



## CHILD PROTECTION MEASURES ON BULLYING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOLS

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### Abstract:

Bullying is a destructive social problem in schools that needs attention. Schools have the responsibility to create a safe place where students can learn without fear of being bullied. The purpose of the study was to explore child protection measures against bullying in selected special education schools in Luapula province. This study was guided by a Constructivist Paradigm, in keeping with the research paradigm, a qualitative intrinsic case study design was employed because the case study outcomes were intended to tell the researcher something that is solely about the case itself. In this case, the child with disability and special education school was of primary interest in the study. The sample size comprised of 38 participants consisting of 2 head teachers, 12 teachers, 12 parents and 12 learners from the two selected special education schools. Purposive critical case sampling was used to select head teachers, expert sampling was used on teachers and criterion sampling was used to select learners and parents. Data from head teachers and teachers were collected using a semi-structured interview guide and focus group discussions guide (FGD) were used on learners and parents. Data were analysed by thematic analysis. The study revealed that children with disabilities were protected from bullying in special education schools using the 3R's (Recognizing, Responding and Reporting) bullying prevention strategies for learners with special educational needs. The findings established that Recognizing bullying prevention strategies included recognizing the statistics or acts of bullying in the school, recognizing the warning signs of victims and stereotypes of bullies and routine checking to stop harassment and bullying acts. The study also revealed that Responding bullying prevention strategies included holding meetings that reinforce positive behaviour expectations, providing guidance and counselling on how to respond to bullying, punishing learners using

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discriminatory language or derogatory remarks, formulation of anti-bullying programs, formation of support groups to sensitize learners, training staff members on how to recognizing incidents of bullying and teach anti-bullying social skills. Other strategies identified include the Reporting bullying prevention strategies which included reporting all forms of ill-treatment, reporting bullying incidence in school settings, reporting any form of harassment, and bullying acts. These bullying prevention strategies enabled the teachers in the school to protect learners with disabilities in schools. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the school should be on the lookout for incidences of bullying, respond to bullying quickly and effectively and document and report all actions taken when recognizing and responding to bullying.

**Keywords:** bullying, child protection, special education school

## 1. Introduction

Bullying is one of the leading social problems facing young people today. In the face of the international mandate for safe learning environments, the reality for many children in school is quite different. The reality of a safe learning environment from a global perspective is that many children with disability do not fare well (UNICEF, 2017). United Nations (2019) reported that despite important progress made in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) violence remains a harsh reality for millions of children including those with disabilities around the world. Ministry of Youth, Sport and Child Development (MYSCD) et al. (2018) reported that child abuse in school has taken a range of forms including verbal abuse, bullying, discrimination and neglect. The negative consequences of bullying affect everyone – the bullies, the victims, the bystanders, the school, parents, and the community. According to Oldenburg (2017), absenteeism due to bullying occurs among 6% of boys and 9% of girls on a weekly basis. Due to the alarming statistics and long-term effects of bullying, it is imperative that school personnel and parents help prevent bullying by knowing the facts. More and more children continue to experience bullying, in schools and this has caused on the increase of drop from school among children with disabilities (Musonda and Qinglin, 2015).

The study of Swearer & Hymel (2015) found that children with disabilities are at a greater risk of being bullied as compared to regular children those without disability. Some studies suggest that learners with disabilities are equally vulnerable to bullying in both mainstream and special schools. However, the evidence is mixed. UNICEF (2019) reported that almost one-third of school-going learners with disabilities have been bullied, by their peers with or without disabilities on a daily basis. In China, Chen et al. (2021) revealed that learners with disabilities were two to three times more likely to experience bullying in mainstream schools than in special schools. Other studies have found that those with certain types of disabilities, for example, learning difficulties and Autism Spectrum Disorders, are at higher risk of bullying in mainstream schools than in special schools (Hatimbula et al., 2019; Allam & Martin, 2021).

