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ORIGINAL PAPER

Developing a Multi-Tiered System of Support-Based Plan for Bullying Prevention Among Students with Disabilities: Perspectives from General and Special Education Teachers During Professional Development

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Abstract

Students with disabilities or at risk for disability identification (SWD) are disproportionately affected by the bullying dynamic; however, professional development and educator-focused training on preventing bullying for this population is lacking. To address this gap, this study presents an analysis of qualitative data collected from general and special education teachers ($n = 33$) participating in an online professional development training using Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to prevent bullying among students with disabilities. Braun and Clarke's six-step process was used to identify key themes and exemplar quotes from qualitative reflections collected as knowledge check responses embedded within two training modules. Three themes were identified and examined based on MTSS tiers: (1) teacher perceptions of SWD and their inclusion in a MTSS-based bullying prevention plan; (2) identifying key stakeholders for preventing bullying within a MTSS-based bullying prevention plan; and (3) potential challenges and solutions of implementing a MTSS-based bullying prevention plan within the individual, classroom, and school contexts. Findings highlight the need to educate teachers on how to use MTSS, especially for bullying prevention and interventions that are inclusive of SWD. Implications from this work extend to all students including those with mental health considerations, regardless of disability status.

Keywords Bullying prevention · Students with disabilities · Multi-tiered system of supports · MTSS

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Introduction

Bullying involvement is disproportionately higher among students with disabilities (SWD) compared to their non-disabled peers (Gage et al., 2021; Malecki et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2015). For instance, 21.6% of SWD experience high levels of bullying victimization, while only 14.5% of students without disabilities experience the same levels of victimization (Rose et al., 2015). Students receiving special education services report higher levels of psychological distress as a result of victimization (Hartley et al., 2015). The stress caused by bullying may make it more difficult for students to concentrate on schoolwork, leading to academic difficulties and school-related problems (Juvonen et al., 2011; Mishna, 2003). Chronic victimization can lead to childhood depression and increased risk of suicide (Espelage & Holt, 2013; Strohacker et al., 2021). Emerging research indicates that SWD are also at an increased risk for higher bullying perpetration rates when compared to students without disabilities (Rose & Espelage, 2012; Rose et al., 2009; Swearer et al., 2012). Interventions that prevent bullying, particularly for SWD, are needed in order to reduce the number of students experiencing the detrimental impacts of bullying. As "key agents of change," teachers require support and training to effectively intervene and prevent bullying situations (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003, p. 19).

In the USA, SWD are legally protected from experiencing discrimination and violence related to their disability at school. However, O'Connor and colleagues (2016) discovered that only 43% of teacher participants had a general understanding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and 34% had a basic knowledge of 504 plans. IDEA and Section 504 are two federal laws that protect the rights of SWD in the USA. IDEA requires public schools to provide special education services by implementing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for eligible students who have been identified with a disability, while Section 504 prohibits discrimination and requires schools to provide reasonable accommodations for eligible SWD to access their education. Students who are legally protected by IDEA must meet the requirements for a specific disability (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disability), while 504 plans are available to students who have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits their ability to access educational content (e.g., students with ADHD may require more time on standardized testing). Knowledge regarding SWD involvement in bullying and the legal responsibilities of educators to protect SWD paired with a framework for implementing best practices to prevent and effectively intervene in bullying experiences that are inclusive of SWD are essential to ensuring a safe school climate for all students. Drawing on previous research and aiming to address the gap in research on teacher experiences with bullying prevention that is inclusive of SWD, the current study seeks to understand teacher perspectives during an online training on bully prevention efforts inclusive of SWD at the school, classroom, and individual level.

Traditional Methods of School-Based Bullying Prevention

Various school-based bullying prevention efforts have been established at the elementary school level; however, these efforts typically have limited long-term effects. Effective anti-bullying programs often tout improvements for older adolescents (11–14 ages), rather than elementary youth (Gaffney et al., 2021a; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). In general, teachers tend to lack awareness of bullying and the harmful effects of bullying, resulting in the inability to properly identify and intervene (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Maunder et al., 2010; Veenstra et al., 2014). Specific to SWD, recent meta-analyses revealed gaps in teacher readiness toward bully prevention with SWD (Gaffney et al., 2021a, 2021b; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). In terms of the students themselves, common bully prevention efforts have lacked critical social–emotional components, such as educating the victim on appropriate response social skills, especially for SWD who have difficulty with processing social cues (e.g., students with Autism Spectrum Disorder) (Rose & Gage, 2017). Given the importance of social–emotional skill development in bullying prevention, it is important to note that SWD are diverse in their identities and disability presentation which may present challenges when addressing bullying only at the individual level. As such, Rose and Monda-Amaya (2012) proposed a multi-tiered framework (see Fig. 1) based on collaborative practices between administrators, parents, students, general education, and special education teachers to guide the implementation of anti-bullying prevention strategies that are effective at the school, classroom, and individual level. Prior anti-bullying programs have been most effective when long-term implementation, parent involvement, firm disciplinary strategies, and increased playground supervision were applied (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). As such, multi-tiered approaches are needed to holistically prevent bullying, and bullying specific to SWD, within the school environment. Thus, this study aims to examine teacher awareness and knowledge of individual, classroom, and school-level bullying prevention inclusive of SWD in the elementary school context.

