

Identifying Effective Support for Students with Disabilities who have Experienced Bullying

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Abstract

This study examines the support experiences of 23 tertiary students with disabilities after being bullied, either at high school or at a tertiary institution. The anonymous online survey focused on what elements of support students found helpful and what would encourage them to seek support after they had been bullied. The findings showed that, after being bullied, most students sought support from parents and friends, followed by counsellors and teachers. However, participants found the support they received only moderately helpful, at best. Participants wanted to see improvements made to: the accessibility of support systems, the action taken after a bullying incident, and education about people with disabilities. Therefore, improvements need to be made to the support provided to tertiary students with disabilities who have experienced bullying within educational institutions.

Keywords

Students with disabilities, Bullying, Support, College, Higher education, School

Introduction

Over the past several decades, there has been a substantial increase in the number of students with disabilities attending tertiary institutions (Karellou, 2019; McNicholl et al., 2021). This has been supported by the reduction of discrimination against individuals with disabilities, which is a key driver of social change. The focus on social justice is underpinned by several Acts in New Zealand, including the Health and Disability Services (Safety) Act 2001, the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990, and the Human Rights Act 1993. Furthermore, the legislation requires tertiary institutions to provide support to students with disabilities to ensure they are not disadvantaged. In return, the institutions are provided with equity funding and specifically targeted frameworks to ensure this support is feasible and to help institutions meet their obligations to students with disabilities (Community Law, n.d.). There is evidence to suggest students with disabilities who receive academic support are more likely to complete their qualification (Dong & Lucas, 2016; Kranke, et al., 2013). For example, Dong and Lucas (2016) investigated academic sources of support for tertiary students with disabilities. They focused on the supports received by American, first year university students with disabilities from university accommodations and disability support services. They found students with disabilities who sought support from disability support services had better academic achievement, compared to their peers who did not do so.

Despite the legislation, funding, and positive intentions, students with disabilities still face a wide array of social, institutional, and disability-specific barriers (Fossey, et al., 2017; Strnadová et al., 2015). For example, Rath (2022) interviewed 23 undergraduate students with disabilities in Ireland about their social engagement. The students' main recommendations were inclusion awareness training for staff and the establishment of disabled peer groups to create a safe place to share their identity. In another large-scale study of 1,700 students with disabilities across several Australian universities, the key recommendation was the provision of awareness training for higher education staff (Pitman, 2022). While interviewing four students with disabilities, Papasotiriou and Windle (2012) noted that supports outside of the university environment were the most important. A focus on outside support was also evident in a study by Fullarton and Duquette (2016). The researchers conducted individual interviews in Canada with students who identified as having had a learning

disability since elementary school. Three out of the four participants reported that parents were the most important source of emotional support. However, the attitude of professors and teachers was not labelled as a barrier, nor were they perceived as unhelpful.

Another factor to consider is that students with disabilities are sometimes more reluctant to seek support due to fear of being judged, misunderstood, excluded, or bullied (Kranke et al., 2013). For example, Dong and Lucas (2016) reported only one out of 10 physically and/or psychologically disabled students reported requesting accommodations from disability support services. Therefore, in addition to ensuring students with disabilities have the appropriate academic support, it is also important that students have a positive social experience. However, this is not always the case (Pitman, 2022) as students with disabilities are more likely than their peers without a disability to experience bullying (Blake, et al., 2012; Chatzitheochari, et al., 2016; Elliott & Davis, 2009). More specifically, in their meta-analysis, Pinquart (2017) found that students with disabilities are 1.6 times more likely to be victims of bullying, compared to children and adolescents without a disability. It is also important to note the risk of being bullied is substantially influenced by their disability status rather than other risk factors, such as gender or obesity (Chatzitheochari, et al., 2016). Students with certain disabilities are especially vulnerable; for example, those with a visible disability or those that receive obvious external support. Unfortunately, the victimisation students with disabilities may have experienced during the school years often continues as they enter tertiary institutions (Cassidy, et al., 2019, 2021; Kowalski et al., 2016). Thus, although most of the research has focused on the school years, there is an increasing focus on bullying within tertiary institutions (Vaill et al., 2020).

