In the Eyes of Parents: The Impact of Bullying on the Lives of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Atse Libne Dingle School, Addis Ababa

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Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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DECLARATION

I, make this declaration regarding this research thesis entitled "In the Eyes of Parents: The Impact of Bullying on the Lives of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Atse Libne Dingle School, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia", is the original document and has not been submitted for the degree in any other institution. The research has been conducted by my own and submitted to the School of Psychology at Addis Ababa University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Developmental Psychology.

I do recognize that failure to maintain academic honesty and integrity, including plagiarism, misrepresentation, or falsification of information, is subject to disciplinary action by the University and can further attract legal prosecution from the wrongly accredited sources.

Researcher Name: Eyerusalem Hailu

Date: October 2025

Signature: _____

STATEMENT OF CERTIFICATION

As an advisor, I hereby certify that the thesis of Eyerusalem Hailu entitled "In the Eyes of Parents: The Impact of Bullying on the Lives of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Atse Libne Dingle School, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia" has been submitted to the School of Psychology, Addis Ababa University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Developmental Psychology. I approved the thesis submission to the College of Education and Language studies.

Advisor's Name: Abera Tibebu (PhD)

Signature: _____

Date: October 2025

APPROVAL SHEET

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A thesis submitted to the School of Psychology, Addis Ababa University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Developmental Psychology.

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List of Acronyms

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

ID: Intellectual Disability

SPED: Special Education

IEP: Individualized Education Program

CWD: Children with Disabilities

SEN: Special Educational Needs

ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of bullying against students with Autism Spectrum Disorder as seen from the perspective of parents at Atse Libne Dingle School in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This exploration aimed at grasping the effect of bullying against students through a qualitative research approach, and used phenomenological research design in descriptive form, that involved in-depth interviews of parents of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The researcher used a purposive sampling technique, and a snowball sampling method to select participants. This study utilized qualitative analysis of data through ATLAS.ti software that aided in determining dominant themes emerging from in-depth interviews of parents of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder according to the study's plan and criteria where students' ages between 12 and 36 years. Based on analysis of data, it was noted that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder have been affected by bullying in terms of being victimized through words, physical attacks, emotional rejection, social isolation, and exclusion from schools. This affected them psychologically as they showed signs of being low in confidence, low in morale, lack of routines such as eating, playing, and speaking, while others showed signs of risking their lives through self-inflicted injuries or running away from home. Therefore, in order to have a profound effect against bullying of those students, multi-level approaches need to be implemented that will involve intense provision of inclusive education programs, anti-Bullying programs by schools, and organizing campaigns through parents' associations as an aspect of implementing social responsibility strategy. As well as including a strong effort to end bullying at a democratic social setting and a communal setting as an aspect of social entrepreneurship to create a safe and respectful environment.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Bullying, Parental Perspective, Psychological Well-being, Inclusive Education, Ethiopia.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by ongoing challenges in social communication and social interaction, in addition to restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In many regions of the world, the prevalence of ASD has continued to rise steadily, with newer reports showing a higher prevalence of identified diagnosis of ASD in children (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Different international researches has provided evidence of challenges faced by students with ASD in educational and social contexts, as they work to understand social cues and maintain peer relationships (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). These challenges also leave them open to higher degrees of victimization and exclusion in all forms (Adams, Taylor, & Duncan, 2016).

At the global level, different studies show that bullying is a widespread problem among students with ASD. It consists different forms such as verbal insults, physical aggression, social ostracism, and emotional abuse (Kohler et al., 2021). This experiences lead to serious consequences, including anxiety, depression, academic failure, and low self-esteem (Mazefsky et al., 2013). Researchers have also emphasized that parental involvement and school-based interventions play key roles in reducing these adverse outcomes. However, this researches not adequately expressed how these bullying experiences are shaped by different cultural and educational contexts, especially in low- and middle-income countries, because these countries have a limited support services for autism spectrum disorders. Most of the international research focused on Western countries, resulting in a

lack of culturally contextualized understanding of bullying against students with ASD in developing nations.

In the context of African, studies on autism and bullying experience are very limited. However, the available researches indicates that students with ASD in African countries face heightened risks of victimization due to widespread social stigma, limited awareness, and inadequate institutional support (Abubaker et al., 2016). These factors have negative consequences like social exclusion and leads early identification and intervention. While existing African studies have contributed to highlighting systemic barriers and cultural misconceptions about autism, they have not sufficiently explored the day-to-day emotional and behavioral impacts of bullying on students with ASD or how families cope with these experiences within African social settings.

Research in Ethiopia is also in its infancy, and most of it is centered around issues of accessibility of specialist learning, social perceptions, and difficulties faced by parents, as opposed to bullying's impacts specifically in students with ASD. In Ethiopia's research too, lack of human resources, inadequate facilities in inclusive learning programs, as well as stigma against children with ASD and their families, have been recognized as problems (Tekola, Belay, & Ayele, 2016). Even though learning institutions such as Atse Libne Dingle in Addis Ababa have managed to make a breakthrough by offering therapy and learning programs (Addis Ababa Education Bureau, 2023), bullying is an ever-recurring challenge that contributes to students' emotional well-being and socialization problems (Mekonnen & Tilahun, 2024). Even though related problems such as anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression in children with ASD have been experienced in Ethiopia (Gebremedhin et al., 2023) as well as emotional difficulties, social exclusion, and economic difficulties of parents of children with ASD (Tadesse & Alemu, 2022) have been documented, research is scanty in addressing impacts of bullying in the social lives of students with ASD.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring how bullying affects students with ASD through the perspectives of their parents at Atse Libne Dingle School in Addis Ababa.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although bullying is a widespread problem faced by individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) across the world. However, very little empirical research on this topic is available in Ethiopia, particularly in Addis Ababa. But there are some institutions provide basic services for Autism for example Atse Libne Dingle School is one of this institutions which enroll and treat students with ASD.

Recent studies show important gaps in ASD individuals' services in Ethiopia, including the lack of specialized diagnostic, therapeutic, and educational centers, absence of specialized personnel, and poor family support (Zeleke et al., 2017). All these challenges are compounded by the social difficulties and vulnerabilities that students with ASD face in school, which makes them more susceptible to bullying.

Furthermore, previous studies conducted in Ethiopia show that numerous caregivers encounter challenges like a lack of available services, high expenses, and insufficient public awareness, all of which adversely affect the developmental outcomes of students (Tilahun et al., 2016). In addition, inadequate educational support for students with ASD further deepens their social isolation and heightens their vulnerability to bullying (Beyene et al., 2022).

Moreover, parental understanding about how bullying affects their child’s life has not yet been explored, despite parents being a key stakeholder in identifying, intervening, and dealing with bullying. Obtaining understanding into parental experiences is vital for developing culturally

relevant support and intervention programs that meet the needs of students with ASD in Ethiopia (Nizar, 2022).

This research seeks to fill the gap in knowledge regarding bullying in relation to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The study is based on the views of parents of students diagnosed with ASD at Atse Libne Dingle School in Addis Ababa. The research aims to collect evidence that is local, potentially informing policy development, intervention efforts, awareness, and the well-being and safety of students diagnosed with ASD in Ethiopia.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are parents' typical accounts of bullying incidents of children with ASD in Atse Libne Dingle School Addis Ababa?

2. What are the reported reactions or responses of the ASD students to the reported bullying incidents to their parents?

3. In what way does bullying impact students with ASD's psychological well-being and lifestyle, according to the perception of parents at Addis Ababa's Atse Libne Dingle School?

1.4 Objective of the study

1.4.1 General objective of the study

To investigate the influence of bullying on the lives of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) according to their parents' view in Atse Libne Dingle School, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

1. To identify parents’ typical accounts of bullying incidents experienced by children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at Atse Libne Dingle School in Addis Ababa.

2. To explore how students with ASD respond or react to bullying experiences, as perceived by their parents.

3. To assess the effect of bullying on the emotional well-being and daily functioning of students with ASD, according to parents in these school.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study is significant because it investigates the consequences of bullying on the lives and psychological well-being of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through the perspectives of their parents. By exploring parents' lived experiences, the study fills an important knowledge gap in the Ethiopian context, where studies in impact of bullying among children with ASD remains limited.

The study findings have great importance for students with ASD, because they contribute to reducing the rate of bullying and promoting a safer, more inclusive learning environment that supports their emotional and social development. This study addresses a significant knowledge gap within Ethiopian context where studies on the impact of bullying among children with ASD are still scarce. It also supports parents by providing better understanding about their children's condition by informing emotional and behavioral support.