Learners with disabilities in institutions and residential schools are at higher risk of bullying. Investigations by the United Nations Children's Fund (2019) suggest that children and young people with disabilities in institutional settings and boarding schools are more vulnerable to violence from teachers, other school staff and other students. They are often maltreated by their peers, teachers, and non-teaching staff in the school (Malungo et al., 2018; MYSCDSS et al. (2018). Factors that increase vulnerability include the 'closed' nature of institutions, inadequate inspection and lack of accountability. Rusteholz et al. (2021) revealed school bullying adversely affects the education of learners with disabilities. The increasing burden of bullying, on children with disabilities coming from their peers and teachers usually forced them to come late or drop out of schools (Allam & Martin, 2021). It further induces absenteeism among learners with disabilities because of fear of being bullied, by peers and teachers in schools (Ng'andu & Chilufya, 2019). Similarly, Njelesani et al., (2022), posit that learners with disabilities who experience bullying by peers and teachers may miss classes, have problems concentrating or drop out of school. It affects their access to and participation in education, attainment and future prospects. This has raised questions over the child protection measures special schools have put in place in order to ensure all children are protected against bullying whilst accessing education (Better Care Network, 2017; Hatimbula et al., 2019). As children with disabilities are a vulnerable group, it is not known how protected they are from bullying, in special education schools in Zambia.

It should be appreciated that children with disabilities in special education schools require adequate protection from bullying, in school if they have to benefit from the learning environment (Njelesani et al., 2022). Hence, this makes it imperative that a study to explore child protection measures on bullying, in special education schools. The purpose of the study is to explore child protection measures on bullying, put in place in selected special education schools in Luapula province. Therefore, the findings of this study will provide the basis for recommendations to policymakers and other stakeholders on priorities and next steps for strengthening child protection in educational settings. It is hoped that with increased understanding and knowledge teachers, caregivers, and parents will be able to better protect and care for children in a bullied environment.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that has created negative consequences for the general school climate and for the right of learners to learn in a safe environment without fear (Baginsky et al., 2019). Further, bullying has remained a significant and long-standing social issue facing learners, teachers, and parents in schools. UNICEF (2019) reported that almost one-third of school-going learners with disabilities have been bullied, discriminated or neglected by their peers with or without disabilities on daily. It has been established that in special education schools having children without disabilities, learners with disabilities face challenges of bullying and discrimination about three times as many as children without disabilities are maltreated from their colleagues,

teachers, and non-teaching staff in the school (Malungo et al., 2018; MYSCDSS et al., 2018). The increasing burden of bullying on children with disabilities has prematurely forced them to come late or drop out of school and it has also induced absenteeism among them because of fear of being bullied (Ng'andu & Chilufya, 2019). This has raised concern over the child protection measures in place in special education schools to ensure all children are protected against bullying (Better Care Network, 2017; Hatimbula et al., 2019). As children with disabilities are a vulnerable group, it is not known how protected they are from bullying in special education schools. And, surprisingly, few scholars have directed their attention to exploring child protection measures against bullying in special education schools. It should be appreciated that children with disabilities in special education schools require adequate protection from bullying, in school if they have to benefit from the learning environment. Hence, this makes it imperative that a study to explore child protection measures on bullying in special education schools in Luapula Province be carried out.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

The ecological approach by Bronfenbrenner (1979) has been selected for the study as it has often been used in child protection research. From an ecological perspective, child bullying is viewed as a transactional issue between teachers, children and the environment, and the complexity surrounding child bullying can be understood in several ways by an ecological approach. To protect children with disabilities and prevent them from bullying, different stakeholders including those with direct (family, and teachers) and indirect contact (school administration, NGOs and government) need to work together. Ecological system theory is applicable to this study because it brings about the child-teacher relationship, which is the tenet of child protection in school. The ecological approach provides protective factors that apply in schools, and therefore, it is beneficial in ensuring the safety of children with disabilities in a school environment. The teacher is potentially able to provide a crucial link to many of the bullied child's needs. Teachers have the perspective not only to help tend to the emotional well-being of the child, but also aid the family in gaining access to the services they need to help avoid any future bullying (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Having access to these types of services, along with positive school experiences, can have an impact beyond the classroom and affect children in a positive manner throughout their lives.

