Violence and bullying in educational settings

The experience of children and young people with disabilities

UNESCO – a global leader in education

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The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to **"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."** The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.

1. Introduction

This UNESCO document, one of a series of technical briefs on school violence and bullying, focuses on the experience of learners with disabilities. For the first time, it brings together evidence on the scale and nature of violence and bullying affecting learners with disabilities in educational settings. It aims to raise awareness of the problem and encourage action to ensure that children and young people with disabilities have access to a safe learning environment.

The document is primarily intended for education policy-makers and planners, school management, principals, teachers and other school staff; and may also be of interest to organizations of persons with disabilities, parents' associations, youth organizations, the media and the wider public. This document aims to improve understanding of how violence and bullying impacts learners with disabilities, encourage further research and generate evidence about effective interventions.

Understanding disability

The 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that "disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". It also recognizes that people with disabilities are diverse and "include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments".

Violence in educational settings includes physical, psychological and sexual violence and bullying[1] (Figure 1). It is mostly perpetrated by other students but is also committed by teachers and other school staff. School violence and bullying occur in all countries, affect a significant number of children and young people, harm health and well-being and undermine learning. However, we know very little about the extent and nature of violence and bullying experienced by children and young people with disabilities in educational settings, as global surveys do not collect specific data on these learners.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of school violence and bullying
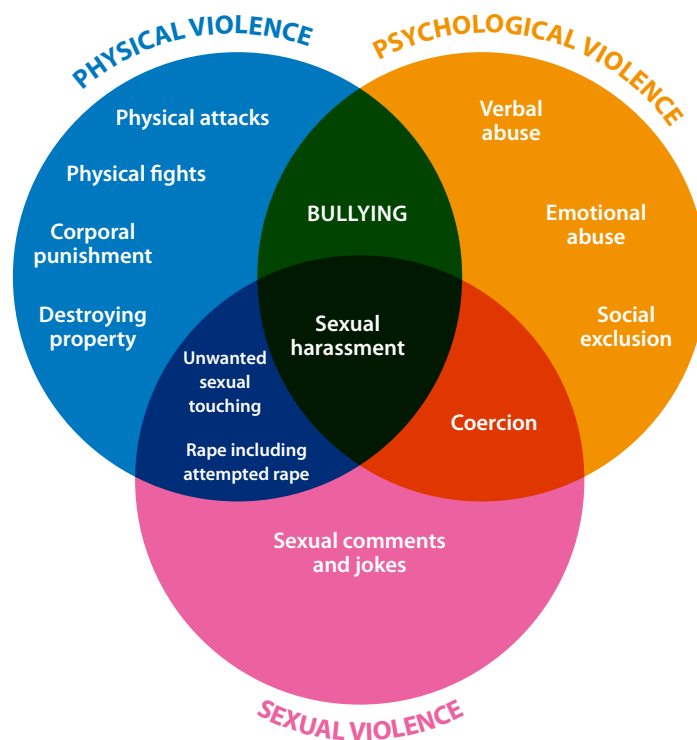
Source: UNESCO (2019), p.11.[2]

Figure 2. Number of children with disabilities

1 in 20

children are living with a disability

Data source: World Health Organization (2011).[3]

This document summarizes the main findings of a review, which was commissioned by UNESCO to assess the scale of violence and bullying affecting learners with disabilities in educational settings, identify factors that increase the risk of victimization[4] and find out what is known about the effectiveness of interventions. The review collected information through:

Review of the academic literature, identifying more than 1,500 articles and selecting more than 300 for review; as well as a review of reports from international organizations.

Interviews with over 30 disability rights advocates and experts in inclusive education and prevention of violence against children and young people with disabilities in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

Focus group discussions with 70 young people over the age of 18 with diverse disabilities in Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Jamaica, Nigeria, South Africa and the United States.

The academic literature has a number of limitations which make it difficult to compare findings or draw conclusions. These include the use of different definitions of violence and bullying and of disability, and differences in the types of disability studied and in approaches to data collection. More than three-quarters of published studies are from North America and Western Europe and there is very little data from other regions. There is also little information about characteristics that, together with disability, may influence vulnerability to violence and bullying, such as gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, race, and socio-economic status.

2. What is the situation?

Children and young people with disabilities are no strangers to violence and bullying, with most reporting that they have experienced it in some form at some time in their lives. In research with young people with disabilities in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia, all respondents said they had experienced violence, including, for some, repeated episodes of physical, sexual and emotional violence, in a range of settings.[5] The findings below suggest that learners with disabilities are also disproportionately at risk of violence and bullying in educational settings.

Children with disabilities are three to four times more likely to be victims of any type of violence in all settings – in the home, in the community as well as in school – than their non-disabled peers.[6]

The scale and nature of violence and bullying affecting learners with disabilities

Violence and bullying by other students

At every level of the education system, learners with disabilities are at least as likely and usually far more likely than their non-disabled peers to be victims of violence and bullying at school. In every study reviewed for this report that compared school violence and bullying involving students with and without disabilities, those with disabilities were as or more likely than their non-disabled peers to be victims, in some cases significantly more. This is found in pre-school, primary school, secondary school and higher education but, overall, the risk appears to be highest between the ages of 13 and 15, during the transition from late childhood into early adolescence.

