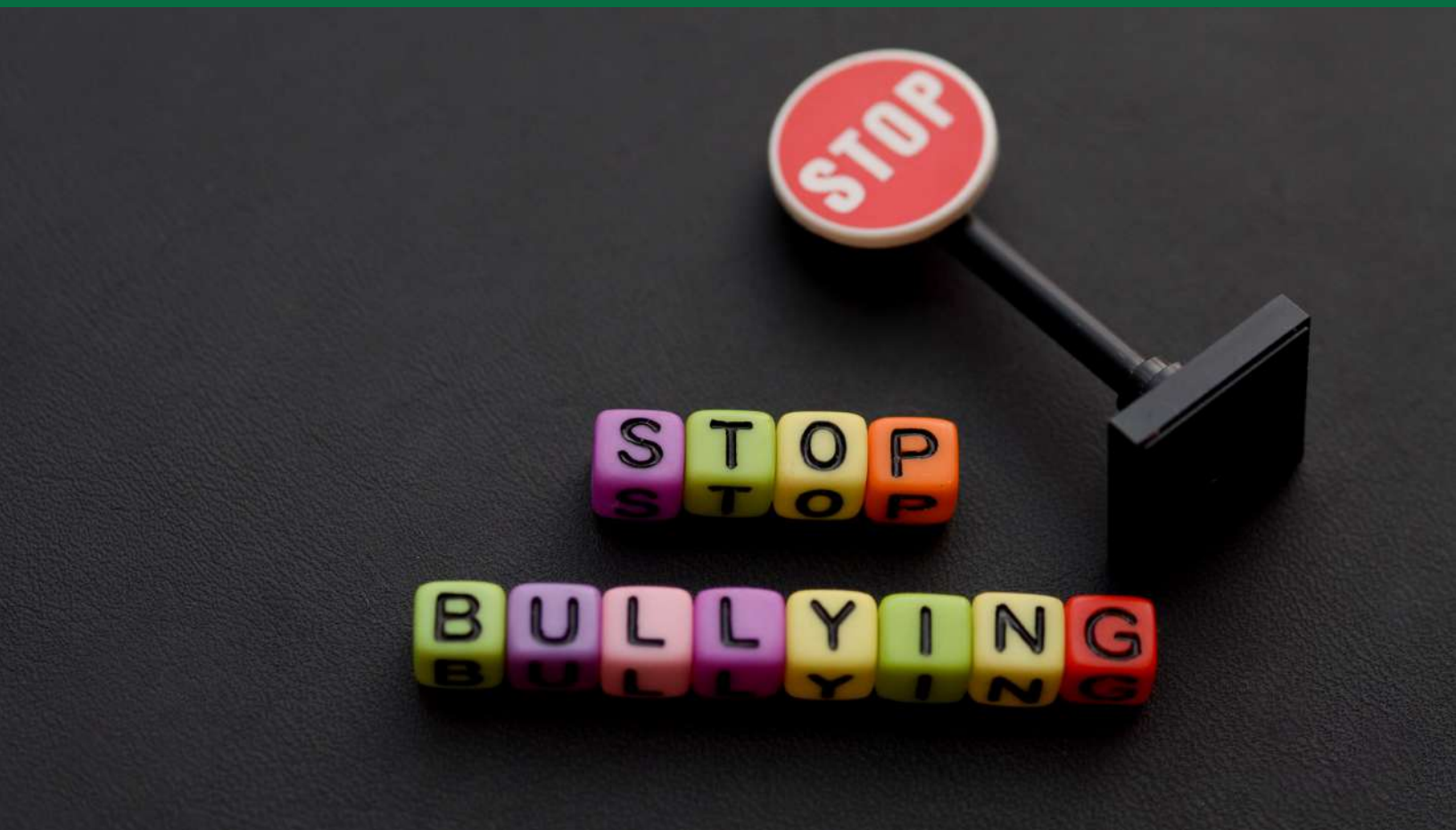
TeachME PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Addressing Bullying and Stigma for Students with Special Needs



Introduction

Bullying and stigma extend beyond discipline or school climate concerns; they can create significant barriers to learning, belonging, and equity, particularly for students with special needs. *Addressing Bullying and Stigma for Students with Special Needs* is designed to help educators recognize how bullying, bias, and exclusion uniquely affect students with disabilities and what they can do, every day, to change these experiences. Throughout this course, participants will explore how bullying and stigma show up in schools, from overt harassment to subtle microaggressions and social exclusion. Additionally, the ways ableism, implicit bias, and intersecting identities (such as race, disability, and language) shape students' opportunities, relationships, and self-perception will be examined. The course will also highlight the academic, social, and emotional impacts of bullying for students with special needs, emphasizing why this work not only encompasses best practice, but is also a matter of human rights and educational equity. Across the three sections, learners will move from understanding the problem, to recognizing the signs, to implementing practical, prevention-focused strategies. By the end of the course, educators will be better equipped to identify when students with special needs are at risk, interpret what their behavior and communication may be saying, and take concrete steps to build classrooms and school communities where every student feels safe, respected, and included.

Section 1: Understanding Bullying, Stigma, and Inclusion

Bullying and stigma are persistent challenges in schools, but for students with special needs, the consequences can be especially profound. While bullying affects all students, research shows that students with special needs are two to three times more likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers (National Bullying Prevention Center, 2025). In addition, bullying can cause greater harm for students with special needs, who may also be less likely to reach out for help or disclose their experiences (Special Needs Alliance, 2023). These experiences undermine well-being, disrupt learning, and create long-lasting barriers to inclusion. Yet, schools also have tremendous power to prevent these harms. When educators build awareness, examine their own assumptions, and implement inclusive practices, they can fundamentally shift the school environment. This section lays the foundation for understanding how bullying, stigma, bias, and exclusion intersect, the prevalence of bullying for students with special needs, and what that means for these students.