## **2.2 Geographical Location of Study Sites**

Luapula Province is one of Zambia's ten provinces located in the northern part of the country. As per the 2010 Zambian census, the Province had a population of 991,927, which accounted for 7.57 per cent of the total Zambian population. The major economic activities are agriculture and fishing, with sweet potato being the major crop. The study focused on two special education school in Luapula province the Mambilima special school in Mwanse district. Mwanse district is located in Luapula Province of Zambia, about 867 kilometres north of Lusaka and about 110 kilometers away from Mansa, the provincial capital, with an elevation of 1,175 metres above sea level. As of the 2000

Zambian Census, the district had a population of 105,759 people. Its top tourist attraction is the Mumbuluma Falls, which is a set of waterfalls and is a national monument of Zambia. The main economic activity is fishing but there is potential for development of agriculture. Mambilima Special Primary School is located in Mulundu village and it is under government and mission (C.M.M.L.). The school has been dedicated its work to the needs of expanded physically handicapped children. Kawambwa District is located in Luapula Province. The capital lies at Kawambwa, which lies at the intersection of three roads: D19, M13, and Kawambwa-Mbereshi. While, St. Marys special school for the blind in Kawambwa district is also under government and catholic church, its majority learners are those with visual impairment and albinism.

### 3. Literature Review

Bullying is a destructive social problem in schools that needs attention. Schools have the responsibility to create a safe place where students can learn without fear of being bullied. Bullying in its various forms has been associated with various emotional, psychological as well as academic problems in children. The study of Aubdul et al. (2022) who looked at the association of bullying on happiness from Thailand argued that there are two different types of bullying behaviour either direct or indirect. Direct bullying can be either verbal bullying which includes such behaviours as taunting, teasing, name-calling, or spreading rumours, or physical bullying encompasses behaviours, such as hitting, kicking, pushing, choking, and destruction of property or theft. Indirect bullying is often subtler and can include behaviours such as threats, obscene gestures, excluding others from a group, and manipulation of friendships (Aubdul et al., 2022). Hinduja & Patchin (2021) reported the newest type of bullying that has emerged in youth as cyber-bullying. Cyberbullying is done electronically through the internet via emails and on-line chat rooms (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021).

Sabramani et al. (2021) whose study was carried out in Malaysia as an evidence from students at national secondary school on bullying and its associated individual, peer, family and school factors confirmed that in the 21st century, bullying has become an increasingly common phenomenon with 5% to 15% of people being the victim of bullying reported worldwide, among which some cases even lead to deaths. Ratib, & Lisa (2021) study on bullying of students who receive special education services for learning and behavior difficulties in Norway, reported that students with disabilities are significantly experience victimization when compared with their peers without disabilities. Its prevalence in special education school is, in part, a product of the lack of information and the paucity of studies, which analyse the wide-ranging consequences for the individuals involved. Falla et al. (2021), noted that the teachers and administration need to recognize the warning signs of bullying that children are involved in school. The safety of children with disabilities in schools or on their way to school is still a major source of concern, as they are faced with threats of bullying (Falla, et al., 2021).

The school operates centrally within a social-ecological framework of treating the children, school and connections to parents as being part of an interconnected system of

relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). So, the systemic dimension of interrogating school climate, institutional culture and relationships is an important broadening of protective perspective beyond simply treating bullying as a problem of children with disabilities in special education schools. This means that since schools deal with issues of children have a duty to keep them safe and uphold their wellbeing. Therefore, the protection of children from bullying in school incorporates the visible leadership; zero tolerance policy against bullying; safe and positive school environment; capacity building for teachers; empowerment and participation of learners; family and community support; awareness campaigns; and monitoring, reporting support services. In the study of Houchins et al. (2016), in Atlanta, USA on bullying and students with disabilities found that leadership at all levels, from national to school level, as critical to champion an effective response to school bullying protection. Leadership needs special training in order to champion the prevention of bullying against learners with disabilities.

UNESCO (2019) in the study behind the numbers: ending school violence and bullying in Paris, identified the need for robust laws and policies, including policies at the school level, to prevent and address school bullying. Xiao (2021) narrated that in order to protect children with disabilities from bullying schools need to adopt a zero-tolerance policy for bullying. Chen et al. (2021), also called on schools to set a school climate of mutual support and ensure that all members of staff receive sufficient training to be equipped to identify and deal with all incidents of bullying. Therefore, schools with children with disabilities need to ensure that school staff are trained and held accountable for policies to protect, prevent and respond to bullying for learners with disabilities.