Figure 3. Learners with disabilities are more likely to be bullied at school than their non-disabled peers

In Finland, pre-school children with special needs were	2x
In Sweden, students with disabilities aged 13-15 were more than	2x
In Republic of Korea , primary school children with Autism Spectrum Disorder were more than	4x
In the United States (rural schools), girls with disabilities were nearly	4x
In the United States (rural schools), boys with disabilities were	2.5x

as likely to be bullied at school than their non-disabled peers
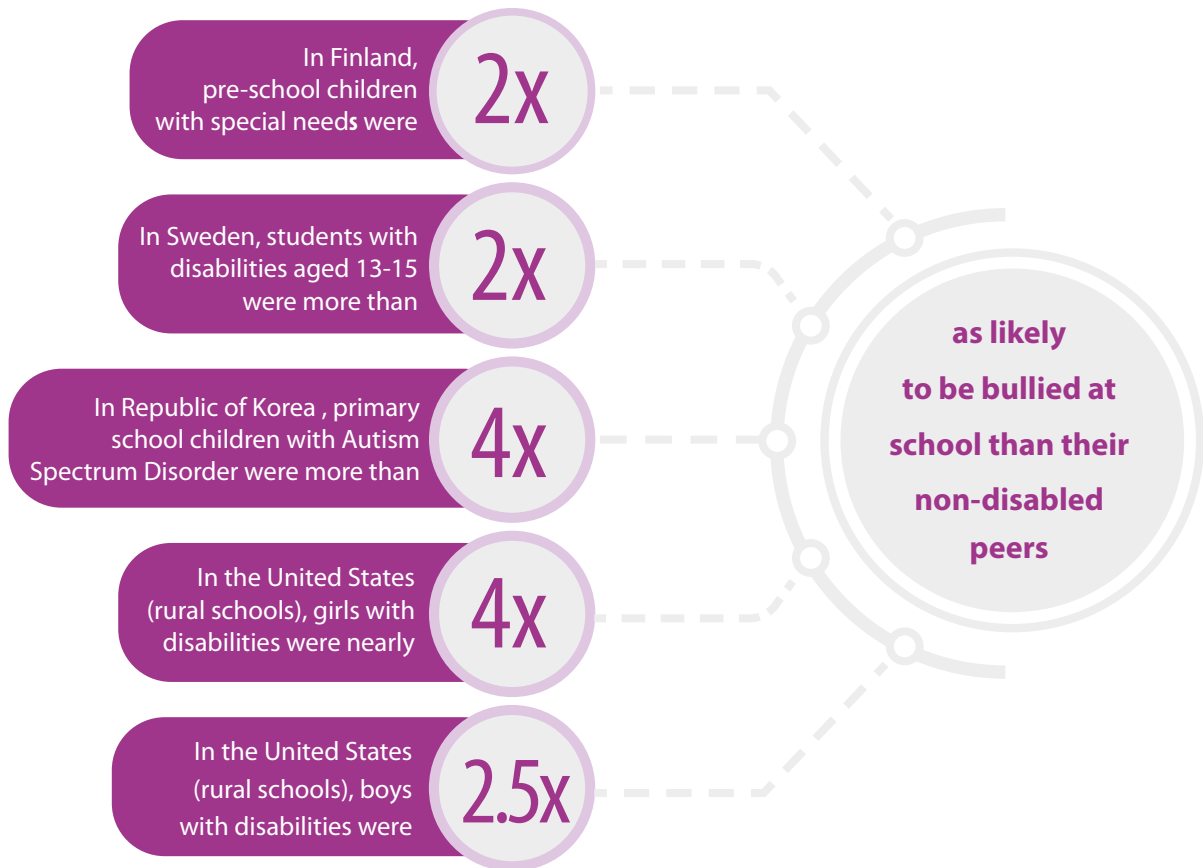
Data sources: Repo & Sajaniemi (2014)[14]; Hwang et al (2018)[15]; Farmer et al (2017); Annerback et al (2014).

The risk is also influenced by the learning setting. For example, evidence suggests that younger children are more at risk of bullying, often by older students, in residential schools.

Learners with disabilities are more likely to be victims of school bullying than their non-disabled peers (Figure 3). For example, a national study of primary and secondary school students in the United States found that learners with disabilities were one to one and half times more likely to be victims of bullying than those without disabilities.[7] In a United States study in rural schools, girls with disabilities were nearly four times more likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers, and boys with disabilities were two and a half times more likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers.[8] Learners with disabilities have been found to experience substantially higher rates of peer bullying than those without disabilities in countries including Germany,[9] Sweden,[10] China[11] and Uganda.[12] A study in 11 European countries involving 55,000 primary and secondary school students found that those with disabilities were disproportionately affected by peer victimization and, in some countries, were twice as likely to be bullied in school as students without disabilities (Figure 4).[13]

Figure 4. Prevalence rate of peer victimization (%) in selected European countries

Students without disability or chronic illness

Students with disability or chronic illness
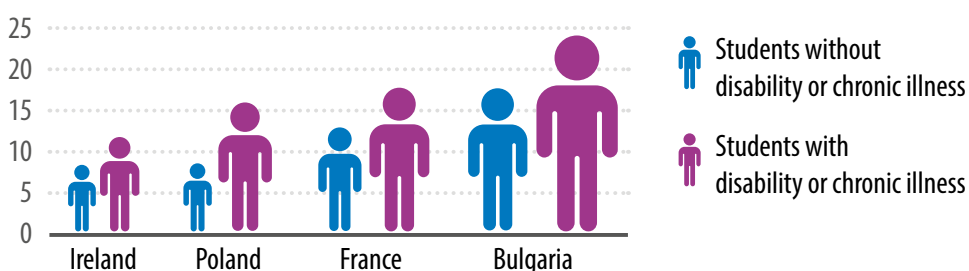
Data source: Sentenac et al (2013).

Disability is a significant risk factor for bullying at school. In a Swedish study, disability was identified as the most significant risk factor for bullying among students aged 13-15, and students with disabilities were more than twice as likely to report having been bullied as students without disabilities.[16] A study of sexual harassment in students in grades 5-8 in Chile identified disability as one of the strongest predictors of vulnerability to victimization.[17]

Learners with disabilities experience all forms of violence and bullying at the hands of other students. Learners with disabilities report experience of physical, psychological and sexual violence, bullying and cyberbullying.[18] In China, focus group participants described physical and psychological abuse at the hands of other students, including being pushed, kicked, teased, mocked and imitated, having their belongings damaged, stolen or hidden, and being socially excluded.

