Bullying from the Perspective
of Multigrade Classroom Teachers

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Abstract: Multigrade classrooms are classrooms where multiple grades are combined into a single class due to factors such as small numbers of students, teachers, or classrooms, and they are usually taught by one teacher. This study examined the opinions of primary school teachers with experience in multigrade classrooms regarding bullying. The teachers' opinions were examined within the categories of definitions of bullying behaviors, types and causes, coping strategies, effects, and preventive measures. The qualitative research method of multiple case studies was applied. The teacher group was selected from among a readily accessible sample, and semi-structured interview forms were administered. MAXQDA 2020 software was used to analyze the data and organize the findings. These findings showed that bullying behavior is generally exhibited by older and stronger students and that the presence of different age groups together also contributes to bullying behavior. It was concluded that age differences stood out in the definitions of bullying offered by teachers in multigrade classrooms, and verbal, physical, and social types of bullying were observed. It is recommended that courses on multigrade classrooms and bullying be added to primary teacher education programs, "Teaching in Multigrade Classrooms" be made a mandatory course, and issues related to bullying be included in the contents of that course to ensure the development of teachers in these areas.

Keywords: Multigrade classroom, bullying, primary school

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Introduction

The primary school years are considered the beginning of education and are crucial for the development of a student's social skills and personality. Providing quality education during this period will enable individuals to acquire new skills in a developing world (Yılmaz et al., 2021). However, possible problems that students may encounter at the primary education level can lead to larger problems in the long run. This is the stage at which basic concepts and attitudes are acquired (Özben, 2000). The Turkish Ministry of National Education (2019) aims to ensure that all male and female students of compulsory education age have access to education, prevent them from dropping out of school, and enable them to use their right to education in all aspects with its 2023 Education Vision Plan.

Program development studies are carried out to meet emerging needs, determine whether existing programs are insufficient, and offer new alternatives (Erişen, 1998). When conducting program development studies, it is also necessary to update the programs of education faculties that train classroom teachers according to changing needs. As with any profession, there are situations that negatively affect processes in the teaching profession. These include the multigrade classroom system and the problems that arise from the nature of that system. Similar practices are required in Türkiye's compulsory education system, which makes it important for teachers who teach in multigrade classrooms to have the competence to properly apply the curriculum. Teachers should be trained with professional knowledge to adapt to rural life and be able to work in village schools before they begin teaching (Akbaşlı & Pilten, 1999). Due to the insufficient implementation of multigrade classroom practices and internship studies in educational institutions, classroom teachers who are assigned to village schools immediately after entering the profession do not know what to do and cannot apply the theoretical knowledge that they have acquired. This leads to teachers becoming demotivated in the first years of their professional lives (Erdem et al., 2005).

In Türkiye, the primary teacher education program includes the course "Teaching in Multigrade Classrooms," where teachers may learn about the concept of multigrade classrooms through practical applications before entering the profession. However, this course, which used to be mandatory in the curriculum for education faculties, was removed from the program with the changes made by the Higher Education Council to the new teacher training undergraduate programs in 2018. The content of the old course was added to an elective course titled "Alternative Practices in Primary Schools" in education faculty programs with the new regulations. However, looking at the appointment conditions of primary teachers, it is seen that the majority are appointed to primary schools with multigrade classrooms in rural areas. Therefore, it is important for this course to be made mandatory again.

In the context of education, primary school is the first level of compulsory education, and it is typically attended by children between the ages of 6 and 12. The primary teacher education program is a degree program that prepares individuals to become

primary teachers, who are responsible for teaching a variety of subjects to students in primary school settings. Primary education is the level with the highest enrollment rate. At this level, however, a multigrade classroom system may be implemented, especially in rural areas with limited populations. The multigrade classroom system is applied by combining multiple classes into a single group and educating them together with one teacher (Akbaşlı & Pilten, 1999). The multigrade classroom system is not unique to Türkiye; it is implemented in many countries where there are not enough students in all settlements to fill all the classes of a school (Şahin et al., 2012). The main reasons for the emergence of the multigrade classroom system are low numbers of students, inadequate numbers of teachers, and inadequate numbers of classrooms (Köksal, 2005).

The number of students participating in classroom activities increases, and a collective work consciousness develops in multigrade classrooms (Tekışık & Mıhçı, 1962). Combining classes allows students of different ages, abilities, experiences, knowledge, and skills to be together in the same class and school community, providing opportunities for cooperation, the exchange of ideas, and learning from each other. Students develop self-study skills, and habits such as research and investigation are acquired.