Thomas et al. (2018) in their study on child-friendly schools: challenges and issues in creating a positive and protective school environment in India, highlighted the need to create a school environment with anti-bullying programs where students feel safe, secure, welcomed and supported, and able to participate fully in school activities (Yahia et al., 2021). In Malaysia, Mohan & Bakar (2021) in their systematic literature review on the effects of bullying at school revealed that for any bullying protection program to be successful, it is necessary for each school to have a clear and easily understood philosophy that promotes a safe and positive environment. Schools need to combat bullying as all children in the school community deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Therefore, it is crucial that all staff members create and maintain a positive working community to ensure the success of a positive climate at school. A school where children don't feel safe is a school where children struggle to learn. Every student deserves to thrive in a safe school and classroom free from bullying.

Rusteholz et al. (2021) suggested that classroom environments characterised by caring staff attitudes, peer friendships and acceptance are protective against school bullying. Ratib & Lisa (2021) posits that learners with disabilities are less vulnerable to bullying in schools where teachers actively encourage and facilitate peer relationships and positive interactions between students with and without disabilities. In the study of Wenyuyu (2020) on anti-bullying interventions for children with special needs in Jonkoping. The findings of the study indicated that ensuring that the needs of learners with disabilities are protected requires adopting an inclusive curriculum, learning and

teaching that promotes the values of equality, respect for diversity and inclusion and ensures that all students know about the rights of people with disabilities.

Wenwuyu (2020) noted that most common bullying protection is based on increasing children's interactions with peer groups, or involving more facilitators in children's environment context. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, schools, classes and peers are key elements in the microsystem that can influence the protection goals. Protection of children in school takes personal assertive skills, peer relations and other performance in schools, which covered both microsystem and mesosystem that is where there, are increasing interactions between participants and general peer groups to help students with disabilities gain self-esteem, social satisfaction, and reduce bullying victimization (Wenwuyu, 2020).

In a study by Xiao et al. (2021) on school bullying and health-related quality of life in Chinese school-aged children and adolescents. The study found that relationships with peers and teachers are widely recognized as protective factors against bullying. Further, Xiao et al. (2021) indicated these bullying behavior interventions needs to include teaching social skills. Therefore, building relationships with peers is at the core of children's protection, by providing them with the social competences required to master social challenges. The report of UNESCO (2021) indicated that in order to protect children with disabilities from bullying it must involve all students in programmes to prevent school bullying, and this should include learners with disabilities to ensure that bullying protection strategies are inclusive. The findings highlighted the need to ensure that children with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in all school activities including extracurricular activities and are represented in school leadership committees.

Downes & Cefai (2016) in their study on how to prevent and tackle bullying and school violence: evidence and practices for strategies for inclusive and safe schools, found that parent training was one of the programme elements significantly associated with both a decrease in bullying and being bullied. Mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model is consisting of connections between elements in a microsystem. In order to have a school free from bullying, families and communities need to collaborate as partners with teachers and other professionals to support children's learning, safety and wellbeing in school. As the study of Likumbo et al. (2021), on the involvement of selected secondary schools in child protection against violence, exploitation and sexual abuse in Lusaka. The findings indicated that protecting children from bullying includes involve training teachers and other stakeholders, in action to prevent school bullying. To ensure the needs of learners with disabilities are protected, this needs to be complemented by interventions to educate parents and the community about the vulnerability of children and how to respond to bullying in school (Likumbo et al., 2021).

UNESCO (2021) reported that people with disabilities as victims often do not speak up because they are afraid that the bullying will get worse, no one will listen to them, their confidentiality will be breached, and perpetrators will not be held accountable. Therefore, establishing reporting mechanisms for learners affected by bullying, together with support and referral services, is a key component of child protection program in schools. To protect the specific needs of learners with disabilities,

it is essential that mechanisms for reporting school bullying are accessible as well as confidential, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive. Hence, UNESCO (2021) advocated for establishing reporting mechanisms for learners affected by bullying, together with support and referral services, as they are key components of child protection programs in schools. In the study of Amanda (2019), on preventing and intervening with bullying in schools in United States. From the study, the findings designated that schools should identify staff to be responsible for monitoring bullying and to whom learners with disabilities can talk about bullying for example, a school counsellor or a teacher who has been trained in bullying prevention and intervention and in inclusive education. Schools should also provide support or referral to support services for learners with disabilities affected by school violence and bullying (Amanda, 2019). Therefore, school administrators and teachers must take an active approach to the physical monitoring of children and remain constantly vigilant to prevent bullying behaviours within their schools.