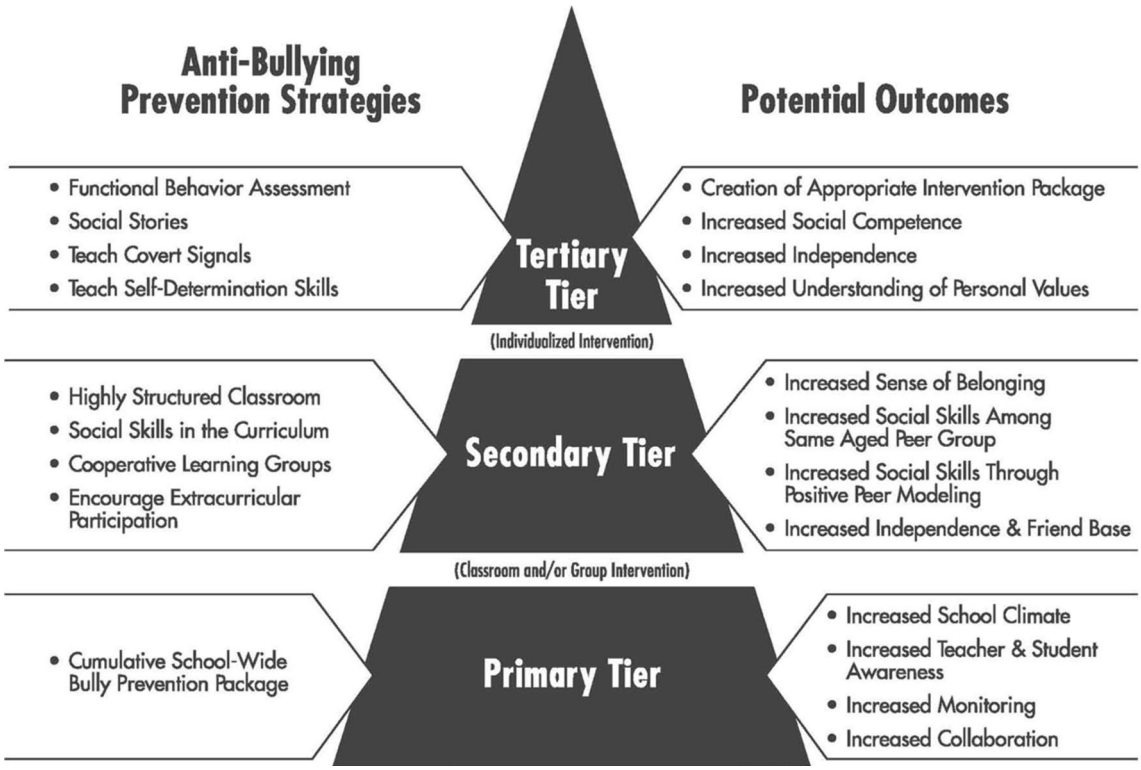

Fig. 1 MTSS-based anti-bullying prevention strategies and potential outcomes (Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012, p. 103)

Theoretical Framework

Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) is an intervention delivery framework that can be used for implementing academic, behavioral, and social–emotional interventions because it utilizes graduated "tiers" of support based on students' individual needs to support the "Whole Child." Based upon the US Public Health Service's model of prevention, which uses three progressively intensive levels of intervention—primary, secondary, and tertiary—the MTSS model utilizes three "tiers" (Walker et al., 1996). Tier 1 services, also known as universal services, are provided to all students regardless of need. Tier 2 services are targeted supports for students who may not be making adequate progress with Tier 1 services alone. Lastly, Tier 3 services are even more intensive and individualized (Batsche et al., 2005; Bradshaw et al., 2013). See Fig. 1 for a visual of the MTSS model from Rose and Monda-Amaya (2012). MTSS also includes the universal screening of all students, the implementation of evidenced-based practices at all tiers, and ongoing data collection often referred to as progress monitoring to evaluate the efficacy of an intervention. Thus, data collection is a key feature of MTSS. Data collected as a part of MTSS is used to ensure that the majority of students are responding to core instruction at Tier 1 and those who do not can receive more intensive interventions at Tiers 2 and 3 (Sailor et al., 2021).

Due to its efficacy, MTSS is growing in popularity and application (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). This rise in popularity must be accompanied by increases in related training, as successful implementation is crucial to overall programmatic success. Prior implementation of multi-tiered support systems for bully prevention, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), has yielded decreases in bullying within elementary schools (Waasdorp et al., 2012), but results are mixed among middle and high school students (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Effective implementation of MTSS relies on building staff knowledge and competencies (Eagle et al., 2015). Sailor and colleagues (2021) outlined the need for teachers and staff to develop the appropriate beliefs, knowledge, and skills to implement MTSS effectively. Skills needed for a successful MTSS implementation include collecting and analyzing student progress monitoring data to inform data-driven decision making, delivering science-based instruction, and working collaboratively with a variety of relevant stakeholders (Prasse et al., 2012; Sailor et al., 2021). Castro-Villarreal and colleagues (2014) examined teacher perspectives on Response to Intervention (RTI), a similar framework to MTSS focused on academic outcomes, in their schools and identified major barriers to implementation, including inadequate teacher training. Furthermore, additional qualitative research with special education teachers noted a belief in the potential of tiered models (Werts

et al., 2014). However, though these teachers believed in the benefits of MTSS for students, they noted that gaps in knowledge, school staff attitudes, and a lack of resources served as barriers to the process (Werts et al., 2014).