Bullying is typically defined as negative actions towards others, repeated over time, by individuals who are perceived to have a higher status than the victim (Olweus, 1994, 2013). It can occur in several different forms: physical bullying (e.g., kicking, punching, hitting), verbal bullying (e.g., teasing, taunting, threatening), relational bullying (e.g., social exclusion, rumour spreading), and cyberbullying (via a technological device) (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Bullying has long been recognised as a ubiquitous problem due to the negative, short- and long-term impact it can have on people (Olweus, 1994, 2013). The impact of bullying can result in lower self-esteem and it can create a negative self-image for victims. It can also result in depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behaviour. Furthermore, these negative effects are also potential contributors to the relationships between victims of bullying and their academic achievement (Graham, 2016; Turner, 2013).

Hypothesised protective factors against the negative impact of bullying are sources of support. For example, there is some evidence in the school-based literature that support from teachers, family members, and peers has the potential to reduce the negative impact of bullying on school students (Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Flaspohler, et al., 2009). Notably, Davidson and Demaray (2007) found that social support may play a buffering role between bully victimisation and internalising distress from bullying, while Flaspohler et al. (2009) found that peer and teacher support might mitigate the impact that bullying has on victims' quality of life. Additionally, Green (2018) noted social support from peers can play a significant role in helping tertiary students with disabilities manage their experiences of bullying and reduce the negative consequences of bullying through acceptance and reassurance.

Although research to date has focused on the discriminatory experiences of school age and tertiary students with disabilities, relatively less attention has been given to students with disabilities who have experienced bullying either at school or during their tertiary education. This is an important area of investigation because New Zealand continues to have one of the highest rates of school-based bullying amongst school age students across OECD member countries (OECD, 2018). This preliminary study builds upon previous research by seeking the voices of students with disabilities who had experienced bullying, either at school or university. They were asked to reflect on the

support they had sought and why they had sought it, both at secondary school and at university. The key research questions were: (1) Do students with disabilities seek support after being bullied? If so, who do they seek support from and how helpful do they find the support they receive? (2) What would encourage students with disabilities to seek support? (3) What would the ideal form of support for students with disabilities look like?

Method

Ethical clearance and informed consent

Ethical approval, in accordance with New Zealand law, was obtained by Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee [# 0000027439]. Before completing the survey, participants indicated that they had read an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study and provided their electronic informed consent to indicate they were voluntarily participating in the present study before they proceeded to the survey questions.

Materials

An anonymous online survey consisting of 21 questions was developed by the authors and drew upon studies which adopted similar methodologies. Four questions measured demographic data, including age, gender, ethnicity, and years spent in tertiary study. Five questions measured aspects of participants' disabilities. Categorical questions were used to determine the length of time that the disability had impacted them and whether their disability was visible or not. A seven-point Likert-type question was then presented to determine participants' openness about their disability. Participants indicated their strength of agreement with statements about their openness with key people, including friends, classmates, strangers, and teachers/lecturers. Open questions were then used to determine what factors influenced the disclosure of their disability. A further 12 questions measured students' past experiences of bullying, both at high school and within the tertiary sector, and any support they had received. Five categorical questions were used to determine what type of bullying students had experienced, from whom students have experienced bullying, and from whom students sought support. Participants were given a list of possible options, as well as the option to select "other", and they selected as many answers as were applicable to their scenarios. A five-point Likert-type question was then used to identify how helpful students found different sources of support. Seven open-ended questions were then used to measure aspects of support that students with disabilities found helpful and unhelpful, aspects that influenced their willingness to seek support, and improvements that they wanted to see in the support given.

Procedures

Study participants were recruited using snowball sampling, meeting the following characteristics: a current tertiary student, self-identifying as having a disability, and aged between 18 and 25 years. Participants were recruited through an online group page for students with disabilities. Students were also recruited through flyers that were distributed throughout the various university campuses. They were also dispersed across two undergraduate psychology courses (selected because they were the largest undergraduate classes within the institution). The flyer contained information about the purpose of the research and a link to a website for prospective participants. The website contained an information sheet for participants to read about the research project. The survey took 10–15 minutes for participants to complete and was open for four weeks.

Data analysis

As the dataset for this preliminary study was small, descriptive analysis was used for the quantitative questions, while responses from each of the qualitative questions were analysed, tallied, and grouped into common themes and answers. The themes were verified by a second coder.

