

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

School-based anti-bullying approaches for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities: A systematic review and synthesis

Julia R. Badger^{1,2}  | Atiyya Nisar¹ | Richard P. Hastings¹ 

¹School of Education Learning and Communication Sciences, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

²Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Correspondence

Julia R. Badger, School of Education Learning and Communication Sciences, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK.
 Email: julia.badger@education.ox.ac.uk

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Abstract

Mainstream anti-bullying interventions can reduce primary school-level victimisation by 15–16% and bullying perpetration by 19%–20% (*Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2019; **45**: 111–133). Less is known about anti-bullying interventions for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) even though they are at least 2–4 times more likely to be involved in bullying. This systematic review aimed to identify reported anti-bullying approaches for pupils with SEND, what the evidence is for these approaches reducing bullying and which design factors are linked to a reduction in bullying. We searched 10 databases and four grey literature sources for articles that evaluated school-based anti-bullying strategies for children and young people aged 4–18 years with SEND. This review included 15 studies and used the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool for quality and risk of bias. Ten reported a reduction in bullying involvement, but the evidence was variable. A further 27 articles formed a ‘suggested strategies’ review which synthesised articles without evaluations of interventions but that suggested anti-bullying strategies for use with pupils with SEND. The main suggestion was encouraging social skills and networks. Interventions should be evaluated for feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness. High-quality randomised controlled trials are required to build an evidence base to support pupils with SEND.

KEYWORDS

bullying, children, disabilities, intervention, school, special educational needs

Key Points

- Bullying is a public health priority. Bullying of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is approximately 2–4 times more frequent than pupils without SEND, and often their SEND status or associated needs make them more vulnerable to targeting.
- There remain a limited number of anti-bullying programmes designed or adapted for pupils with SEND.
- There is some evidence that current anti-bullying programmes reduce perpetration or victimisation of pupils with SEND, but most studies do not include comparison groups or large enough SEND populations to provide a good evidence base to determine effectiveness.
- Anti-bullying programmes for pupils with SEND should be co-developed with pupils, parents and staff specifically for this population and incorporate the synthesised strategies and content design for effective delivery, engagement and learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a major public health and education system priority with global rates from 40 developing countries suggesting that on average 42% of boys and 37% of girls are exposed to bullying at some point (World Health Organization, 2020). For some individuals, victimisation can become stable across time; a study of over 500 children across 3 years found that 9% were victimised in primary school, and 43% of those *continued* to be victimised 3 years later when in secondary school (Scholte et al., 2007). Research has also shown the negative associated outcomes of victimisation for children's health and educational and social outcomes (Armitage, 2021; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Merrin et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2017) some of which last into adulthood (Lidberg et al., 2023; Vanderbilt & Augustyn, 2010; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Bullying is characterised by three factors: (1) an imbalance of power, (2) deliberate intention to cause harm and (3) repetition of the act (Olweus, 1993). This applies to interactions in person and/or online (cyberbullying). These factors mean that bullying can be psychologically damaging to those being victimised: over time, they become increasingly vulnerable and less able to defend themselves (Armitage, 2021). Bullying can be direct or indirect (Arseneault, 2018) and can take on various forms with the most common forms in school contexts being physical, such as hitting, kicking or shoving and verbal, such as saying mean and hurtful things. In 2005, the UK government acknowledged the complex and significant issue of bullying amongst school-aged pupils and the following Education and Inspections Act 2006 was enforced, which included the legal requirement of every maintained school to have a policy in place to prevent all forms of bullying amongst pupils (legislation.gov.uk, 2006).

Bullying roles

Early research into school bullying involvement focused on two main roles, the bully (a child who victimises one or more of their peers) and the victim (a child who is targeted by their peers and is less likely to retaliate). A further five roles were later identified: assistant (a child who helps the perpetrator), reinforcer (a child who encourages the perpetrator), defender (a child who helps the victim), outsider (a child who sees the bullying but takes no action: a bystander) and bully-victims (a child who both bullies others *and* is bullied themselves, also sometimes called provocative-victims) (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Bully victims are known to be a complex group who struggle the most with emotional regulation and social adjustment (Olweus, 1999).

Bullying involvement

There are various reasons why children may bully their peers including emotional reactivity, early life experience, cultural norms and other socioecological influences (see Liu & Graves, 2011 and Thomas et al., 2018 for overviews). However, research has shown that one of the most common reasons is to gain social status and dominance within a peer group (Nassem & Harris, 2015); children want to be liked or seen as “cool” (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002), and for some, bullying can achieve that influence and leadership amongst peers. It could be said that some perpetrators of bullying, therefore, hold a positive attitude towards the associated outcomes of bullying, violence and peer dominance (Lagerspetz et al., 1982; Olweus, 1978).

Any child can be involved in bullying, yet certain risk factors increase the likelihood of becoming perpetrators and/or victims of bullying. Combined bullying data from two large studies of children and young people from 144 countries found that the greatest risk factor to becoming a victim of bullying was being ‘different’ to one's peers. These differences included factors such as physical appearance, physical or learning disability, race, nationality, skin colour and family-level disadvantage (World Health Organization, 2018a, 2018b). Other risk factors have included having low self-esteem (Kumpulainen et al., 2001), dysregulated emotional reactivity (Rosen et al., 2012), poor mental health (Gumpel, 2008), low academic achievement (Cook et al., 2010) and poor social skills, parenting and home life (Bernstein & Watson, 1997).