Current Study

The current study examined teacher awareness and knowledge of bullying among elementary youth, especially SWD, and their plans to implement MTSS-focused anti-bullying interventions. Teachers in this study participated in a pilot evaluation of an online professional development training (PD) with four-modules. The current study analyzes participant responses across the last two modules, consisting of content-based and open-ended response questions. The MTSS-based modules are intended to provide knowledge and proactive steps for planning a school-wide and classroom-wide bullying prevention plan. The modules detail classroom behavior management and MTSS strategies for an individual student, classroom, or school-wide environment. With the module content in mind, we anticipated that teacher knowledge of bullying, specifically SWD-focused, would impact their bullying prevention efforts such that they would intentionally think about the need to create and maintain school and classroom climates where all students, including SWD, are safe both physically and psychologically. Based on this knowledge, we expected participants to think creatively about anti-bullying strategies that are inclusive of SWD and could be implemented in their context using an MTSS framework. While completing the modules, teachers had the opportunity to collaborate with coaches to critically think and design their MTSS-based bullying prevention plan inclusive of SWD.

Despite there being overarching evidence that teachers are key stakeholders in bullying prevention among adolescents, there is a lack of professional development and training specifically concerning SWD (Allen, 2010; O'Brennan et al., 2014; Raskauskas & Modell, 2011). The current study focused on three central research questions: (1) How do teacher perceptions of students with or at risk for disabilities influence teacher plans for an MTSS-based bullying prevention strategy?; (2) Who are the key stakeholders at school that teachers identify as critical to prevent bullying in their schools using an MTSS-based bullying prevention plan?; and (3) What do teachers report as potential challenges in implementing an MTSS bullying prevention plan and how would they overcome some of these challenges? The focus on evaluating the responses to Modules 3 and 4 aims to analyze elementary teacher knowledge and awareness of bullying, SWD, and the MTSS framework, as well as how this understanding may shape MTSS-centered bully prevention efforts.

Methods

DIAL Professional Development Modules 3 and 4

The Disability Anti-Bullying (DIAL) professional development (PD) was designed for general and special education teachers and consists of four online modules focused on informing teachers how to effectively recognize and respond to bullying with an emphasis on students with disabilities. Modules 3 and 4 included actionable steps on planning and implementing a school-wide and classroom-wide bullying prevention plan using a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Figure 1 shows a visual representation of MTSS-Based Anti-Bullying Prevention Strategies and Potential Outcomes and was provided to participants during modules 3 and 4 to help them with conceptualizing their own MTSS-focused anti-bullying interventions (Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012, p. 103). More information about the development of this PD is detailed elsewhere (Espelage et al., in press).

Participants

Participants were elementary school teachers ($n = 33$) recruited from three schools in one of the largest urban school districts in the southeast USA. Teachers were nominated by school administrators to participate in the study during the 2021–2022 academic year and were given six months to complete the DIAL PD. The majority of students in this school district identify as Hispanic (70%) and 9% of students have IEPs. Across the three schools, the number of students in each school ranged from 597 to 757. The number of full-time teachers ranged from 41 to 42. The percent of students with disabilities ranged from 8 to 24%, the percent of students receiving free/reduced lunch ranged from 44 to 74%, and the percent of students who identified as an ethnic minority ranged from 90 to 97%. The principal investigator received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study. All participants completed an informed consent procedure prior to starting the DIAL PD. Participants were compensated with a $50 gift card for each module they completed and received a $50 gift card for each survey they took as part of the quantitative evaluation of the DIAL PD.

Of the 33 participants, 29 were general education teachers and 4 were special education teachers. There were five kindergarten teachers, four first grade teachers, six second grade teachers, eight third grade teachers, nine fourth grade teachers, and five fifth grade teachers. Four of these teachers taught multiple grades in combined grade-level classrooms. Participant teaching experience ranged from

4 to 34 years, with an average of 13 years teaching. Participants identified as 12% Caucasian, 69% Hispanic, 3% Black or African American, 12% Haitian, 2.8% Asian American, and 3% multiple or other race. 90.0% of the participants were female. Table 1 showcases pertinent demographic information.

Data Collection

Throughout the modules, participants were prompted to respond to qualitative reflection-based learning checkpoints (Appendix A). These checkpoints were designed for participants to demonstrate their understanding of module content (e.g., context of the MTSS framework) and discuss its direct application to their school and classroom context. Participant responses ranged from a few sentences to multiple paragraphs. Each participant's responses were de-identified and exported via a CSV file.

Research Team Positionality

All authors are school-based researchers on bullying prevention and intervention and are part of a multi-institutional research team focused on bullying prevention, supporting students with disabilities and teacher professional development. The authors are also deeply committed to educational equity, especially for students with disabilities and their intersecting identities. As lead researchers, Drescher and El Sheikh cleaned the transcripts of relevant data, developed the codebook, and monitored other coders throughout the coding and analysis process. Robinson and Clements developed the research questions for the analyses of this paper and collaborated on summarizing the results to the group.