Results

Participants

Twenty-three participants completed the survey. As shown in Table 1, the majority were aged between 18–21, female, and Caucasian, and over half had been in the tertiary institution for over a year. Of the 23 participants that responded to the survey, six had a visible disability and 17 had a non-visible disability. However, given the small dataset, these two groups were combined for the remainder of the analysis.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants

Demographic information	Participants	
	(<i>n</i> = 23)	%
Age		
18–21	15	65.1
22–25	8	34.7
Gender		
Female	14	60.9
Male	8	34.8
Non-binary	1	4.3
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	18	78.3
Māori, Asian, Pacific Island, Indian, or other	5	21.7
Years in tertiary study		
Up to 12 months	10	43.5
Over 1 year and up to 5 years	13	56.5
Visibility of disability		
Visible	6	26.1
Non-visible	17	73.9

The majority of participants reported that they were open with their friends and teachers about their disability, but not with strangers. When asked about their openness with classmates, participants were divided. Just over half (*n*=12) of the participants reported that they were not open with their classmates, whereas nine participants reported that they were somewhat open with their classmates about their disability. When asked what influenced their willingness to disclose their disability, the majority (*n*=15) of participants reported that this was dependent on its situational relevance. For example, one participant said: “I don’t normally have a choice. I have to let my teachers/lecturers know. Otherwise, it disadvantages me, which also means that sometimes some of my classmates end up knowing”.

Participants also indicated that they were more willing to disclose their disability if they were assured that disclosure would remain confidential, and when the other person was friendly, open, and knowledgeable about disabilities. However, previous negative experiences, and being treated differently, contributed to participants’ reluctance to disclose their disability. For example, one participant said: “People doubted me and/or my capabilities after I disclosed, even though nothing had changed”. Internal factors, such as their beliefs and sense of trust, also influenced seven participants’ willingness to disclose their disability. Being scared or afraid, and ashamed or embarrassed, of their disability made some participants more reluctant to disclose their disability.

Experiences of bullying

The majority of participants ($n=18$) indicated that they had experienced bullying because of their disability. Verbal and/or relational bullying was reported by most ($n=17$) participants. Two participants also experienced physical bullying and three participants also experienced cyberbullying in the past. Participants commented that they were bullied by friends and/or classmates/peers the most. Two participants also indicated that they had been bullied by strangers, teachers/lecturers, and/or family members in the past.

Experiences of support

Of the participants that had experienced bullying because of their disability, 17 had sought support. Only one participant did not seek support after bullying. As shown in Table 2, when asked to identify who they sought support from, the majority reported friends, parents, teachers, and counsellors were the main forms of support, whereas fewer participants sought support from siblings, clubs, and helplines.

In addition to asking who participants sought support from, we also asked participants to rank how helpful this support was from 1–5, where 5 was indicative of very helpful support. As seen in Table 2, the mean scores were around 2–3, indicating that the help they received was only slightly or moderately helpful, at best. The most helpful forms of support appeared to come from siblings and friends, with means of 3.25 and 3.07 respectively.

Table 2: Sources of support and helpfulness of support after experiencing bullying

Sources of support	Helpfulness of the support	
	($n = 18$)*	M (SD)
Parents	10	2.5 (.85)
Siblings	4	3.25 (.5)
Friends	14	3.07 (.83)
Teacher/Lecturer	7	2.71 (.76)
Counsellor/Advisor	7	2.86 (1.35)
Club/Society	2	3 (0)
Helpline and other online support	4	2.33 (.58)

Note. *Participants could select more than one form of support.

Participants were then asked about the helpfulness of the support and what made it unhelpful. Participants claimed that they preferred to talk to someone with a similar background and/or to an expert who was unbiased. For example, one participant said: “[Talking with an expert allowed me to] develop some really good coping mechanisms”. Another participant reported that they preferred to talk to someone anonymously so that they did not have to worry about what their opinions and thoughts were.

Other factors that influenced how helpful participants found the support included other people’s actions and availability. Participants reported that being able to talk to friends and be listened to was the most helpful as it helped facilitate their understanding of the situation. It also validated and affirmed their feelings when friends would offer words of encouragement and affirmation. For example, one participant said: “Being able to talk with someone and get a different perspective on the situation [was helpful]. People [would] affirm my feelings and tell me that it is ok to be upset”.