As a result of the reasons that make the multigrade classroom system mandatory, there are both beneficial and harmful aspects to it. There are limitations, such as increased responsibilities for teachers, an increase in the time teachers spend preparing for classes, difficulties in achieving the goals set in primary education programs, and teachers not having sufficient equipment or receiving enough guidance (Köksal, 2005). The solutions to the problems encountered in multigrade classrooms are closely related to the provision of the necessary conditions and equipment. It is important to adjust primary school programs according to the realities of multigrade classrooms, but this alone is not enough. Suitable equipment and conditions must also be provided to solve the problems (Binbaşıoğlu, 1983). One of the negative situations that may arise among students in multigrade classrooms where different age groups receive education together is bullying behavior. Older students in multigrade classrooms may target younger students to establish dominance over them. The main reason for this is the age difference among the students (Rambaran, 2017).

Bullying occurs when a student is subjected to negative behaviors exhibited by one or more students at certain intervals (Olweus, 1993). For a behavior to be defined as bullying, there must be a power imbalance between the students, the behavior must occur repeatedly, and it must be done intentionally (Ertuğrul, 2019; Olweus, 1997). Multigrade classrooms, where students of different age groups learn together, may foster the emergence of bullying behaviors.

According to Olweus (1997), behaviors that can be defined as bullying include physical contact, verbal harassment, name-calling, the spreading of rumors, and exclusion from a group. Besag (1995) stated that bullying is a long-term behavior that

can be observed not only physically but also psychologically, verbally, and emotionally. While communication tools such as the internet, messaging services, and mobile phones make life easier for people, they can also lead to disturbing behaviors by some malicious users, reflected in harmful actions on the internet that are referred to as cyberbullying (Tamer & Vatanartıran, 2014). As seen in these definitions, bullying behaviors appear in different forms.

Students may be affected as bullies, victims, or witnesses of bullying behaviors. Students who have made a habit of exhibiting bullying behaviors are negatively affected to the same degree as students who are subjected to bullying (Olweus, 1993). Students who are subjected to bullying are often pushed out of peer groups and isolated. Other students who previously associated with students who are subjected to bullying behaviors may begin avoiding those students so as to not lose status or be subjected to bullying, which results in the further exclusion of bullied students (Pişkin, 2002). This also shows how witnesses of bullying behaviors are negatively affected.

Due to the small number of students in villages and the inability to assign a separate teacher for every classroom, the multigrade classroom system is necessary (Şahin et al., 2012). In multigrade classrooms where students from different age groups are together in classes, unwanted behaviors may occur. Older students in multigrade classrooms may target younger students, and age differences between students are among the most important reasons for bullying behaviors in multigrade classrooms (Rambaran, 2017). Therefore, it is important to identify bullying behaviors encountered in multigrade classrooms to ensure successful student development. The aim of the current study is to identify the definitions, types, and causes of bullying behaviors in multigrade classrooms, as well as ways of coping with bullying behaviors, the effects of bullying behaviors, and the precautions that can be taken, based on the opinions of teachers with multigrade classroom experience.

Method

This section includes information about the purpose of the study, the study group, the data collection tool, and the analysis of the data.

Design

The case study method as a qualitative research method was used in this study with a multiple-case design. Case studies can be used in both qualitative and quantitative research, with the aim of revealing results for specific situations. In a qualitative case study, a situation is examined in depth, and the ways in which factors involved in the research are affected by and affect that situation are observed (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In qualitative case studies, a situation is taken as a whole, with all its aspects, over a long period of time. In the present study, the types of bullying encountered in

multigrade classrooms, strategies for coping with those behaviors, and the effects of the behaviors were revealed, and the views of teachers were examined in depth.

Study Group

The study group for this research consisted of 25 primary school teachers who had experience teaching in multigrade classrooms and who worked in central and village schools affiliated with the Çankırı Provincial Directorate of National Education during the 2021-2022 academic year. The study group was selected using an easily accessible sampling method.

Data Collection Tool

The data for this study were obtained using a semi-structured interview form prepared in line with the opinions of two experts. While preparing the interview form, source scanning was conducted, and domestic and foreign books, articles, papers, and theses related to the topics of bullying and multigrade classrooms were examined. The semi-structured interview technique is more effective in obtaining detailed information compared to surveys. It can be applied to determine the interviewee's experiences, knowledge, reactions, and comments regarding the situation of interest and to obtain more detailed information.

Data Collection Process and Analysis

While preparing the semi-structured interview questions to collect the data for this study, the opinions of two experts were obtained. The interviews were recorded using a recording device and then transcribed. Content analysis was performed by examining the interviews conducted with the participants. The data were coded by two researchers, and the agreement between the coders was initially calculated at 72%. Based on the assumption that coding results above 80% are reliable (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the reliability consensus percentage was ensured to be 100% throughout the interviews and in the joint coding between the coders. MAXQDA 2020 software was used to analyze the data and organize the findings. Code-subcode modeling was used while coding the findings.