> "People imitated the way I walked … and made everyone laugh" (Focus group participant, physical disability, China)

Some children and young people with disabilities may not recognize violence and bullying as abuse. Consequently, evidence about the prevalence of violence and bullying that is based on self-reporting is likely to underestimate the problem. Equally troubling is that some children and young people recognize abuse but tolerate it because they are willing to accept 'friendship at any cost' and because it is preferable to loneliness and social isolation.[19]

Girls with disabilities are at higher risk of sexual violence perpetrated by their peers than girls without disabilities. Girls with disabilities are more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience sexual violence at the hands of fellow students. A study in primary schools in Uganda found that girls with disabilities were two to four times more likely to experience sexual violence perpetrated by male students than non-disabled girls.[20] Focus group participants in Bangladesh and Indonesia also suggested that girls with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual violence in school.

Learners with disabilities appear to be more vulnerable to cyberbullying.[21] A number of studies suggest that children and young people with intellectual disabilities, for example, those with learning difficulties, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Autism Spectrum Disorders, are more likely to experience cyberbullying than their non-disabled peers.[22]

Learners with disabilities are over-represented among perpetrator-victims and bystanders. Learners with disabilities are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of bullying than those without disabilities.[23] Violence and bullying perpetrated by students with disabilities may be due to lack of social skills or a response to prolonged victimization. Learners with disabilities are also more likely to be involved in bullying as assisters, for example, joining in with bullying initiated by another student, and as defenders, for example, trying to protect a student who is being bullied, telling the bully to stop or seeking help.[24]

Witnessing bullying is perceived as very stressful by learners with disabilities. In the United Kingdom, learners with disabilities aged 11-14 rated 'seeing bullying' as one of their potentially most stressful situations and one of the main reasons was that they did not know how to respond.[25]

Violence by teachers and other school staff

Learners with disabilities experience higher rates of physical violence at the hands of teachers than those without disabilities. In some contexts, teachers and parents see physical punishment as legitimate and necessary to 'control' learners with disabilities. In primary schools in Uganda, teachers were shown to be more likely to be physically violent towards girls with disabilities than girls or boys without disabilities.[26] In the United States, use of corporal punishment was almost twice as high in schools with a higher proportion of students receiving special education as in other schools, even when there was no difference in the prevalence of problem behaviours.[27]

Learners with disabilities are more likely to be physically restrained or confined. Research in the United States found that, although only one in ten students has a disability, learners with disabilities accounted for three in four students who were physically restrained and more than half of those who were involuntarily confined by school staff. Learners with emotional and intellectual disabilities were most likely to be restrained or confined (Figure 5).[28]

Figure 5. Learners with disabilities are at higher risk of violence at the hands of teachers

In the United States, learners with disabilities are at higher risk of violence at the hands of teachers and school staff

75% of students physically restrained

more than **50%** involuntarily confined
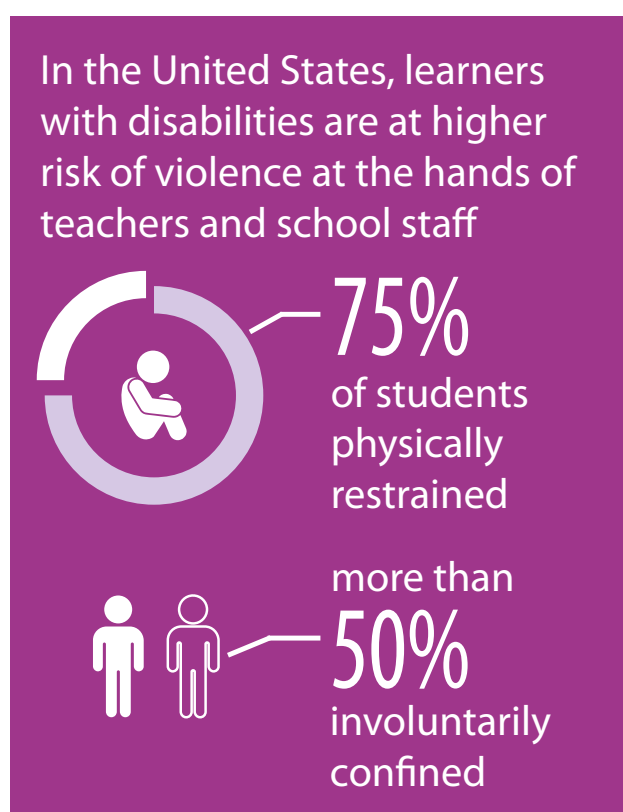
Data source: Suarez (2017).

Learners with disabilities are also subjected to psychological violence from teachers. The primary school study in Uganda found that teachers were more likely to be emotionally abusive towards learners with disabilities than those without disabilities.[29] Young people with disabilities participating in focus group discussions in a range of countries also described being humiliated, mocked and picked on by teachers and suggested that abuse by teachers can encourage violence and bullying by other students.

"I had a male classmate who was both deaf and had intellectual impairment…The teacher would speak openly in front of the whole class, "Oh, that guy is an idiot. He doesn't study well. He should just quit and go outside to work. But which boss would hire someone like him? He is totally useless!" The students in my class believed in the teacher and would also bully him…. he quit in 12th grade to work in a noodle restaurant" (Focus group participant, hearing disability, China)