Bullying and SEND

The majority of peer bullying research has focused on mainstream schools. However, increasingly, researchers are seeking to understand more about bullying within the population of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream or special schools. Where bullying rates amongst pupils without SEND are estimated to be 20%–30%, a literature review of bullying rates amongst pupils with SEND estimates a range of 25–69% (Rose et al., 2011). When pupils with SEND are self-reporting victimisation in the past month, they have been found to experience 2–4 times more victimisation than their peers (Hartley et al., 2015). Although comparison data are limited, pupils with SEND have a higher risk of bullying involvement than their peers in general: a study of 21,646 pupils aged 12–18 found that pupils with SEND were twice as likely to be perpetrators and/or victims than their peers (Rose et al., 2009). However, Rose et al. (2009) found that those in inclusive education settings were less involved compared to those in

exclusive education settings (such as self-contained special education classrooms within a mainstream school). This may have been due to the nature of their educational needs creating a greater risk, or perhaps the very logistics of being seen as separate.

Pupils with SEND are bullied for many of the same reasons as their peers, but their SEND status itself can make them an additional target, and pupils with SEND may have more difficulties recognising, responding to and reporting bullying (Whitney et al., 1992). Pupils with SEND are more likely to have poorer social skills, struggle with communication and lack assertiveness (Kaukiainen et al., 2002; Sharp & Cowie, 1994) and in some cases, have unusual hobbies, interactions, reactions and movements, such as rocking, which can become risk factors for bullying (Gray, 2004).

Anti-Bullying interventions

A recent systematic review identified 67 anti-bullying programmes, interventions and prevention strategies for use with children and young people aged between 4 and 18 in mainstream schools (Gaffney et al., 2021) with the most commonly reported being the Olweus Bullying Prevention Plan (OBPP; Olweus, 1991), the Viennese Social Competence Program (ViSC; Strohmeier et al., 2012), No Trap! (Palladine et al., 2012) and KiVa (Salmivalli et al., 2010). A meta-analysis found mainstream anti-bullying interventions to effectively reduce school-level victimisation by approximately 15%–16% and reduce school-level bullying by approximately 19%–20% (Gaffney et al., 2019). Although anti-bullying programmes can vary widely in their approach and findings, and not all programme components are found to be effective or positive in every study, some of the most effective components identified for reducing bullying involvement and improving mental health are considered to be a whole-school approach, clear and enforced school rules, parental involvement/understanding of the school's programme, and peer involvement (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Gaffney et al., 2019, 2021; Gregory et al., 2010; Guzman-Holst et al., 2022; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Wurf, 2012). It must be noted, however, that although studies may show an overall school-level decrease in bullying perpetration and victimisation with the introduction of an anti-bullying programme, the 'healthy context paradox' (Salmivalli, 2018) has been identified to acknowledge the worsened outcomes for some pupils who *remain* victimised by peers despite the introduction of the anti-bullying programme and overall school improvement (Huising et al., 2019).

Two previous systematic reviews have considered the presence and effectiveness of anti-bullying approaches with regard to pupils with SEND. In 2016, Houchins

et al. reviewed research evaluating bullying intervention or prevention programmes within a school context. They found that within only six studies identified, authors had covered a wide range of ages (3–18 years) and had generally focused on either one specific need such as emotional disturbance, or the inclusion of any pupil with SEND. Houchins et al. (2016) also found that the characteristics and settings of the interventions varied greatly, as did the outcome measure assessments. As a consequence, the results across studies were mixed and lacked replication. Interestingly, none of the six papers focused on or considered cyberbullying. Houchins et al. (2016) concluded that future research should include: (a) age-appropriate interventions, (b) interventions that teach individuals how to respond and react to bullying, (c) consider both teacher and student responses to better understand the nuances of bullying and (d) consider a level of standardisation to increase the strength of evidence and replication. In 2022, Maxfield et al. extended this review by including studies outside the school context and studies that included adults with disabilities. Fourteen studies were reviewed, which included interventions based at school, home, clinic, group home and adult work centre. Ten studies were also included in a meta-analysis. In addition to mirroring findings from Houchins et al. (2016), Maxfield et al. (2022) found small to large effect sizes for the success of bullying interventions for individuals with SEND; the largest effect size was found when teachers implemented the intervention. However, they did note the need for more rigorous fidelity checks to ensure the validity of the interventions and programmes being carried out, which would provide much-needed knowledge around the feasibility of these interventions being embedded into an existing setting. Both reviews add to our understanding of bullying and pupils with SEND and highlight the lack of standardisation and replication of this topic within the research literature. Both reviews recommend more research into this area to eventually be able to provide a good evidence base of 'what works' with bullying interventions for individuals with SEND.

Current systematic review

Children and young people with SEND face multiple inequities and are exposed to bullying involvement more frequently than their peers without SEND. We aim to expand on and update previous reviews (Houchins et al., 2016; Maxfield et al., 2022) with a primary focus on the evaluation of anti-bullying approaches (interventions, programmes and resources) within a school context only and a secondary focus on strategies and design features that may lead to the development of successful anti-bullying programmes for use with pupils with SEND.

This review had three questions:

1. What anti-bullying approaches (including programmes, resources and interventions) for pupils with SEND have been reported in the literature?
2. What is the evidence for these approaches to reducing bullying for pupils with SEND?
3. What design factors link anti-bullying approaches for pupils with SEND to a reduction in bullying?