For teachers, school administrators, and policymakers, the study provides practical insights that can inform the design of intervention programs, teacher training, and inclusive education policies aimed at preventing bullying and improving support services for students with ASD. Health professionals and social workers may also use the findings to strengthen counseling, awareness campaigns, and therapeutic interventions that address the emotional and psychological needs of these children.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The goal of the research is, through the parents' point of view, to examine the impact of bullying on the students with ASD day-to-day life and mental health at Atse Libne Dingle School in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The study was limited to Atse Libne Dingle School, as it was one of the primary providers of autism care in the town and had a great number of students and families with ASD. The study explored the impact of bullying experiences on the psychological and behavioral well-being of the students with ASD, their response to the incidents, through the parents' perception.

1.7 Definition of Terms

1. **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):** a neurodevelopmental disorder, in different circumstances the students with ASD exhibit deficiencies in social communication and interaction on different events, besides displaying limited, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or hobbies (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Operationally, tests like the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) and parent interviews are used to identify students with ASD. These students exhibit difficulties such as restricted interests that are out of character for their age group, repetitive behaviors, difficulty understanding social cues, and limited eye contact.

2. Bullying: Persistent aggressive conduct with the goal of hurting or upsetting the victim, marked by an unequal power dynamic between the two parties (Olweus, 1993). According to the parents of

students with ASD, bullying in this study encompasses verbal, physical, social, and cyber forms of aggression.

3. Emotional well-being: refers to how positively an individual generally feels about their life, encompassing both immediate emotional experiences and reflective judgments about life satisfaction, meaning, and purpose.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter surely examines the existing research and studies related to the topic. Moreover, it reviews the important literature that supports this research work. This chapter has six sections as per the conceptual understanding of ASD and general stigma regarding ASD. The second part surely examines particular bullying incidents faced by students with ASD in different environments. Moreover, it reviews specific experiences these students encounter across various educational settings. Part three actually talks about the effects while part four definitely explains how parents and caregivers deal with what their children with ASD go through. The fifth section further discusses inclusive schools for special needs students and summarizes policy directives itself.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical framework of the study

2.1 Conceptual Frame Work of the Study

2.1.1 Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by restricted and repetitive behaviors, interests or activities, and continuous deficits in social communication and interaction (APA, 2013). Given the "spectrum" nature of ASD, individuals may present a range of abilities and difficulties, from high function and independence to severe limitations in behavior and communication. The severity of autism symptoms is variable, but cognitive functioning often informs an individual's functioning level, independence, and ability to communicate

Social communication disunities and restricted interests are among the diverse characteristics of ASD which pose challenges in interpreting social cues and understanding social interactions. These characteristics require the awareness of educators, caregivers, and peers and accommodate the

unique needs of individuals with ASD. Developmentally, symptoms are most often identified between 12 and 24 months, though milder symptoms may be recognized later, and significant delays may be observed earlier. Early childhood behavioral signs include lack of interest in social engagement and, In certain cases, children with ASD may experience developmental regression or plateaus, marked by a loss of previously acquired social or language skills. This type of regression is uncommon in other childhood conditions and can act as an important "red flag" for clinicians in the identification of ASD (DSM-5, 2013)

Deficits in communication and social skills are particularly prominent behavioral traits in children with ASD and are directly associated with their higher risk of being bullied. Research shows that children with ASD that experience communication issues are seven times more likely to be bullied than those who do not (Matthias et al., 2021). This issue is compounded by the limited awareness of multiple social contexts which further limits their ability to interpret peer intentions or identify situations of bullying (Fisher and Taylor, 2016). While children with ASD may cognitively understand definitions of bullying including physical, social, or material aggression, many report difficulty identifying or interpreting these situations when they occur in public spaces. (Humpheray, 2021).

One of the areas that children with ASD fall short in is in "theory of mind," a cognitive philosophical construct that pertains to one's ability to understand one's own and others' mental states and points of view. This particular aspect of ASD leads to a greater incidence of bullying misunderstandings as well as victimization because children with ASD have a harder time deciphering emotions and intentions, though it is less likely that they will be perpetrators (Forrest et al., 2019). This lack of understanding of emotions and intentions leads to greater opportunities for bullying of children with ASD, causing higher probabilities of victimization and mental issues such

as anxiety, depression, and a poor quality of life (Adams, Taylor, & Duncan, 2016; Espelage et al., 2017).

There has been increased research related to bullying of students with ASD in recent years, though issues remain, especially in non-western society. Research indicates that students diagnosed with ASD are victims of extreme bullying compared to non-ASD students in a myriad of ways, arising out of intricate links between individual elements and overall system-level variables in school and social setups (Dark, & Stone, 2011).

2.1.2 Concept and Definition of Bullying

Bullying is a type of aggressive behavior that is intentional, repeated, and occurs within a context of power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim. As Olweus (1993) explains, bullying consists of three key elements: repeated harmful actions, a deliberate intention to inflict physical or psychological harm, and a power imbalance that prevents victims from defending themselves effectively. Unlike isolated acts of aggression, bullying is systematic and habitual, posing serious social and developmental risks for hurt individuals. Olweus emphasized that power imbalances may manifest through physical strength, social status, or numbers, and these imbalances are dynamic and context-dependent.

With the rise of digital communication, bullying has also extended into cyberspace, manifesting as cyberbullying. This form includes harassment, impersonation, and dissemination of harmful material using social media and text messaging. Cyberbullying's anonymous and persistent nature can make it especially damaging, often occurring beyond traditional school environments.

Recognizing bullying as repeated, intentional aggression driven by power imbalances is crucial for creating effective prevention and intervention strategies. This is especially important for vulnerable

groups, such as children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who face bullying more frequently and encounter distinct social challenges.

2.1.3 Types of Bullying

Bullying experienced by children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) takes several distinct forms, each with its own characteristics and effects. Understanding these types is critical for effective identification, support, and intervention.

1. Physical bullying

Physical bullying involves causing direct harm to a child's body or threatening them physically. Children with ASD may be subjected to hitting, pushing, kicking, having their belongings stolen, or having their property damaged. Studies indicate that physical bullying can occur not only at school but also at home or in other social settings. Some children report being targeted by individual peers or groups, and in some cases, even experiencing sexual harassment during school or social events (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Because children with ASD often have heightened sensory sensitivities or difficulty processing threats, these physical attacks can trigger intense distress or meltdowns, further increasing their vulnerability.

2. Verbal bullying

Verbal bullying is the most commonly reported type and includes actions such as name-calling, teasing, insults, threats, or public humiliation. Students with ASD are often targeted with derogatory names related to their behavior or differences and may face loud ridicule from peers. Verbal bullying can also involve spreading rumors or false information, which can lead to social exclusion (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Matthias et al., 2021). Since children with ASD may struggle to

understand social cues, they might not always recognize when verbal bullying occurs, or their responses may be misinterpreted by others, making the situation even more challenging.

3. Social bullying

Social bullying, also known as relational bullying, is often subtle but can be highly damaging. It includes deliberate exclusion, spreading rumors, ignoring, or isolating a child from peers. Students with ASD are particularly vulnerable due to their limited social awareness and difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships. Being socially excluded can intensify feelings of loneliness and contribute to anxiety or depression (Smith et al., 2020).

4. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a growing concern in the digital age, taking place through social media and other online platforms. It includes sending cruel messages, impersonating someone, sharing embarrassing content, creating hate pages, or issuing anonymous insults. Students with ASD may be especially exposed because they often struggle to interpret online social norms or detect harmful intent. The anonymous and persistent nature of cyberbullying makes it difficult to escape, and attacks can occur outside school hours, intruding on spaces that would otherwise be considered safe for these students (Mishna et al., 2020).

2.1.4 The Context of Bullying as Experienced by Children with ASD

Bullying is a significant concern in schools, particularly for children with disabilities, who often become easy targets. Olweus (1993) defines bullying as a persistent and deliberate form of aggression, marked by an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim. For students with ASD who are being bullied is a particularly painful experience, as their neurodevelopmental differences play a big part in the way they perceive and react to the situation. Recent research by

Budor et al. (2022) highlights the need for a better understanding of the approaches that educators and parents can use to tackle autism-specific bullying. One of the negative for these students is common misconceptions about autism, as behaviors associated with ASD are frequently misinterpreted as deliberate disobedience instead of being recognized as signs of a developmental disorder. Additionally, a lack of awareness about autism can lead to the misunderstanding that ASD traits are a matter of personal choice rather than neurological differences (Vidojević et al., 2014), which creates environments where bullying can flourish.

In Ethiopia, school life for students with ASD can be particularly challenging. Cultural attitudes toward disabilities significantly influence how these students are treated, and many schools lack adequate support systems to meet their needs. Those unique behaviors that come with ASD, like stimming or odd ways of talking, and even special sensory stuff they need, they end up making these students easy targets. This happens in places where folks just do not get neurodiversity all that well. Research indicates that children with ASD often experience what experts refer to as “gateway behaviors.” Minor differences in their actions or ways of communicating can gradually escalate into more serious forms of bullying. This concept was discussed by Sofronoff, Dark, and Stone in 2011. The social and communication hurdles built into ASD leave them really exposed. They might not pick up on when someone means harm. Reporting problems can be hard for them too. And figuring out the tricky social stuff that helps regular kids avoid getting picked on, well, that is another struggle.

