health status (Humphrey & Crisp, 2008; Gürhan, 2017; Nansel et al., 2001). To prevent bullying in schools and to provide solutions, it is important to examine the underlying factors of bullying in depth, both in terms of the bullies and the victims because bullying behaviours that are ignored or disregarded can result in victims being constantly targeted and harassed which can have lifelong consequences for them (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Although many studies (Adalar Çelenk & Yıldızlar, 2019; Arslan et al., 2012; Cheraghi & Pişkin, 2011; Çarkıt & Bacanlı, 2020; Gladden, et al., 2014; Gutiérrez et al., 2008; Karabacak et al., 2015; Öztürk et al., 2019) examining peer bullying among Turkish adolescents and youth, there is a notable lack of research examining bullying behaviours in primary schools. Only one study (Eroğlu & Kılıç, 2020) was found in the literature that dealt with peer bullying behaviour among primary school children with autism spectrum disorder. However, the question of whether there is a problem of peer bullying among Turkish mainstream primary school students remains unanswered. Therefore, the present study aimed to fill this gap by examining in depth whether mainstream primary school students are exposed to peer bullying and, if so, how they try to cope with this problem.

Although several studies have explored peer bullying among Turkish adolescents, the literature significantly lacks detailed, qualitative investigations of bullying experiences among mainstream primary school children. Unlike prior research, which predominantly relied on quantitative data or focused on adolescents or children with special needs, the present study employs a qualitative, in-depth approach to explore the lived experiences of bullying and coping strategies among typically developing primary school students. By doing so, this research not only addresses an understudied population but also offers rich, contextual insights that can inform more developmentally appropriate prevention and intervention strategies for younger children. In this regard, the following questions were attempted to be answered.

- Q1. What types of peer bullying situations are seen among the participants?
- Q2. What kind of coping strategies were utilized by bullied participants?
- Q3. What are the reasons for peer bullying?

Research Methodology

Design

In the study, a case study design, one of the qualitative research designs, was employed. The aim of the case study is to obtain comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about the examined case (Patton, 2015). The present study, conducted during the 2023-2024 academic year, aimed to explore as comprehensively and deeply as possible the types of peer bullying experienced by primary school children and the coping strategies they employed.

Participants

In the present study, a criterion sampling method was utilized to recruit the participants. Being a bully, victim or both were considered as criteria. Participants were selected based on the interview conducted with the class teacher. Since she had been teaching the students for four years, it was assumed that she had decent experience with them. As a result, 13 Turkish primary school students, aged 10 to 12 ($M_{age} = 10.76$), studying in the fourth grade, were recruited. The study group consisted of nine boys ($M_{age} = 10.88$) and four girls ($M_{age} = 10.5$). Similarly, studies (Obregon-Cuesta et al., 2022; Sarzosa & Urzúa, 2021) reported that bullying behaviours are more prevalent among boys compared to girls. All students except one had pre-school education, and their parents live together. A student did not have a pre-school education, and his parents live separately. All participants' parents were alive. Participants were informed about the study and assured that their participation was completely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage of the research if they wished. Written consent form was obtained from the parents of the children.

Measurement Tool

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews as they provide a flexible yet focused framework to explore the participants' subjective experiences of bullying and their coping strategies in depth. This method allows researchers to probe beyond surface-level responses, enabling children to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences in their own words—an especially valuable approach when working with younger participants. Given that bullying is a sensitive and complex phenomenon that may vary across contexts and individuals, the use of semi-structured interviews was deemed suitable for eliciting rich, nuanced data aligned with the study's exploratory goals.

A semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers and a personal information form were used to collect data. To create the interview form, relevant literature and assessment tools were reviewed, and the created draft form was reviewed by three field experts (two field experts and one assessment and evaluation specialist). The draft form was revised in line with the feedback of field experts and re-sent for their approval. After approval, the semi-structured interview form was finalised. The data regarding the students' demographic information and the variables (*i.e.*, age, gender, parental status [alive/dead or married/divorced], having pre-school education) that are thought to influence peer bullying or coping strategies were gathered through the personal information form.