METHOD

Protocol and registration

This systematic review was preregistered on PROSPERO in March 2023 (CRD42023400670). Reporting follows the PRISMA guidelines (www.prisma-statement.org). One adjustment was made from our original protocol so that we could incorporate additional evidence: eligible texts were categorised as either 'main review' or 'suggested strategies' so that review Question 3 could be more comprehensively addressed. This is detailed in the study selection below.

Search strategy

This review included searches of 10 electronic databases carried out between February 2023 and March 2023: PsycINFO, ProQuest, Web of Science, Scopus, British Education Index, Education Research Complete, Embase, ERIC, DOAJ and JSTOR and 4 grey literature sources: Google Scholar, (UK) Department for Education, National Foundation for Educational Research and the Antbullying Alliance. The search strategy was modified according to the requirements for each database and source. To decrease publication bias, we included dissertations, theses and book chapters as well as journal articles as long as they were written in or translated into English. Forwards and backwards reference searching of included papers was conducted, but no additional studies were identified. An example of the specific search strategy for one database can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they were written in or translated into English and described school-based anti-bullying strategies for children and young people with SEND. There were no restrictions on date of publication or geographical location. Eligibility criteria related to population, setting and design.

Population

The anti-bullying strategy had to be targeted at children and young people (CYP) aged 4–18 years with

SEND. Data had to have been reported by CYP within that age range, or from staff in educational settings involved in the delivery of anti-bullying strategies for pupils with SEND, or from parents or carers of pupils with SEND receiving anti-bullying strategies. In cases where the research sample included a mixture of CYP with and without SEND but the SEND population made up less than 70% and the data were not reported separately for pupils with SEND, the studies were excluded from our review.

Setting

Data had to have been gathered from mainstream schools, special schools, further education institutions, alternative (non-clinical such as hospital schools) educational provisions, or day or residential education settings. The anti-bullying strategies had to be directly linked to schools and delivered during the school day or during school-based out-of-hours clubs or similar.

Design

Any experimental or quasi-experimental study reporting quantitative or qualitative anti-bullying outcomes was included. Studies providing descriptive information regarding interventions but no experimental data were also eligible. Any qualitative or quantitative studies reporting pupil, staff or parent views of anti-bullying approaches were also eligible.

Study selection

[Figure 1](#) illustrates the study selection process. A total of 2588 records were identified from screening the electronic databases and grey literature. After removing duplications, a total of 1560 records were retained. Two authors (AN and JB) independently screened titles and abstracts (AN=100%; JB=25%) and identified 112 records to be retained for full-text screening. Interrater reliability at this stage was $k=0.96$. The same two authors independently screened 100% of full texts and identified those that were eligible for the review. It was at this stage that the authors decided to incorporate additional evidence: 'suggested strategies' to more fully address review Question 3. Texts were categorised as 'suggested strategies' on the basis that they did not conduct empirical evaluations of anti-bullying interventions but offered descriptions or proposals of anti-bullying strategies for use with pupils with SEND. A total of 15 records were included in the main review synthesis and 27 records were included in the suggested strategies synthesis. Interrater reliability for inclusion

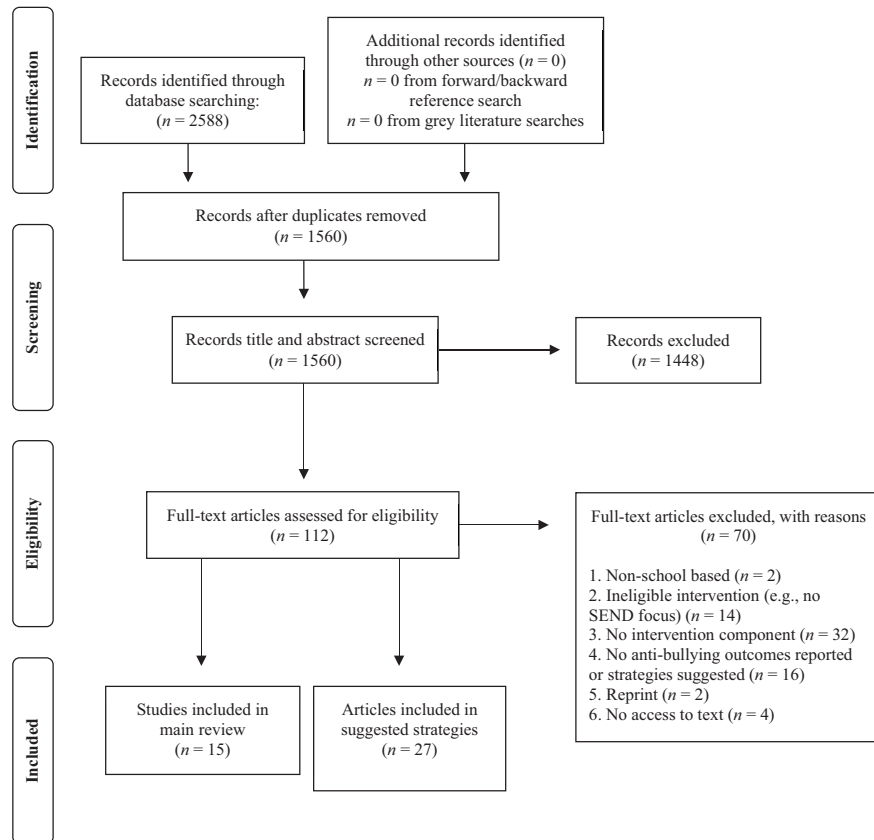


FIGURE 1 Prisma flow chart.

at this stage was $k=0.80$. Disagreements were resolved through discussion between the authors. Reasons for exclusion of papers at the full text stage were recorded (see Figure 1).