The physical layout of schools plays an important role in either preventing or contributing to bullying of children with ASD. Areas such as playgrounds, lunchrooms, and hallways can be particularly challenging, as they often lack sufficient adult supervision. Additionally, children with ASD may find it difficult to navigate the social interactions required in these spaces, which can

increase their vulnerability to bullying. Transitions count too. Moving from class to class, squeezing through packed halls. That stuff can ramp up anxiety, overload senses. Leaves them open to teasing or worse when they are stressed out already. Thing is, getting these environment details makes sense for building good ways to fight bullying. You have to cover the people side and the place side both, in school settings for ASD students.

2.1.5 The Context of Bullying: Perspectives of Parents

Bullying can profoundly affect not only children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) but also their families, particularly parents, who frequently have to witness or manage the consequences of such experiences. Parents of children with ASD frequently express heightened worries about their children's social vulnerability, with negative incidents occurring regularly due to peer-to-peer aggression and exclusion, often mediated by communication issues and atypical behavioral traits (Iyengar, 2022).

Parents state their children frequently experience verbal bullying of name-calling and teasing, which can be particularly harmful considering many children with ASD struggle to navigate social cues and interpretations. Social bullying, and the purposeful exclusion of children in friendships and activities, is another common concern, which parents expect only compounds their children's sense of loneliness and anxiety. Less prevalent than verbal or social bullying, yet still troubling, is the potential for physical bullying which is a source of great distress to families (Iyengar, 2022).

2.1.6 Bullying in Schools

In recent years, bullying in schools has received increasing attention, particularly regarding vulnerable groups such as students with ASD. Research highlights the unique challenges faced by children with autism and the widespread presence of bullying in both mainstream schools and

specialized autism centers. This study draws on key research, including work by Kohler et al. (2021), to provide an overview of bullying experiences among students with ASD in Addis Ababa.

Social dynamics within educational settings, whether in regular schools or specialized centers, can either increase or decrease the risk of bullying for students with autism. One of the most effective strategies for preventing bullying among adolescents with ASD is fostering strong collaboration between educators and parents. By carefully assessing each student's needs, teachers and parents can develop tailored plans to ensure safety and support (Hong et al., 2014). Additionally, teaching students how to recognize, respond to, and report bullying, both in school and outside, is especially important for children with ASD (Hong et al., 2014).

Bullying remains a significant issue in schools. Studies indicate that students with disabilities, including those with autism, are particularly vulnerable to victimization (Nansel et al., 2001; Rose et al., 2011). Kohler et al. (2021) explored bullying in Addis Ababa, showing that neither schools nor autism centers are immune. Their findings suggest that students with ASD are often targeted due to difficulties in social communication, which can make them easy targets for peers seeking control or social dominance.

Mannheim et al. (2020) further examine the mechanisms of bullying within educational contexts, noting that environments lacking inclusive practices tend to foster such behaviors. They highlight the influence of peer relationships and social hierarchies in perpetuating bullying, stressing that without effective interventions, students with ASD remain highly vulnerable. The study underscores the importance of creating inclusive school environments that promote empathy, understanding, and support among all students, which can significantly reduce bullying incidents.

2.1.7 Impact of Bullying on Wellbeing of Students with ASD

Students with ASD often face greater challenges because they struggle not only with social relationships but also with effectively communicating with others (Murray et al., 2019). The disadvantages in bullying may be more likely to get targeted from milking and then later develop into problems like anxiousness, feeling down and not feeling good about themselves (Schwartz et al., 2020). In Ethiopia, the challenges can be compounded by stigma around disability. Families may keep their child's autism a secret, so they miss out on help and support

Bullying is a particularly serious issue for students with ASD due to the complex interplay of cognitive, social, and cultural factors. It can have profound effects on their mental well-being and social relationships. Research indicates that children with ASD who experience bullying often develop heightened anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Adams, Taylor, & Duncan, 2016). Prolonged exposure to bullying can lead to severe consequences, including symptoms similar to PTSD. This underscores the need for effective prevention and intervention strategies that are specifically tailored to the needs of students with ASD.

The impact of bullying on students with ASD extends beyond immediate emotional distress; it can affect their academic performance, social development, and overall well-being. Bullying is linked to academic achievement and school attendance among students with ASD (Schroeder et al. 2014). According to their findings, avoidance behaviors may result from a fear of bullying, which would make these students' struggles in school much more severe. These results are supported by Mazefsky et al. (2013), who point out that bullying's psychological effects can impede the development of social skills, which are already difficult for many students with autism. The authors emphasize that bullying can cause a cycle of social disengagement in which impacted students grow

more and more estranged from their classmates, further reducing their social capital and potentially reinforcing the bullying dynamic.

Students with ASD are more likely to skip school and place themselves in precarious positions where they are likely to be victims of bullying. Research indicates that more than 35% of parents of students with ASD reported that their children wouldn't attend school because they were being harassed (Sofronoff, Dark, & Stone, 2011). Students who have comorbid conditions like ADHD or mental health issues are more likely to refuse to attend school as they get older. When students with ASD encounter bullying scenarios with peers, they are more likely to become socially isolated and vulnerable to repeated victimization due to difficulties in forming protective social connections (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014).

Bullying victimization is substantially linked to increased levels of internalizing and externalizing mental health issues in students with ASD. Victimized students are more likely to experience poor quality of life, academic challenges, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Adams, Taylor, & Duncan, 2016). Research indicates that substantial rates of bullying victimization are documented even among students with Level 1 ASD, despite their relatively strong verbal abilities. The psychopathology triggered by bullying during school years can persist into adulthood, creating additional challenges for individuals with ASD as they navigate adult responsibilities and social integration (Mazefsky et al., 2013).

According to Beyene's (2022) the long-term consequences of bullying on students' with ASD mental health reveals that participants reported persistent feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression directly linked to their bullying experiences. This aligns with established research indicating that victimization can have lasting psychological effects across the lifespan. The study

particularly notes that many participants continued to grapple with bullying's consequences well into adolescence and adulthood, underscoring the critical importance of early intervention. The author advocates for a multi-faceted approach incorporating mental health support, community awareness initiatives, and policy reforms to create safer educational environments for students with ASD.

The social challenges faced by students with ASD in bullying contexts are well-documented and have significant association for their mental health and social integration. Social interactions present substantial difficulties for many students with ASD, often leading to isolation and exclusion. Research examining the social skills of students with ASD in relation to their neurotypical peers reveals that challenges in interpreting social cues and navigating interactions frequently lead to misunderstandings and social marginalization (Schroeder et al., 2014). These social difficulties make students with ASD particularly vulnerable to bullying, as their peers may misinterpret their behaviors or communication styles.

Contemporary research emphasizes the particular social vulnerabilities that students with ASD experience in bullying situations. Their difficulties in interpreting complex social dynamics and responding to social cues create significant susceptibility to victimization (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). Their responses to bullying, which may include either reactive aggression or social withdrawal, can unfortunately exacerbate their isolation and increase victimization risk. This underscores the necessity for targeted social skills interventions and environmental modifications to support students' with ASD social navigation. In the Ethiopian context, cultural stigma surrounding disability compounds these social vulnerabilities, further isolating students with ASD and limiting their opportunities for positive social engagement and inclusion.

2.1.8 Support Systems within Autism Centers

To support student with ASD Autism centers play a vital role, even it helps in minimizing parental burdens. This centers provide therapeutic services, educational support, and opportunities for community engagement (Kumar et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the development of autism centers in Ethiopia has been slow. Existing facilities might lack the necessary resources or adequately trained staff to effectively assist children with ASD and their families (Tadesse et al., 2023). As research indicates the comprehensive support system is significant because it serves the educational needs of students with ASD. Also offering training for families and educators is important to create inclusive environments (Beyene et al., 2022).

According to Beyene (2022) many children with autism are bullied in Addis Ababa, and stated that bullying is heightened by societal stigma around autism. From qualitative interviews, parents fear for the safety and social integration of their child, while youth tend to isolate themselves as a result of prejudice in society. Further, this researcher highlights the necessity for tailored interventions that meet the unique demands of children with autism. To create a more favorable and constructive environment, training programs targeting peers and teachers are promoted by the author. This is consistent with (Kohler et al. 2021), who posit that preventive interventions like peer mentorship programs and social skills training can cut the prevalence of bullying among children with autism substantially.