To ensure conceptual clarity, the semi-structured interview questions were designed to capture the key features of bullying—intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance. Participants were asked not only to describe the incidents but also to clarify their frequency and their perceived ability to respond (*e.g.*, *Did this happen just once or did it happen multiple times?*; *Could you say no or stop the person doing this to you?*), allowing for a clear distinction between

isolated aggression and systematic bullying. The questions also explored children's perceptions and coping strategies without implying personal responsibility (e.g., *In such a situation, do you respond in any way? If so, how?*). Given the young age of participants, it is acknowledged that their explanations reflect subjective perceptions rather than an objective understanding of the aggressors' motives.

Procedure

After obtaining the parents' consent, face-to-face interviews with the primary school children were held in a proper room provided by the school administration. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the study, and they were assured that the data obtained would not be shared with third parties and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage of the research if they wished to. With the permission of the participants and the school administration, interviews were recorded with a voice recorder device in order to prevent data loss. Interview sessions lasted between 12 and 28 minutes.

The Experiences of the Researchers

It is highly important that researchers possess knowledge and experience regarding the subject of the study to conduct both the data collection and coding processes effectively. The researchers had extensive prior experience with qualitative research and the qualitative analysis process. Additionally, before the interviews, the researchers interacted individually with both the classroom teacher and the participants to gain familiarity with the participants. Moreover, prior to starting the formal interview, a brief general conversation—unrelated to the interview topic—was held with each participant to help reduce any potential tension or anxiety.

Inter-Coder Reliability (ICR)

To ensure inter-coder reliability, some parts of the data (30%) were coded by two experienced coders. Both coders have experience in qualitative analysis and qualitative studies. Disagreements during the coding process were resolved by a joint solution of the coders or by consulting an experienced third coder. In case a consensus could not be reached among three researchers, then the decision of the majority (two researchers) was applied.

Participant Validation

In the content analysis process, it is crucial for validity that the codes generated by the coders accurately reflect the participants' actual intentions (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2015). To ensure this, at the end of each interview, participants were provided with a summary of their statements and were asked whether there was anything they would like to add or if there was any misunderstanding by the researchers. Additionally, during the interviews, the participants were occasionally asked clarifying questions such as "Is this what you meant?" or "Did I understand you correctly?" to confirm the accuracy of their statements.

Analysis

The data derived from the primary school children were transformed into a Word document. A qualitative content analysis technique, which is basically defined as "a set of procedures to make inferences from text" (Weber, 1990), was provided through the qualitative data analysis program (MAXQDA, version 2020) to reach the codes and categorizations. In

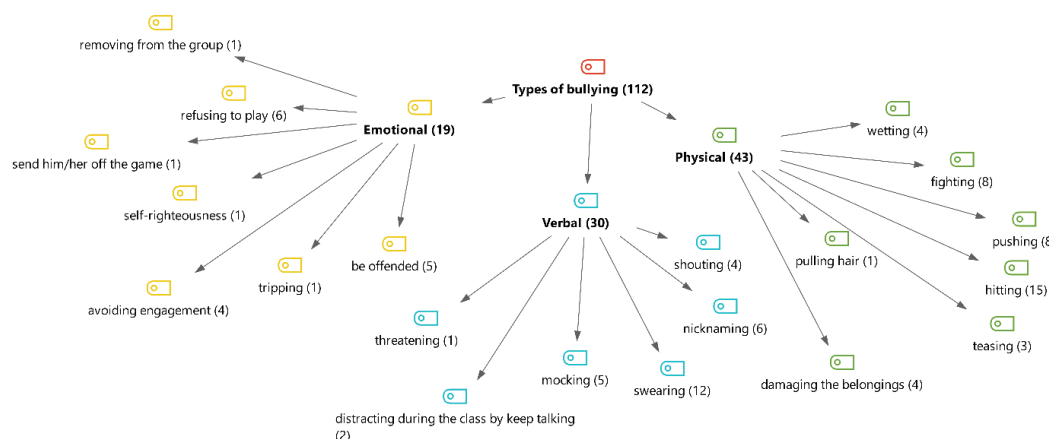
qualitative content analysis, the researcher constructs the analytical contexts themselves; in doing so, they act with an awareness of acknowledging others' worlds, pursuing their own research questions, and adopting analytical frameworks based on existing literature or prior knowledge related to the context of the texts being analysed (Krippendorf, 2004).