Data extraction

Two data extraction forms were developed by the authors for this review (1. main, and 2. suggested strategies). AN compiled, and JB confirmed, the data extracted for the main review and the suggested strategies review.

Main review extracted data were as follows: (1) *article characteristics*: title, author, journal, year; (2) *Population characteristics*: number of participants, mean age, age range, sex, population, SEND percentage; (3) *study characteristics*: study OBJECTIVES, country, design, setting; (4) *Anti-bullying approach characteristics*: name, theoretical framework, content, delivery and training, deliverer, duration, type; (5) *study outcomes*: anti-bullying measures, anti-bullying outcomes (effectiveness of the approach), key conclusions; (6) *Intervention evaluation*: views and experiences, implementation factors.

For suggested strategies articles, data were extracted on: (1) *article characteristics*: title, author, year; (2) *participant characteristics*: population; (3) *Strategy*

characteristics: approach name and/or concept, approach theoretical framework, strategy suggestions.

Assessment of methodological quality (risk of bias)

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018) was used for individual methodological quality appraisal by AN of the 15 studies included in the main review. The MMAT allowed for appraisal of all 15 studies according to one of five different methodological categories: qualitative ($n=0$), quantitative randomised controlled trials ($n=2$), quantitative non-randomised studies ($n=5$), quantitative descriptive studies ($n=6$), and mixed methods studies ($n=2$). Each methodological category comprises five criteria; a '1' is awarded for each criterion met. Possible quality appraisal scores range from 0 to 5 (transformed to 0%–100%). The full appraisal for each study can be found in the (Table SI).

RESULTS

Study and Programme characteristics

See Table 1 for corresponding study details.

TABLE 1 Study and program characteristics.

Author (year)	Country	n	Age	% SEND	Disability	Deliverer	Duration	Type	AB approach
Abdulkader (2017)	Saudi Arabia	40	12–15	100	LD	T	4 weeks, 17 sessions of 35-min	Ta	CBT counselling
Bradley (2016)	England	48	11–12	25	ASD	T	7 months, every 2 weeks	Ta	Peer Mentoring
Cook et al. (2019)	England	65	9–11	15	ASD	EC	11 weeks of 35-min lessons	W-C	Musical contact
Espelage et al. (2015)	USA	123	11–12	100	SEND	T	13–15 lessons of 50-min	W-C	Second Step
Graybill et al. (2016)	USA	78	9–14	17	SEND	R	7 group sessions of 60 min. Possible additional 7 individual sessions of 30 min	Ta	Bullying/Victimisation Intervention Program
Humphrey et al. (2013)	England	4758	5–15	100	SEND	T	U	Ta	Achievement for All
Rahill and Teghiasi (2003)	USA	82	7–12	100	ED	R	25 weeks of 40–45 min sessions	Ta	STORIES; Skillstreaming
Ramirez (2018)	USA	U	11–14	U	SEND	T	U	W-S	Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
Rex (2014)	USA	6	8–12	100	ASD	U	9 weeks	Ta	Video Modelling
Rudd (2016)	USA	6	8–11	50	ADHD, LD	T	6 lessons of 10–30 min	W-C	Bully Prevention in Positive Behaviour Support
Saylor and Leach (2009)	USA	48	12–18	50	ASD, SDD, ID, CP, DS, ADD/ADHD, SA, CHC, LD, ED, HI, VI, SI	U	24–27 weeks, once a week	Ta	Peer EXPRESS
Segura (2012)	USA	3	6–10	100	ASD	U	18 weeks, 18 lessons of 30 min. Most lessons were repeated 3 times	Ta	Superheroes Social Skills Programme
Sreckovic et al. (2017)	USA	3	15	100	ASD	R	4 weeks, twice a week then 3 weeks, once a week	Ta	Peer Network Intervention
Sullivan et al. (2015)	USA	456	10–14	23	SI, LD, ID, ED, HI	R	15 lessons	W-C	Second Step
Vessey and O'Neill (2011)	USA	65	8–14	100	MH, DD, ADHD, CP, PDD, PI, SA, HI	SN	24 weeks, every 2 weeks for 30-min	Ta	Take a Stand, Lend a Hand, Stop Bullying Now

Abbreviations: ADD/ADHD, attention deficit disorder/hyperactivity disorder; ASD, autism spectrum disorder; CHC, chronic health condition; CP, cerebral palsy; DD, developmental delays; DS, down syndrome; EC, external consultant; ED, emotional behavioural disorder; EXPRESS, Experience to Promote Recreation, Exposure and Social Skills; HI, hearing impaired; ID, intellectual disability; LD, learning disabilities; PI, physical impairment; R, Researcher; SA, severe allergies; SEND, special educational needs and disabilities; SI, speech language impairment; SN, school nurse; T, teacher; Ta, Targeted; U, unspecified; VI, visually impaired; W-C, whole-class; W-S, whole-school.