#### **4. Material and Methods**

This study was guided by a Constructivist Paradigm, as it enabled the researcher to have in-depth understanding of the subjective world of head teachers, teachers, parents and learners on how children with disabilities are protected from bullying in selected special education schools in Luapula province. In keeping with the research paradigm, a qualitative research design, an intrinsic case study design was employed because the case study outcomes were intended to tell the researcher something that was solely about the case itself. In that case, the child with disability and child protection measures of bullying in special education school was of primary interest in the study. An intrinsic case study is when the aim is fundamentally to understand the case (Kamal, 2019), and in this case was to explore protective measures put in place to protect children with disabilities from bullying, while in schools.

For the study population, purposive critical case sampling was used to select 2 head teachers as they were in charge and overseers of children's safety protection while in school. Expert sampling was used to sample 12 Teachers as they have day-to-day responsibility for children's protection from bullying, while in school. Criterion sampling was used to select 12 Learners as they were key informers who appreciate child protection measures on bullying, in special education schools. 12 Parents were brought in to help validate the views of head teachers, teachers and learners on how the school protects the children from bullying and criterion sampling was used to sample them. The sample sizes of teachers, parents and learners are adequate as they are consistent with the principle of data saturation. Guest et al. (2006) state that in qualitative studies, saturation may occur with as few as six participants. Jassim and Whitford (2014), also found that after the 10th interview, there were no new themes generated from the interviews. Therefore, it was deemed that the data collection was reached a saturation point, the two more interviews were to ensure and confirm that there are no new themes emerging (Jassim and Whitford, 2014).



The research instruments that were used in this study included a semi-structured interview guide and a focus group discussions guide (FGD). The semi-structured interview guide was used to collect in-depth qualitative data from head teachers and teachers as it allows a back-and-forth dialogue (Vagle, 2014), thus providing an opportunity to react to comments, change the wording of questions, interjections for probes and clarifications. A focus group discussion guide shall be used to collect data from learners and parents, it was chosen because it allowed participants to discuss their concerns in a group. As participants interact within the group the quality and richness of data is enhanced. Data from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were triangulated to enhance the trustworthiness of the study findings.

The data was analysed manually to answer the research questions on how children with disabilities are protected from bullying in selected special education schools in Luapula province, using six major stages that include familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and report writing and where possible, verbalisms were used to indicate actual voices of the participants (Saldaña et al., 2014).

## 5. Results

To establish how children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools, data was collected from thirty-eight (38) participants. The study used interviews and FGDs to probe the participants. A question was asked to the participants: *“How are children with disabilities protected from bullying in selected special education schools in Luapula province?”* The study revealed that children with disabilities were protected from bullying in special education schools using the 3R’s bullying prevention strategies for learners with special educational needs. These included Recognizing, Responding and Reporting strategies as indicated by codes or near codes generated during data analysis as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Ways children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools

Themes	Codes or Near Codes
<b>1. Recognizing Bullying Prevention Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize the acts of bullying in the school.</li> <li>Recognize the warning signs of victims and stereotypes of bullies</li> <li>Routine checking to stop harassment and bullying acts.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Responding Bullying Prevention Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Holding meetings that reinforce positive behavior expectations.</li> <li>Provide guidance and counselling on how to respond to bullying.</li> <li>Punishing learners using discriminatory language or derogatory remarks.</li> <li>Formulation of anti-bullying programs</li> <li>Formation of support groups to sensitize learners.</li> <li>Training staff members on how to recognizing incidents of bullying.</li> <li>Teach anti-bullying social skills</li> </ul>
<b>3. Reporting Bullying</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting all forms of ill-treatment.</li> <li>Reporting bullying incidence in school settings.</li> </ul>

<b>Prevention Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reporting any form of harassment and bullying acts.</li></ul>
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**Source:** Researcher's illustration based on fieldwork.

Below is a detailed presentation of findings cited above regarding Recognizing, Responding, and Reporting bullying prevention strategies on how children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools.