Research Results

Types of Peer Bullying

The first research question focused on identifying the types of peer bullying experienced by participants. Interview data indicated that students had encountered physical, verbal, and emotional bullying during school hours. The possibility of sexual bullying was also explored; however, all participants explicitly denied any such experiences involving either peers or adults. A summary of bullying types is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Distribution of Bullying Types and Sub-codes



As shown in Figure 1, physical bullying emerged as the most frequently reported category (code frequency[cf] = 43), followed by verbal (cf = 30) and emotional bullying (cf = 19). The most common physical bullying behaviours included *hitting* (cf = 15), *pushing* (cf = 8), and *fighting* (cf = 8). In the verbal category, *swearing* (cf = 12), *nicknaming* (cf = 6), and *shouting* (cf = 4) were most frequently mentioned. Emotional bullying primarily involved *exclusion from play* (cf = 6), *taking offense* (cf = 5), and *social withdrawal* (cf = 4). Illustrative excerpts from participant narratives are presented below to contextualize these findings:

P3: My desk mate takes my notebook and throws it in the bin while I'm studying (*physical bullying – damaging the belongs*).

P5: Students, mostly not from our class but from other classes, swear at me and my friends and run away. **Researcher:** Why? I do not know why, and I do not even know these people very well. I think it is for fun (*verbal bullying – swearing*).

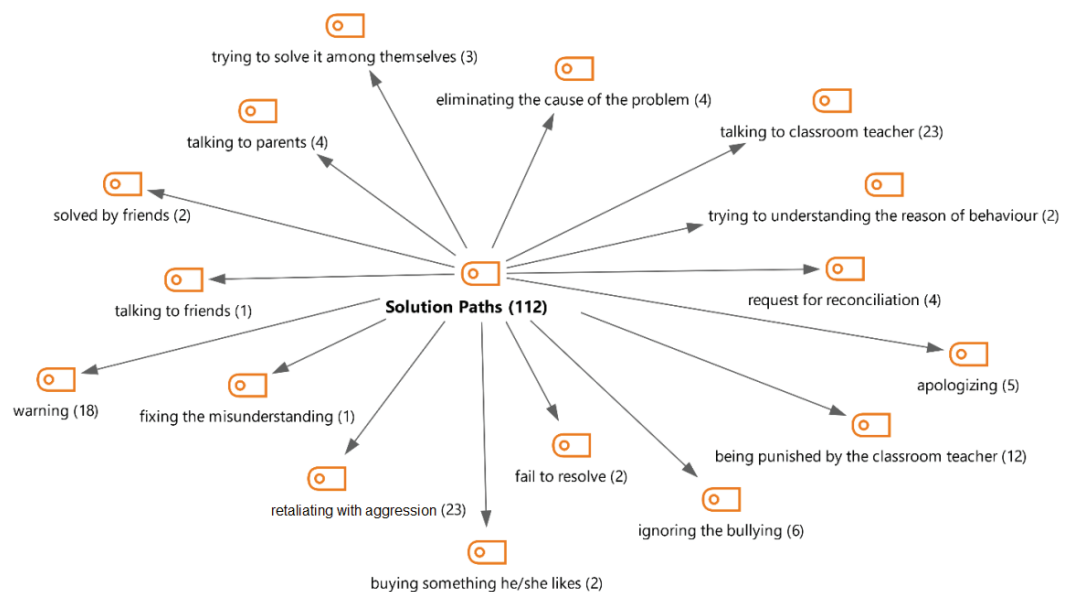
Researcher: Don't you talk to him? **P2:** No. Me and my close friends do not interact with him much. He always tries to hang out with us. Of course, I don't want him to walk around with me. (*emotional bullying, avoiding engagement*).