Helpful actions from other people were mentioned in the participants’ responses, including working together to find a solution, being an active bystander, being treated like a normal person, and having someone offer a distraction. For example, one participant said: “Friends would distract me by doing

something else ...”. Another participant also said that they had a teacher who educated the class on their disability, which was helpful.

Participants mentioned resource-related factors as particularly unhelpful when seeking support. For example, the waiting time to get help and receiving no resolutions when they did seek help. One participant said: “Talking to someone about the issue was helpful, but it [didn’t] fix or change anything. It helped me deal with the aftermath, but it didn’t prevent similar future instances from occurring”. Other unhelpful actions reported included being dismissive, being excluded by others, being given unhelpful advice, and having other people make inaccurate assumptions and accusations against them. For example, one participant said they were called a “liar” by various people.

Willingness to seek support

Participants were asked to reveal what influenced them to seek support. When asked what would encourage them to seek support, the confidentiality and anonymity of the situation and the expertise and background of the person from whom they were seeking support were the most reported influential factors. For example, one participant said: “Anonymity of oneself [so] that the bully does not know who reported the incident [would encourage me to seek support]”.

A transparent process and people’s previous actions was also reported by participants when asked what would encourage them to seek support. For example, if a person has expressed and offered their support in the past. Participants also mentioned an internal characteristic when asked what encouraged them to seek support, such as their self-belief and sense of trust. For example, one participant said: “Believing that I deserve to seek support [is important]”. However, when asked what would discourage them from seeking support, participants often mentioned internal factors such as being worried about confidentiality, distrust and fear of being a burden, and/or appearing as weak. For example, one participant said: “Fear of not know[ing] that person [discourages me]. I don’t know what their values are, what they will think, how they’ll react, etc.”.

A previous negative experience had also discouraged participants from seeking support in the past. For example, participants had been threatened, treated differently, penalised, dismissed and pitied in the past, which had discouraged them from seeking further support. One participant also reported that they felt frustrated as there were rarely any resolutions, so the time and effort required to seek support was not worth it.

Ideal form of support

Factors that had been helpful in the past were mentioned and expanded on when participants were asked what their ideal form of support would be. When participants were asked how their friends and family could provide the best support and care, over half commented that they wanted their friends and families to be more understanding and they wanted them to show more reassurance, sympathy, and care. For example, one participant said: “Reassuring the victim is the best support. There doesn’t need to be a conversation, just a few words are all that is needed”. Participants also indicated that they wanted their families and friends to listen to them more and give them more autonomy. For example, one participant said: “Don’t be dismissive, don’t judge. Listen, I’m not an invalid so don’t try and do things for me. If I need something, I’ll ask”. This comment contrasts with one participant who reported that they wanted their families and friends to be active, rather than passive, bystanders.

Participants were then asked how their school and/or university could provide better support and care for them. Participants wanted to see more action taken by their school and/or university. In addition, they indicated that they wanted to see schools take more proactive action against bullying and address bullying situations promptly and privately. For example, one participant said: “Stand up for the victim! There were times in school when I was younger and I was told that it’s just a

phase, ignore them and they will eventually go away”. Participants also indicated that they wanted to see more varied support options and three participants said that they wanted to see schools and/or universities be more understanding of their needs. One participant also mentioned that there was a mismatch between what schools and universities say and do. For example, they said: “Act inclusive. It is one thing to say that you are inclusive. It is another thing to actually be inclusive”.

In addition, participants were asked what changes they would make to the support systems and care in place in New Zealand for individuals with disabilities. Changes to the diversity and transparency of support services was reported by participants including more varied support, catering to more diverse demographics and contexts. For example, one participant said: “[I want to see] more support systems available for a wide range of age groups and religions”.

Participants revealed that they did not know of any support systems or care in place in New Zealand for individuals with disabilities who experience bullying and wanted to see improvements made to the accessibility of support services. They indicated that there was a lack of information about what support services were available and what kind of process was involved to access those support services. For example, one participant said: “There is a huge lack of resources and lack of information about how to even go about accessing those resources. I’d like to see ... more clear and straightforward information about how to access [those] resources”.

Another participant suggested that providing an easily accessible list of available support services would be beneficial. A need for a change in society was also indicated by nine participants. Participants specifically wanted to see others act and be more proactive against bullying. Inclusion was also emphasised by participants, who wanted to see less shaming and segregation in society. In addition, participants suggested more education in society about disabilities, to facilitate peoples’ understanding. For example, one participant suggested people should: “Encourage other students to understand how we feel and why we act the way we do, look the way we do, etc.”.