Validity and Reliability

Source scanning was conducted, and two experts were consulted while preparing the interview questions. Subsequently, a semi-structured interview form was created from the common questions. The study was described in detail at every stage of the research, as describing the process clearly contributes to the validity of the study. The careful selection of the research method and the statement of the reasons for that choice are validity measures that researchers need to focus on (Balat et al., 2019).

Credibility and Ethics

Ethics committee documents confirming that there was no harm in implementing this study were obtained from the Çankırı Karatekin University Ethics Committee (decision of meeting no. 20 on May 31, 2021) and the necessary permissions were obtained from the Çankırı Provincial Directorate of National Education. Interviews were conducted with volunteer teachers who gave their consent to participate. During the interviews, a recording device was used, and the interviews were transcribed afterwards. Sufficient time was allotted to increase the depth of the interactions. The interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes on average and were completed over the course of about 4 weeks. Participants were limited to teachers working in Çankırı Province who voluntarily agreed to be interviewed.

Findings

In this section, the descriptive analysis of the data obtained with the semi-structured interview form is described, and the findings and comments about the obtained results are presented.

Definition of Bullying by Multigrade Classroom Teachers

In this subsection, the definitions of bullying provided by teachers with experience in multigrade classrooms are examined. The participants' definitions of bullying were coded within categories of "who," "when," "where," "why (purpose)," and "what (action)" and appropriate subheadings were determined.

Figure 1.

Hierarchical Code-Subcode Model for Definitions of Bullying Encountered in Multigrade Classrooms
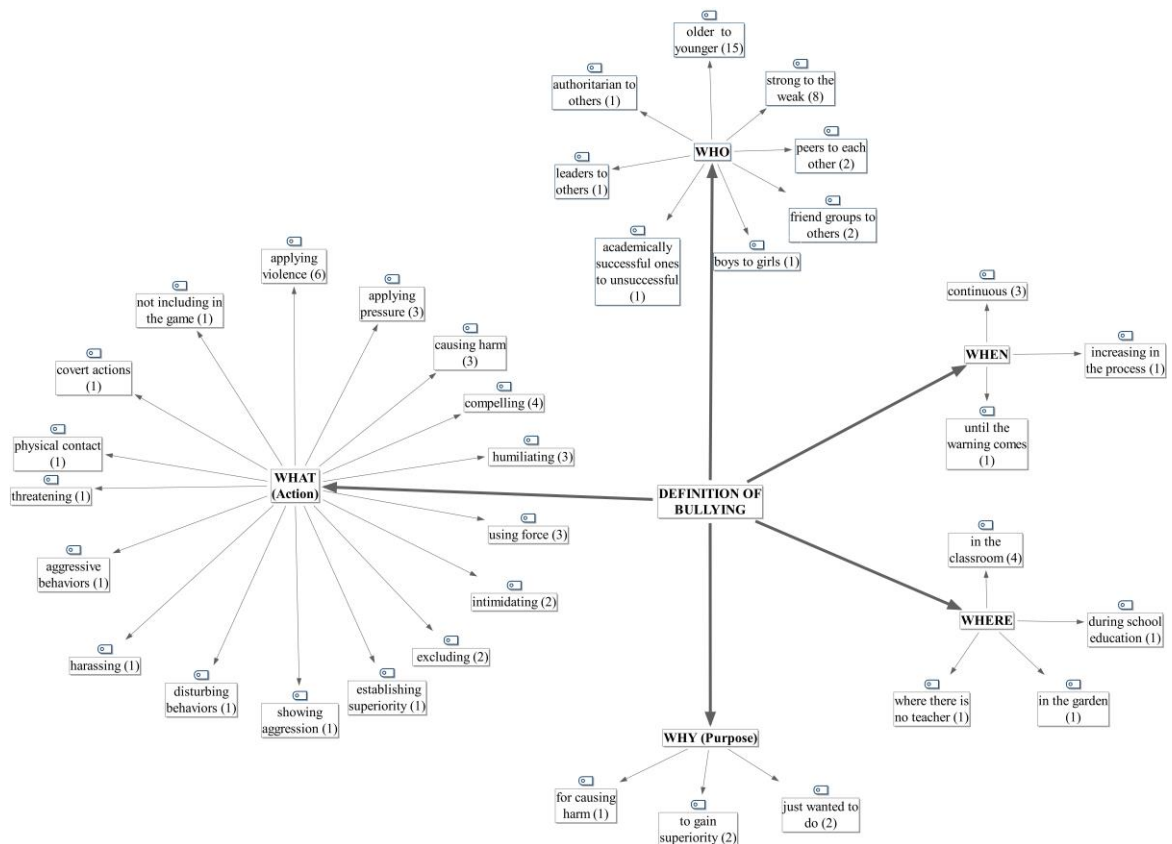
The definitions of bullying offered by the multigrade classroom teachers often involved older students bullying younger ones. For example:

> Bullying in a multigrade classroom is when older students use their power to mistreat younger ones (t25).