Population

Fourteen of the main review included studies were based in mainstream schools with one study (Saylor & Leach, 2009) working with young people with SEND from self-contained special educational classrooms within the mainstream school. The additional study worked with young people from special education centres for individuals with emotional disabilities (Rahill & Teglasi, 2003). All studies came from high-income countries: Saudi Arabia ($n=1$), England ($n=3$) and the USA ($n=11$) with samples ranging from 3 to 4758 pupils aged 5–18 years, with a range of 15%–100% pupils with SEND. Five studies were focused solely on pupils with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; Bradley, 2016; Cook et al., 2019; Rex, 2014; Segura, 2012; Sreckovic et al., 2017), one on pupils with specific learning disabilities (Abdulkader, 2017), one on pupils with emotional disabilities (Rahill & Teglasi, 2003), one on attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or learning disabilities (Rudd, 2016) and the remaining seven focused more broadly on SEND.

Delivery

In three studies, it was unclear who delivered the anti-bullying approaches (Rex, 2014; Saylor & Leach, 2009; Segura, 2012); school staff delivered the approach in seven of the remaining studies, researchers in four and an external consultant in one. When specified, approaches included between 9 and 27 lessons of 10–60 min over a 4-week to 7-month period. Ten studies focused on a targeted anti-bullying approach, four on a whole-class approach and one (Ramirez, 2018) focused on a whole-school approach.

Approach/intervention model

The mainstream approach ‘Second Step’ was evaluated in two of the studies (Espelage et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2015), but all other approaches were unique. Five studies trialled a newly designed approach: CBT counselling (Abdulkader, 2017), peer mentoring (Bradley, 2016), musical contact (Cook et al., 2019), video modelling (Rex, 2014) and peer network meetings (Sreckovic et al., 2017). The remaining eight trialled pre-existing mainstream anti-bullying approaches with pupils with SEND: Bullying/Victimisation Intervention Program (BVIP; Graybill et al., 2016), Achievement for All (AfA; Humphrey et al., 2013), STORIES and Skillstreaming (Rahill & Teglasi, 2003), Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP; Ramirez, 2018), Bully Prevention in Positive Behaviour Support Program (BP-PBS; Rudd, 2016), Peer EXperiences to Promote Recreation, Exposure and Social Skills (Peer EXPRESS; Saylor & Leach, 2009), The Superheroes Social Skills Program (Segura, 2012), and Take a Stand, Lend a Hand, Stop

Bullying Now (Vessey & O’Neill, 2011). See Table 1 for information of which approach/intervention focused on the whole school (WS), whole class (WC) or a targeted group of pupils (Ta).

Intervention population focus

Three of the studies used approaches designed specifically for pupils with SEND (Abdulkader, 2017; Humphrey et al., 2013; Segura, 2012). Six studies used approaches designed or adapted for both pupils without SEND and pupils with SEND, and six studies used approaches designed for pupils without SEND.

Programme content

The content of anti-bullying approaches across the 15 studies varied greatly. The two most common components were: (1) interactive classroom activities, such as watching and discussing videos and role-playing situations and (2) anti-bullying lessons (Espelage et al., 2015; Graybill et al., 2016; Rahill & Teglasi, 2003; Ramirez, 2018; Rex, 2014; Rudd, 2016; Segura, 2012; Sullivan et al., 2015; Vessey & O’Neill, 2011). Several studies initiated socialisation between pupils with SEND and pupils without SEND either through structured peer networks or peer mentoring (Bradley, 2016; Sreckovic et al., 2017) or through group-based activities such as singing, sports and arts (Cook et al., 2019; Saylor & Leach, 2009). Two studies also included parents (Humphrey et al., 2013) or the wider community (Ramirez, 2018) into the approach.

Anti-Bullying outcome measurement

Studies also varied in their measurement of bullying with only one questionnaire used in more than one study: the Bully Victimisation Scale (Reynolds, 2003) was used in three studies alongside other measures (Saylor & Leach, 2009; Segura, 2012; Sreckovic et al., 2017). Twelve studies collected bullying data directly from the pupils. Of those, two also collected data from parents, two from researchers and one from teachers. The remaining three studies only collected data from teachers.

Anti-Bullying outcomes

Three of the studies reported a reduction in bullying (of which two were able to provide statistics), and eight studies reported a reduction in victimisation (of which five were able to provide statistics; see Table 2 for a breakdown). Only five studies reporting

TABLE 2 Anti-bullying outcomes.

Author (year)	Study design	Approach content	Reduction in bullying involvement	Improvement in responding to bullying	No change
Abdulkader (2017)	QE	CBT counselling	Yes (bullying: $p=0.1$)		
Bradley (2016)	QN-R	Peer mentoring	Yes (victimisation: $p<0.001$)		Yes
Cook et al. (2019)	QN-R	Musical contact			
Espelage et al. (2015)	RCT	Social-emotional learning	Yes (bullying: $p<0.05$)		
Graybill et al. (2016)	QE	Targeted teaching/learning	Yes (victimisation: $p<0.001$)	Yes	
Humphrey et al. (2013)	QN-R	School support to provide SEND opportunities to fulfil potential	Yes (victimisation: $p<0.01$)		
Rahill and Tegiasi (2003)	QN-R	Social competence and social information processing			Yes
Ramirez (2018)	MM	School climate to discourage bullying			Yes
Rex (2014)	MB/MPD	Video modelling		Yes	
Rudd (2016)	MB/MPD	School-wide expectations and rules	Yes (bullying and victimisation: no statistics)	Yes	
Saylor and Leach (2009)	QN-R	Shared activities	Yes (victimisation: $p<0.02$)		
Segura (2012)	RAB	Videos, role-playing and modelling	Yes (victimisation: no statistics)	Yes	
Sreckovic et al. (2017)	MB/MPD	Peer network meetings	Yes (victimisation: no statistics)		
Sullivan et al. (2015)	RCT	Social-emotional learning	Yes (victimisation: $p<0.001$)		
Vessey and O'Neill (2011)	MM	Social marketing/teaching		Yes	