### 5.1 Recognizing Strategies

The study findings indicated that children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools using recognizing strategies. These strategies included recognizing the statistics or acts of bullying in the school, recognize the warning signs of victims and stereotypes of bullies and routine checking to stop harassment and bullying acts. These findings were evidenced in the following verbal account given by one head teacher participant from School 1 during interviews <SCH1 HT1> who observed that:

*"One-way children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools was by first recognizing the form of bullying acts in the school and thereafter a measure was put in place to address that particular type of bully." (20.10.2022).*

In support of the above findings, another head teacher participant from School 2 during interviews <SCH2 HT2> lamented that:

*"To protect children from bullying in the school, we first recognize the warning signs of victims and stereotypes of bullies, then we find a way to address the act." (25.10.2022).*

Contributing on the above findings, one male Specialist teacher participant from School 1 participant during interviews <SHC1 ST1 M> pointed out that:

*"Children with disabilities are protected from bullying in selected special education schools using routine checking mechanism in order to stop harassment and bullying acts in the school." (21.10.2022).*

With these findings, children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools using recognizing strategies such as recognizing the statistics or acts of bullying in the school, recognizing the warning signs of victims and stereotypes of bullies and routine checking to stop harassment and bullying acts. The strategies enabled the teachers to recognise or identify the bullying acts among children with disabilities in special education schools.

## 5.2 Responding Strategies

Regarding responding strategies as a tool on how children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools, most teacher participants reported that they were held meetings that reinforced positive behaviours expectations, provided guidance and counselling on how to respond to bullying and punished learners using discriminatory language or derogatory remark. Further, participants reported that they formulated of anti-bullying programs, formulated of support groups to sensitize learners, trained staff members on how to recognizing incidents of bullying and taught anti-bullying social skills.

In conformity with the above findings, one head teacher participant from School 1 during interviews <SCH1 HT1> reported that:

*“We hold meetings with teachers that reinforce positive behavior expectations among the learners. Some teachers didn’t know how to control the bullying acts in the school therefore, it is important to reinforce them with that positive behavior expectation.”* (20.10.2022)

In agreement with the above findings, one female Specialist teacher participant from School 2 during interviews <SCH 2 ST11 F> confirmed that:

*“As a school, the measures that we have put in place to protect bullying to our learners living with disabilities is intensive guidance and counselling. We provide on-going opportunities for continued open discussions, checking in with the child regularly.”* (26.10.2022)

Supporting the findings above, one head teacher participant from School 2 during interviews <SCH2 HT2> highlighted that:

*“Sometimes teachers punish learners who use discriminatory language or derogatory remarks against other children in the school. We do this to protect children with disabilities are protected from bullying.”* (25.10.2022)

Agreeing with the findings above, one male Specialist teacher participant from School 2 participant during interviews <SHC 2 ST7 M> observed that:

*“As a school, we protect children with disabilities from bullying by formulation of anti-bullying programs that support the learners with disabilities. In these programs, children are taught the advantages and disadvantages of bullying acts in the school.”* (26.10.2022)

In support of the notion on how children with disabilities were protected from bullying in schools, one head teacher participant from School 2 <SCH2 HT2> observed that:

*“One-way children with disabilities are protected from bullying in schools is by the formation of support groups to sensitize learners and the teachers on issues of bullying in school” (25.10.2022)*

One head teacher participant from School 1 <SCH1 HT1> confirmed that:

*“Training staff members on how to recognizing incidents of bullying are one-way children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools. Some teachers have no knowledge and skills in special education so they need to be trained on how they should recognize incidents of bullying in the school.” (20.10.2022)*

Similar sentiments from one female Specialist teacher participant from School 2 participant during interviews <SHC 2 ST12 F> were that:

*“Children with disabilities were protected from bullying in schools by teaching anti-bullying social skills. There are anti-bullying clubs, which spearheads the teaching of anti-bullying social skills. This has helped children without disabilities interact with disabilities freely.” (26.10.2022)*

It was evident that responding strategies such as holding meetings to reinforce positive behaviours expectations, guidance and counselling, punishing learners using discriminatory language or derogatory remarks, formulation of anti-bullying programs, support groups, training staff members and taught anti-bullying social skill, were some of the strategies children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools.

## **5.2 Reporting Strategies**

The findings of the study showed that some of the reporting strategies included reporting all forms of ill-treatment, reporting bullying incidence in school settings and reporting any form of harassment and bullying acts. These strategies enabled the teachers in the school to protect learners with disabilities in schools.