Teacher violence is linked to lack of understanding and negative attitudes towards disability. Young people participating in focus groups commented that teachers have low expectations of learners with disabilities – reflecting negative attitudes in wider society about disability and the capabilities of people with disabilities – and do not pay equal attention to their education. They described teachers lacking patience with learners with disabilities, ignoring them, telling them that they cannot do well in their studies, and voicing concerns that they will adversely affect the overall performance of the class.
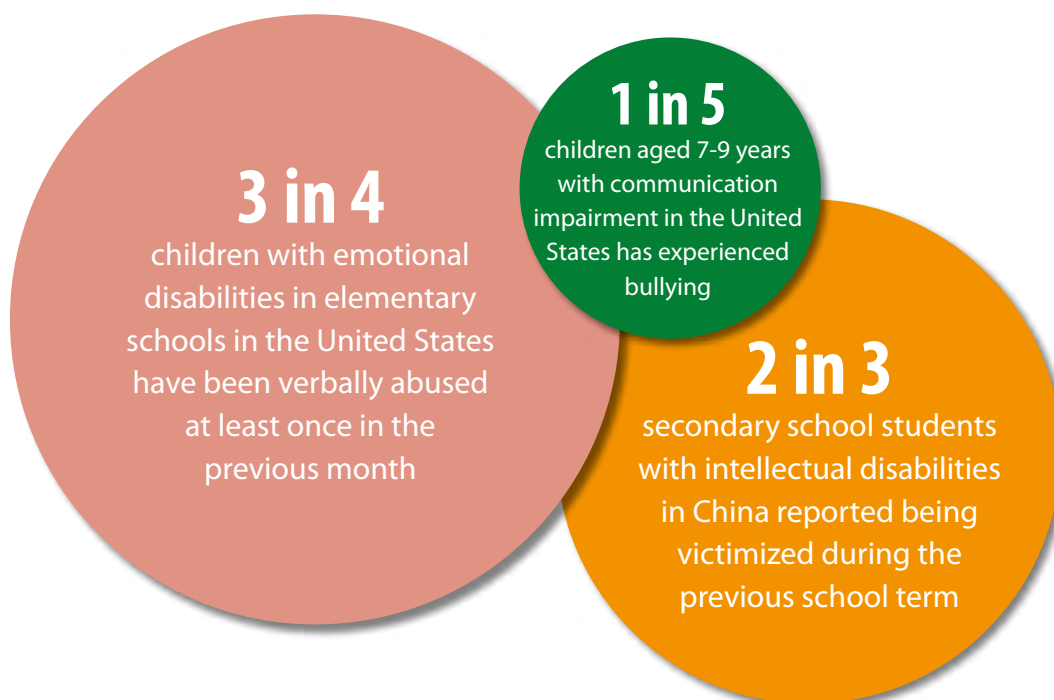
Factors that influence the risk of violence and bullying

Type of disability

Learners with emotional and behavioural disabilities are more at risk of bullying than those with other disabilities (Figure 6). National data on bullying of learners with disabilities in primary, middle and secondary schools in the United States show that those with emotional and behavioural disturbances[30] are more likely to be victimized than those with other disabilities. At secondary school level, two in five students with emotional disturbances had been bullied by another student, compared with one in five of all students with disabilities.[31] Another study found that, in elementary schools, almost three in four students with emotional disabilities had been verbally abused and more than one in four had been physically abused at least once in the previous month.[32]

Figure 6. Learners with emotional, intellectual and communication disabilities are at higher risk of school violence and bullying

3 in 4
children with emotional disabilities in elementary schools in the United States have been verbally abused at least once in the previous month

1 in 5
children aged 7-9 years with communication impairment in the United States has experienced bullying

2 in 3
secondary school students with intellectual disabilities in China reported being victimized during the previous school term

Data sources: Bear et al (2015); Chiu et al (2017).

Learners with intellectual disabilities also experience high rates of bullying. The United States national data referred to above showed that, in elementary and middle school, learners with autism were more at risk of repeat victimization than those with other disabilities.[33] In China, students with intellectual disabilities experienced high rates of bullying.[34] And a review of multiple studies of the prevalence of school bullying among students with Autism Spectrum Disorders found that 44% had been bullied.[35]

Disabilities that affect ability to communicate or interact socially make learners more vulnerable to violence and bullying. Children and young people who have difficulties communicating find it less easy to make friends and are more socially isolated. As friendship groups are an important protective factor, learners who are socially isolated are at increased risk of bullying. In the United States, children aged 7-9 with communication difficulties were twice as likely to experience bullying as those without.[36] In Uganda, learners with communication challenges were among the most at risk of violence from school staff, more so than learners with sight, hearing or mobility difficulties.[37] Feedback from the focus group in Indonesia highlighted the extent to which learners with hearing disabilities are vulnerable to abuse and exclusion because of communication barriers. Similarly, in Jamaica, focus group participants reported that in deaf school settings, students who can't communicate using Jamaican Sign Language experience bullying by other students.

Learners with multiple disabilities are more likely to be bullied. This has been found to be the case for those with learning disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder, learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and both emotional and physical disabilities. In Israel, learners with learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder were almost twice as likely to be frequent victims of bullying as learners with only one of these disabilities.[38] In the United States, learners with a mental health or emotional problem and a physical disability experienced higher rates of victimization than learners with one type of disability.[39]

Gender

Gender affects the type of bullying experienced by learners with disabilities. Boys with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to physical bullying from their peers, while girls report higher rates of psychological bullying perpetrated by other girls. This is consistent with global evidence, which shows that boys are more likely to be perpetrators and victims of physical bullying, while girls are more likely to engage in more subtle or indirect forms of bullying including emotional and relational bullying and social exclusion. However, the influence of gender depends on the context. Focus group participants in Nigeria commented that girls with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and bullying because culture and religion prioritise boys over girls, while participants in Indonesia suggested that boys are more likely to be bullied in school, especially when they are younger.