1.1 Defining Bullying and Stigmatizing Behaviors

Bullying is commonly understood as repeated, intentional behavior that involves an imbalance of power. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2024) defines bullying as “unwanted aggressive behavior… that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or highly likely to be repeated.” For students with special needs, this power imbalance can be amplified by communication differences, physical or cognitive disabilities, or a reliance on support services. Bullying takes many forms, including physical behaviors such as hitting, kicking, or tripping; verbal actions like name-calling, teasing, or verbal threats; and relational or social bullying, which involves

spreading rumors, excluding others from groups, or damaging peer relationships (CDC). Bullying may also involve damage to a student's personal property. In today's digital world, bullying increasingly occurs through electronic or cyber platforms, extending harm beyond the classroom and into students' online lives - typically this is referred to as cyberbullying. Importantly, a young person may experience bullying in different roles; they may be the perpetrator, the victim, or, in some cases, both (CDC). Understanding these varied forms helps educators recognize bullying early and respond appropriately.

Focusing only on overt or dramatic instances of bullying misses a broad set of behaviors that also cause harm. Subtle forms of exclusion - such as ignoring a student during group work, smirking when a student answers incorrectly, or excluding someone from lunch or recess play - can send powerful messages about belonging. These behaviors fall under concepts such as microaggressions, social exclusion, and implicit bias, all of which may not meet traditional definitions of bullying but still shape students' experiences.

Microaggression

Microaggressions are brief, often unintentional comments or actions that convey derogatory or dismissive messages toward a marginalized group (disAbility Law Center of Virginia, 2023). There are three primary types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinvalidations, and microinsults (disAbility Law Center of Virginia). Microassaults are deliberate and intentional acts meant to cause harm, such as using insulting language, telling offensive jokes, or openly mocking a person. Microinvalidations occur when someone dismisses, minimizes, or discredits the lived experiences of a person. This often happens when individuals compare their own experiences in a way that undermines the reality of the student's challenges. Microinsults are subtle but hurtful comments that convey disrespect or stereotypes about a person's identity, such as expressing surprise at

a student's intelligence or communication skills because of a disability - implying that such abilities are unexpected (disAbility Law Center of Virginia).

For individuals with special needs, microaggressions function as a form of ableism, as they assign lower value to individuals with disabilities and reinforce harmful assumptions about their abilities (Lightner, 2024). Ableism refers to attitudes and behaviors that favor people without disabilities while devaluing those who have disabilities (Lightner). At its core, ableism assigns lower value to individuals with developmental, emotional, physical, or psychiatric disabilities, which can limit their opportunities and negatively influence decisions made by those who control access to supports, services, and educational resources (Lightner). Ableism also appears when the legitimate needs of students with disabilities are minimized or dismissed. This may include questioning the necessity of mobility devices, assistive technology, interpreters, medication, or frequent medical appointments (Lightner).

According to Lightner (2024), microaggressions toward students with disabilities are common in schools and often occur through everyday actions, language, and assumptions. In classroom settings, microaggressions often take the form of denying adequate processing time for students who speak slowly, interrupting students who stutter, or using baby talk or an exaggerated tone with students who do not need it (Lightner). Other harmful behaviors include assuming a student is automatically on a life skills track rather than a diploma track, presuming incompetence instead of presuming competence, or failing to offer activities and materials that reflect age-appropriate interests. Students may also experience microaggressions when educators dismiss bullying, minimize medical needs, or assume that visible disabilities mean a student lacks academic ability (Lightner). In IEP meetings, microaggressions may appear when students are excluded from participating because adults assume they cannot contribute, when staff are unprepared to accommodate a student's physical or communication needs, or

when professionals speak about students as if they are not present. Speaking only to parents instead of directly to the student also sends the message that the student's voice does not matter (Lightner).

School environments can further reinforce microaggressions through language and accessibility barriers. Examples include using outdated or victim-based language such as "suffers from" or "confined to a wheelchair," excluding students from group activities or photos because spaces are not accessible, and portraying students or families as objects of pity rather than capable partners in education (Lightner, 2024). Even well-intended comments such as calling a student "inspiring" simply for attending school, offering unsolicited medical advice, or engaging in toxic positivity can reinforce ableist beliefs. Over time, these repeated messages can damage students' self-confidence, sense of belonging, and trust in the school system (Lightner). Recognizing and addressing these microaggressions is a critical step toward building genuinely inclusive and respectful learning environments.

Social Exclusion

According to research highlighted by University of Missouri, social exclusion, also known as relational aggression, is one of the most common and damaging forms of bullying (Consiglio, 2022). This type of bullying involves intentionally leaving peers out of group activities, spreading rumors, and damaging social relationships. Chad Rose, associate professor and director of the Mizzou Ed Bully Prevention Lab, explains that the emotional and psychological harm caused by being socially excluded can be just as serious as the harm caused by repeated physical violence (Consiglio). Students who experience ongoing exclusion often suffer significant short-term and long-term consequences, including problems with self-esteem, anxiety, school engagement, and peer relationships (Consiglio).

Differentiating Between Conflict and Bullying

It is also important to differentiate conflict from bullying. Conflict is a normal part of childhood; bullying is not. Conflict may involve peers who are equally matched and disagree over goals or priorities; bullying, however, involves power and repetition (National Bullying Prevention Center, 2025). Educators must understand these distinctions so that interventions address the correct issues. Finally, the intent vs. impact principle matters greatly in disability-related bullying. A peer may claim, “I didn’t mean it like that,” but the impact—shame, exclusion, harm—still affects the student. Recognizing that intent does not erase impact is a key mindset shift that educators must adopt (National Bullying Prevention Center).

1.2 Prevalence of Bullying for Students with Special Needs

Research summarized by Ručman and Šulc (2025) shows that students with disabilities experience disproportionately high rates of bullying across both special education and inclusive school settings. Studies consistently find that students in special education schools or programs are more likely to be involved in bullying in multiple roles, including as victims, perpetrators, or both, as well as in cyberbullying. However, even in inclusive general education environments, students with disabilities remain at significantly greater risk of being bullied and cyberbullied than their peers without disabilities (Ručman and Šulc). The likelihood of victimization also varies by type and visibility of disability. Students with visible physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities are at especially high risk, with large-scale analyses showing that adolescents with visible disabilities are bullied more often than those whose disabilities are not immediately apparent. Students with speech and language impairments, mobility differences, hearing or vision impairments, and those who use assistive devices are frequently targeted through name-calling, mimicking, and social ridicule. At the same time, research also indicates that non-physical disabilities, such as autism, learning disabilities,

and attention-related disorders, may place students at even greater risk of victimization than some physical disabilities (Ručman and Šulc).