2.1.9 Summary

Overall, the literature on bullying among students with ASD paints a clear picture of how deeply these experiences affect their daily lives, emotional well-being, and social development. Studies consistently show that students with ASD face a higher risk of being bullied and often struggle to cope with the emotional and social consequences. Many experience intense fear, anxiety, and sadness, and some begin to withdraw from school or peers altogether. For some, repeated bullying

leads to long-lasting psychological effects, such as chronic stress or trauma-related symptoms (Adams, Taylor, & Duncan, 2016). These reactions are shaped not only by the nature of the bullying but also by the social and cultural context in which the students live and learn.

Research highlights that students with ASD often face challenges that make them more vulnerable during social interactions such as difficulty interpreting social cues, limited communication skills, and trouble forming friendships. These factors can intensify the impact of bullying and make it harder for them to respond or seek help. In settings where stigma or misunderstanding about autism is common, students may feel even more isolated, reinforcing feelings of shame and low self-worth. The emotional weight of these experiences underscores the need for schools to create environments where students with ASD feel seen, protected, and supported.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of strong support systems within schools. When teachers, counselors, and school leadership understand the unique needs of students with ASD, they are better prepared to notice signs of bullying early and intervene appropriately. Inclusive school climates where differences are understood and respected are repeatedly shown to reduce bullying and improve students' sense of belonging (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). This suggests that effective interventions must go beyond individual coping strategies and prioritize whole-school approaches that build empathy, awareness, and acceptance.

Despite these insights, there remains a noticeable gap in research focusing on bullying and ASD within Ethiopian schools. The few existing studies indicate that students with ASD often encounter

barriers shaped by cultural beliefs, limited school resources, and insufficient awareness among peers and educators (Tadesse & Teshome, 2023). Without a clear understanding of how these factors interact in local contexts, school policies and interventions can fall short. This highlights the urgent need for research that examines the realities of Ethiopian classrooms and identifies what truly supports students with ASD in those environments.

Understanding the local cultural context is essential for designing meaningful solutions. Schools and communities must work together to break stigma, raise awareness about ASD, and promote positive attitudes toward inclusion. This can involve training educators on the behavioral and communication characteristics of ASD, running community awareness campaigns, and establishing support networks that listen to students' experiences and needs.

Improving access to mental health services is also crucial. Many students with ASD struggle silently with the emotional toll of bullying, and early psychological support can make a significant difference in reducing long-term harm. When educators, mental health professionals, and community leaders collaborate, they can create school environments where students with ASD feel safer, more confident, and better equipped to thrive both academically and socially.

2.2 Theoretical frame work of the study

2.2.1 Overview of Autism in the Ethiopian Context

Cultural differences play a significant role in the perception and management of autism in Ethiopian society. For example, Beyene (2020) found that the way Ethiopian culture perceives autism often results in stigma, which impacts students with ASD and their families. Societal stigma may make challenges more intense, isolating families from others and therefore limiting access to resources and support services. There is clearly a need to cultivate awareness for and create culturally

responsive interventions for autism, as both are important considerations for addressing the ramifications of autism in Ethiopia.

More recent estimates suggest a prevalence of approximately 1 in 100 in Ethiopia (Michael et al., 2022), although this number may not truly reflect the realities when considering differences in awareness and diagnostic capacity across regions. There is no comprehensive, population-wide data on autism, highlighting the need for public health campaigns and health care provider training to improve identification and support of children with ASD.

Diagnostic and educational services for children with autism are more available in urban areas like Addis Ababa, while families in rural communities face even greater practical and emotional challenges. These include stronger stigma, limited resources, and fewer support networks. There are also no available tools to assess children with autism in a culturally and contextually appropriate manner, which may result in many children with autism remaining undiagnosed or wrongly diagnosed as intellectually disabled.

2.2.2 Theories of Bullying and Stigma

Bullying is understood as intentional, repeated aggression carried out by someone who holds more power over the victim. This is a complicated social phenomenon that can have important implications for both the victim and the perpetrator. Understanding bullying in the context of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will require consideration of traditional bullying theories from within the developmental and neurocognitive research, emphasizing the unique vulnerabilities of children with ASD.

Olweus' Bullying Theory is one of the most influential frameworks in understanding bullying. Dan Olweus was one of the first researchers who engaged in deeply studying bullying, defining it to be

"aggressive behavior or intentional 'harm doing' that is carried out repeatedly and over time in interpersonal relationships characterized by an imbalance of power" (Olweus, 1994, p. 68). "Bullying," as a specific concept, differs from occasional aggression because the action is systematic (when a bully attacks someone in a specific way) and it is intentional aggression. Victims of bullying rarely initiate or provoke the aggression. In Olweus' work, bullying a kind of fundamentally different behavior, repositioning bullying as a major social/educational problem rather than a normal or justifiable childhood rite. The definition further captures not just bullying as behavior, but the detrimental psychological effects including distress, depression, and anxiety. Olweus also captured that bullying was significantly different from aggression of various forms (physical, verbal) and also included cyberbullying, extending the new vulnerability to children to be attacked outside of school and online, any time, and anywhere in the world, making incidents appear limitless and increasingly severe.

2.2.3 Emotional Well-being: Theoretical Perspectives

The psychological and emotional well-being of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder is a multi-faceted construct that includes not only the absence of negative emotions (for example, anxiety and depression), but the presence of resilience, social connectedness, purpose, and satisfaction. The Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being describe six dimensions' self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and positive relations that have been used in research with vulnerable children, including children diagnosed with ASD.

Bullying & stigma are significant risks to the emotional and psychological health of children with autism, with studies documenting increased rates of anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, diminished quality of life, etc., among children diagnosed with autism who have been bullied (Adams, Taylor, &

Duncan, 2016; Gonzalez et al., 2020). In addition to this, studies demonstrate that children diagnosed with autism who have experienced bullying have indicated academic underperformance, social development impairment, and obstacles to establishing friendships, further complicating issues that children with disability face.

Theoretical models suggest that bullying diminishes protective factors like self-esteem, belongingness, and ability to develop healthy relationships through repeated exposure. The children diagnosed with ASD are particularly susceptible, evidenced by social communication challenges, an often limited understanding of social norms, and difficulties identifying harmful behaviors (for example, bullying) and determining how to respond. Often times, this experiential emotional distress will compound, as if creating a snowball effect, through the observed circles of bullying.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter shows the research approach, design and basic data collecting and analyzing methodologies selected for the study, it also presents the sampling techniques employed, tools used for data collection, the procedure of the study and the method of data analysis.

3.1 Research approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is most suitable for exploring complex social phenomena and gaining an in-depth understanding of lived experiences. The goal was to explore how students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience bullying and how their parents perceive and respond to these incidents at Atse Libne Dingle School in Addis Ababa.

Qualitative research embeds data collection within participants' settings, providing a means to reveal intricate insights based on real-life situations, not preordained circumstances (Chisaka, 2011). The interviews were utilized as the major data collection tool, yielding comprehensive, first-hand reflections and assisting the researcher in studying the social and emotional consequences of bullying on children with ASD.

As Creswell (2007) notes, qualitative research is suitable when the aim is to understand a concept in-detail and from multiple dimensions, especially through location lending itself to engagement with participants. This design allowed the researcher to investigate how bullying impacts students' psychological and social well-being, based on parent observations and reports.

3.2 Research Design

Research design is a "plan or a proposal to conduct research, involving the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry and specific methods" (Creswell, 2009, p. 5). A research design serves as a plan that guides the researcher to connect the empirical data to the study's research questions, and ultimately, to answer the research questions that were set to guide the study (Yin, 2014). This study employed a phenomenological research design in descriptive form, aiming to understand and describe the lived experiences of students with ASD in the eyes of their parents, the impact of bullying experiences they had encountered. Phenomenology is suitable for this study because it focuses on how individuals make sense of their personal experiences, which aligns with the study's focus on parental interpretation and emotional responses to bullying.

3.3 Study Area

The study was carried out at a primary and middle school called Atse Libane Dingle School located in the city of Addis Ababa Ethiopia at Gulele sub city, Woreda 4. The school is government funded and provides specialized educational and therapeutic services for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

The study enrolled 1,393 students in grades 1–8; some of them required specific therapy of ASD. The school established various therapeutic programs, training sessions, and events among parents, students in the community for dual purposes: in order to increase awareness of autism and reduce stigma associated with the disorder.

The school made a significant contribution to the city's efforts to assist the social and academic growth of children with ASD (Educate Ethiopia, 2025).

3.4 Sampling Technique

In this research, purposive sampling technique was used to select the locations that were most relevant to the research objectives, allowing for in-depth exploration of specific phenomena (Polit & Beck, 2014). Based on this sampling method Atse Libne Dingle Primary and Middle School in Addis Ababa is selected because the school is one of a key provider of services to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Moreover, participants were selected using the snowball sampling method, which involves identifying a few initial participants who then refer other potential participants who meet the same inclusion criteria (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017). The first parent of a student was helped the researcher to connect with additional parents of the students with ASD who had similar experiences related to their children's bullying. This approach was useful because it appropriate for the sensitive nature of the topic and the need to build trust among participants. The process of data collection was continued until data saturation was reached, this is when no new themes or significant information emerged from subsequent interviews.