> "If girls are the perpetrators they usually use some indirect ways, for example, making sarcastic comments without mentioning a name, but you know it's you they are talking about" (Focus group participant, visual disability, China)

Girls and young women with disabilities are more likely to experience sexual violence, from male students and school staff, than their non-disabled peers. In Uganda, girls with disabilities were more likely to experience sexual violence than other girls and than boys with disabilities.[40] Among high school students in the United States, girls with disabilities were more likely than girls without disabilities to have been physically forced to have sex.[41] A large survey of college students in the United States found that female students with disabilities were twice as likely as other female students to experience sexual assault.[42]
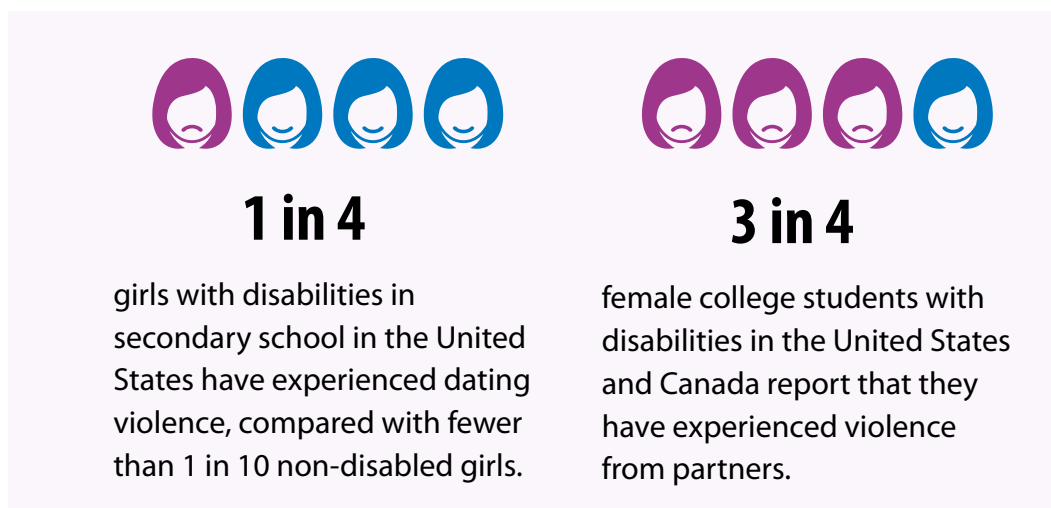
Girls and young women with disabilities tend to internalise what they perceive as society's rejection. They are more likely than their male peers to think of themselves as disabled and hold a negative self-image.[43] This in turn can make them more vulnerable to sexual victimization.[44]

> **In Uganda, girls with disabilities were twice as likely as non-disabled girls to experience sexual violence by male students and were also more likely to be sexually abused by school staff.**[45]

Boys and young men with disabilities are also at greater risk of sexual violence than their non-disabled peers. In Uganda and the United States, boys and young men with disabilities report higher levels of sexual violence and harassment than their non-disabled male peers. In a study of sexual harassment among all learners in grades 5-8 in Chile, boys were more likely to report sexual victimization than girls, and disability was one of the strongest predictors of victimization.[46]

In addition, outside school, young women and men with disabilities are more likely to experience dating and partner violence. A United States study of high school students found that one in four girls with disabilities had experienced dating violence compared with less than one in ten girls without disabilities; boys with disabilities were twice as likely to experience dating violence as boys without disabilities and were more likely to experience dating violence than girls without disabilities.[47] In another United States study of 20,000 college students aged 18-25, those with disabilities were nearly twice as likely to experience partner violence as their non-disabled peers, with students with mental disabilities and multiple disabilities at the greatest risk.[48]

Figure 7. Girls with disabilities and sexual violence

1 in 4

girls with disabilities in secondary school in the United States have experienced dating violence, compared with fewer than 1 in 10 non-disabled girls.

3 in 4

female college students with disabilities in the United States and Canada report that they have experienced violence from partners.

Data sources: Mitra et al (2013); Son et al (2020)[49].

Past experience of victimization and family background

Research shows that children with disabilities who experience violence or bullying, including abuse by parents or caregivers, or peer or community violence – are more likely to experience it as adults. A United States study of students aged 6-13 showed that, although other factors were predictors of risk, previous experience of victimization was the most significant predictor of risk of future victimization for learners with disabilities.[50]

> **In the United States, the risk of future victimization increased five-fold for learners with disabilities who had been bullied in the past.[51]**

Poverty may increase the vulnerability of learners with disabilities to peer bullying. Focus group participants in Jamaica reported that learners with disabilities from less well-off families were more likely to be bullied; participants in Bangladesh and Nigeria made the same observation. This is consistent with

evidence suggesting that learners with disabilities from higher-income families are less at risk than those from poorer families; this may be partly because they can afford status symbols, such as expensive clothes and cell phones, which protect them from teasing and other forms of bullying.[52]

Learning context

Learners with disabilities experience bullying in mainstream and special schools. Some studies suggest that learners with disabilities are equally vulnerable to bullying in both mainstream and special schools.[53] However, the evidence is mixed. For example, in Hong Kong (SAR China), learners with disabilities were two to three times more likely to experience bullying in mainstream schools than in special schools.[54] 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.[55] Young people participating in focus group discussions reported both positive and negative experiences of being in mainstream and special schools.

Learners with disabilities in institutions and residential schools are at higher risk of violence and bullying. Investigations by the United Nations 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.[56] Factors that increase vulnerability include the 'closed' nature of institutions, inadequate inspection and lack of accountability.

Depending on the country context, the risk of bullying may be higher in rural schools. This is particularly the case in contexts where there is less awareness and understanding of disability in more remote or less developed areas. But there are also examples of rural schools providing a supportive environment for learners with disabilities, such as in Bhutan.[57]

Consequences of violence and bullying

School violence and bullying has a significant impact on the well-being of learners with disabilities. Young people participating in focus group discussions reported that violence and bullying, together with lack of friends and social isolation, can result in anxiety, anger, depression and suicidal thoughts. This is consistent with research that shows high rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation in learners with disabilities who have experienced bullying, and that students with disabilities, especially girls, are more likely than those without disabilities to have negative mental health outcomes as a result of bullying.[58] Bullying that focuses on their disability also has an adverse impact on the sense of self of children and young people with disabilities.[59]

> **In Australia, one in three children with physical disabilities or chronic illness transitioning from primary to middle school reported that they did not have a single friend in school.[60]**

> "Bullying at school is worse than community violence because it breaks another part of you, it gets at your abilities, what you can and cannot do…it tells you you do not belong, you cannot learn [and] you cannot run away from it" (Mpho Tjobe, Albinism Advocacy for Access)

> "Having bullying directed at you makes you feel even more pushed to the edge of society" (Focus group participant, intellectual disability, United States)

School violence and bullying adversely affects the education of learners with disabilities. It affects their access to and participation in education, attainment and future prospects. Participants in focus groups in Bangladesh and Nigeria said that parents are often reluctant to send children with disabilities to school because of fear of bullying. Learners with disabilities who experience violence and bullying by peers and teachers may miss classes, have problems concentrating or drop out of school. Violence and bullying also undermines the quality of education of learners with disabilities and can result in them being socially excluded from activities such as music, drama and sport.