The second-most common definition involved stronger students bullying weaker ones. The interviewed teachers also stated that bullying behaviors are often persistent, increase over time, and continue until there is intervention. For example:

> It is when a child intends to harm those perceived as weaker, repeatedly… (t13).

The main reasons for bullying were stated to be "wanting something" and "trying to establish superiority." This reflects efforts to establish dominance among students of different age groups, leading to bullying behavior. Additionally, it was noted that these behaviors are intentional and, in some cases are intended to cause direct harm. For example:

> Bullying is when one person intentionally causes continuous harm to another through aggressive behavior, physical contact, words, or covert actions (t5).

> It is when children of similar age try to establish psychological and physical dominance over younger, weaker students (t20).

Multigrade classroom teachers indicated that bullying behavior is most often associated with physical violence. Additionally, bullying behaviors are often seen as involving coercion, harm, power, and dominance. As per the researchers' opinions, bullying behaviors are most often physical and psychological. For example:

> In my opinion, bullying is when a stronger person makes another do what they want through force, harassment, threats, or intimidation (t3).
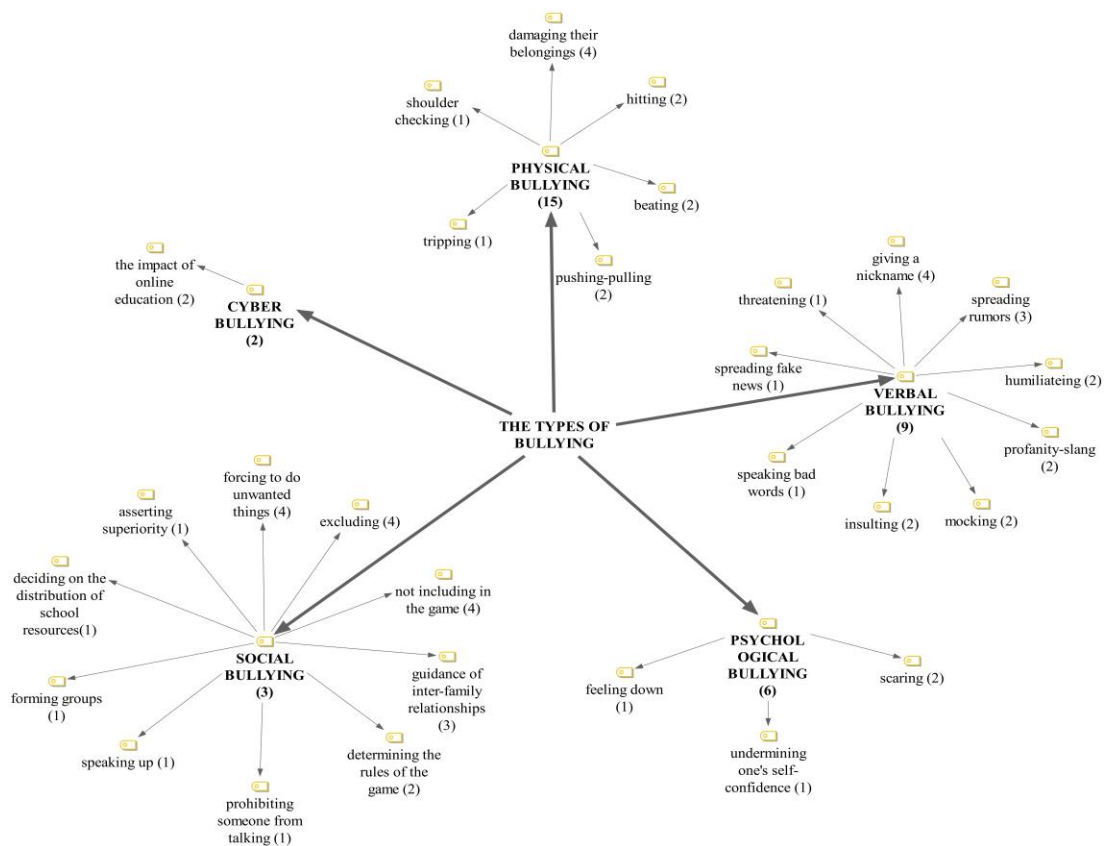
Additionally, it was noted that bullying behaviors are often persistent, increase over time, and continue until intervention occurs. Bullying behaviors are often seen in the classroom, but they can also occur on the playground or school gardens, during school hours, or in other places where teachers are not present. Multigrade classrooms are created by having students of different age groups learn together, which can lead to bullying behaviors due to the presence of students of different ages and strengths.

Types of Bullying Encountered in Multigrade Classrooms

In this subsection, the opinions of multigrade classroom teachers regarding types of bullying are examined. The views of the participants on types of bullying were coded within the subcategories of "physical bullying," "verbal bullying," "psychological bullying," "social bullying," and "cyberbullying", and appropriate subheadings were given for each subcategory.