Coping Strategies for Bullying Behaviours

Interview data revealed multiple coping strategies employed by students in response to bullying (Figure 2). The two most frequent responses were retaliating with aggression (cf = 23) and seeking teacher intervention (cf = 23), reflecting distinct approaches—individual retaliation versus reliance on institutional authority. A secondary but notable strategy involved teacher-imposed punitive measures (cf = 12), which emerged as an extension of teacher intervention. Punishments typically took non-physical forms, such as recess restrictions or repetitive writing tasks, as illustrated by **P10**: “When my friend hit me, I told the teacher. [The teacher] made him write 50 times, ‘I shouldn’t hit my friend.’”

Students frequently employed *retaliatory aggression* as a response to bullying, exemplified by physical retaliation (**P2**: “I hit him too every time for self-defence”; **P12**: “I pushed him to the ground... just to scare him”) and verbal aggression (**P6**: “I swear at them when angry”). These behaviours suggest a cyclical escalation of peer aggression. Other coping strategies included *passive avoidance* (ignoring; cf = 6), *conflict resolution* (apologizing, cf = 5; reconciliation-seeking, cf = 4), and *problem-solving* (eliminating the cause; cf = 4).

Figure 2
Coping Strategies Employed by Students Experiencing Peer Bullying



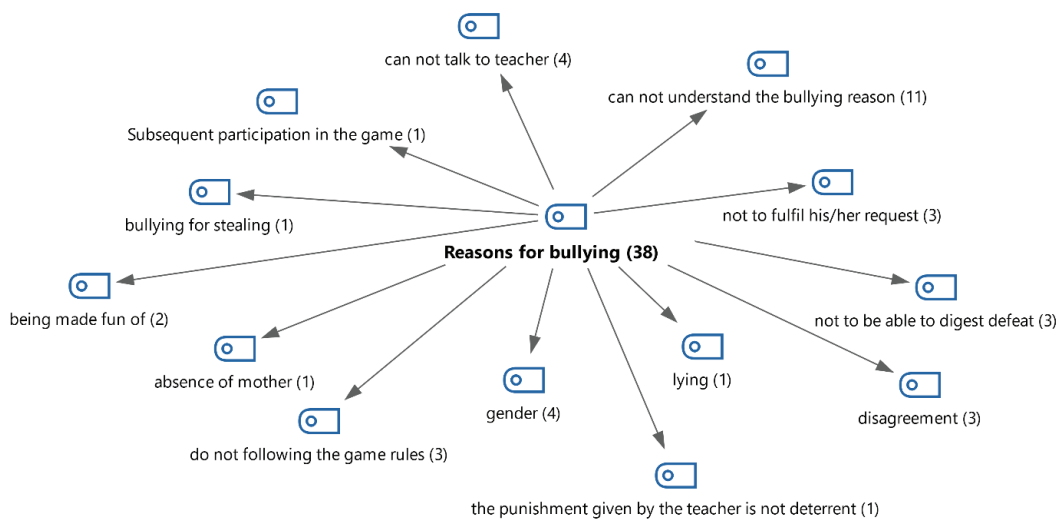
Reasons for Peer Bullying

Analysis of participants’ explanations for engaging in or witnessing peer bullying yielded 13 distinct codes (Figure 3). Unlike responses to RQ1 and RQ2, no single code emerged as dominant regarding bullying motivations. Notably, a substantial proportion of participants (cf = 11) reported being unable to discern any clear rationale for bullying behaviour. Gender emerged as a salient factor (cf = 4), with participants indicating that bullying predominantly occurs within same-gender peer groups. This pattern aligns with reported interaction norms, where students primarily socialized with same-gender peers (e.g., boys playing with boys). Male students appeared particularly vulnerable, reporting higher exposure to bullying compared to their female counterparts. Additionally, some participants noted displaying greater tolerance toward opposite-gender peers relative to same-gender peers. For example:

P6: I usually have bullying problems with boys. Because I do not prefer to play with girls.