Abbreviations: MB/MPD, Multiple-baseline / Multiple probe design; MM, mixed methods; QE, quasi-experimental; QN-R, quantitative non-randomised; RAB, replicated AB single study design; RCT, quantitative randomised controlled trial.

a reduction included data from more than 20 ‘intervention’ participants with SEND: (Abdulkader, 2017; Espelage et al., 2015; Humphrey et al., 2013; Saylor & Leach, 2009; Sullivan et al., 2015). Five of the studies reported a positive change in how pupils with SEND responded or dealt with bullying situations, but only one was able to provide statistics for this. Three of the studies reported no changes. Refer to [Table S1](#) for details on study method type.

Quality assessment

The methodological quality of included studies varied considerably with one study being rated 100% against the methodological quality criteria (Humphrey et al., 2013), six studies being rated 80% (Cook et al., 2019; Espelage et al., 2015; Graybill et al., 2016; Segura, 2012; Sreckovic et al., 2017; Sullivan et al., 2015), six studies being rated 60% (Abdulkader, 2017; Bradley, 2016; Rex, 2014; Rudd, 2016; Saylor & Leach, 2009; Vessey & O’Neill, 2011), and two studies being rated 40% (Rahill & Teglasi, 2003; Ramirez, 2018). Full appraisal details including study designs can be found in the [Table S1](#).

Suggested anti-bullying strategies

A total of 27 additional articles were included in the suggested strategies section of the review to provide a fuller answer to review Question 3. These articles did not report on empirical evaluations of anti-bullying interventions but offered descriptions or proposals of anti-bullying strategies for use with pupils with SEND.

In [Table 3](#), anti-bullying components and strategies suggested by more than one article have been listed in order of frequency going from ‘social skills/networks’ which was mentioned in 16 of the 27 articles to ‘appreciate diversity’ which was mentioned in 2 of the 27 articles. Other strategies suggested in one article each were: more repetition of key concepts (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011); ensuring materials are accessible (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011); representing a variety of disabilities within the materials (Walton, 2012); using person-first language (Walton, 2012); increasing supervision in high bullying-risk areas (Heinrichs, 2003); providing movement opportunities during teaching (McNamara, 2017); creating a school staff team that manage bullying reports (Pearson, 2018) and creating individualised instructions for pupils (Knorr, 2018).

DISCUSSION

This review confirmed previous findings (Houchins et al., 2016; Maxfield et al., 2022) that there were very few studies evaluating the effectiveness of an anti-bullying

approach to reduce perpetration and victimisation amongst pupils with SEND, and those identified varied greatly in the approach, demographics, dosage, results and outcome measurements.

Anti-Bullying approaches for pupils with SEND

Our first research question sought to explore what anti-bullying approaches for pupils with SEND had been reported in the literature. From the 15 eligible studies identified, there were 14 different approaches, with only one approach – “Second Step” – having been used more than once (Espelage et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2015). The different approaches used in each study can be found in [Table 1](#) under ‘AB approach’. This variety of approach mirrors previous reviews into anti-bullying approaches with pupils with SEND but also those reviews exploring mainstream anti-bullying approaches. It appears that in the education sector there is little standardisation regarding anti-bullying approaches with a varied focus on reducing victimisation and bullying perpetration and/or increasing bullying identification, response and recognition. Some studies focus on teaching pupils and some focus on supporting teachers.

In a recent systematic review of mainstream anti-bullying approaches (Gaffney et al., 2021), the most commonly used programme was the OBPP. Although identified once in this review (Ramirez, 2018), it had not been adapted for use with pupils with SEND. A third of studies identified for this review were trialling new interventions with no existing evidence base even within the mainstream setting. Of the more established approaches, only one had been adapted for use with pupils with SEND (Vessey & O’Neill, 2011), and two were designed for use with pupils with SEND in mainstream schools (Saylor & Leach, 2009; Segura, 2012). None of the approaches were specifically designed for use in special schools. This highlights the need for an evidence-based anti-bullying approach designed *specifically* for pupils with SEND, especially those in special schools, or an approach carefully adapted from a mainstream evidence-based programme, with the main focus being anti-bullying. The remaining studies focused on pupils with SEND in mainstream schools. Although it is important that programmes and interventions are suitable for pupils with SEND within mainstream education as a targeted or whole school inclusive approach, our review findings highlight a significant gap in research and programmes for use with pupils with SEND in special schools. Thus, there is a lack of evidence to guide anti-bullying practice in special schools.

The mainstream school anti-bullying literature suggests that programmes should be delivered as a whole-school approach so that all members of the school community see themselves as against bullying, that a

TABLE 3 Suggested strategies for anti-bullying interventions.