Table 1 Participant demographics

N = 33	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	3	10%
Female	28	90%
Unknown	2	
Race/Ethnicity		
Black or African American	1	3%
Haitian	4	12%
Hispanic	22	69%
White or European American	4	12%
Multiple or Other	1	3%
Unknown	1	
Education		
Bachelor's Degree	11	33%
Some post-graduate work	1	3%
Masters Degree	21	64%

Drescher identifies as white cisgender heterosexual woman and was previously a teacher. El Sheikh identifies as a white cisgender Palestinian woman with ADHD and was a mental health counselor-in-training in school settings. Robinson identifies as a multiracial Latina and has experience working with Latinx children and families with and at-risk for developmental and psychological disabilities. Clements identifies as a white cisgender heterosexual woman and is the research coordinator for an adolescent psychology laboratory focused on advancing research in areas such as bullying prevention, school-based interventions, and social–emotional learning. Milarsky identifies as a white cisgender neurodivergent woman with experiences as both a K-12 special education student and former special educator. Eight of the authors identify as female, and two of the authors identify as male. One author identifies as disabled and nine identify as non-disabled. Our analysis was influenced by the emic and etic perspectives of our research team (Bhattacharya, 2017). Our position as emic insiders with a deep understanding of the education system and experience working with SWD was balanced by our etic status as researchers who are informed by the broader scientific literature. The remaining authors also assisted with iterative coding, interpreting codes and themes, and synthesizing the data across participants.

Data Analysis

Four of the co-authors read and organized the teacher responses across all modules prior to starting data analysis. Responses from teacher participants across modules 3 and 4 were organized within a spreadsheet matrix to facilitate researchers' visualization of the similarities between and within participant responses. It was noted that three teachers from the sample submitted the same responses and reported working together on assignments to their coaches. The reflection-based learning checkpoints in modules 3 and 4 were directly related to developing a bullying prevention plan in their school and classroom using an MTSS framework, which guided the development of the research questions. We utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for conducting a thematic analysis frequently used in teaching and learning research (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Steps included: (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) generating meaningful initial codes; (3) identifying overarching themes and relationships among codes (e.g., themes, subthemes); (4) reviewing and refining the themes according to their applicability to the overall dataset; (5) naming the themes with concise definitions; and (6) pulling out and sharing the results in a compelling and cohesive manner. All responses from each participant were organized as columns in a spreadsheet, and the analysis was synthesized across the columns. See supplemental materials Appendix A: Module

3 and 4 Questions to understand the prompts given to participants that elicited their data.

Findings

Findings from modules 3 and 4 are organized by tiers within a MTSS framework, where interventions for Tier 1 are at the school level and intended for all students, Tier 2 are at the classroom level for students at risk of bullying involvement, and Tier 3 are at the individual level for students involved in bullying. As explained in the modules, in US schools implementing a three-tiered framework for bullying prevention and intervention would inherently include SWD. One element of IDEA is that SWD must learn in the least restrictive environments (LRE), meaning that children who receive special education through an IEP should also spend as much time as possible in classrooms with their neuro-typical peers. As a result, participants were prompted to use the knowledge on interventions presented in the modules for SWD to create a plan that could work to effectively prevent and intervene in bullying at each tier relevant to their school context. However, there were inconsistencies with participants' expressing the inclusion of SWDs at tier 1 and tier 2 when compared to tier 3. Given that participants were presented with each tier sequentially in the modules, our findings are organized by tiers and then, by research questions according to each tier. Identifiable information in teacher responses (e.g., school name, etc.) was replaced with an X.

Tier 1: School-Level Interventions

In Module 3, teachers were asked to think about the issues at their school related to bullying that could be addressed at Tier 1, how their Tier 1 intervention would be inclusive of students with or at risk for disabilities, and how they would use data-driven decision making in the development of their intervention. There was variability in how teachers approached the intervention design. The majority of teachers mentioned using their school climate surveys as a data point to help them identify how bullying prevention strategies can be developed and implemented at the school level. However, the majority of teachers did not mention how they would ensure that their Tier 1 intervention was inclusive of students with disabilities or those at risk for disabilities. One teacher said:

> According to the 2019–2020 School Climate Survey, only 61% of students like coming to school and only 62% believe that adults care about them as individuals. Furthermore, only 61% believe that the school counselor helps them with personal problems… this is a significant problem. Therefore, it is imperative that we increase student awareness that adults at school are available to help and are willing & able to listen and assist with student problems including issues with bullying and mental health. (Teacher 20, General Ed, 3rd/4th grade, Female, White).

Generally, teachers mentioned that school climate surveys would be helpful in identifying where bullying takes place (i.e., school setting, grade level) and how often bullying occurs in order to inform Tier 1 interventions. Also, teachers expressed a need for students to be more aware of bullying and how to report it. Although ensuring that all students enjoy coming to school and feel cared for by the adults at school would benefit the school climate and in turn may reduce bullying involvement among SWD, this connection was not explicitly made. Some teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of how Tier 1 interventions are intended to be developed and implemented using data-driven decision making, but did not explicitly mention students with or at risk for disabilities. The few teachers who did explicitly mention SWD did not include specific examples of data-driven decision making. For example:

> One school-wide bullying prevention intervention for students with or at risk of disability identification that I would like to address is making other students aware of different disabilities that they might find "weird" or poke fun of because they have never seen such a behavior (Teacher 23, General Ed, 2nd grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Although this teacher's intent to provide school-wide education and awareness on SWD may have been informed from their previous experience, it is unclear how evidence was gathered to suggest this as a problem at their school. Another teacher who mentioned SWD seemed to have been speaking from experience, but again it is unclear if it is a problem specific to their school or if they have data to support their intervention.