P9: My friends used to call me nicknames. At first, I warned them, but I did not work and I had to do other things. I got so angry, and frustrated, and I wanted to hit them. They got scared and stopped calling with nicknames. **Researcher:** Is it the same with girls? **P9:** No, I didn't do it to girls. I only did it with boys. **Researcher:** What did you tell the girls? **P9:** They stopped doing it immediately when I warned them once or twice.

Figure 3
Reasons for Peer Bullying



Students identified several key factors contributing to bullying incidents. A significant barrier reported was the perceived inability to report bullying incidents to teachers. Additionally, participants cited multiple interpersonal triggers, including being made fun of ($cf = 2$), disagreement ($cf = 3$), not following the game rules ($cf = 3$), not being able to digest defeat ($cf = 3$), and not to fulfil his/her request. These findings suggest that bullying behaviours often stem from social conflicts and perceived rule violations within peer interactions, compounded by barriers to adult intervention.

Discussion

Children who are bullied tend to be less assertive, more easily emotionally distressed, and less effective in conflict resolution than other children (Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Healy, 2015), and have difficulty defending themselves (Olweus, 1994). As a result of bullying, many students' educational life as well as their daily life can be negatively affected. For some children, the effects of bullying are not limited to school time, but also continue in adult life (Healy et al., 2015). Therefore, the present study aims to provide an in-depth examination of the bullying behaviours experienced by children in the early stages of their educational journey, the underlying factors contributing to these behaviours, and the strategies employed by the children to cope with or overcome bullying.

Participants reported experiencing various forms of bullying, with physical bullying being most prevalent, followed by verbal and emotional bullying. This finding is consistent with previous research (Çankaya, 2011; Çarkıt & Bacanlı, 2020; Çinkır & Karaman-Kepenekçi, 2003; Gültekin Akduman, 2012; Kartal & Bilgin, 2008; Özkan & Çıfci, 2010; Pişkin, 2010; Polat & Sohbet, 2020). Physical bullying primarily manifested as hitting, pushing, and fighting, while

verbal bullying included swearing, nicknaming, mocking, and shouting. Emotional bullying, though less frequent, involved behaviours such as social exclusion and intentional offending. These findings align with Wiertsema et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis, which demonstrated that bullies often face peer rejection. Regardless of type, bullying has been associated with negative outcomes, including poor social and emotional adjustment, friendship difficulties, school absenteeism, rule noncompliance, anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal tendencies (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Lereya et al., 2015; Skybo, 2005). Furthermore, bullying behaviours adversely affect school climate (Polat & Sohbət, 2020). While no instances of sexual bullying were reported in this study, existing literature indicates its presence in similar age groups (Çinkır & Karaman-Kepenekçi, 2003; Kapcı, 2004), with potential contributing factors including student age, school socioeconomic status (Özkan & Çifci, 2010), and presence of disabilities (Contreras et al., 2021).

Victims employed various coping strategies, most of which were individual-oriented (12 out of 15), such as ignoring the bullying or warning the bullies. However, the most frequently reported strategies were adult-oriented, particularly involving class teachers (talking to the teacher, *cf* = 23; teacher-imposed punishments, *cf* = 12). The third most common strategy was retaliatory aggression (*cf* = 23). These results suggest that while multiple coping strategies exist, victims predominantly rely on authoritative figures for resolution, a finding supported by existing literature (Kutlu & Karaca, 2021; Purcell, 2012). Notably, teachers tended to employ non-physical punishments. Retaliatory aggression emerged as a concerning strategy, potentially perpetuating cycles of bullying. Some victims also adopted avoidance strategies, effectively creating their own punishment systems by excluding bullies.