Students' vulnerability to bullying is strongly shaped by social and environmental factors, including difficulties with social communication, challenges responding to provocation, experiences of social exclusion, and the absence of a strong peer support network (Ručman and Šulc, 2025). These factors make some students with disabilities more visible and more isolated, increasing their risk of being targeted. Youth with multiple disabilities face an even higher likelihood of victimization than those with a single disability. Together, these findings demonstrate that bullying of students with disabilities is not isolated to one setting or one type of disability. Rather, it is a widespread and systemic issue shaped by societal attitudes toward disability, visibility of difference, and the availability of peer and adult support (Ručman and Šulc).

1.3 Impact of Bullying and Stigma on Students with Special Needs

In addition to bullying, students with disabilities often experience stigma and discrimination that stem from deeply rooted negative beliefs about disability (UNICEF, n.d.). These attitudes are shaped by ableism, which values certain ways of looking, functioning, and behaving as superior while viewing disability as a deficit. As a result, students with special needs may be unfairly seen as needing to be "fixed," as less capable of meaningful participation, or as less deserving of attention and opportunity (UNICEF). These harmful assumptions can limit students' access to inclusive learning environments and reduce their sense of belonging and self-worth. For this reason, addressing bullying and the stigma and discrimination associated with it is not only an educational responsibility but also a fundamental human rights issue, essential to ensuring that all students are respected, valued, and supported in schools (UNICEF).

Academic Impacts

Bullying and associated stigma also directly affects students' experiences and outcomes in school. Research by Agena et al. (2021) found that biases held by both teachers and parents negatively influence the academic achievement of students with learning disabilities by shifting attention away from students' strengths and potential and toward their limitations. This pattern contributes not only to academic barriers but also to emotional distress. When students with learning disabilities begin to view themselves as incompetent, they are more likely to put forth less effort, which can lead to lower academic performance over time. This negative self-perception is often reinforced by the low expectations of adults, including teachers and parents (Shifier, 2013). As a result, stigma not only shapes how students are treated in school, but also how they see themselves as learners.

Social and Emotional Impacts

Research shows that bullying has serious and long-lasting emotional and social consequences for students, with especially severe effects for students with disabilities (Ručman and Šulc, 2025). Longitudinal studies indicate that involvement in bullying is linked to ongoing difficulties in social well-being well into adulthood, including higher risks of depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, psychosomatic symptoms, and challenges with personal development and social inclusion. Some students also engage in self-injurious behaviors following repeated victimization. Students with disabilities are doubly vulnerable because they face both a higher likelihood of being bullied and pre-existing social and educational barriers. This combination significantly increases their risk for negative mental health outcomes, making the emotional toll of bullying even more damaging (Ručman and Šulc). Research further shows that students with disabilities experience stronger negative effects from cyberbullying than their non-disabled peers, including heightened depression and reduced self-esteem. Overall,

bullying does not simply add temporary distress for students with special needs; it intensifies existing psychological and social challenges, deepens social inequality, and places students at greater long-term risk for emotional and mental health difficulties (Ručman and Šulc).

Research indicates that bullying can also influence some students with disabilities to become involved as perpetrators, although this outcome should never be viewed as inevitable (Ručman and Šulc, 2025). It is important for educators to move beyond the stereotype that being bullied automatically leads a student to bully others and instead examine the underlying factors that contribute to this behavior. Studies show that certain disabilities, including learning disorders, ADHD, and emotional, behavioral, and developmental disorders, are associated with a higher likelihood of bullying perpetration (Ručman and Šulc, 2025). This increased risk is often linked to challenges with social skills, difficulty interpreting social communication, and impulsivity, rather than malicious intent. In many cases, bullying behavior among students with disabilities may also reflect reactive aggression or a coping response to prior victimization. When students have repeatedly experienced bullying, they may act out as a way to regain control, protect themselves, or respond to perceived threats (Ručman and Šulc, 2025). These findings reinforce the importance of addressing both victimization and behavior support simultaneously. For educators, this means recognizing that when students with disabilities exhibit bullying behaviors, it is often a signal of unmet social-emotional needs, past trauma, or skill gaps, rather than simply a disciplinary issue (Ručman and Šulc, 2025). Effective intervention requires supportive, skill-building approaches rather than punishment alone.

Stigma associated with disabilities affects how students see themselves. Children who repeatedly receive messages of “you don’t belong” begin to believe it. Research summarized by Agena et al. (2021) demonstrates that stigma surrounding learning disabilities also has a significant and harmful impact on

students' emotional well-being. Even when students with learning disabilities achieve at the same academic level as their peers, they tend to experience poorer mental and emotional health in general education settings. Studies have shown that these students report lower levels of hope, reduced self-efficacy, and a less positive overall mood compared to classmates without learning disabilities (Agena et al.). Emotional factors such as self-efficacy are particularly important, as they strongly influence how much effort students invest in their learning (Agena et al.). When educators and families fail to recognize the emotional toll of stigma, it becomes a barrier to creating truly inclusive, supportive classrooms where students with learning disabilities can thrive both academically and emotionally.

The Role of Educators in Challenging Bullying and Associated Stigma

Schools are not neutral environments. Every classroom routine, hallway interaction, disciplinary decision, or word choice reinforces either inclusion or exclusion. Educators who model empathy, respect, and understanding play a critical role in reshaping student perceptions. Educators can actively push back against stigma through purposeful, daily practices. This includes leading with students' strengths rather than their challenges, using learning supports as tools for growth rather than symbols of limitation, and modeling that all learners benefit from supports (Butler, 2025). Educators are also encouraged to use respectful, person-first language, avoid rigid labels that limit opportunity, and intentionally teach students about empathy, neurodiversity, and the many ways people learn (Butler).