> Kids with special health needs, such as epilepsy or food allergies, often face higher risks of being bullied. Bullying can include making fun of kids because of their allergies or exposing them to the things they are allergic to. In these cases, bullying is not just serious, it can mean life or death. A tier 1 strategy would be providing general up-front information to peers about the kinds of support children with special needs require, and having adults facilitate peer support (Teacher 33, General Ed, Kindergarten, Female, Black).

Another teacher explicitly mentioned SWD-focused interventions at Tier 1, yet their intervention would be more appropriate for Tier 3. For example:

> We have a student identified as being on the autism spectrum, specifically Asperger's. This child is hyper sensitive to any sort of comment or look that another child might display. We have kept anecdotal records of every incident that has made this child feel uncomfortable, causing extreme reactions (Teacher 9, General Ed, 2nd grade, Female, Hispanic).

Similarly, when asked about Tier 1 interventions at their school, another teacher stated:

> We currently do not have one at my school, but different things I would do would be to contact the parents and get the school counselor involved (Teacher 16, General Ed, Kindergarten, Female, White/Hispanic).

Although responses like these last two were rare, it is possible that in Module 3 there was still confusion from teachers on the tiered system, indicating that teachers across this district may have different levels of understanding and experience with MTSS generally. There may also be a lack of existing strategies for SWD or knowledge of these strategies in some of the schools.

There was widespread consensus that teachers themselves were important stakeholders for bullying prevention along with parents, school staff (i.e., administrators, counselors), and students. One teacher summarized this school-wide approach by stating:

> The entire school should be involved. Administration and school help staff (counselor, school psychologist) can arrange in school training for parents and provide updated resources on school website, Twitter, and Classdojo. Teachers can also implement these trainings in class with their students (Teacher 6, General Ed, 3rd grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Explicit inclusion of SWD as stakeholders was less common among teachers, but those that did include them explained the value of having their perspectives in intervention planning. In particular, one teacher mentioned including students with less-apparent disabilities (i.e., someone who might not be assumed to be disabled at first meeting, such as individuals with chronic pain, traumatic brain injury, multiple sclerosis, and diabetes.):

> Students with disabilities that others cannot see, students who have more of a difficult time communicating and expressing their emotions. I believe this is why it is most important to have more surveys available so we can better monitor and follow up with students. This can assist with leadership teams to come up with more effective action plans so nothing is missed. (Teacher 7, General Ed, 3rd grade, Female, Black/Haitian).

Every teacher expressed a variety of barriers, but only about half of the teachers provided solutions to those barriers. Multiple teachers expressed barriers including limited time to address bullying at the school level, lack of parental and administrator support, shortage of school counselors, insufficient funding, variability in teacher willingness to implement non-academic school-wide interventions (i.e., Social–Emotional Learning programming), student absenteeism, and student disposition to engage with the interventions. Teachers who did not provide a solution tended to include multiple barriers as their response, while teachers who provided solutions either focused on one barrier and addressed it directly with a solution or listed multiple barriers and solutions that would encompass all the barriers. The solutions included school and family partnerships, student buddy systems, improved teacher processes for documentation of bullying incidents, accountability efforts and incentives to engage the whole school community, and additional support at the school and district levels.

One teacher, whose plan was to increase "social awareness of disabilities" at the school level through ongoing conversations, mentioned school counselors as key stakeholders in developing and planning a school-wide intervention (Teacher 14, General Ed, 2nd grade, Female, White/Hispanic). This teacher expressed their concern about the limited access they have to counselors as they are often helping with other school-wide issues and that a solution would require additional funding for more counselors at the district level.

Furthermore, teachers who expressed a lack of support from key stakeholders in implementing a sustainable plan at Tier 1 expressed a need for flexibility in both development and implementation. One teacher summarized this as:

> A barrier that would prevent the intervention from being a success is any of the parties unwillingness to collaborate in their part of the plan. A way to avoid this from happening is monthly meetings where all parties can express their thoughts on the progress of the intervention. This way things may be modified in the process rather than at the end (Teacher 11, General Ed, 1st grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Unwillingness from key stakeholders to collaborate in a Tier 1 intervention leads to ineffective implementation which can be addressed by establishing consistent meetings. There may be other ways to counteract this barrier, and teachers acknowledged the critical need to address barriers in order for bullying prevention plans to be successful.