Figure 2.

Hierarchical Code-Subcode Model of Types of Bullying Encountered in Multigrade Classrooms

In the category of physical bullying, the most common type of bullying was seen to be the damaging of objects. In addition, it was stated that bullying behaviors involving direct physical contact, such as hitting, punching, and pushing, are also frequently observed. For example:

> The most common one is brute force. Physically. It happens in the form of name-calling, humiliation, threatening, exclusion from games, and harming [other] children (t19).

In the category of verbal bullying, it was stated that the most common bullying behavior was giving nicknames, and spreading rumors was also a particularly common type of verbal bullying. Insulting, swearing, teasing, ridiculing, using derogatory language, spreading false news, and threatening behaviors were also included in the category of verbal bullying. For example:

> Usually, children give each other nicknames, don't want to include them in games or exclude them, and since the [multigrade] classrooms are generally in small places and villages, they can spread rumors. They make fun of them and damage their belongings. They can create a reaction against the child by influencing their friends (t13).

In the category of psychological bullying, behaviors intended to intimidate, reduce self-confidence, and undermine morale were included, and the most common psychological bullying behavior was intimidation. In the category of social bullying, the most common bullying behaviors encountered were said to be forcing others to do unwanted things, excluding others, and not including others in games. For example:

> … It was a sad situation, and it was psychological bullying… (t15).

According to the views of the participants, the least commonly encountered type of bullying in multigrade classrooms is cyberbullying. The participants stated that the reason for cyberbullying is the effect of distance education. Spending more time using communication tools such as computers, tablets, and phones during distance education may cause cyberbullying. For example:

> Physical and emotional bullying. Recently, cyberbullying has also been seen in online classes. Spending more time with computers and tablets causes young children to experience cyberbullying (t25).

Causes of Bullying Behavior in Multigrade Classrooms

In this section, the views of multigrade classroom teachers on the reasons for bullying behavior are examined. The views of the participant teachers on the causes of bullying behavior are coded into subcategories of "student relationships", "oneself", "family", "environment", and "school", and subheadings are provided.

Figure 3.

Hierarchical Code-Subcode Model for the Reasons of Bullying Behaviors in Multigrade Classrooms
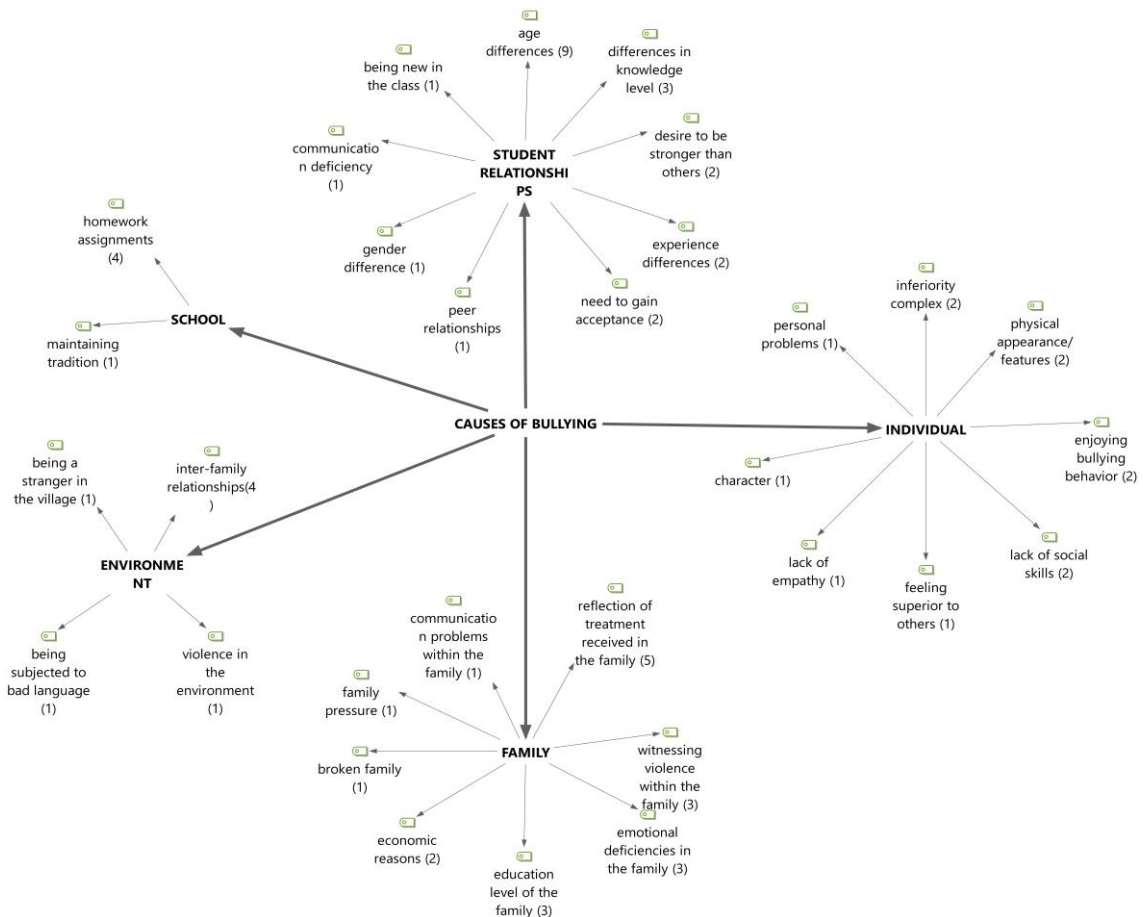
The age difference among students was considered to be the most significant factor in the emergence of bullying behaviors due to student-to-student relationships. Additionally, differences in knowledge levels, a desire for power and experience, and the desire to be accepted by other students were also described as causing bullying behaviors due to student-to-student relationships. For example:

> I think age difference... (t12).

> The presence of different grade levels together is the biggest factor. The confidence of students in the higher grade naturally increases due to being in the same class for four years. They are getting stronger. Different grade levels… (t3).

Students' feelings such as inferiority, a lack of social skills, and enjoyment of bullying behaviors are also seen as important factors in the emergence of bullying. For example:

> Children who are beaten down, have an inferiority complex, and are excluded from their families reflect what they see in their families (t22).

Another important reason for the bullying behaviors exhibited by students is the reflection of the treatment they see in their families. It can be said that experiencing violence in the family, emotional deficiencies within the family, and the education level of the family are potential causes of bullying behaviors originating in the family. For example:

> If students usually experience violence from their families, they try to apply it at school, as well. If they see someone younger than themselves at school, they try to crush them (t7).

However, the most important reason for students to exhibit bullying behaviors due to external factors was reported as problems in relationships between families. The problems experienced between families affect student-to-student relationships and may cause bullying behavior. For example:

> …sometimes there can be disputes between families, and what happens at home can be used against the weaker ones… (t14).

Students most often exhibit school-related bullying behaviors in relation to homework, and in this case, the teacher needs to provide sufficient assignments for students during class time reserved for such work. For example:

> In multigrade classrooms, an age difference is present among students. When teachers assign homework to students, some students can use other students… Assignments should be appropriate for students' age groups (t14).

Dealing with Bullying Behaviors in Multigrade Classrooms

In this section, the views of teachers with experience in multigrade classrooms on coping with bullying behaviors are examined. The participants' responses in this regard were coded within the subcategories of "actions to be taken," "what the teacher can do," "what can be done within the class," "what the school can do," and "what can be done with families" and appropriate subheadings were determined.

Figure 4.