1.4 Bias, Stereotypes, and Misconceptions

Bias—particularly implicit bias—is a significant driver of bullying and stigma. Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence perception

and behavior (Wester, 2022). These biases can affect how educators interpret behaviors, assign tasks, respond to conflict, or set expectations.

Common Stereotypes About Students with Special Needs

Some frequent misconceptions include:

- Students with disabilities can't learn at high levels.
- They need constant help to succeed.
- They are disruptive or difficult.
- They should be separated from their peers.
- They don’t understand social norms.

These stereotypes create barriers that prevent students from fully participating in classroom life. They also shape peer attitudes, often unintentionally reinforcing exclusion.

How Implicit Bias Shapes Opportunities

Implicit bias can quietly but powerfully shape the opportunities students with disabilities receive in school. When expectations are lowered based on unconscious beliefs rather than students’ actual abilities, the effects can be far-reaching and long-lasting (Wester, 2022). These impacts include (Wester):

- Lowered teacher expectations before students have a meaningful chance to demonstrate their abilities
- Reduced access to challenging instruction and enrichment opportunities
- Decreased student confidence as students internalize the low expectations of trusted adults

- Lower self-efficacy, making students less likely to attempt challenging tasks or persist through difficulty
- Decreased motivation and effort, which can suppress academic growth over time
- A self-fulfilling cycle, in which lowered expectations lead to lower performance that appears to confirm the original bias
- Long-term inequities in opportunity, limiting future academic, career, and life outcomes

When implicit bias goes unrecognized, it can quietly undermine both achievement and emotional well-being. By becoming aware of these patterns and intentionally maintaining high expectations for all learners, educators can interrupt this cycle and create more equitable pathways to success.

Intersectionality: Multiple Identities, Multiple Biases

Students often hold more than one marginalized identity—such as disability + race, disability + gender, or disability + linguistic background. Intersectionality shapes the way students experience stigma. For instance, Black students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined, suspended, or placed in restrictive settings (Jordan, 2023). Understanding intersectionality helps educators recognize that experiences of bullying or exclusion may stem from multiple overlapping biases.

Section 1 Conclusion

Understanding bullying, stigma, microaggressions, social exclusion, and implicit bias is essential for creating truly inclusive learning environments for students with special needs. As this section has shown, harm is not limited to overt acts of

bullying. It is also reinforced through subtle behaviors, stereotypes, lowered expectations, and systemic attitudes that shape how students are treated and how they see themselves. These forces can affect students' academic performance, emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and long-term opportunities. By building awareness of these dynamics and reflecting on personal and institutional practices, educators take the first critical step toward disrupting harmful patterns and fostering school cultures rooted in dignity, equity, and inclusion. In the next section, educators will shift from understanding *what* bullying and exclusion look like to learning *how to recognize the signs*. Section 2 focuses on identifying both visible and subtle indicators of bullying and social isolation, including behaviors that are often overlooked but signal that a student may be struggling.

Section 1 Key Terms

Ableism - Attitudes, beliefs, and practices that favor people without disabilities while devaluing individuals with disabilities, often resulting in limited access to opportunities, supports, and inclusion.

Bias - A preference or prejudice, either conscious or unconscious, that influences perceptions, expectations, and actions toward individuals or groups.

Bully-Victim - A student who is both a target of bullying and a perpetrator of bullying.

Bullying - Repeated, intentional aggressive behavior involving a power imbalance that causes physical, emotional, social, or psychological harm.

Cyberbullying - Bullying that occurs through digital platforms such as social media, text messages, or online communication tools.

Disability Stigma - Negative beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions about individuals with disabilities that lead to discrimination, exclusion, and reduced opportunity.

Imbalance of Power - A core feature of bullying in which one individual has greater physical, social, psychological, or systemic power than another.

Implicit Bias - Unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect perceptions, expectations, and behavior without intentional awareness.

Inclusion - The practice of ensuring that all students, including those with special needs, are fully welcomed, supported, and able to participate meaningfully in all aspects of school life.

Intersectionality - The way multiple identities such as disability, race, gender, and language intersect to shape a student's experience of bias, stigma, or exclusion.

Microaggression - Brief, often subtle verbal or behavioral slights that communicate negative or dismissive messages toward a marginalized group.

Microassault - A type of microaggression that involves deliberate, intentional acts meant to harm, insult, or demean.

Microinvalidation - A type of microaggression that minimizes, dismisses, or discredits the lived experiences of individuals from marginalized groups.

Microinsult - A type of microaggression that conveys rudeness, insensitivity, or stereotypes about a person's identity or abilities.

Perpetrator - A person who engages in bullying behavior toward others.

Prevalence - The rate or frequency at which a behavior, such as bullying, occurs within a specific population.

Reactive Aggression - Aggressive behavior that occurs as a defensive or emotional response to perceived threat, provocation, or prior victimization.

Relational Aggression - A form of bullying that targets social relationships through exclusion, rumor-spreading, and manipulation of peer connections.

Self-Efficacy - The belief in one's own ability to succeed in tasks and challenges, which strongly influences motivation and effort.

Social Exclusion - The intentional isolation of a student from peer groups, activities, or social participation.

Stereotype - An oversimplified and generalized belief about a group of people that ignores individual differences.

Victimization - The experience of being targeted by bullying, harassment, or repeated harmful behavior.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. In what ways might subtle behaviors such as tone of voice, body language, or classroom routines unintentionally reinforce inclusion or exclusion for students with special needs?
2. Think about your own school setting. Where might bullying be most likely to occur outside of direct adult supervision, and how are those areas currently monitored?
3. What assumptions do you think educators, including yourself, may unconsciously hold about the academic or social abilities of students with special needs?
4. What personal or professional experiences have most shaped how you view bullying and stigma today?

5. After engaging with this section, what is one belief, assumption, or practice you feel challenged to reconsider in your own work?