Tier 2: Classroom-Level Interventions

In the second half of module 3, teachers learned about Tier 2 interventions at the classroom level. Teachers were

prompted during the reflection-based learning checkpoints to develop a plan based on data from their classroom and who they would include as key stakeholders for their plan, as well as reflect on potential barriers and solutions to their Tier 2 plan. Teachers expressed different issues related to social–emotional competencies (i.e., relationship skills, self-management) in their classrooms that they would like to target, as it often impacts SWD and their classroom climate more generally. Teachers mentioned wanting to reduce verbal aggression, increase healthy interpersonal relationships, and address social and communication skill deficits to address bullying at Tier 2. One teacher provided an example of how they reinforce specific behaviors using ClassDojo, an online community for teachers, parents, and students to communicate with one another.

> Students lack a sense of belonging and social skills among same-aged peers. I also have student data on class dojo using a point system where students receiving points for an array of things including helping others, being kind or helpful. I have noticed the students are having a hard time interacting with each other in a positive way. They belittle and treat each other unkindly (Teacher 5, General Ed, 3rd grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Although the majority of teachers did not explicitly mention data points to inform their Tier 2 intervention, they explained how they would collect that data to be inclusive of SWD. One teacher who was interested in fostering healthy interpersonal relationships said:

> Increased independence & friend base is one key issue pertaining to classroom bullying prevention interventions for students with, or at risk for, disability identification that I would like to address.... In order to effectively design a Tier 2 intervention strategy, I would need to collect data on how students engage with one another in conversation. Do they allow others a turn to talk? Do they seem open to listening to new perspectives? (Teacher 13, SPED, 4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

A different teacher interested in supporting students with learning disabilities said the following:

> One issue I would like to address is what I perceive to be a lack of respect for students with disabilities, particularly a learning disability. I don't have any data to back this up, but I have observed the snickering and eye rolling treatment that some students display in the presence of students with learning disabilities. In order for me to address this issue, I would want to interview students with both visible and invisible disabilities to confirm or disprove my suspicions. I would also want to question other teachers and the school counselor to see if they share my opinion or whether they can provide documented data on the subject (Teacher 1, General Ed, 4th grade, Male, Black/Haitian).

Other teachers mentioned collaborative problem solving through cooperative learning groups as a means of ensuring that SWD are not excluded in the classroom:

> One key issue at this level would be those students who are at risk for disability identification to be able to work with their peers. It would be important to see if there are cooperative learning groups being created in the classroom. This would allow all students to participate as well as not allow students to isolate others out (Teacher 11, General Ed, 1st grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

According to teachers, the vast majority agreed the key stakeholders would be teachers themselves and the student(s) identified as needing a Tier 2 intervention because they are involved in peer aggression. However, other teachers with plans using cooperative learning mentioned involving the entire classroom where teachers who discussed targeting social skills in the classroom mentioned the importance of also involving parents, coaches, and other school staff who students trust. One teacher shared:

> As their teacher, I would involve the parent, counselor, mental health coordinator, and administration if necessary. The role the intervention team will play is as a listener, or to create a plan for alternate strategies in order for the child to have success and mental stability. The teacher will develop curriculum and instructional outcomes as well as evaluate and communicate with all involved (Teacher 9, General Ed, 4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Similarly, another teacher stated:

> This intervention would target all students in the classroom as they are working together which will allow these with or at risk of disability intervention to have a better sense of belonging as an increase in social skills. It would also involve staff at the school for monitoring, collaborating, and documenting these behaviors. Parents would be involved as well as all parties need to communicate and guide the students of expectations during cooperative learning groups. All parties involved have an important role in mentoring the students and creating relationships with them (Teacher 11, General Ed, 1st grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

At the Tier 2 level, teachers mentioned similar potential barriers from Tier 1 including a lack of support from parents and school staff, unwillingness from stakeholders

to engage with intervention implementation, limited time, and overwhelmed counselors. Potential solutions to these barriers were greater communication among stakeholders to ensure bullying prevention priorities are discussed and that the goals are feasible and flexible, time management strategies, and support from administrators when counselors are unable to provide support. One teacher expressed the value of connecting with parents as a solution to barriers that may arise if students are encountering problems in their personal lives outside of school. This teacher shared their solution: "In order to prevent these barriers I will communicate with parents regarding social/emotional/ and financial issues related to the family" (Teacher 22, SPED, 3rd/4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Additional barriers that were specific to Tier 2 consisted of communication skill deficits among students, inconsistencies with co-teachers implementing interventions, large classroom sizes, classroom disruptions, students struggling to work in groups, and limited access to school staff training to prevent bullying at the classroom level. Solutions to these challenges included teacher and parent partnerships to prevent bullying, collaboration and accountability among teachers and co-teachers to be consistent, and fostering a collaborative space for students to work in groups. One teacher expressed how they would navigate challenges specific to communication skill deficits by working with parents to understand the student's experience:

> I would rely on parents to help... Parents usually have a way of communicating and understanding what their child has to say and will be an asset in the communication process… I would educate students with disabilities about the nature of bullying and give them specific examples to paint a clear picture (Teacher 1, General Ed, 4th grade, Male, Black/Haitian).

A different teacher presented solutions for their intervention of students working together in groups when their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) states that group work is a challenge for the student:

> Some challenges or barriers are that some students with behavior goals on their IEP's might have a harder time "getting along" or allowing other students to have a "turn" in participating in the task. A way to help this situation is to have a mediator or captain in each team to oversee that everyone is having a turn to voice their ideas and opinions (Teacher 26, General Ed, 3rd/4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

This teacher recognized adapting the classroom is necessary to establish an equitable environment for SWD. Various teachers at the Tier 2 intervention level acknowledged the need to address the social and learning climate for SWD in a general education classroom.