Bullying and exclusion are barriers to participation in higher education. In the United States, students with disabilities are less likely to graduate from college than students without disabilities, and completion rates are particularly low for students with specific disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorders.[61] Students with disabilities participating in focus group discussions in the United States and South Africa described their experiences in higher education as 'more subtle' forms of bullying, including exclusion from social, cultural and sporting events, staff hostility and suspicion from peers that they were benefiting from special treatment.

3. What needs to be done?

"Bullying and school violence against students with disabilities is a serious violation of human rights. How can this, which is also a form of discrimination, be combated? … By implementing interventions to raise awareness about diversity and human rights, which should be (included) in laws, public policies and training for teachers, who should be the leaders of inclusion in the school community … if acts of violence and harassment persist, the education sector must tackle them and, if necessary, involve the justice system to ensure that the rights of students with disabilities who cannot defend themselves are protected."

María Soledad Cisternas Reyes,
Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General
on Disability and Accessibility

There is clear evidence about effective interventions to prevent and respond to school violence and bullying in general, but there has been little research to assess the extent to which these interventions are effective in addressing violence and bullying involving learners with disabilities.

UNESCO has developed a framework – the whole education approach (Figure 8) – which captures the key areas of intervention required to prevent and address school violence and bullying.[62] To ensure that the whole education approach is also effective for learners with disabilities, each area of intervention or component of the framework should incorporate the principles of inclusive education and be sensitive to the needs of children and young people living with disabilities. The following identifies some key issues to consider.

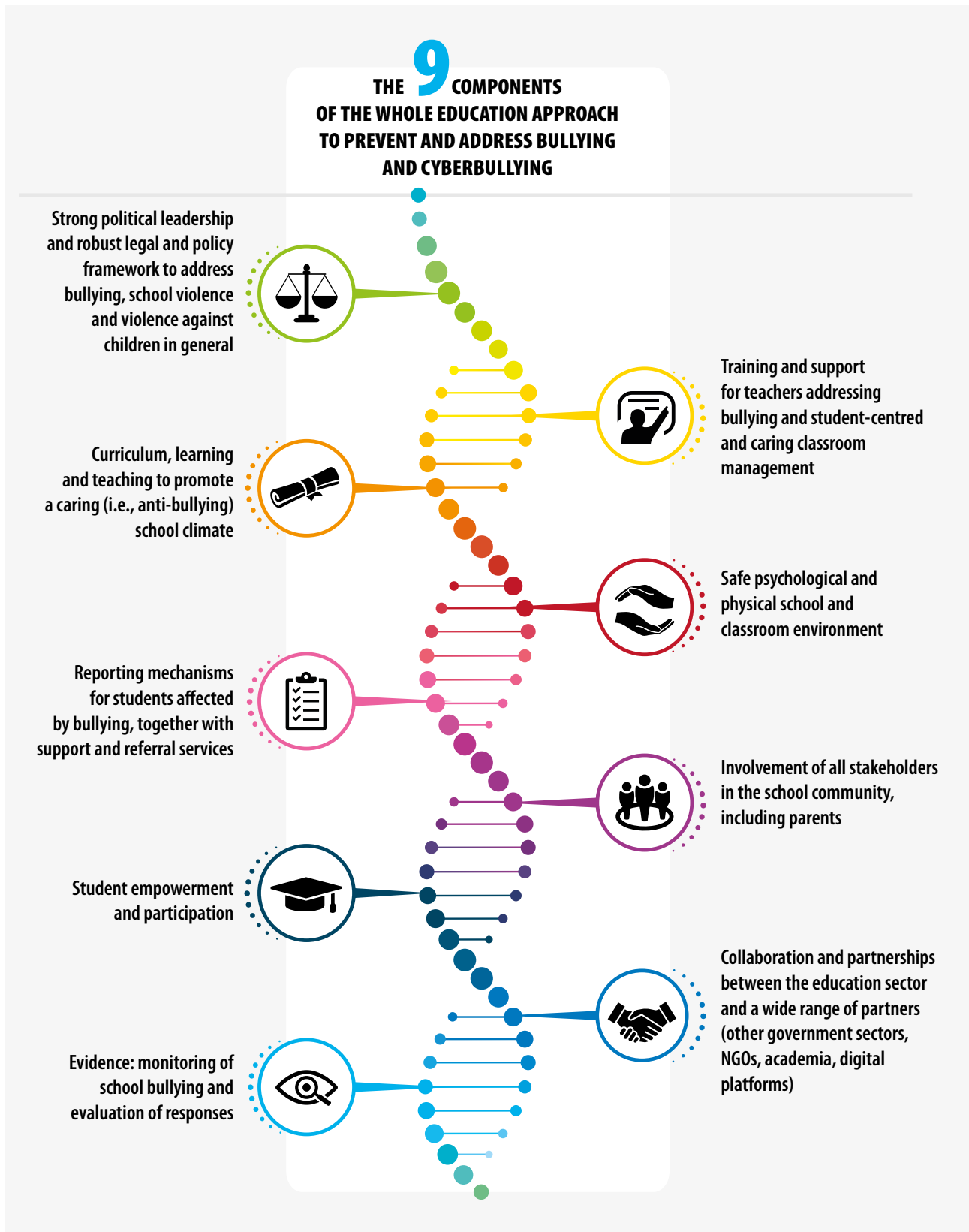### Strong political leadership, legal and policy frameworks

The whole education approach identifies leadership at all levels, from national to school level, as critical to champion an effective response to school violence and bullying. It also identifies the need for robust laws and policies, including policies at the school level, to prevent and address school violence and bullying. Leadership, laws and policies need to take account of the specific vulnerability of learners with disabilities – leadership must champion prevention of violence and bullying against learners with disabilities, and laws and policies must protect the rights of children and young people with disabilities, prohibit violence against them, and support inclusive education.