Hierarchical Code-Subcode Model for Coping with Bullying in Multigrade Classrooms
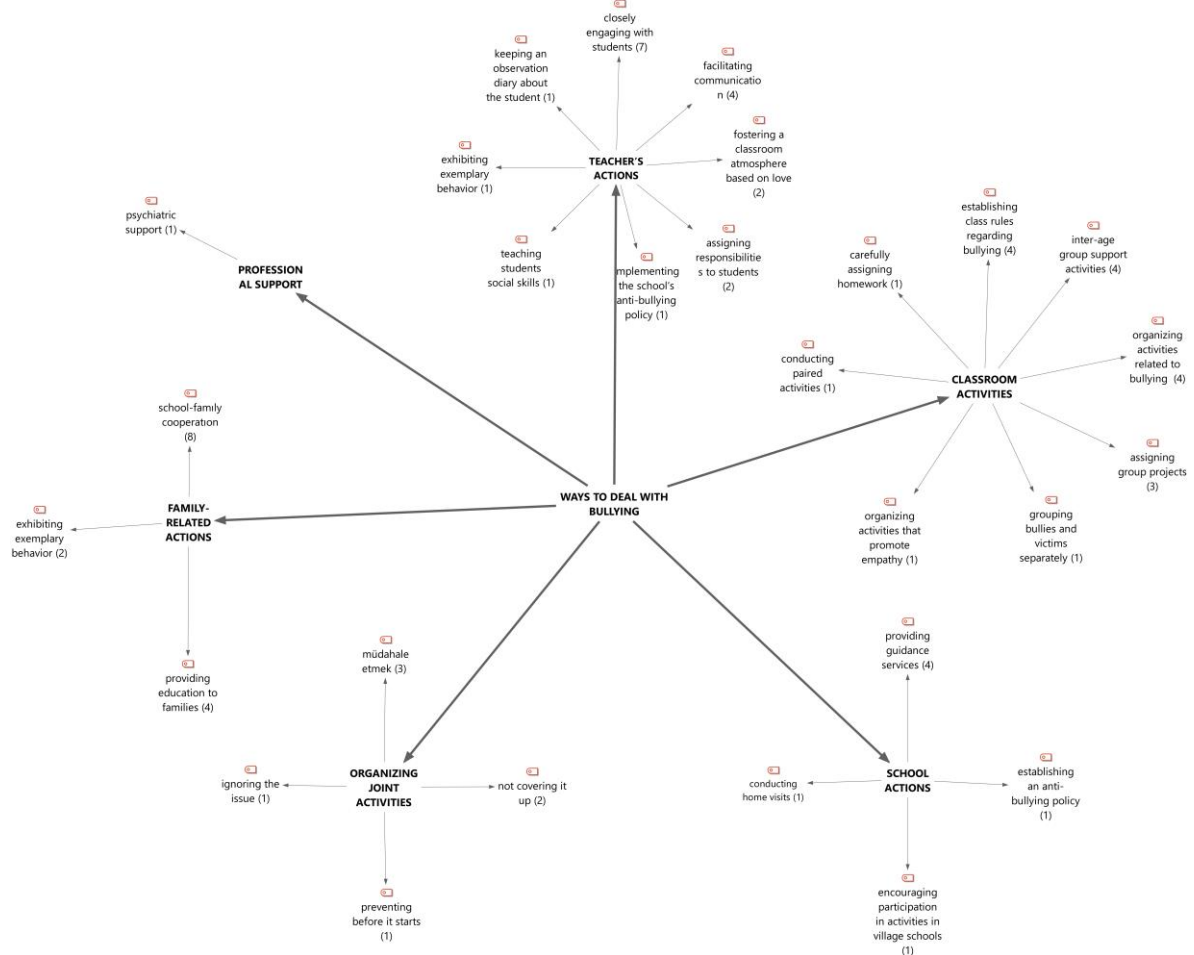
It was observed that the most important action that can be taken to prevent bullying behavior is to intervene. In addition, to cope with bullying, the behaviors should not be covered up. For example:

> First of all, the teacher should see and warn the child and say that it's wrong. They should intervene without giving the child courage (t19).

It can be said that the most important behavior that teachers can use to prevent bullying is to interact with students closely. Providing freedom of expression among students is also an important factor in coping with bullying behaviors. For example:

> The way to do this is to closely interact with the students, to monitor their behaviors well, to talk to them, to take students into account, and to constantly have dialogue with the parents (t6).

The most frequently mentioned measures that can be taken in the classroom against bullying behaviors are setting class rules, organizing activities among different age groups, and organizing activities related to bullying. For example:

> …at the beginning of the semester, students should actively participate in the establishment of class rules… (t4).

It was also stated that the most important activity that schools can do to prevent bullying behaviors in multigrade classrooms is to provide professional support. For example:

> Guidance should be provided to students through counseling teachers (t21).

It was seen that school-parent cooperation is important in preventing bullying behaviors. In addition, multigrade teachers also stated that providing education to families can help prevent such behaviors. For example:

> Cooperation should be made with the family, and correct behaviors should be rewarded (t19).

Effects of Bullying Behaviors in Multigrade Classrooms

In this section, the views of teachers with experience in multigrade classrooms regarding the effects of bullying behaviors are examined. Participants' statements were coded within the subcategories of "effects on the bully," "effects on the environment," and "effects on victims/witnesses" and appropriate subheadings were determined.

Figure 5.