Section 1 Activities

1. **Implicit Bias Self-Reflection Tool:** Locate and complete an online implicit bias self-reflection or assessment from a reputable source. Reflect in writing on any insights gained and how they may influence your expectations, interactions, or instructional decisions with students.
2. **Bullying Hotspot Map:** Create a visual map of your school and identify locations where bullying is most likely to occur based on student movement and supervision patterns.
3. **Microaggression Observation Log:** For one week, keep a confidential log of subtle interactions you observe that may reflect microaggressions, noting context and responses.
4. **Support Network Mapping:** Identify which students have strong peer or adult support networks and which may be socially isolated.
5. **Bias in Referral Data Review:** Examine your discipline or referral data for possible disproportionality related to disability, race, or behavior patterns.

Section 2: Recognizing the Signs of Bullying and Social Isolation

Recognizing bullying among students with special needs requires attention to both visible behaviors and subtle patterns that often go unnoticed. While some incidents are obvious, many harmful interactions occur quietly, especially for students who communicate differently or have difficulty expressing their needs.

Further, bullying does not always occur in places where teachers or school staff can easily observe it. Students report that bullying most frequently takes place in hallways and stairwells (43.4%) and classrooms (42.1%), locations that may appear supervised but often include unstructured moments such as transitions or independent work time; bullying also commonly occurs in the cafeteria (26.8%), outside on school grounds (21.9%), and online or through text messages (15.3%), extending beyond the physical classroom (KIT, 2022). Less visible locations such as bathrooms or locker rooms (12.1%) and the school bus (8%) further highlight how easily bullying can go unnoticed by adults (KIT). These findings underscore the importance of educator vigilance beyond formal instructional spaces and the need for schoolwide supervision, student reporting systems, and proactive monitoring across all school environments. This section explores how to recognize indicators of bullying, understand communication and behavioral signals, and elevate student voices to gain a clearer understanding of their experiences.

2.1 Visible Indicators of Bullying

Visible indicators of bullying are the most commonly recognized signs. Physical bullying includes physical aggression, name calling, insults, property destruction, and exclusion during observable social situations (CDC, 2024). Students may report feeling unsafe, express fear of a particular peer, or attempt to avoid certain areas of the school (StopBullying.gov, 2021). Some common visible indicators of bullying include (CDC):

- Frequent crying or emotional distress
- Unexplained bruises, scratches, or physical marks
- Damaged or missing personal items
- Observable teasing, mocking, or rude gestures from peers

Students with social communication differences may struggle to articulate what happened, and some may not label the experience as bullying even when it meets all criteria. This makes educator observation essential. Visible cyberbullying indicators also matter. Although younger children may have limited technology access, older elementary and secondary students often experience disability based harassment online. Signs include withdrawal from devices, anxiety when notifications appear, or sudden reluctance to participate in digital platforms used by the class (CDC).

2.2 Subtle and Overlooked Indicators

Signs of bullying are often subtle. They can involve exclusion from group work, patronizing comments, or social dynamics where a student is tolerated but not included. These forms of bullying do not leave physical evidence, and students may not report them due to fear, communication barriers, or previous negative responses from adults. However, there are some subtle changes educators can look for.

Changes in Behavior

For all children including students with special needs, bullying does not always appear as obvious conflict or direct confrontation. In many cases, it emerges through small but meaningful changes in a student's behavior, emotions, and academic engagement (Lavendar, 2024). Because these changes may develop gradually or resemble other challenges, they are often overlooked, particularly for students with special needs. Likewise, some of these behaviors can be perceived as defiance by the student. Parents and educators should be attentive to the following warning signs that may indicate a student is experiencing bullying (Birth Injury Justice Center):

- Uncharacteristic aggression or anger
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Increased withdrawal from peers or activities previously enjoyed
- Reluctance to attend school or participate in class
- Lack of interest in schoolwork
- Noticeable decline in academic performance
- Ongoing signs of anxiety or depression

Identifying these signs early allows educators and caregivers to intervene promptly. Effective response begins with open communication, careful observation, and a supportive approach that encourages students to share concerns without fear of judgment or retaliation.

Recognizing Bullying in Nonverbal Students and Students with Communication Differences

Identifying bullying is especially challenging for students with disabilities who are nonverbal or have limited communication abilities (Birth Injury Justice Center, 2024). These students may not be able to verbally describe distressing experiences, making behavioral and emotional observation essential. Instead of direct disclosure, warning signs may appear through shifts in mood, routines, or physical well-being. Nonverbal indicators that a student may be experiencing bullying include:

- Agitation or restlessness
- Avoidance of specific people or locations
- Sudden mood or behavior changes

- Decreased interest in preferred activities
- Increased anxiety or visible distress
- Resistance to going to school or participating in usual routines
- Abrupt changes in sleep or eating patterns
- The same physical indicators discussed above

Because these students cannot always advocate for themselves verbally, educators must rely on consistent monitoring, collaboration with families and support staff, and a deep understanding of each student's typical behavior (Birth Injury Justice Center, 2024). Creating alternative communication strategies, such as the use of visuals, gestures, picture systems, or assistive technology, provides students with essential tools to express concerns and share experiences safely (Birth Injury Justice Center). When students are supported in communicating in ways that work for them, they are better protected and more likely to receive timely help.

Social Withdrawal and Isolation

Social withdrawal is strongly associated with peer victimization (LRADAC, 2024). Students may begin distancing themselves from peers or avoiding social activities they previously enjoyed. A student who consistently participates in recess may suddenly prefer sitting alone. A student who once enjoyed group activities may show reluctance to join partners or teams. Social withdrawal is strongly associated with peer victimization. This withdrawal can reinforce further exclusion, creating a harmful cycle (LRADAC).

Changes in Academic Engagement

Bullying and exclusion often lead to the following academic changes (LRADAC, 2024; CDC; 2024:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Avoidance of class participation
- Decrease in quality of work
- Frequent visits to the nurse or counselor
- Requests to work alone even during group assignments

These signs are sometimes misinterpreted as academic struggles unrelated to the social environment. However, emotional safety significantly influences cognitive functioning and learning.