Tier 3: Individual-Level Interventions

In module 4, teachers learned about Tier 3 interventions at the individual level and how these interventions can be used to prevent and intervene in bullying involvement, primarily focusing on students with or at risk of disability identification. Similar to Tier 1, there was a lot more variability in how teachers responded to developing and implementing a bullying prevention plan at Tier 3, with slightly more than half of them specifically mentioning students with or at risk for disabilities. There were still inconsistencies with how teachers identified Tier 3 interventions as some teachers identified interventions that were appropriate for Tier 1 (school level) or Tier 2 (classroom level). Overall, teachers were interested in addressing targeted behavioral problems as outlined in a student's Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP), social skills, addressing teasing with students engaging in verbal aggression, improving student–teacher relationships, increasing independent work and self-determination, and academic interventions for students performing below grade level as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic or their disability. Teachers who worked in classrooms with a high number of SWD mentioned self-determination as an important skill they would want to work on with specific students to help reduce bullying involvement. One teacher specified:

> The key issue that I see with students that I would like to address is the students' self-advocacy skills...Many students lack the confidence and self-determination to either stand up for themselves and advocate for what they want/need or they don't feel empowered enough to exercise that right (Teacher 13, SPED, 4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Other teachers who were familiar with FBAs and BIPs explained how interventions focused on social and communication skill deficits may also be useful among SWD to prevent bullying. One teacher stated:

> I do not have documented data, however, I have observed that some students with a disability don't seem to recognize when to stop trying to interact with other students. In order for me to design a Tier 3 intervention strategy, I may need to use a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) to map out the roots of the undesired behavior, and a behavioral intervention plan (BIP) to make appropriate behavior modification (Teacher 1, General Ed, 4th grade, Male, Black/Haitian).

When prompted to reflect on who represents key stakeholders at their school to prevent bullying at Tier 3, teachers included SWD, students receiving the intervention, special education teachers, parents, tutors, and counselors. Contrary

to Tiers 1 and 2 stakeholders, teachers expressed Tier 3 stakeholders were supporting a specific student, while Tiers 1 and 2 stakeholders were responsible for supporting each other as school staff in implementing the intervention. For example, one teacher expressed the importance of working with parents to monitor and record behaviors to support the implementation of interventions being implemented at school. Other teachers who included a variety of stakeholders described the need for multiple perspectives to identify the student and develop an intervention that would best support the student.

Regarding the potential barriers to a Tier 3 bullying prevention plan, teachers mentioned a lack of support from families, student unwillingness to engage with an intervention, student absenteeism, limited time and inconsistencies in implementation, and insufficient training for teachers to implement interventions. A teacher provided a solution for this, stating:

> …the lack of family involvement and support. In order to prevent this barrier or challenge, it is necessary to educate parents and families about the bullying prevention plan, create a open channel of communication, and provide feedback on student's progress in the Tier 3 plan (Teacher 22, SPED, 3rd/4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Similar to Tier 1 and Tier 2 reflection responses, about half of the teachers mentioned possible solutions to these barriers. One specifically detailed a barrier for emotionally "children who are all over the place," by sharing:

> They have bad days that they cannot get control of, and for some children, this will consume their entire day. We need to be prepared to make them feel good. We cannot let bad days overcome us, because the students will feel it. We should have encouraging motivators nearby, candies, stickers, and of course kind words. If we want them to try their best and believe in themselves, we need to show them that we believe in them (Teacher 28, General Ed, 3rd grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Other teachers proposed solutions to these barriers including educating families and developing school-family partnerships, involving tutors with implementation, working with school counselors to learn additional strategies, approaching students with compassion and patience when unwilling to engage, and utilizing incentives to encourage students in engaging with the intervention.

Discussion

The majority of students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their time in general education classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This highlights the need for general education teachers to be equipped to support SWD in developing strong academic, social, and emotional skills. However, general education teachers often do not receive training specific to supporting SWD, especially regarding bullying prevention and intervention (Chiappe, 2019). MTSS can help ensure that bullying prevention efforts are equitable, or that services are distributed and tailored to the school, classroom, and individual-level, and include students that need specialized support and are at risk for bullying involvement (e.g., SWD, English Learners; Sailor et al., 2021). The current study sought to understand how elementary school teachers would develop an MTSS-based bullying prevention plan across all three tiers of support during an online professional development training (DIAL). Specifically, researchers explored and summarized the themes that emerged when teachers were asked to develop a bullying prevention plan inclusive of SWD, who would be identified as key stakeholders, and potential barriers and solutions to implementing their plan at all three tiers. The findings from the current study suggest that MTSS terminology (e.g., Tier 1—school-level interventions, Tier 2—classroom level interventions, Tier 3—individual level interventions), despite being described throughout the modules, and the concept of data-driven decision making were still unclear among many of the teachers, particularly those in general education roles. Research suggests that one of the biggest barriers to implementing MTSS-based interventions in schools is inconsistencies in terminology and a lack of support at the district and school level to implement MTSS (Freeman et al., 2015; Poole & Kemp, 2018). According to Panorama Education (n.d.), schools struggle with using data effectively when implementing MTSS. The school district that participated in this study developed an MTSS implementation guide for the 2019–2020 school year, but given COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures, it is possible that the DIAL training was the first time some of these teachers learned about MTSS. Thus, if teachers were not already exposed to MTSS, making the connection to bullying prevention that is inclusive of SWD may have added a layer to a concept that was new or had been explained to them using different terminology in the past (e.g., RTI).