Discussion

The findings provide preliminary information that builds upon previous research on the experiences and thoughts of tertiary students with disabilities who are seeking support after bullying. The findings showed that, within this sample, most students who sought support after being bullied gained this support from friends and family. This is consistent with previous studies based on high school students’ experiences of seeking support after they have been bullied (Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Flaspohler, et al., 2009; Fullarton & Duquette, 2016). However, one strength of the present study included asking participants about the helpfulness of the support they received and their recommendations for what is needed. When asked to rate how helpful these forms of support were, participants rated the support they received as only moderately helpful, at best. This rating implies that the support students with disabilities are receiving is not perceived as very helpful. Participants indicated they were encouraged to seek support if they were assured of anonymity and/or confidentiality. They also commented that they were more likely to seek support when the support service was transparent about accessibility and the process involved.

In this respect, several implications arise from the findings of this preliminary study. The findings highlighted the persistent lack of awareness about disabilities as evidenced by several misconceptions held by other people. In particular, the participants reported that they thought bullying against students with disabilities might be prevented if education about disabilities is incorporated into the New Zealand curriculum, as it could address some people’s ignorance on the topic.

The results also suggest that the support being provided to students with disabilities is somewhat insufficient and ineffective and they would like to see more action and promotion of available support services. However, while external supports (e.g., family, friends) are important, their relative effectiveness is less easily altered in comparison to changes that can be made within the

school and/or university. In particular, the participants' recommendations are consistent with previous research where inclusion awareness training for staff (and students) within educational institutions is seen as an important and practical way of improving the support offered to students (Rath, 2022; Pitman, 2022). Furthermore, although institutions are obligated to provide practical (i.e., academic) supports to students with disabilities and have made significant and important steps in this direction, the findings from this study have highlighted the need for additional social supports, particularly for those students who have experienced bullying. It is particularly important that students with disabilities who have experienced bullying are able to seek confidential support in dealing with the issue in order to mitigate the negative short- and long-term effects of bullying.

These findings also indicate that some students with disabilities were unsure whether there were any social support services available to them after experiencing bullying. However, without additional research to confirm this, it is unclear whether social support services are inaccessible or just unavailable. It was interesting to note that clubs, societies, and helplines were the least sought forms of support by students with disabilities. This may reflect a general inclination to avoid these types of support, as it may be unclear how helpful they would be for students who had experienced bullying.

The small sample size is a limitation of the study as the findings are unlikely to reflect the opinions of all tertiary students with disabilities who have been bullied. The sample size was also limited to students with disabilities at one university. Additionally, the recruitment of students from undergraduate psychology classes likely impacted the generalisability of the findings. As a result, these findings are not representative of the views of students with disabilities on bullying and support throughout New Zealand universities. There were also a limited number of students with visible disabilities who responded to the survey, compared to students with non-visible disabilities. Considering the limitations from this preliminary study, further research is needed, including a larger sample of students with a range of disabilities across a wider range of degree programmes and universities. It may also be helpful to compare the experiences of a larger sample of students with, and without, visible disabilities given the increasing number of students with disabilities entering tertiary institutions. Research is also needed to determine the feasibility and helpfulness of the suggestions made by students with disabilities, to improve the support provided. Despite the limitations, it is hoped that the findings from this preliminary study—including the specifically designed survey focusing on support systems for students with disabilities who have been bullied in high school and/or tertiary institutions—has contributed to the emerging body of research. In addition, the work has helped to highlight some critical aspects of the student voice that warrant further investigation with a larger, more inclusive, sample of participants.

In conclusion, most students with disabilities who responded to the survey had experienced bullying. From the current study it was found that, while students with disabilities are seeking support, the support that is being provided is only moderately helpful. Therefore, improvements need to be made to the support given to students with disabilities who are bullied. Furthermore, it is important to understand how educational institutions can continue to ensure equitable access and full participation, and potentially mitigate the negative effects of bullying. In this respect, educational institutions have an additional responsibility to put in place transformative policies, procedures, and programmes to not only provide support to students with disabilities, but to help eliminate discrimination and prevent bullying behaviours.

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