Section 2 Conclusion

Recognizing the signs of bullying and social isolation among students with special needs requires educators to look beyond obvious incidents and remain attentive to subtle shifts in behavior, communication, and academic engagement. As this section has shown, bullying can occur in hidden spaces, take non-physical forms, and present differently for students who communicate in diverse ways. Changes in mood, routines, peer interactions, and school performance are often early indicators that students may be struggling, even when they cannot verbalize what is happening. When these signs are overlooked or misinterpreted, students may continue to experience harm in silence. By strengthening observation skills, understanding disability-related communication differences, and responding with empathy and consistency, educators position themselves to intervene early and prevent further harm. Early recognition is not only key to stopping bullying, but

also to protecting students' emotional well-being, sense of safety, and access to learning. In the next section, educators will move from recognizing the signs of bullying to implementing proactive, inclusive strategies that reduce vulnerability and foster supportive classroom environments.

Section 2 Key Terms

Academic Engagement - A student's level of participation, attention, effort, and investment in learning activities and schoolwork.

Agitation - A state of heightened restlessness, irritability, or emotional distress that may signal anxiety or discomfort.

Avoidance Behavior - A pattern of deliberately staying away from specific people, places, or activities due to fear, stress, or negative experiences.

Behavioral Indicators - Observable changes in a student's actions or routines that may signal emotional distress or exposure to bullying.

Communication Barriers - Challenges that limit a student's ability to express thoughts, feelings, or experiences using typical verbal or written language.

Cyber Harassment - Harmful or threatening behavior directed at a student through digital platforms, messaging, or online tools.

Emotional Distress - A state of psychological discomfort that may include anxiety, sadness, fear, or withdrawal.

Masking - The act of hiding emotional distress, differences, or discomfort in order to fit in socially or avoid drawing attention.

Nonverbal Communication - The use of behavior, gestures, facial expressions, or alternative systems instead of spoken language to express meaning.

Peer Isolation - A condition in which a student lacks meaningful peer relationships or is routinely separated from social interaction.

Physical Indicators - Visible signs on a student's body or belongings that may result from bullying or aggressive behavior.

Psychosomatic Symptoms - Physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches that stem from emotional distress or anxiety.

Reporting Systems - Formal or informal methods that allow students to disclose bullying or safety concerns.

School Avoidance - Repeated reluctance or refusal to attend school due to fear, anxiety, or negative peer experiences.

Social Withdrawal - A pattern of disengaging from peers, activities, or group participation.

Supervision Gaps - Times or locations in which adult monitoring is limited, increasing the risk for unobserved bullying.

Victim Disclosure - When students reveal or report that they have experienced bullying.

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. What barriers might prevent students from reporting bullying in your school, even when reporting systems exist?
2. Which of the subtle signs of bullying described in this section do you think are most likely to be overlooked in your school? Why?
3. What role does emotional safety play in your classroom decision-making and instructional planning?

4. What informal strategies do you currently use to “check in” on students’ emotional well-being, and how effective do you believe those strategies are?

5. If students were asked where bullying is most likely to occur in your school, do you think their answers would match adult perceptions? Why or why not?

Section 2 Activities

1. **Transition Time Observation:** Observe one transition period (arrival, lunch, recess, dismissal) and document student interactions and supervision coverage.

2. **Student Check-In System Design:** Create a daily or weekly emotional check-in routine that allows students to share how they are feeling in a low-pressure way.

3. **Family Communication Reflection:** Draft a sample message to families explaining subtle warning signs of bullying and how caregivers can share concerns with the school.

4. **Staff Collaboration Interview:** Interview a counselor, social worker, or administrator about how subtle bullying cases are typically identified and addressed.

5. **Peer Isolation Mapping:** Identify students who frequently work, eat, or move alone and reflect on what supports may strengthen their peer connections.

Section 3: Strategies for Anti-Bullying and Building Inclusive, Supportive Classrooms

Understanding bullying and stigma is only the first step. Lasting change occurs when educators intentionally implement strategies that foster empathy, inclusion, and safety within their classrooms and school communities. This section focuses on proactive, school-based approaches that reduce the risk of bullying while strengthening students' sense of belonging. By promoting empathy, establishing inclusive environments, and developing social skills and resilience, educators can create learning spaces where all students, especially those with special needs, feel respected, supported, and empowered to succeed.

3.1 Promoting Empathy and Understanding: Educating Students About Neurodiversity and Diverse Learning Needs

A particularly powerful anti-bullying strategy identified in research is educating peers about disabilities, which helps reduce misunderstanding and stigma (Ručman and Šulc, 2025). When peers better understand differences in learning, communication, or behavior, their attitudes toward students with disabilities become more positive and accepting. Importantly, studies show that peer knowledge about disabilities directly influences student perceptions and social acceptance. Increased awareness leads to stronger friendships, which serve as one of the most powerful protective factors against bullying. High-quality friendships not only help prevent victimization but also significantly buffer the negative emotional effects of bullying when it occurs. Supportive peer relationships reduce isolation, improve well-being, and increase students' ability to cope successfully with stress and adversity (Ručman and Šulc). For educators, this research reinforces that teaching empathy, neurodiversity, and diverse learning needs is not optional - it is preventive work. When classrooms

intentionally promote understanding, normalize differences, and build strong peer relationships, they reduce the likelihood of misinterpreting disability-related behaviors, strengthen natural support systems among students, and create school environments where difference is viewed as a strength rather than a liability.

3.2 Creating an Inclusive Environment

Language That Supports Dignity and Belonging

Creating a safe and inclusive environment begins with the language educators use every day. According to the Birth Injury Justice Center (2024), inclusive school climates are grounded in cultures that value diversity, dignity, and mutual respect. Language that affirms student identity, avoids labels, and emphasizes strengths over deficits helps students with special needs feel seen, respected, and valued. Inclusive language also sets the tone for peer interactions by signaling that differences are expected and respected, not ridiculed or minimized (Birth Injury Justice Center). When educators consistently model respectful communication, students learn how to engage with one another in ways that promote belonging rather than exclusion.