The vast majority of teachers stated the importance of involving various stakeholders within all three tiers, including students, families, school staff, administrators, and trusted adults (e.g., coaches, tutors). Research indicates parental involvement and support as a necessity for MTSS to be implemented effectively (Sailor et al., 2021). In a qualitative study of parent perspectives on outcomes of family-school partnerships, Francis and colleagues (2016) identified the interrelationship between a school culture of inclusion and belonging and positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students, including SWD. Parents of students with and without disabilities spoke about how

inclusive schools and classrooms have academic, social, and emotional benefits for all of their children (Francis et al., 2016). Specifically, parents named evidence-based MTSS bullying prevention outcomes, such as high collaboration, a positive school climate, increased belonging, increased friends, and increased social skills stemming from tiered support as the underlying mechanisms that improved their child's educational experience. Additionally, parents of SWD discussed the positive impact teachers had on "demystifying disability" (Francis et al., 2016, p. 21) for their children. This highlights the need for comprehensive, unified programming that includes a variety of stakeholders to promote partnerships and a culture of inclusion and belonging in schools.

Lastly, teachers identified a variety of potential problems and solutions at different tiers when developing and forecasting the implementation of their MTSS-based bullying prevention plan. Specifically, teachers mentioned the need for parental and familial involvement and support, additional training on bullying prevention among SWD, funding for support staff (i.e., school counselors), and teacher ability to increase student willingness to engage in interventions by creating a positive classroom and school climate. According to research on bullying prevention, these problems and solutions are often cited. Yell and colleagues (2016) provide an overview of legal cases involving bullying among SWD and offer the following six suggestions to school districts related to bullying prevention and intervention: (1) create a visible and consistently implemented school district bullying prevention policy, (2) implement an evidence-based bullying prevention program as part of a MTSS framework, (3) provide professional development for all school staff about bullying, (4) use comprehensive methods for detecting bullying (e.g., collect data about bullying involvement), (5) respond to bullying in a timely and effective manner, and (6) document all actions regarding bullying intervention and communicate to all involved parties. Importantly, Yell and colleagues (2016) highlight the importance of active participation of parents and all school staff in bullying prevention plans such as creating bullying prevention policies.

Teachers in our sample recognized the need for familial involvement, having a comprehensive bullying prevention stakeholder team, providing education about disabilities, and promoting a culture of inclusion as essential to supporting all students. However, many teacher responses did not explicitly mention how these supports would specifically benefit SWD. This is consistent with other qualitative research where elementary general education teachers stated they need more professional development for bullying prevention, especially for supporting SWD (Chiappe, 2019). Our findings also underscored the importance of administrative support in bullying prevention and intervention. Given the positive impacts that disability education can have on students (Francis et al., 2016), and the apparent gap in teacher knowledge about specialized supports for SWD (Chiappe, 2019), it is imperative that general education teachers are given ongoing professional development that teaches them about disabilities and MTSS.

Limitations

The results of qualitative studies are intended to explore particular problems or issues among specific participants without providing evidence of generalizability to other members of the population being studied (Leko et al., 2021). Important considerations exist when evaluating qualitative trustworthiness. Member checking, or respondent validation (Birt et al., 2016), is when gathered data are presented to the participants to check for accuracy. Conducting member checks with participants would strengthen the trustworthiness of this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lastly, some teachers worked together when completing these modules. The mix of individual and collaborative responses may be a limitation of this study.

Implications and Future Directions

School mental health hinges on the physical and psychological safety of all students. Thus, bullying prevention is imperative to student wellbeing and given that bullying among elementary school aged children often occurs in school, the findings from this study have clear implications for general and special educators, counselors, and school administrators focused on preventing bullying that is inclusive of SWD. SWD may also include those with ongoing or chronic mental health challenges that may be exacerbated by bullying involvement. For example, some students may qualify for an IEP under the "emotional disturbance" or the "Other Health Impairment" disability category because they have a mental health diagnosis such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), conduct disorder, anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and one of the most common, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). SWD may also have comorbidities that place them at compounded risk of bullying involvement. Furthermore, elementary school is when many children are first identified with a disability and therefore, a comprehensive bullying prevention plan would require additional support from stakeholders at all three tiers of the MTSS model.

Notably, increasing stakeholder awareness, knowledge, and collaboration around supporting SWD within the bullying dynamic is essential for reducing bullying overall. Our findings also highlight how general and special educators are and are not operationalizing MTSS in practice. Specifically, increasing skills and application of MTSS principles (i.e., data-based decision making, collecting and using student

progress monitoring data, delivering science-based instruction, and working collaboratively across school teams) might be fruitful for school communities when preventing bullying among SWD. Future research should continue to focus on the role of teacher perceptions and their understanding of MTSS-based strategies for bullying prevention.

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