5.2 Bullying and CYP with SEND

There is an increasing awareness among the public and within policy development of the phenomenon of bullying and/or cyberbullying involving school-age CYP (Carrington et al., 2017; Cross, Epstein et al. 2011; Cross, Monks et al. 2011; Murray-Harvey and Slee 2010). There is a large literature indicating that CYP with disabilities are more vulnerable across a range of power imbalances or risk factors contributing increased experiences of bullying (Álvarez-García et al., 2015). Indeed, Rose & Espelage (2012) suggest that CYP with SEND are twice as likely to experience peer victimization relative to their non-disabled peers while other studies have estimated that they are 2 to 4 times more likely to be bullied (Hartleyet al., 2015). In the US Blake et al. (2012) reported 24.5% of elementary, 34.1% of middle school, and 26.6% of high school of CYP with SEND met the profile of bully-victims.

A complex picture emerges regarding bullying which may involve those with SEND which is not limited to greater vulnerability to being targets of bullying from others. While some research indicates that CYP with SEND do experience elevated levels of bullying victimization relative to rates among nondisabled peers, other studies found CYP with disabilities displayed higher levels of bullying perpetration or aggression than their nondisabled peers (Marsh, 2018). Some researchers have suggested that CYP with more externalising behaviours are more likely to be targets or to also engage in bullying behaviour while those whose disability involves a more obvious intellectual or physical disability are more vulnerable to being targeted by peers (Farmer et al., 2015; O'Brennan et al., 2015). Indeed, students with physical disabilities constitute "easier targets" for bullies, who tend to persecute the most vulnerable. Due to the lack of understanding of their disability, they tend to be more easily excluded in the playground, as well as not considered in the school environment. Consequently, bullying for students with physical disabilities adds to their feeling of exclusion and low self-esteem, which in turn can worsen their mental health and lead to depression, increased anxiety, or even suicidal thoughts.

Autistic CYP experience particularly high levels of bully victimisation (Horgan et al., 2022: Cook et al., 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Saggers, 2015). Klin et al., 2000, (p.6) described autistic young people as "perfect victims" for bullying. Studies from the US found 90% of Autistic participants reported experience of regular bullying (Carrington et al., 2017), echoing UK finding reporting 75% of school aged students experienced bullying, rising to 82% of secondary aged students. Recent studies exploring the perspectives or experiences of autistic students attending mainstream schools reported that they reported physical abuse occurred with 'alarming regularity' (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a), with the young people recalled being pushed, squashed behind a door, tackled and punched. Worryingly, many studies found that, while they were regularly the victims of bullying or were excluded by their peers, autistic students regularly chose not to report episodes of bullying or verbal harassment 'as long as they don't do anything physically harmful to

me, there’s no point’ (Saggers, 2015, p.39).

Hand in hand with elevated incidences of bullying among Autistic CYP, social exclusion is also a significant issue. Research from the UK found autistic students are more rejected and less popular than their non-autistic peers (Jones & Frederickson, 2010) and also than students with other forms of disability (Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Autistic students also report significantly lower levels of social support from parents, classmates, and friends (but not teachers) than other students (Humphrey & Symes, 2010), report fewer friends (Cairns & Cairns, 1994) and more limited social networks (Chamberlain et al, 2007). They are also among the most likely to be excluded from school (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) or placed on reduced timetables than their non-autistic peers (AsIAm, 2019).

While there may be commonality from the existing literature relevant to bullying involving Autistic CYP, the profile of autism differs significantly from that of other forms of disability. It would be inadvisable to make generalisations across the spectrum of CYP with SEND given these well-documented differences in strengths and support needs. This has obvious implications for interventions to support CYP with SEND who are experiencing bullying in school settings.

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