Classroom Norms That Emphasize Respect and Collaboration

Inclusive classrooms are built through intentional norms and expectations. Schools should ensure all students, especially those with special needs, feel included in every aspect of school life (Birth Injury Justice Center, 2024). This includes setting clear expectations for kindness, collaboration, and accountability. Students learn appropriate behavior not only through instruction but through consistent modeling (KIT, 2022). Educators should actively demonstrate what respectful behavior looks like and clearly address what behaviors are not acceptable. Explicitly teaching students what bullying looks like and reinforcing

that it is never something they have to tolerate helps empower them to speak up. When students understand that bullying is wrong and that adults will respond, they are more likely to report harmful behaviors and support their peers (KIT). Encouraging students to reach out to teachers, counselors, or other trusted adults strengthens the collective responsibility for safety and inclusion.

It is also essential that schools provide multiple, accessible ways for students to communicate concerns, particularly for students with diverse communication needs (Birth Injury Justice Center, 2024). Some students may rely on alternative or augmentative communication methods, while others may feel anxious or unsafe approaching an adult face-to-face. Offering multi-modal communication methods, such as devices or visuals, as well as private reporting options, such as anonymous or semi-anonymous online forms, Google Forms, digital reporting tools, or designated safe reporting systems, gives students additional, low-barrier ways to seek help (Birth Injury Justice Center). When students know they can communicate concerns in a way that feels safe and accessible to them, they are far more likely to report bullying and receive support.

Setting Up the Physical Environment to Reduce Exclusion

The physical layout of a classroom also plays a powerful role in inclusion. The Birth Injury Justice Center (2024) highlights the importance of ensuring that students with special needs feel welcome and supported in all spaces, not just instructional areas. Classrooms should be arranged to allow ease of movement, access to materials, and flexible seating so that students with mobility, sensory, or processing needs can participate fully. Visual supports, quiet spaces, and clearly defined work areas further reduce barriers to participation (Birth Injury Justice Center). When the physical environment is thoughtfully designed, it communicates that every student belongs and has equal access to learning.

Proactive Planning for Transitions, Group Work, and Peer Activities

Many instances of bullying and exclusion occur during unstructured times, such as transitions, group projects, and peer-based activities. Prevention is most effective when schools engage in proactive planning rather than reactive discipline (Birth Injury Justice Center, 2024). Educators can reduce risk by intentionally assigning groups, teaching collaboration skills, providing structured roles in group work, and closely monitoring interactions. KIT (2022) further stresses the importance of clear communication about expectations during these moments. Students should know what respectful behavior looks like and understand that reporting concerns is encouraged and supported. Regular monitoring of student interactions, along with the presence of safe spaces where students can express concerns, strengthens schoolwide prevention efforts (Birth Injury Justice Center).

3.3 Developing Social Skills and Resilience

According to the Birth Injury Justice Center (2024), intentionally building social skills and resilience in students, especially those with special needs, is a proactive and protective approach to bullying prevention. Many students with disabilities face additional challenges in social communication, peer interaction, and self-advocacy, which can increase their vulnerability to bullying. Teaching these skills directly helps students navigate social situations with greater confidence and reduces the likelihood that they will be targeted or isolated. Effective programs that focus on social skill development, empathy, self-advocacy, and conflict resolution provide students with concrete tools for positive interaction (Birth Injury Justice Center). These skills include learning how to initiate and maintain conversations, interpret social cues, express needs appropriately, set boundaries, and seek help when needed. When students are explicitly taught how to manage conflict and advocate for themselves, they are better equipped to respond to challenging situations safely and constructively (Birth Injury Justice Center). The

Birth Injury Justice Center also emphasizes the role of resilience in helping students recover from negative experiences and build lasting emotional strength. Resilience supports students in processing setbacks, rebuilding confidence after peer conflict, and maintaining a sense of self-worth even in difficult social environments. For students with special needs, resilience-building is especially important because repeated experiences of stigma, exclusion, or misunderstanding can erode confidence over time.

Section 3 Conclusion

Building inclusive, supportive classrooms is one of the most powerful forms of bullying prevention. When educators intentionally teach empathy, model respectful behavior, design inclusive physical and social environments, and strengthen students' social skills and resilience, they address not only bullying behavior but also the conditions that allow it to arise. These strategies work together to reduce vulnerability, strengthen peer relationships, and promote confidence and self-worth among students with special needs. By embedding these practices into everyday instruction and school culture, educators move beyond responding to harm and toward creating learning environments rooted in dignity, connection, and shared responsibility for student well-being.

Section 3 Key Terms

Alternative Communication Methods - Nontraditional ways for students to express needs or concerns, such as visuals, devices, gestures, or digital tools.

Belonging - A student's sense of being accepted, valued, and included within the school and classroom community.

Collaboration Skills - Abilities that enable students to work effectively with others, including sharing ideas, listening, turn-taking, and joint problem-solving.

Conflict Resolution - The process of addressing and resolving disagreements in a constructive, respectful, and nonviolent way.

Empathy Instruction - Intentional teaching practices that help students understand and respect the feelings, experiences, and perspectives of others.

Flexible Seating - Classroom seating arrangements that allow students to choose positions or furniture that best support their physical, sensory, or learning needs.

High-Quality Friendships - Supportive peer relationships characterized by trust, mutual respect, and emotional connection that protect against bullying.

Inclusive Language - Communication that affirms student identity, avoids labels and deficit-based terms, and promotes dignity and respect.

Neurodiversity - The understanding that differences in brain function, learning, and behavior are natural variations of human diversity.

Peer Support Networks - Groups of peers who provide social, emotional, and practical support to one another.

Preventive Education - Proactive instruction aimed at reducing future harm by building awareness, skills, and positive attitudes.

Proactive Planning - Intentional preparation for transitions, group work, and unstructured time to reduce risk and promote positive interaction.

Protective Factors - Conditions or relationships that reduce a student's vulnerability to bullying and emotional harm.