Policies and regulations that prohibit and respond effectively to violence and bullying affecting all learners, including those with disabilities, are also essential at the school level. Available evidence shows that learners with disabilities are less likely to experience violence and bullying in schools with zero tolerance policies,[63] and in schools where there is fair and consistent enforcement of school rules and standards of behaviour and teachers intervene promptly.[64] Comments from focus group participants in Nigeria were consistent with these findings, suggesting that students with disabilities are less likely to experience violence and bullying in schools with clear guidelines and standards. Participants in in other countries also highlighted the importance of ensuring that school staff are held accountable for policies to protect learners with disabilities and to prevent and respond to violence and bullying.

Safe and inclusive school and classroom environment

The whole education approach highlights the need to create a school environment where students feel safe, secure, welcomed and supported, and the role of school principals, teachers and other staff in this. Feedback from focus group participants consistently emphasized the importance of promoting an inclusive school culture, and this is supported by the literature.[65] In Uganda, interventions to change school culture that involved students, teachers and school staff in promoting mutual respect, engaged students in decision-making processes, used non-violent discipline and promoted responsive school governance, were effective in reducing levels of staff and peer violence.[66]

Figure 8. The components of the whole education approach to prevent and address bullying and cyberbullying

THE **9** COMPONENTS
OF THE WHOLE EDUCATION APPROACH
TO PREVENT AND ADDRESS BULLYING
AND CYBERBULLYING

Strong political leadership and robust legal and policy framework to address bullying, school violence and violence against children in general

Training and support for teachers addressing bullying and student-centred and caring classroom management

Curriculum, learning and teaching to promote a caring (i.e., anti-bullying) school climate

Safe psychological and physical school and classroom environment

Reporting mechanisms for students affected by bullying, together with support and referral services

Involvement of all stakeholders in the school community, including parents

Student empowerment and participation

Collaboration and partnerships between the education sector and a wide range of partners (other government sectors, NGOs, academia, digital platforms)

Evidence: monitoring of school bullying and evaluation of responses

Source: UNESCO and French Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (2020), p.3.

"You can start the journey to be inclusive with very little… it just takes the school ethos to make it work. Changing mindsets does not have to cost much money provided schools have some committed people are championing inclusion…" (Julia McGeown, Humanity and Inclusion)

A study of inclusive education in Bhutan found that while rural schools had fewer resources to support children with disabilities and were less accessible, they were providing a caring and supportive environment through a policy of appointing older students without disabilities to support children with special education needs.[67] Studies suggest that peer abuse is reduced when students with disabilities are recognized as active members of the school community, and focus group participants suggested that creating a school culture where learners with disabilities are treated as valued members of the school community can reduce their risk of violence and bullying. In addition, feedback from interviews with key stakeholders suggested that recruitment of teachers and other school staff with disabilities and representation of people living with disabilities in school management structures can also help to promote a more inclusive school culture.

Curriculum, learning and teaching

The whole education approach emphasizes the importance of the curriculum, learning and teaching – in addition to student-teacher relationships – in preventing bullying and fostering a caring school environment. Schools have a critical role to play in eliminating stigma and discrimination and transforming the root causes of violence and bullying. To ensure the needs of learners with disabilities are addressed 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.

Training and support for teachers

Young people with disabilities identify teachers as one of the most important factors influencing their experience of school violence and bullying. Evidence from Uganda and the United States suggests that classroom environments characterised by caring staff attitudes, peer friendships and acceptance

are protective against school violence and bullying in general. Other data suggests that learners with disabilities are less vulnerable to violence and bullying in schools where teachers actively encourage and facilitate peer relationships and positive interactions between students with and without disabilities.[68]

"The spirit that was built by the teachers … was the spirit of collectivism… this lasted from the beginning of my school to the end. For example, when I cannot read a book, friends help me to read it. In fact, this is not a school that has previous experience with disabilities at all. But they accepted me wholeheartedly" (Focus group participant, visual disability, Indonesia)

However, many focus group participants reported that teachers fail to intervene when learners with disabilities are bullied and, in some cases, shift responsibility to the individual student – telling them they have to be brave, participate and make friends – instead of taking action. In one United States study, learners with disabilities were more likely to experience victimization in schools where school staff ignored their needs.[69]

Teachers often lack the knowledge and skills to support students with disabilities and teacher training does not equip them to prevent or respond to violence and bullying. Training and support for teachers on non-violent classroom management, promoting positive peer relationships and preventing and responding appropriately to violence and bullying is a key component of the whole education approach. Training should also ensure that teachers understand and can apply the principles of inclusion and have the necessary competencies to prevent and respond to violence and bullying affecting students with disabilities specifically.

Reporting mechanisms and support services

Learners with disabilities report that the tactics they adopt in response to school violence and bullying, for example, walking away or telling an adult, are not always effective. In one study, students with disabilities were two to three times more likely than those without disabilities to report that bullying got worse after they had tried avoidance or telling an adult.[70] Perhaps not

surprisingly, learners with disabilities are less likely than their non-disabled peers to report violence and bullying. Reasons include lack of accessible, confidential reporting mechanisms, fear of reprisals, lack of confidence that effective action will be taken, and communication challenges. In focus group discussions, young people with disabilities reported that victims often do not speak up because they are afraid that the violence and bullying will get worse, no-one will listen to them, their confidentiality will be breached, and perpetrators will not be held accountable.