3.5 Participants of the study

The study involved eight participants this not pre identified it is when the data become saturated in the eighth participant. This outcome aligns with the scholarly understanding that data saturation can often be reached with smaller, specific groups in qualitative research when participants share similar experiences and the research topic is focused (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

3.6 Data Collection Instrument

Semi-structured interview used to collect data conducting with parents of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This instrument was designed to obtain in-depth insights into parents' experiences and perceptions regarding the bullying experiences of their children.

This interview guide was developed by the researcher after reviewing related literature, previous empirical studies on bullying and autism, and by consulting the research advisor and other professionals experienced in special needs education and psychology.

The open-ended questions were focused on key areas such as the student's background and diagnosis, types of bullying encountered, the student's emotional and behavioral reactions, and suggestions for improving institutional support. This kind of questions provides flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into emerging issues.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher first obtained an official letter of authorization from the School of Psychology at Addis Ababa University to conduct the study. Before beginning data collection, the researcher established trust with participants by clearly explaining the purpose of the study and securing their informed consent. With participants' approval, interviews were audio-recorded using a tape recorder. Each participant was also given the freedom to decide the time and place of the interview to ensure their comfort and convenience.

3.8 Data Analysis

The data analysis process started with verbatim transcription of all audio-recorded interviews, which were then translated from Amharic into English. This approach was helped to preserve the accuracy of participants' perspectives and experiences in their original context. The transcripts were subsequently

organized according to the main research questions, allowing for a coherent and structured exploration of the emerging themes.

After transcription, the data were imported into ATLAS.ti, which is a specialized software for qualitative analysis, it supported to efficient organization and coding of the extensive text material. The researcher carefully read through the transcripts, assigning initial codes to capture significant pieces of information relevant to the study's objectives. These codes were then continually refined and organized into hierarchical themes, reflecting broader patterns and key concepts that emerged from the data.

The coded data were further analyzed using ATLAS.ti's visualization features, such as tables and network diagrams, which highlighted the relationships between the identified themes. These visual tools aided in interpreting the data, identifying connections, and presenting the findings in a clear and organized way.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The study was involved students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families, therefore it needs to follow strict ethical guidelines. This study followed ethical rules to ensure that each participant's rights, privacy, safety, and dignity are respected. Before gathering data, participants were given clear details about the study's goals, methods, risks, and benefits. For all participants a written consent was given in Amharic, and they understood it completely. Participants were informed that they could leave the study at any time, throughout the study, researcher made sure to keep the participants' information private. All reports used pseudonym, and personal details were removed while writing them down.

The researcher kept the data safe on devices that were protected by passwords. Participants were assured that any information they shared would be used only for the study and would not be shared with anyone else. Talking about bullying is very sensitive for this reason the researcher used a kind and understanding approach to help reduce any emotional discomfort during the interviews. Participants were told that some topics might be upsetting, and they could choose to stop or leave the interview whenever they wanted. To make it more safe researcher provided information about psychological support services.

CHAPTER FOUR

STUDY FINDINGS

Chapter four presents the findings of this study based on the interviews conducted with eight parents of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) the students enrolled in Atse Libne Dingle School, Addis Ababa and it based on the parent's perspectives about the lived experience of bullying. The results are organized based on the thematic analysis according to the specific objectives of the study. Parents' narratives are used for the analysis, with key themes and sub-themes emerging from the data.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Participants and Their Children

The study involved eight parents of students, specifically adolescent and young adults diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) which are currently enrolled at Atse Libne Dingle School Therefore the parents themselves served as the study participants, demographic data were collected to describe their children with ASD, as reported by these parents. This method acknowledges that the direct informants were the parents, however the demographic profile focuses on the characteristics of the students living with ASD for contextual understanding.

Table 1 *Demographic Profile of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder as Reported by Parents*

Participant (parents of students with ASD)	**Parent's Sex**	**Student's Sex**	**Student's Age**
P1	Female	Female	15 years

P2	Female	Male	12 years
P3	Female	Male	15 years
P4	Male	Female	32 years
P5	Female	Male	36 years
P6	Female	Male	20 years
P7	Male	Male	26 years
P8	Female	Female	21 years

The demographic profiles shown in Table 1 indicated that the study involved eight parents and among this six are mothers and two are fathers of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD. Regarding to their sex five of them are males and the three are females and their ages is between 12 and 36 years. The above distribution indicates that the participants' children represented both adolescent and young adult age groups. The inclusion of both male and female students, as well as a wide age range, used to provide a diverse representation of individuals with ASD within the study context.

4.2 Common Bullying Experiences

Table 2 *Bullying Experiences of Children with ASD*

Theme	**Sub-themes**	**Description**	**Participant Quote**
Bullying Experiences of Children with ASD	**Verbal Bullying (Mockery and Jokes)**	Students with ASD were ridiculed, laughed at, or called foolish names by others, damaging their self-esteem.	*"Others joking on her, looking her as foolish."* (P4)
	Emotional Rejection	Parents described that there are lack of affection or refusal to engage with the student by	*"She wasn't bullied by community but she was bullied by her father… he didn't show love for her."*

		family members or peers.	(P8)
	Physical Bullying	Direct physical aggression, such as pushing or hitting by peers, creating fear and aggression in the student.	*"She was pushed by classmates who laughed at her difference."* (P3)
	Institutional Exclusion	Schools and service providers denied enrollment or neglected treatment, reinforcing stigma.	*"Many schools were not accepting her as a normal student… finally I got a chance here in Atse Libne Dingle School."* (P8)
	Social Isolation	Students were ignored or excluded from play and group activities, leaving them without peers.	*"She didn't play with others… she didn't engage with others."* (P8)

Theme 1 Bullying Experiences of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

The interview with parents provided a depth information of their children's experiences with various forms of bullying, which affected their feelings and social relationships. Parents more repeatedly described that their children's were being bullied, excluded, and misunderstood. For example, one of the parents described this general theme by stating: "They treat him differently because he is not like others. Sometimes they laugh, sometimes they ignore him; it hurts me to see that" (P2). This sense of unfair treatment is the overarching theme of Bullying Experiences of Students with ASD and includes related sub-themes, described below.

Sub- Theme 1 Verbal Bullying (Mockery and Jokes)

Numerous parents were reported that their children were faced a challenges of mocking like giving insulting names by others. This made the students to feel self-conscious and unwanted by others. Participant one (P4) was explained this, "Others joking on her, looking her as foolish". Also another

participant described that people laughed at how their child spoke or behaved, turning their differences into a source of entertainment or they are using them as an enjoyment. These frequent verbal insults deeply hurt the children and made them reluctant to engage with peers in playing or other activities.

Sub-Theme 2 Emotional Rejection

Based on the reports of some parents their children experienced rejection within their own families not only from peers. They explained how their parent's relatives refused to show affection or avoided interacting with their child for example one parent said that, "She wasn't bullied by the community but she was bullied by her father… he didn't show love for her" (P8). Such emotional neglect caused the children to feel unloved and disconnected from those around them which was warmly affected their emotion.

Sub-Theme 3 Physical Bullying

Regarding to physical bullying some Parents shared incidents of physical aggression directed toward their children. These aggressions consist of pushing, hitting, and other forms of physical harm. Participant 3 (P3) reported that, "She was pushed by classmates who laughed at her difference". These experiences caused fear in the children and made them to be anxious in social environments especially at school.

Sub-Theme 4 Institutional Exclusion

Participant (8) stated that "Many schools were not accepting her as a normal student… finally I got a chance here in Atse Libne Dingle School" This report shows that a number of parents experienced a frustration that their children were sometimes rejected by institutions meant to support them.

Schools and service providers often refused to admit or adequately assist children with ASD. This finally created a challenges for parents to be stayed at home with their child and it also created additional emotional problem on their children they thought as unloved and unwanted by others.

Sub-Theme 5 Social Isolation

Many Parents frequently described that their children were being left out of social activities or friendships. They shared that their children were often ignored during play or classroom interactions. For example, one participant8) reported that, "*She didn't play and engage with others*". Another participant (P3) also described that her child stayed alone most of the time because peers avoided her and not engaging with them. This consistent isolation left the children feeling lonely and detached from their social surroundings.