Author (date)	Social skills/ network	Whole-school approach	Parents/ community	Practice activities	Language/ communication	Definition of SEND bullying	VM	Concrete examples/ direct focus	Multiple bullying report methods	Additional examples	Appreciate diversity
Berreman (2018)	Yes		Yes	Yes							
Bridgewater (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes				
Carlson et al. (2005)	Yes	Yes	Yes								
Carrington et al. (2017)		Yes	Yes								
Chen and Schwartz (2012)	Yes						Yes				
Chiappe (2019)	Yes		Yes								
Flynt and Morton (2007)	Yes				Yes	Yes			Yes		
Garcia Biggs et al. (2010)	Yes		Yes	Yes							
Good et al. (2011)		Yes		Yes							
Heinrichs (2003)			Yes			Yes					
Holmquist (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes								
Humphrey and Hebron (2015)	Yes	Yes									
Humphrey and Lewis (2008)		Yes			Yes						
Hong et al. (2015)			Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes		Yes	
K.norr (2018)	Yes										
Marshall (2019)	Yes	Yes									
McNamara (2017)	Yes	Yes						Yes			
Oh and Moss (2012)	Yes	Yes	Yes								
Pearson (2018)											
Raskauskas and Modell (2011)		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	
Rose and Monda-Amaya (2012)	Yes	Yes									
Rule et al. (2013)				Yes							
Samuels (2014)	Yes										
Symes (2017)	Yes										Yes
Trzaska (2018)		Yes									
Walton (2012)					Yes						
Warne (2003)											Yes

common anti-bullying language can be used and understood, and that there is a common process for reporting bullying (Salmivalli et al., 2010). One study took a whole-school approach—the OBPP—but again, this had not been adapted for pupils with SEND. Some studies evaluated an approach for whole-class administration, while others targeted pupils with SEND (and occasionally a few pupils without SEND). In these instances, the individuals may be learning skills around identifying, responding to and reporting bullying from peers, but the rest of the school community is not being encouraged to rethink their role in bullying including the bullying of peers with SEND.

Although a whole-school approach is suggested to be the most beneficial and effective method for reducing bullying and victimisation at the school level in mainstream schools, it must remain clear that at the individual level, these programmes *can* lead to a worse outcome for some pupils who continue to be victimised (Huitsing et al., 2019; Salmivalli, 2018). Due to the lack of a whole-school anti-bullying programme designed for use in special schools, it is currently unknown whether this approach would be the most effective or lead to negative effects for the most vulnerable.

Acceptability of interventions

It is important to note that few studies recorded data on acceptability—social validity—from staff, pupils or parents on the content and delivery of the programme (Bradley, 2016; Rudd, 2016; Segura, 2012; Sreckovic et al., 2017). If an approach is to be taken to scale and widely used, then researchers must ensure that it is not only effective during research testing but that it is also feasible for use and accepted by teachers and pupils. This will ensure adherence to the programme during wider-scale implementation. When future studies include evaluation of acceptability, it will help to inform additional programmes and interventions on how to ensure engagement and acceptance when used with pupils with SEND.

Effectiveness in reducing bullying involvement

Our second research question sought to explore what evidence there was for the identified study approaches to reducing bullying of pupils with SEND. As can be seen in Table 2, the effectiveness of the approaches in this review was not encouraging with no significant change in bullying involvement by bullying perpetration or victimisation in 20% of studies (Cook et al., 2019; Rahill & Teglassi, 2003; Ramirez, 2018); however, one of the approaches (music intervention; Cook et al., 2019) was a new programme, and although the other two were established anti-bullying programmes, neither had been adapted for use with pupils with SEND (STORIES

and Skillstreaming, Rahill & Teglassi, 2003; OBPP, Ramirez, 2018). Two-thirds of studies reported a reduction in bullying involvement for pupils with SEND (three reduced bully perpetration and eight reduced victimisation). However, three of these studies only reported descriptive statistics due to the small sample. The remaining seven studies reported a statistically significant degree of change. However, of the 10 studies reporting positive outcomes, only five included data from more than 20 ‘intervention’ participants with SEND: (Abdulkader, 2017; Espelage et al., 2015; Humphrey et al., 2013; Saylor & Leach, 2009; Sullivan et al., 2015). Again, this highlights a gap in the evidence-base to inform the use of anti-bullying programmes and interventions with the SEND population (Houchins et al., 2016; Maxfield et al., 2022).

An important aspect of identifying the effectiveness of an anti-bullying approach on reducing bullying involvement is the direct evaluation of data against a comparison (or practice as usual) group, ideally with allocation determined at random (Hariton & Locascio, 2018). Yet only five of the reviewed studies included a comparison group during data collection (Abdulkader, 2017; Espelage et al., 2015; Humphrey et al., 2013; Rahill & Teglassi, 2003; Sullivan et al., 2015), and of those, only two were strategically included as part of a randomised controlled trial (Espelage et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2015). Although this is unsurprising when trialling a new methodology or approach, a comparison group (or practice as usual group) of matched pupils with SEND should be included when assessing the effectiveness of an approach for wider use. This is something that future evaluations of approaches should include to fully understand the impact of a specific approach on reducing bullying involvement (Hariton & Locascio, 2018).