Establishing reporting mechanisms for learners affected by violence and bullying, together with support and referral services, is a key component of the whole education approach. To address the specific needs of learners with disabilities, it is essential that mechanisms for reporting school violence and bullying are accessible as well as confidential, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive.

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.

Empowerment and participation of learners with disabilities

The whole education approach emphasizes the importance of involving all students in programmes to prevent school violence and bullying, and this should include learners with disabilities to ensure that bullying prevention strategies are inclusive. Stakeholders report that when learners with disabilities are involved, awareness of violence and bullying increases and levels of violence are reduced.

Feedback from focus group participants also highlighted the need to ensure that children and young people with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in all school activities including extra-curricular activities and are represented in school and college leadership committees.

Involvement of parents and the whole school community

Family support, or lack of it, is an important factor. Young people participating in focus groups described both positive and negative experiences – in some cases parents have been supportive and have actively intervened with the school or transferred the learner to a different school, in others they have not responded or have told the victim to put up with the situation. Participants in Indonesia commented that many parents are ashamed of having children with disabilities. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some parents condone or support the use of violence by teachers to control or punish learners with disabilities. Parents' attitudes reflect attitudes in wider society, and there clearly needs to be a significant change in perceptions about disability and people with disabilities, since negative attitudes contribute to violence and bullying affecting students with disabilities.

The whole education approach includes involvement of the whole school community, including parents, in action to prevent school violence and bullying. To ensure the needs of learners with disabilities are addressed, this should be complemented by interventions to educate parents and the community about the vulnerability of children and young people to school violence and bullying. In parallel, wider efforts are needed – including engaging with the media, political, community and religious leaders, and organizations of persons with disabilities – to change negative social attitudes towards disability and the potential of learners with disabilities.

Monitoring, evaluation and evidence

The final component of the whole school approach is monitoring of school violence and bullying and evaluation of responses. Monitoring needs to take account of the factors that increase the vulnerability of some learners to victimization and to ensure that data collected on school violence and bullying is disaggregated by type of disability as well as by age and gender.

Steps also need to be taken to address gaps in the evidence, including on the scale, nature and consequences of school violence and bullying affecting students with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries, the vulnerability of students with disabilities to online violence and bullying, the vulnerability of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students with disabilities to school violence and bullying, and the vulnerability of boys and young men with disabilities to sexual violence.

4. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this document suggests that learners with disabilities are disproportionately affected by school violence and bullying at all ages and in all learning settings and that this adversely affects their education, health and well-being. The vulnerability of students with disabilities to school violence and bullying is influenced by age, gender and type of disability. Prior experience of violence, family disadvantage and poverty appear to increase the risk of victimization.

Preventing and responding to school violence and bullying affecting learners with disabilities calls for a multi-pronged approach. This means addressing the specific needs of these learners through the whole education approach and applying the principles of inclusive education. For example, school curricula should ensure that all learners know about the rights of people with disabilities; teachers and other school staff should be trained to provide appropriate support to learners with disabilities to protect them from violence and bullying; and mechanisms for reporting incidents

of violence and bullying should be accessible to all learners with disabilities. Wider efforts are also needed – including engaging with parents, the media, political, community and religious leaders, and organizations of persons with disabilities – to change the negative social attitudes and stigma associated with disabilities that contribute to violence and bullying.

Finally, there are significant gaps in knowledge about the relationship between disability and vulnerability to school violence and bullying. There is a need for better data on the scale and nature of the problem, in particular data that is comparable across countries and that is disaggregated by age, gender and type of disability, and for research to identify and evaluate interventions to prevent violence and bullying affecting children and young people with disabilities in schools and other learning settings. Improving our understanding both of the problem and of effective interventions is critical to inform policy and programming to ensure that students with disabilities can realize their right to education.

1   Bullying is a pattern of behaviour rather than isolated incidents, which can be defined as intentional and aggressive behaviour occurring repeatedly against a victim. It can take various forms: physical bullying, including hitting, kicking and the destruction of property; psychological bullying, such as teasing, insulting and threatening; or relational, through the spreading of rumours and exclusion from a group; and sexual bullying, such as making fun of a victim with sexual jokes, comments or gestures, which may be defined as sexual 'harassment' in some countries.

2   UNESCO, 2019. Behind the Numbers: Ending school violence and bullying. Paris, UNESCO. Retrieved from: https://en.unesco.org/news/school-violence-and-bullying-major-global-issue-new-unesco-publication-finds.

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4   In research on bullying, bullying "victimization" is not typically a defined term. Rather, one who has experienced bullying is referred to as a "victim" or "bully victim" and "victimization" rates refer to the proportion of "victims" in any given study. Because the definition of bullying varies across studies, the specific experiences the term "victimization" captures are likely to refer to different types of bullying and other forms of violence. The frequency and timeframes in which those experiences of bullying/violence occurred are also likely to vary across studies. The scope of what is meant by "victimization" in any given study should therefore be determined by reference to the methodology.

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6   Jones et al, 2012. Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *Lancet, 380*, 899-907.

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17   López et al, 2020. Sexual harassment by peers in Chilean schools. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *107*, 104602.

18   Maïano et al, 2016. Prevalence and correlates of bullying perpetration and victimization among school-aged youth with intellectual disabilities: A systematic review. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, *49-50*, 181-195.

19   McHugh and Howard, 2017. Friendship at any cost: Parent perspectives on cyberbullying children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, *10*(4), 288-308.

20   Devries et al, 2014. Violence against primary school children with disabilities in Uganda: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, *14*(1017).

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Violence and bullying in educational settings

The experience of children and young people with disabilities

Learners with disabilities are disproportionately affected by school violence and bullying at all ages and in all learning settings. This has significant adverse impacts on their education, health and well-being.

This document aims to raise awareness of the problem and encourage action to ensure that children and young people with disabilities have access to a safe learning environment.

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