The above views were reflected in a response from one by Male Learner participant during the first Focus Group Discussion <FGD 1 ML> who asserted that:

*“All forms of ill-treatment concerning bullying are reported to the teachers and in turn teachers also report to the administration for action on the offenders. This has helped reduce the rates of bullying in the school.” (31.10.2022)*

Additionally, another female learner participant during the first focus group discussion <FGD 1 FL> advanced that:

*“Children with disabilities are protected from bullying in schools by reporting bullying incidence in school settings. All the children are alert to report any form of bullying act to their teachers” (31.10.2022).*

Contributing on the same findings above, one other male learner participant during the first focus group discussion <FGD 1 ML> had this to say:

*“We are protected from bullying acts in schools by reporting any form of harassment and bullying acts to the teachers. If one tries to harass us, we quickly report them to our teachers or the administration for action.” (31.10.2022)*

Arising from the findings above, it was evident that some of the reporting strategies included reporting all forms of ill-treatment, reporting bullying incidence in school settings, reporting forms of harassment and bullying acts. These strategies enabled the teachers in the school to protect learners with disabilities in schools.

## **6. Discussion**

The study revealed that children with disabilities were protected from bullying in special education schools using the 3R’s bullying prevention strategies for learners with special educational needs. The results indicated that children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools using recognizing strategies. These strategies included recognizing the statistics or acts of bullying in the school, recognize the warning signs of victims and stereotypes of bullies and routine checking to stop harassment and bullying acts. Children with disabilities were protected from bullying was by first recognizing the form of bullying acts in the school and thereafter a measure was put in place to address that particular type of bully. This was in line with Chirwa (2019), who reported that if you know or suspect bullying has occurred, learn how to find out what has happened to a child. Understanding what has happened can also help in communicating with class teachers or school officials about the situation. Similarly, Falla et al. (2021), noted that the teachers and administration need to recognize the warning signs of bullying in schools that children are involved in. They could be being bullied, bullying others, or witnessing bullying. Although these signs could signal other issues, teacher or school counsellor need to talk to children if they display any sort of behavioural or emotional changes as a result of being bullied in school. The strategies enabled the teachers to recognise or identify the bullying acts among children with disabilities in special education schools.

Further, regarding responding strategies as a tool on how children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools, most teacher participants reported that they were held meetings that reinforced positive behaviours expectations, provided guidance and counselling on how to respond to bullying of learners and punished learners using discriminatory language or derogatory remark. Further, participants reported the formulation of anti-bullying programs,

support groups to sensitize learners, trained staff members on how to recognize incidents of bullying and taught anti-bullying social skills. These results were in conformity with Chen et al. (2021), who reported that schools need to set a school climate of mutual support and ensure that all members of staff receive sufficient training to be equipped to identify and deal with all incidents of bullying. When students feel they are important and belong to a friendly and welcoming school, bullying is far less likely to be part of their behaviours. The schools are engaged in training staff members on how to recognizing incidents of bullying are one-way children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools. Some teachers have no knowledge and skills in special education so they need to be trained on how they should recognize incidents of bullying in the school. These results were in line with Amanda (2019), who noted that schools should identify and train staff to be responsible for monitoring bullying and to whom learners with disabilities can talk about bullying for example, a school counsellor or a teacher who needs to be trained in bullying prevention and intervention and in inclusive education. The special education schools needs training of all staff in bullying prevention and intervention and need to provide support services for learners with disabilities affected by school bullying (Amanda, 2019).

The schools need to go further in the protection of children with disabilities from bullying by formulation of anti-bullying programs that support the learners with disabilities where they are taught the advantages and disadvantages of bullying acts in the school. This is supported by the findings of Yahia et al. (2021), who noted that students should be encouraged to participate fully in activities that raise their awareness about bullying and to increase their empathy, in order that they clearly understand what to do if they, or another student, are being bullied. Similarly, Lessard et al. (2022), revealed that learners need to be part of anti-bullying programs that involve and promote improving their mobility, physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional abilities as well as by reducing day-to-day tensions. Although anti-bullying programs appear to be effective, emphasis should be placed on *“cultivating comprehensive, multi-tiered climates of acceptance and inclusion”* (Lessard et al., 2022)

The study revealed that children with disabilities in schools are also taught anti-bullying social skills. There are anti-bullying clubs, which spearheads the teaching of anti-bullying social skills. This has helped children without disabilities interact with disabilities freely. This resonates with Wenwuyu (2020) who reported that most common bullying protection are based on increasing children’s interactions with peer groups, or involving more facilitators in children’s environment context. Similarly, Xioa (2021) indicated that when learners are involved, awareness of bullying increases and levels of bullying are reduced. Xioa further indicated that bullying behavior interventions needs to include teaching social skills such as friendship, empathy, and anger management in one-on-one settings, not in a group setting.