4.3 Student's responses

Table 3 *Student's Responses for Bullying Experience*

Theme	Sub-themes	Description	Participant Quote
Student's Responses to Bullying	Emotional distress	Students reacted with crying, sadness, or withdrawal after experiencing bullying or rejection.	"She cries and becomes angry and she was always dejected after bullying." (P1)
	Aggressive behavior	Some students was responded by attacking others, throwing objects, biting, or colliding with walls.	"When he is bulled and excluded, he gets angry, hits the wall, and even attacks others." (P3)
	Withdrawal and silence	Bullying led some students to withdraw themselves from activities like to stop eating, stop playing, or become silent.	"When bullied, he stops playing and becomes very quiet." (P7)

Theme 2 Students' Responses to Bullying

Based on the above reports from Parents their children's exhibited different emotional and behavioral reactions after being bullied. These responses reflected that students after experiencing rejection and mistreatment they get a deep emotional pain and confusion. As a parent (P6) said that, *"After they tease or reject him, he changes immediately; you can see it in his face and behavior"*. These indicates students responds for the bullying by separating them from activities, y showing aggressive behaviors and emotional distress

Sub-Theme 1 Emotional Distress

Some parents were observed that their children often became sad, cried frequently, or appeared emotionally drained after experiencing bullying. These emotional pain was observed in the children expressions and daily routines. One Participant (P1) stated, "She becomes angry and cries; she is always dejected after bullying". In addition, Parents explained that such experiences left their children feeling hopeless and vulnerable, often losing interest in previously enjoyed activities.

Sub-Theme 2 Aggressive Behavior

Several students were responded to bullying with aggression, either by attacking others or by physically expressing their frustration. Parents described that this aggression was not intentional harm but a reflection of their children's inability to manage strong emotions. For example, one parent reported that, "When he is excluded, he gets angry, hits the wall, and even attacks others" (P3). Also another participant (P3) mentioned that their child would throw objects or bite when overwhelmed, especially after being laughed at or ignored. These behaviors showed the emotional turmoil the children went through following bullying incidents.

Sub-Theme 3 Withdrawal and Silence

Some students respond by complete withdrawal from activities and engagements. Parents reported that their children would stop interacting, refuse to play, or become unusually quiet. One Participant reported that, *"When he bullied, he stops playing and becomes very quiet"* (P7). In addition, other participant (P1) described that their child often lost appetite or avoided communicating with anyone for hours after a bullying experience. This silence and social withdrawal reflected the children's effort to cope by retreating from the environment that caused them pain.

4.4 Effects on Psychological Well-being and Daily Life

Table 4 *The Effect of Bullying on Psychological Well-Being*

Theme	Sub-themes	Description	Participant Quote
Effects on Psychological Well-being and Daily Life	Loss of confidence and low morale	Students showed diminished self-esteem and parents reported broken morale due to stigma and bullying.	"*My morale is broken when someone jokes on her and calls her foolish*." (P4)
	Disrupted daily functioning	Student's ability to eat, play, or manage emotions was disrupted by bullying.	"*He doesn't want to talk to others and refuses to eat after bullying*." (P5)
	Risk behaviors	In extreme cases, bullying led to self-harm or wandering away from home.	"*She couldn't control her emotions and once she ran away from home*." (P4)

Theme 3 Effects on Psychological Well-being and Daily Life

Parents explained how bullying had serious psychological and behavioral effects on their children, this influenced not only their emotional stability but also their everyday activities.

These effects were not limited to the children; parents themselves also expressed feelings of sadness, worry, and helplessness as they witnessed the suffering of their children. Based on the collected data one participant (P2) reflected this issue or the depth of this impact, saying, *"It affects all of us at home; when she is bullied, the whole family feels it"*. Based on these inputs the major theme of effects on Psychological well-being and daily Life, categorized in three interrelated sub-theme which are loss of confidence and low morale, disrupted daily functioning, and risk behaviors.

Sub-Theme 1 Loss of Confidence and Low Morale

According to loss of confidence and low morale many parents reported that their children's self-esteem decreased as a result of constant bullying. They explained that repeated bullying experiences like mockery and exclusion made the students to feel inferior and discouraged. One parent shared that, "*My morale is broken when someone jokes on her and calls her foolish*" (P4), expressing how both the child and parent felt emotionally affected. Therefore, many Parents observed that their children became more hesitant to join activities or communicate, often doubting their own abilities.

Sub-Theme 2 Disrupted Daily Functioning

The disruption of daily functioning is one of a visible impact on psychological wellbeing of students. Based on the parent's report bullying caused changes in eating, sleeping, and social behaviors of students. Some students refused to eat, avoided playing, or became detached from normal interactions. Related to these one parent reported, "He doesn't want to talk to others and refuses to eat after bullying" (P5). These behavioral changes affected the children's overall well-being and made daily treatment more difficult for parents.

Sub-Theme 3 Risk Behaviors

Risk behaviors were one of a problem in the psychological wellbeing of students. In extreme situations, bullying experiences led to more serious behaviors such as self-harm or running away from home. Parents were explained moments of fear and confusion when their children acted out of distress. As one participant parent reported that, *"She couldn't control her emotions and once she ran away from home"* (P4). These incidents showed how deeply the bullying experiences affected the emotional regulation and safety of students with ASD.

4.5 Exploring Bullying Experiences of Children with ASD

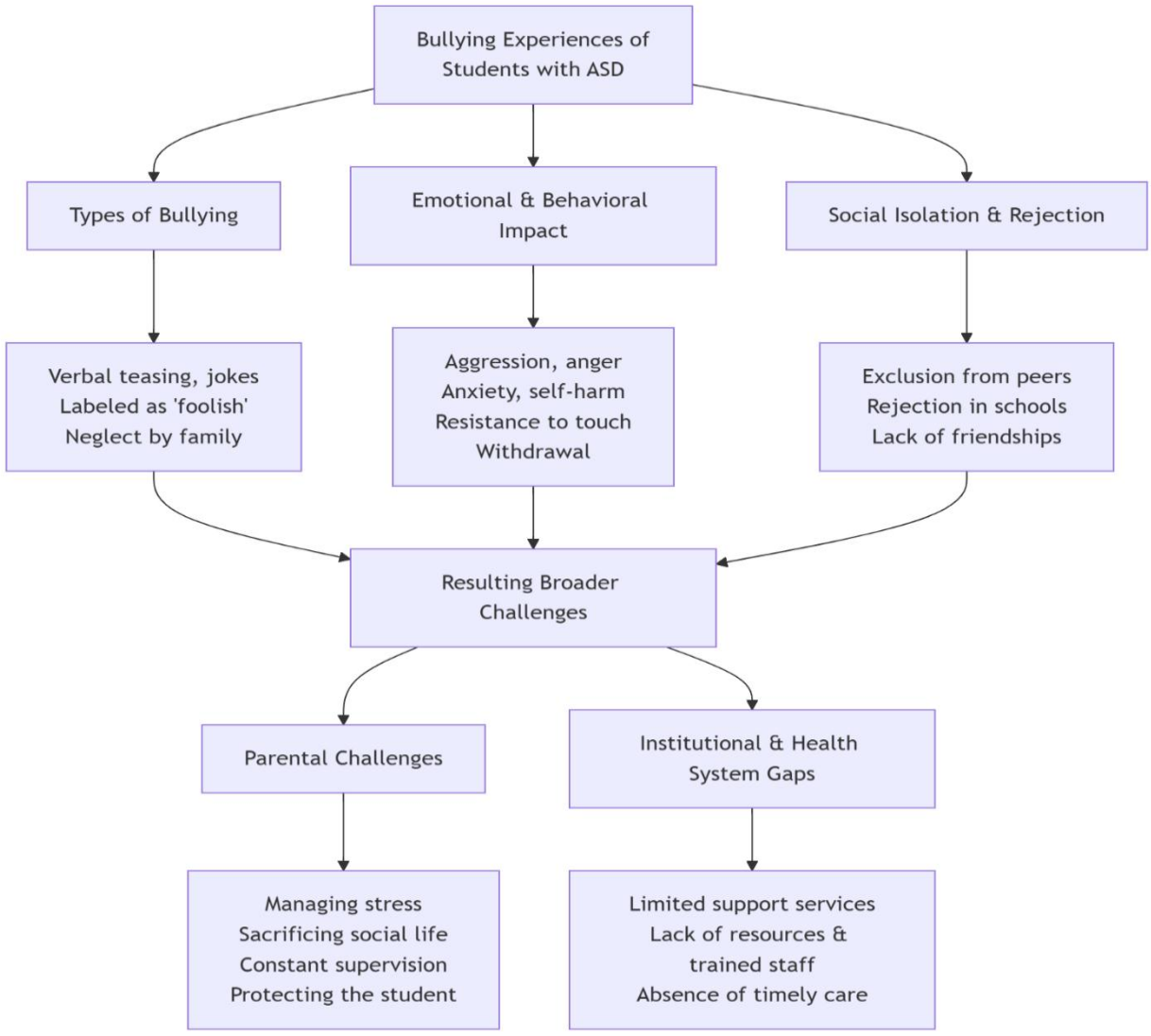


Figure 1: Flow Chart: Themes Arising from the Study on Bullying Experience of Students with ASD

This flow chart visually maps out the interconnected cycle of bullying experienced by students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It shows that bullying is not a solitary event but a major problem that brings about a lot of negative results.