Participants identified no single dominant reason for bullying behaviours, with many unable to comprehend the motivations behind bullying. This uncertainty may stem from the fact that bullying primarily originated from one student (P6), whose personal circumstances provided insight into potential causes. P6, a 12-year-old male, had experienced teacher violence in first grade, leading to temporary school withdrawal. His parents were divorced, and he lived with his father and siblings, expressing feelings of maternal abandonment. The family's socioeconomic situation was precarious, with the father as the sole provider, requiring P6 to assist with household responsibilities. These factors align with Contreras et al.'s (2021) multifactorial explanation of bullying, which incorporates individual, familial, and school-related influences. Shams et al. (2017) identified five key factors: psychological (e.g., mental health issues), familial (e.g., domestic violence), school-related (e.g., teacher conduct), socioeconomic (e.g., poverty), and media influence (e.g., violent video games). In P6's case, familial instability, socioeconomic hardship, and psychological distress appear particularly relevant.

Gender also emerged as a significant factor, with male students reporting higher bullying exposure than females, consistent with previous research (Camodeca et al., 2002; Çankaya, 2011; Baker & Kavşut, 2007; Fekkes et al., 2005; Kartal & Bilgin, 2008; Öztürk et al., 2019; Polat & Sohbət, 2020; Radwan et al., 2021; Sapouna, 2008). Bullying predominantly occurred within same-gender groups, reflecting typical peer interaction patterns. Additionally, some students reported reluctance to discuss bullying incidents with teachers due to perceived authoritarianism, potentially exacerbating unresolved cases.

Conclusions and Implications

The present study examined the nature of peer bullying in mainstream primary school settings through qualitative analysis of student experiences. Findings revealed that physical bullying was the most common type of aggression, followed by verbal and emotional forms. Students adopted a range of coping strategies, including seeking help from teachers or, in some cases, resorting to retaliatory behaviours. Bullying motivations appeared multifaceted,

with familial instability, socioeconomic challenges, and psychological distress frequently emerging as contributing factors. Notably, boys experienced higher rates of same-gender victimization, and many students expressed reluctance to report incidents due to perceptions of teacher authoritarianism. These results highlight the complexity of bullying behaviours and the individual, familial, and contextual factors shaping them.

The findings suggest that effective intervention requires addressing not only behavioural outcomes but also the social and emotional dimensions influencing both victims and perpetrators. Schools should create more supportive and approachable reporting mechanisms to counter students' hesitations. Additionally, fostering teacher-student trust and recognizing underlying risk factors such as psychological distress or unstable home environments are critical. Future research should further explore how gender, teacher attitudes, and school culture intersect to shape children's bullying experiences. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies could provide deeper insights into the evolving nature of peer aggression and the long-term efficacy of prevention strategies.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study has some limitations that should be considered while interpreting the results and designing the future studies based on its key findings. The number of participants was limited as the study's focus was on an in-depth analysis of the specific case, and only Turkish children were included. This limitation restricts the extent to which broader generalizations can be made. Future research involving larger sample sizes and conducted in diverse cultural settings may help to compare and generalize the findings.

In addition, the study group predominantly consisted of victims, which may have led to bullying incidents being analysed mainly from the victims' perspective. However, understanding the viewpoints of bullies is also essential. Future qualitative studies in which at least half—or nearly half—of the participants are bullies could help fill this gap and provide a more balanced understanding.

Although this study did not measure happiness directly using quantitative scales, the qualitative data strongly suggest that bullying experiences negatively impact children's emotional well-being and, consequently, their overall happiness in school. Addressing bullying, therefore, requires holistic interventions that not only promote behavioural change but also support children's emotional needs and family contexts.

Ethics Approval

To conduct interviews with the participants, necessary permissions and approval were obtained from Balıkesir University Ethics Committee (No: E-19928322-302.08.01-27266).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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