Quiet Spaces - Designated areas in the classroom that provide sensory relief, emotional regulation, or a break from overstimulation.

Resilience - The ability to recover from stress, setbacks, or adversity while maintaining emotional strength and self-worth.

Self-Advocacy - A student's ability to express needs, set boundaries, and seek help independently.

Social Skill Development - Instruction focused on building communication, interaction, and relationship skills.

Strength-Based Language - Communication that emphasizes students' abilities, assets, and potential rather than limitations.

Structured Group Roles - Clearly defined responsibilities within group work that promote participation and reduce exclusion.

Universal Access - The design of environments and systems so that all students can participate without the need for special adaptation.

Section 3 Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on how neurodiversity is discussed in your school. Is it framed as a difference, a deficit, or a strength—and how does that framing affect student attitudes?
2. Reflect on your use of language in the classroom. Are there moments when well-intended comments might unintentionally reinforce deficit-based thinking?
3. Think about a student who struggles socially in your classroom. What protective factors currently exist for that student, and what additional supports could strengthen their peer connections?
4. If you could redesign one daily routine to reduce the risk of exclusion or bullying, which routine would you choose and why?

5. After reviewing this section, what is one inclusion-focused practice you feel confident in—and one area where you see a clear need for growth?

Section 3 Activities

1. **Peer Interaction Observation:** Conduct a 20–30 minute observation during group work or unstructured time and document examples of inclusion, exclusion, and peer support.
2. **Private Reporting Tool Creation:** Create or adapt a private digital reporting system (e.g., Google Form) for your classroom or grade level and test it for accessibility.
3. **Behavior vs. Skill Reflection:** Review two recent behavior incidents and analyze whether the issue stemmed from a skill deficit, emotional need, communication barrier, or willful misconduct.
4. **Empathy Integration Plan:** Design one lesson or activity that explicitly teaches empathy, neurodiversity, or diverse learning needs using age-appropriate materials.
5. **Grouping Practices Review:** Analyze how you assign groups across one week of instruction and reflect on patterns of inclusion, exclusion, or repeated isolation.

Course Conclusion

Addressing bullying and stigma for students with special needs requires more than a single program or policy - it requires a sustained commitment to seeing, supporting, and believing in every learner. Throughout this course, you have explored how bullying, microaggressions, and social exclusion intersect with

ableism and bias to create disproportionate harm for students with disabilities. You have also examined the deep academic, social, and emotional impacts of these experiences, and how they can follow students far beyond the classroom. You have learned to recognize both visible and subtle indicators of bullying and social isolation, including the ways these signs may look different for students who communicate or interact in diverse ways. Most importantly, you have engaged with practical strategies to prevent and respond to bullying: educating peers about neurodiversity, using language that affirms dignity and belonging, creating inclusive physical and social environments, and intentionally building students' social skills and resilience. As an educator, you are uniquely positioned to interrupt harmful patterns and foster cultures of safety and respect. Every choice—from the words you use, to the expectations you set, to how you respond when a student is struggling—can either reinforce stigma or promote inclusion. Moving forward, the challenge is to integrate these insights into daily practice: to notice who may be on the margins, to listen deeply to student voices, and to act consistently in ways that communicate, "You belong here."

Classroom Example

Ms. Ramirez teaches a fifth-grade inclusive classroom in a public school located in a suburban community. Her students come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and several receive special education services or use additional supports for learning, communication, or behavior. A strong advocate for inclusive education, Ms. Ramirez believes that every student deserves to feel safe, respected, and valued within their classroom community. Recently, her school adopted a new initiative focused on addressing bullying. The initiative encourages teachers to strengthen inclusive classroom practices, respond more consistently to bullying, and promote empathy and understanding among students.

Challenges

- **Recognizing Subtle Forms of Bullying and Exclusion:** Ms. Ramirez has noticed that bullying in her classroom rarely involves physical conflict. More often, it appears through subtle behaviors such as exclusion from group work, whispered comments, avoidance during partner activities, or selective ignoring at recess. Some students struggle to explain what is happening, making it difficult to determine when peer conflict crosses into bullying. Ms. Ramirez wants stronger systems for identifying and addressing these behaviors early, before they escalate.
- **Addressing Microaggressions and Ableist Language:** Despite her efforts to build an inclusive classroom culture, Ms. Ramirez occasionally hears comments like, “Why does he always get extra help?” or “She can’t do that.” She recognizes that these statements reflect underlying biases and microaggressions, but she finds it challenging to respond in ways that both correct misconceptions and foster empathy without singling out individual students.
- **Creating Safe and Accessible Reporting Systems:** Not all students feel comfortable approaching a teacher when something goes wrong. Some students experience anxiety, fear retaliation, or rely on alternative forms of communication. Ms. Ramirez wants to design multiple, accessible ways for students to report concerns so that every student has a safe way to communicate.
- **Supporting Social Skills and Emotional Regulation:** Several students in Ms. Ramirez’s class struggle with interpreting social cues, managing frustration, or resolving conflicts appropriately. She knows these skills are essential for preventing bullying, but integrating explicit instruction in social skills and resilience into an already full curriculum feels overwhelming at times.

- **Strengthening Peer Understanding of Neurodiversity:** Ms. Ramirez believes strongly in teaching students about different ways of learning, thinking, and communicating. However, she wants guidance on how to educate peers about neurodiversity in developmentally appropriate ways while still protecting student privacy and dignity.

Considerations for Support and Improvement

- How can Ms. Ramirez create classroom norms that actively prevent microaggressions and promote belonging for all students?
- What strategies could help her identify subtle signs of bullying more quickly and accurately?
- In what ways might Ms. Ramirez design private, accessible reporting systems so students feel safe sharing concerns?
- How can social skills and resilience instruction be embedded into daily classroom routines rather than taught only in isolated lessons?
- What professional learning or schoolwide supports could help staff respond consistently to bullying and stigma?
- How might collaboration with families, counselors, and special education staff strengthen prevention efforts across settings?
- What approaches could help peers become informed, compassionate allies to students with special needs?

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