Suggested design factors and strategies for effective interventions

Our third research question sought to identify anti-bullying approach design factors suggested to be linked to reducing bullying for pupils with SEND. This review found a limited amount of data showing a reduction in bullying: although 10 studies stated a reduction in bullying involvement only 50% of those included more than 20 participants. Of those, the design factors included social–emotional learning (Espelage et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2015), shared pupil activities (Saylor & Leach, 2009), CBT counselling (Abdulkader, 2017), and the school providing more targeted provisions, opportunities and school-wide strategies (Humphrey et al., 2013). However, from our secondary review of suggested strategies, four factors were most often recommended to be included in the design and delivery of an anti-bullying approach for pupils with SEND (see Table 3). Although the exact effectiveness of these strategies is unknown, inclusion may be useful for educators or researchers

wishing to develop engaging and informative resources. Resources should be made available to encourage and the support practice of social skills and forming a social network, for example, buddy systems, peer mentoring, role-playing and drawing storyboards. This may be within the classroom but ideally across the whole school as part of an inclusive whole-school approach. This inclusive approach could also go beyond the pupils and staff to include parents and the wider community. Mainstream anti-bullying programme KiVa encourages schools to organise a 'launch' of the programme by inviting parents to attend the school and learn about what it means for their children to be part of a KiVa school including the KiVa anti-bullying language (Salmivalli et al., 2010). Other suggestions from the review papers involved inviting community members to the school to provide talks or attend meetings about diversity and inclusivity (see Table 3 for relevant references). The remaining strategies and design factors can be categorised into the following three foci, with examples for practical application taken from papers in Table 3: (1) *clarity of language and communication*, such as having a clear definition of SEND bullying, providing concrete examples, repetition of key concepts and using person-first language, (2) *interaction beyond the text*, such as video modelling and providing movement opportunities and (3) *staff tasks*, such as creating individualised instructions for pupils, forming a staff team to manage bullying reports and increasing supervision in high bullying-risk areas.

Limitations of the review

Although we tried to mitigate this in our search strategy, it is possible that studies were missed during the searches due to the difference in terminology around bullying and education/schooling across the world. Terminologies around pupils with SEND also vary greatly and future reviews in this field should be aware of the lack of standardisation. It is reassuring, however, that studies included in this review did overlap with those included in the previous two similar reviews (Houchins et al., 2016; Maxfield et al., 2022) but also included additional relevant studies and literature that offered a perspective on strategies or components that may be especially important when devising anti-bullying approaches for use with pupils with SEND.

An appraisal score determines a paper's reliability, validity and overall quality; the varied quality of studies in this review resulted in just less than half having a high methodology appraisal score of 80%–100% (see the Table S1 for the full appraisal for each study and study design). This variety in overall study quality would suggest caution when interpreting the findings for implementation. Future reviewers should also consider a method of retrieving and accurately interpreting relevant studies that have not been published in English. Our review

included 14 studies from English-speaking countries and only one from a non-English-speaking country that had been published in English. All studies were also from high-income countries. The current review may, therefore, be unrepresentative of probable programmes and studies across the world.

For the purpose of clear reporting, we categorised suggested strategies when synthesising the findings in relation to review Question 3. Although useful to gain an overview of the data, this approach may lead to a simplified and undetailed reporting of the strategies. Future researchers are referred back to the original articles for specific details.

Conclusion

Although there are still a limited number of studies evaluating anti-bullying approaches with pupils with SEND, this review has provided useful insights. First, when designing future studies, we recommend the use control groups and where possible, randomised controlled trials as the most rigorous method of evaluating effectiveness of any anti-bullying programmes developed specifically for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools and/or for special schools in reducing bullying perpetration and victimisation. Second, when future researchers wish to develop or adapt anti-bullying programmes for pupils with SEND, they should consider our synthesised key suggestions for content inclusion and programme design, although the exact effectiveness of each component currently remains unknown. There are also several evidence-based approaches for mainstream schools noted in this paper that could be adapted for use with pupils with SEND or special schools; adaptation is necessary to ensure pupils with SEND fully benefit from the teaching and engagement. Third, we highlighted a lack of social validity data on anti-bullying programmes for pupils with SEND. This is an essential step for researchers to ensure that a programme is accepted by and engaging for, school staff and pupils. Finally, more research is needed around the measurement of bullying with the population of pupils with SEND. A variety of measures were identified during this review with a main focus on bullying as a generic term. It is clear from this review, however, that bullying and the reporting of bullying may appear, or be, different for pupils with SEND or within special schools. To gain a clearer picture of bullying within the population of SEND, measures need to reflect these potential differences.

The educational and public health priorities and needs are clear and with a better understanding of how best to develop, deliver and measure the effectiveness of an anti-bullying programme for pupils with SEND, the next step will be to conduct high-quality randomised controlled trials to build an evidence base to support pupils with SEND across the world.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data extracted that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and was given favourable opinion by the University of Warwick's Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC): Reference number HSSREC 154/22-23.

ORCID

Julia R. Badger  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3060-1934>

Richard P. Hastings  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0495-8270>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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APPENDIX 1

EXAMPLE OF DETAILED SEARCH STRATEGY FOR PROQUEST/EDUCATION RESEARCH COMPLETE/BRITISH EDUCATION INDEX/WEB OF SCIENCE

Terms and synonyms relating to anti-bullying interventions were combined with search terms and synonyms relating to students with SEND.

Group 1: child* OR student OR pupil OR teen* OR adolescent OR youth.

AND

Group 2:

(Special OR “Special education” OR SEN OR SEND) N3 (school* OR setting* OR context* OR classroom* OR provision* OR college) N3 (setting* OR classroom* OR class* OR context* OR provision*) OR (Learning OR Intellectual OR Mental OR Developmental) N3 (Disab* OR Difficult* OR Impair* OR Complex OR “special educ*” OR “additional support”) N3 (need* OR “need* and disab*”) OR (ALN OR SEN OR ASD OR autism*).

AND

Group 3:

Anti-bullying OR antibullying OR “antibullying” OR bullying OR “bullying prevention” OR perpetration OR victim* OR bully OR “school harassment.”

Note: Search strategy varied slightly for other databases and websites.