Further, the school holds meetings with teachers that reinforce positive behavior expectations among the learners. Some teachers don’t know how to control the bullying acts in the school therefore, it is important to reinforce them with that positive behavior expectation. This is supported by Mohan & Bakar (2021), who lamented that teachers

need to have the necessary competencies to prevent and respond to bullying affecting students with disabilities specifically. For schools to protect learners with disabilities and respond to bullying in school need to conduct intensive guidance and counselling with the victims of bullying and bullies. This provides on-going opportunities for continued open discussions, checking in with the children regularly in school.

Furthermore, the findings of the study showed that some of the reporting strategies included reporting all forms of ill-treatment, reporting bullying incidence in school settings and reporting any form of harassment and bullying acts. This was in affirmation with Lessard et al. (2022), who indicated that bullying reporting was fundamental to preventing and addressing bullying. This strategy enables the teacher in the school to protect learners with disabilities in schools. Knowing how bullying is handled at your child's school will enable you to know who to contact in the event of an incident. It will also set clear expectations of how the school might handle the situation. All forms of ill-treatment concerning bullying are reported to the teachers and in turn teachers also report to the administration for action on the offenders. This has helped reduce the rates of bullying in the school. Children with disabilities are protected from bullying in schools by reporting bullying incidence in school settings.

All the children are alert to report any form of bullying act to their teachers or the administration for action. These results were in line with Antwi, (2021) who incidents of bullying should always be reported. Ask to meet with school personnel and have a face-to-face meeting. This demonstrates your commitment to seeing the situation resolved. Also, the results were not quite different from those of UNESCO (2021), who advocated for establishing reporting mechanisms for learners affected by bullying, together with support and referral services, as key components of child protection programs in schools. To protect the specific needs of learners with disabilities, it is essential that mechanisms for reporting school bullying are accessible as well as confidential, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive. Arising from the findings above, reporting strategies enabled the teachers in the school to protect learners with disabilities in schools from all forms of bullying.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the research question above, it was evident from the study that children with disabilities were protected from bullying in selected special education schools using the 3R's bullying prevention strategies namely recognizing, responding and reporting strategies. The findings established that Recognizing bullying prevention strategies included recognizing the statistics or acts of bullying in the school, recognize the warning signs of victims and stereotypes of bullies and routine checking to stop harassment and bullying acts. The study also revealed that Responding bullying prevention strategies included holding meetings that reinforce positive behaviour expectations, providing guidance and counselling on how to respond to bullying, punishing learners using discriminatory language or derogatory remarks, formulation of anti-bullying programs, formation of support groups to sensitize learners, training staff

members on how to recognizing incidents of bullying and teach anti-bullying social skills. Other strategies identified include the Reporting bullying prevention strategies which included reporting all forms of ill-treatment, reporting bullying incidence in school settings, reporting any form of harassment, and bullying acts. These bullying prevention strategies enabled the teachers in the school to protect learners with disabilities in schools. Based on the results on child protection measures on bullying in selected special education schools presented, the study recommends the following:

- Develop and implement a school bullying policy for preventing and addressing bullying. The school needs to ensure that administrators, teachers, staff, and learners have up-to-date professional development training needed to recognise and respond to incidences of bullying and to adopt strong policies for preventing and addressing bullying in special education schools.
- The school should be on the lookout for incidences of bullying. School officials should develop an environment where students feel safe reporting bullying that involves them or that they hear about.
- The schools should respond to bullying quickly and effectively. When an investigation reveals that a student with disabilities is being bullied, school administrators need to respond quickly and effectively and should act to ensure that bullying does not take place in the future.
- School need to document and report all actions taken when recognizing and responding to bullying. Moreover, the parents of the victim and perpetrator should be kept abreast of actions taken in response to the bullying and for future reference.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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