The chart shows the direct effects of bullying such as verbal and emotional abuse, and social isolation that severely impacts the students with ASD personally causing them to have anxiety, to act aggressively towards others, and to emotionally withdraw. These personal struggles combined with social rejections then create a ripple effect overwhelming parents. This also expresses the critical need for a better health system and institutional help.

CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

This chapter outline the study's findings which are the bullying experiences of the Addis Ababa Atse Libne Dingel's students with ASD in reference to their parent's testimonies. All the findings were compiled based on the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis.

5.1 Common Bullying Experiences

The study results showed that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at Atse Libne Dingle School experienced different forms of bullying which were affected their emotional, social and daily lives. Parents frequently explained that their children's were encountered verbal, emotional, social and physical bullying and these experiences ranged from being mocked to being rejected, physical harmed or denied acceptance in school settings. Such kind of repeated mistreatments not only harmed children's sense of belonging but also disrupted their confidence and their daily functioning. Therefore, the frequency of these experiences indicates the vulnerability of students with ASD to multiple forms of bullying and the need for understanding the impact of each type

5.1.1 Verbal Bullying (Mockery and Jokes)

Based on the parent reports bulling was the one of the most frequent and upsetting experience. Children were often labeled with derogatory names, mocked, or laughed at by peers and neighbors because of their differences in behavior or communication. Also Parents explained how these repeated insults and jokes caused their children to feel humiliated and resulted to socially withdrawn. This constant mockery reduced their confidence and made them avoid interaction with others, by reinforcing their sense of exclusion. These experiences align with the findings of

Humphrey and Hebron (2015), who noted that verbal victimization is one of the most prevalent forms of bullying among students with ASD, often resulting in emotional distress and reduced self-esteem. Finally, parents in this study reported that their children's sensitivity to negative comments intensified the psychological harm caused by verbal bullying, making it one of the most painful forms of abuse they faced.

5.1.2 Emotional Rejection

Another type of bullying observed in the study was emotional rejection, this was occurred both within families and the community. Parents reported that sometimes bullying comes from the family members for example one of the father from the participant family was showed a lack of affection and refused to engage with his children due to misunderstanding or stigma surrounding autism. Moreover, this rejection extended to social environments, where neighbors or peers avoided interacting with the children, further deepening their isolation. Therefore, the absence of emotional support from those closest to family and community created a strong sense of loneliness and reinforced feelings in the students and leads them to think being different. These findings mirror the results of Little, Hays, and Hebron (2017), who emphasized that emotional neglect within families exacerbates the psychological difficulties of children with ASD. In line with what the parents shared, this study found that emotional rejection makes children more vulnerable for social isolation and damage their abilities to trust others.

5.1.3 Physical Bullying

The study also found that physical bullying was a serious and recurring problem experienced by students with ASD. Parents reported that their children were pushed, hit, or physically intimidated by classmates, often accompanied by laughter or mocking. These kinds of aggressive was caused fear and sometimes led to reactive behaviors such as anger or self-harm. The parents noted that their

children became more anxious in social settings, particularly in school. This finding is supported by the work of Hebron and Humphrey (2014), who found that children with ASD face significantly higher rates of physical victimization compared to their typically developing peers. Therefore, both studies show that physical bulling continues to be a major sources of distress for students with ASD.

5.1.4 Institutional Exclusion

Institutional exclusion was another issue which is identified by the study, it was one of a broader barrier faced by students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in both educational and healthcare settings. Most Parents were reported a presence of repeated experiences of their children being denied school admission or receiving minimal attention from teachers and administrators. Some schools explicitly refused enrollment, while others accepted the students but failed to provide adequate learning or therapeutic support. These problems not only affect the students in limiting educational opportunities it contributes to more social stigma and bullying. Parents often had to move from one institution to another in search of acceptance, which caused frustration and emotional exhaustion. This finding of institutional exclusion aligns with the finding of Koller and Bertilsdotter(2028) who emphasized that institutional barriers and inadequate support systems continue to prevent children with ASD from fully involving in the mainstream education.

5.1.5 Social Isolation

This study was also found that social isolation was a common and painful experience for students with ASD. According to parents report their children were repeatedly isolated from peer interactions, games and group activities, this resulted students in deep feeling of loneliness. Many students accepted staying alone because of this repeated rejection of their classmates. Parents expressed concern that their children’s social development was being hindered as they were unable

to build meaningful relationships. This finding is related to the observation of Roekel, Scholte, and Didden (2010), who reported that social exclusion significantly affects the emotional well-being and peer relationships of students with ASD. Based on this study conclusion this study has similar observation which indicates that the inability to participate fully in social settings leaves students isolated and disconnected from their school community. The repeated experiences of exclusion thus became a defining aspect of the children's school life, shaping how they interacted with others and viewed themselves in relation to their peers.

5.2 Student's Responses to Bullying

Parents described that students with ASD faced challenging bullying experiences that was exhibited on their emotional and behavioral reactions. These findings shows the complex psychological and social barriers encountered by the students. The sub-themes listed below feature the prevalent patterns of emotional distress, aggression, and withdrawal faced by the students.

5.2.1 Emotional Distress

Emotional distress exhibited by the students with ASD through crying, sadness, and signs of dejection. The bad psychological impact of victimization demonstrated the emotional pain that the students' experience, consistent with the findings of van Roekel et al. (2010) that showed the extreme levels of emotional distress in bullied children with ASD. Continued exposure to such bullying experience led the children with ASD to long-term mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (Cappadocia et al., 2012).

5.2.2 Aggressive Behavior

The response to exclusion and provocation reflected through Aggressive behaviors by some of the students with ASD, which include throwing objects, hitting others, or colliding with walls. This defensive aggression behavioral patterns of students with ASD when facing overwhelming social

stress coincide with established research. A study by Schroeder et al. (2014) identified social threats and frustration from peer rejection are key factors of reactive aggression.

Aggression represent dysfunctional preliminary communication tool for showing distress or attempting to self-protect in aversive social environments, comparably such behaviors can be taken as a manifestation of impaired emotional regulation (Mazefsky et al., 2013).

5.2.3 Withdrawal and Silence

Withdrawal from social interactions, being quiet, stopping playing with others, and/or not being involved in activities are some of the responses students have to being bullied. The withdrawal triggers emotional overload and a desire to avoid further harm or rejection, as highlighted by Humphrey and Hebron (2015) in their study of social withdrawal among children with ASD who experienced victimization. These withdrawals can make the social isolation worse and it might make it hard for the students to develop their social skills.

5.2.4 The Experience Connection to Student's Responses

There are responses children with ASD have to being bullied such as emotional and behavioral. They internalize their emotion by withdrawing and by being quiet and externalize their behavior by becoming aggressive. These responses are not isolated occurrences but are critical perturbation signs that show their profound vulnerability. The responses also show the hard time the students have processing social complexities and emotional trauma which shows the main challenges of autism such as difficulties communicating with others and sensory sensitivities.

For example, a student can become silent or stop eating after being bullied which shows that the child is shutting down emotionally and if it is not addressed in a timely manner, it can lead to depression and chronic anxiety. Aggressive outbursts, often confused as a simple behavioral

problem, are a defensive mechanism to feelings of being afraid, to being frustrated for being mocked or made fun of, being excluded, or feeling that there is a lack of fairness. As such, acknowledging the triggers and specific functions that lead to these responses is the first step in reducing the intensity of the situation and making available immediate and compassionate support that shows the child's experience is validated instead of punishing the child for how they reacted to the situation.

5.3 Effects on Psychological Well-being and Daily Life

According to the study findings bullying had a significant effect on the emotion and daily functioning of children with ASD. These effects were diminished self-esteem, disrupted routines, and in some cases it resulted in high risk behaviors. Therefore, the following sub-themes are elaborated the broad consequences bullying has on the student's mental health and everyday life.

5.3.1 Loss of Confidence and Low Morale

Based on the Parents report the continuous bullying was resulted in a loss of confidence and low morale in their children. Persistent stigma and negative social interactions were negatively affected the students' self-esteem, making them feel less capable and valued. Furthermore, there are researches supports this finding for instance research by Sofronoff, Dark, and Stone (2011), highlighted that repeated victimization directly contributes to heightened anxiety and a marked decline in self-worth among youth with ASD, as they internalize negative social feedback.

5.3.2 Disrupted Daily Functioning

Student's daily routines and basic functioning were also affected by bullying these are eating, playing and engaging in social communications. Parents explained that their children's were refused to eat and excluded themselves from playing after being bullied, therefore this indicates that bullying interferes with normal development and wellbeing. This result is consistent with findings

by van Roekel et al. (2010), who emphasized that victimization negatively impacts everyday activities and behavioral regulation in students with ASD.

5.3.3 Risk Behaviors

In extreme cases, bullying led to risk behaviors such as self-harm or running away from home. The necessity for mental health support exhibited by serious emotional distress, this supports the findings from Adams, Taylor, and Duncan (2016), the undeviating response to the unbearable psychological distress due to severe peer victimization are self-injurious behaviors and desertion.

5.3.4 The Experience Connection of Psychological and Daily Life Effects

Primarily, the bullying effects on the day-to-day life of students with ASD shows the disaster that stretches far beyond the schoolyard affecting their developmental path and their mental health.

The hurtful description of being “less than” was the result of the deep-rooted erosion of self-worth, insecurity, degraded moral, the collective effect of verbal abuse, social rejection, and institutional neglect. It shouldn’t be considered as a momentary hindrance but this will carry on into adulthood, triggering chronic anxiety and depression on individuals stranding them to be vulnerable.

The psychological distress disrupts the day-to-day life of the students with ASD, pushing them to become isolated and vulnerable, showing social withdrawal, refusal to eat, abandoning them to the vicious cycle of the effect, and becoming weak to manage emotions depriving the necessary routine structures that are very important for the students with ASD to feel secure and regulated.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

6.1 Summary of the Study

This research investigated the impact of bullying on the lives of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), framed from the perspective of the parents of students at Atse Libne Dingle School in Addis Ababa. Through a phenomenological research design, this study sought to understand the lived experience of parents of children with ASD that they were bullied, focusing on their perceptions, emotional responses to bullying, and effects they noticed on their children's psychological functioning and their day-to-day lives.

Demographic data in Table 1 indicates that there were eight participants - six mothers, and two fathers of students with ASD. Parents reported that their children with ASD were five males and three females, who ranged in age from 12 to 36 years. This age range indicates that the study included both adolescent and young adults. Overall, the study captured a variety of different students with ASD situated in the context of a school.

Demographic data in Table 1 indicates that there were eight participants' six mothers, and two fathers of students with ASD. Regarding to demography of students five males and three females who ranged in age from 12 to 36 years were participated in representation of their parents. This distribution indicates that the participants' children represented both adolescent and young adult age groups and the inclusion of both male and female students helped to provide a diverse representation of individuals with ASD within the study context.

The study findings showed that students experienced a range of different forms of bullying which are verbal insults, physical aggression, emotional abuse, and social rejection. Also the Participants

reported that these incidences of bullying manifested within the school environment as well as in the broader social context and affected the children and their families significantly.

Based on the reports of parent student's responses were varied depending on their coping abilities and personal characteristics some students were very distressed, whereas other children were able to cope and adapt and not let the bullying negatively affect them.

6.2 Conclusion

The study was explored the impact of bullying on students with Autism Spectrum Disorder(ASD) based on the perspectives of their parents at at Atse Libne Dingle School in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The research involved eight parents which includes six mothers and two fathers of students diagnosed with ASD, whose children ranged in age from 12 to 36 years. This demographic information helped the researcher understand how age and gender intersected with the experiences of bullying and its impact on the psychological and social lives of students with ASD.

The study employed qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool. This interviews were guided by questions developed by the researcher after reviewing related studies and consulting the research advisor and professionals in the field of special needs education. ATLAS ti software were used to analyze the collected data by using thematic analysis. Snowball sampling is used for selection of participants it was allowed to find parents who shared similar lived experiences.

The study findings showed that students with ASD faced multiple forms of bullying, such as verbal, emotional, physical, institutional abuse and social isolation. Parents reported that their children

were often mocked, laughed at, and called insulting names, this was lowered their confidence and increased their emotional distress. Emotional rejection was also evident, not only from peers but sometimes within families, including a lack of affection which was further deepened the children's sense of loneliness. Another form of bullying was a physical bullying, such as pushing and hitting, this was created fear and anxiety and also the institutional exclusion through denial of school admission or inadequate support highlighted systemic discrimination in students with ASD. Finally, social isolation was emerged as a recurring issue, where children were frequently excluded from play and group activities, resulting in loneliness and reduced social development.

This study also explored students' response to bullying, it showed that many students were reacted to emotional distress, by crying, being sadness, and withdrawal, while other students exhibited aggressive behaviors such as hitting, biting, or colliding with walls. Some students became completely silent or stopped engaging in daily activities after being bullied. These behaviors reflected the emotional burden that bullying imposed on their mental health.

Furthermore, the findings showed that the psychological well-being and daily functioning of both students and parents were deeply affected by this bullying experiences. In addition, parents described that they were faced experiences like broken morale, loss of confidence, and emotional exhaustion, while children displayed disrupted eating, playing, and sleeping patterns. In severe cases, students responded in the risky behaviors such as self-harm or running away from home, this indicated the far-reaching consequences of persistent bullying.

6.3 Recommendations

Based on the study findings the following recommendation points are suggested:

6.3.1 For Schools and Community Organizations

- Implement inclusive education programs and anti-bullying programs.
- Conduct awareness programs and workshops for teachers, students, and community members to promote empathy, acceptance, and respect for students with ASD.
- Encourage peer support initiatives that help students with ASD engage in classroom and play activities, reducing isolation and promoting friendship.
- Enhance effort to end bullying at a democratic social setting and a communal setting as an aspect of social entrepreneurship to create a safe and respectful environment.
- Provide counseling and emotional support services for students who have been bullied and for their parents, helping them cope with emotional distress and rebuild confidence. Set-up a system to support the effort.
- Zero-tolerance policy for bullying in schools, and announce the predetermined consequences of the bullying. Put a clear expectations and build a positive school culture.
- Strengthen school–community collaboration to create a safer and more supportive environment for children with ASD both inside and outside the classroom.

6.3.2 For Parents and Families

- Organize different parent networks where families can share experiences and coping strategies.
- Collaborate with schools and teachers to report bullying incidents and participate in finding solutions.

- Seek guidance from professionals and specialists when dealing with children's emotional or behavioral reactions to bullying, to strengthen resilience and adaptive coping.

6.4 Suggestions for Further Research

The success of particular intervention programs intended to lessen bullying of children with ASD in Ethiopian contexts may be investigated in future research. In addition to parents' view, expanding the research to explore the perspectives of peers, educators, and medical professionals, may help to see the broader systemic issues and inclusionary potential. Evidence-based interventions could also benefit from longitudinal studies that monitor the psychological and developmental consequences of bullying on students with ASD.

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Appendices

Interview Guide

Interview Questions for Parents

This interview guide is used to collect data from parents regarding the bullying experiences of students with ASD and their reactions in Atse Libne Dingle School Addis Ababa:

General Background

1. Could you please describe your child's background briefly, including age, autism diagnosis, and involvement with the autism centers in Addis Ababa?
2. Can you share specific instances or types of bullying your child has experienced in school, community?
3. How has your child responded or reacted to these bullying experiences emotionally, socially, or behaviorally?
4. Have you noticed changes in your child’s behavior or wellbeing due to bullying? If so, could you elaborate?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with your child’s bullying or your role as a parent?

የቃለ መጠይቅ መምሪያ

ይህ የመጠይቅ መምሪያ ለጆቻቸው ኡቲዝም ያለባቸው ወላጆች ለጆቻቸው ስለኡቲዝም ስለአላቸው ተሞክሮ እና ምላሽ በተመለከተ መረጃ ለመሰብሰብ የታልመ ነው፡፡

አጠቃላይ ዳሰሳ

1. የልጅዎን ዕድሜ፣ የኡቲዝም ምልክት ምርመራ እና ከአዲስ አበባ የኡቲዝም ማእከሎች ጋር ያለው ግንኙነት ጨምሮ የልጅዎን ዳሰሳ ባጭሩ መግለጽ ይችላሉ?

2. ልጅዎ በት/ቤት፣ በማህበረሰብ ወይም በሌሎች ቦታዎች የተጋለጡትን የተወሰኑ የመጠቃት ሁኔታዎች ማካፈል ይችላሉ?

3. ልጅዎ እነዚህን የመጠቃት ተሞክሮዎች በስሜት፣ በማህበራዊ ኑሮ ወይም በባህሪ ላይ እንዴት ምላሽ ሰጥቷል?

4. በመጠቃት ምክንያት በልጅዎ ባህሪ ወይም ደህንነት ላይ ለውጦች እንዳሉ አስተውለዋል? ካሉ፣ ማብራራት ይችላሉ?

5. ስለ ልጅዎ መጠቃት ተሞክሮ ወይም እንደ ወላጅ የእርስዎ ሚና ሌላ ማካፈል የሚፈልጉት ነገር አለ?