Hierarchical Code-Subcode Model For Effects of Bullying in Multigrade Classrooms
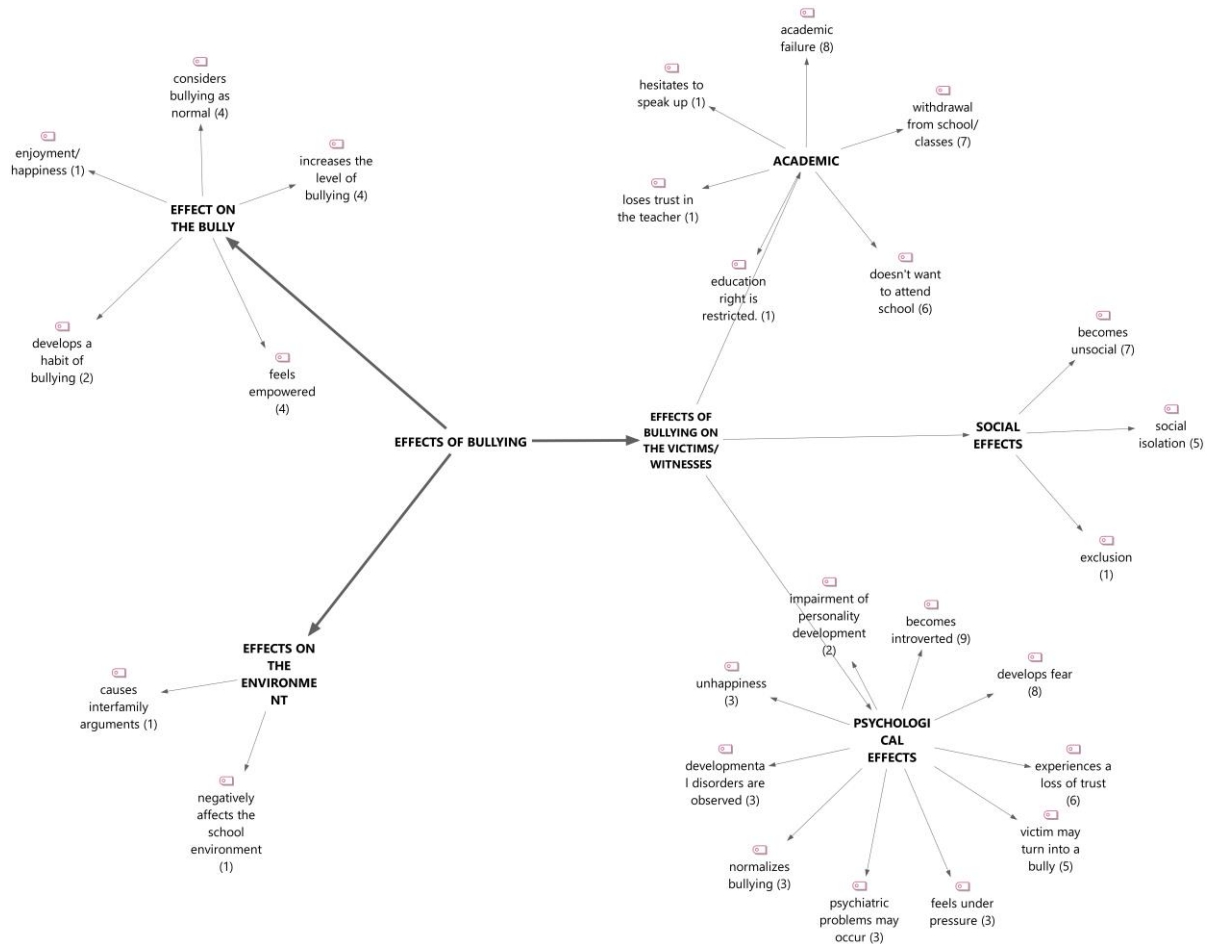
Participants stated that bullying behaviors lead to a sense of empowerment in the students who exhibit such behaviors, which in turn increases the level of bullying over time. It can also be said that students who exhibit bullying behaviors eventually start to see such behaviors as normal. This situation may affect the future of the students who exhibit bullying behaviors. For example:

> A student who is subjected to bullying becomes quite victimized, and their personality is damaged. However, students who exhibit bullying behavior feel powerful and see their behavior as normal (t9).

> All these students experience psychological problems. Those who are subjected to, and witness bullying become introverted and unhappy. Bullying students, on the other hand, continue to exhibit this behavior, thinking that they are powerful (t25).

It can be said that bullying behaviors also have negative effects on the environment, leading to disputes among students' families and a negative school atmosphere. Multigrade classroom teachers stated that bullying has the most psychological effects on victims and witnesses. Among those psychological effects, introversion, fear, and loss of trust are frequently observed. For example:

> A student who is subjected to bullying is psychologically affected by the situation and may fear violence for many years (t14).

> Usually, behaviors such as introversion, loneliness, fear, and distancing from friends are seen in students. These students can become introverted, timid, reluctant to speak up, and uncomfortable with socializing in the future (t7).

Secondly, it was observed that bullying has academic effects\ and these effects can lead to academic failure, disengagement from school/lessons, and a reluctance to continue attending school. Considering the social effects of bullying behaviors, participants stated that they may lead to an inability to socialize, with loneliness arising as a result. For example:

> Students who are subjected to and witness bullying are psychologically affected by it. They do not feel safe; they lose interest in school and lessons, experience a decrease in academic achievement, and their trust in teachers is damaged (t6).

Preventive Measures Against Bullying Behaviors Encountered in Multigrade Classrooms

In this section, the opinions of teachers with experience in multigrade classrooms regarding preventive measures that can be taken against bullying behaviors are presented. Their replies were coded within the subcategories of "teacher's measures," "classroom measures," "peer support," "individual measures," "raising awareness," and "measures related to family/environment" and appropriate subheadings were determined.

Figure 6.

Hierarchical Code-Subcode Model for Preventing Bullying in Multigrade Classrooms
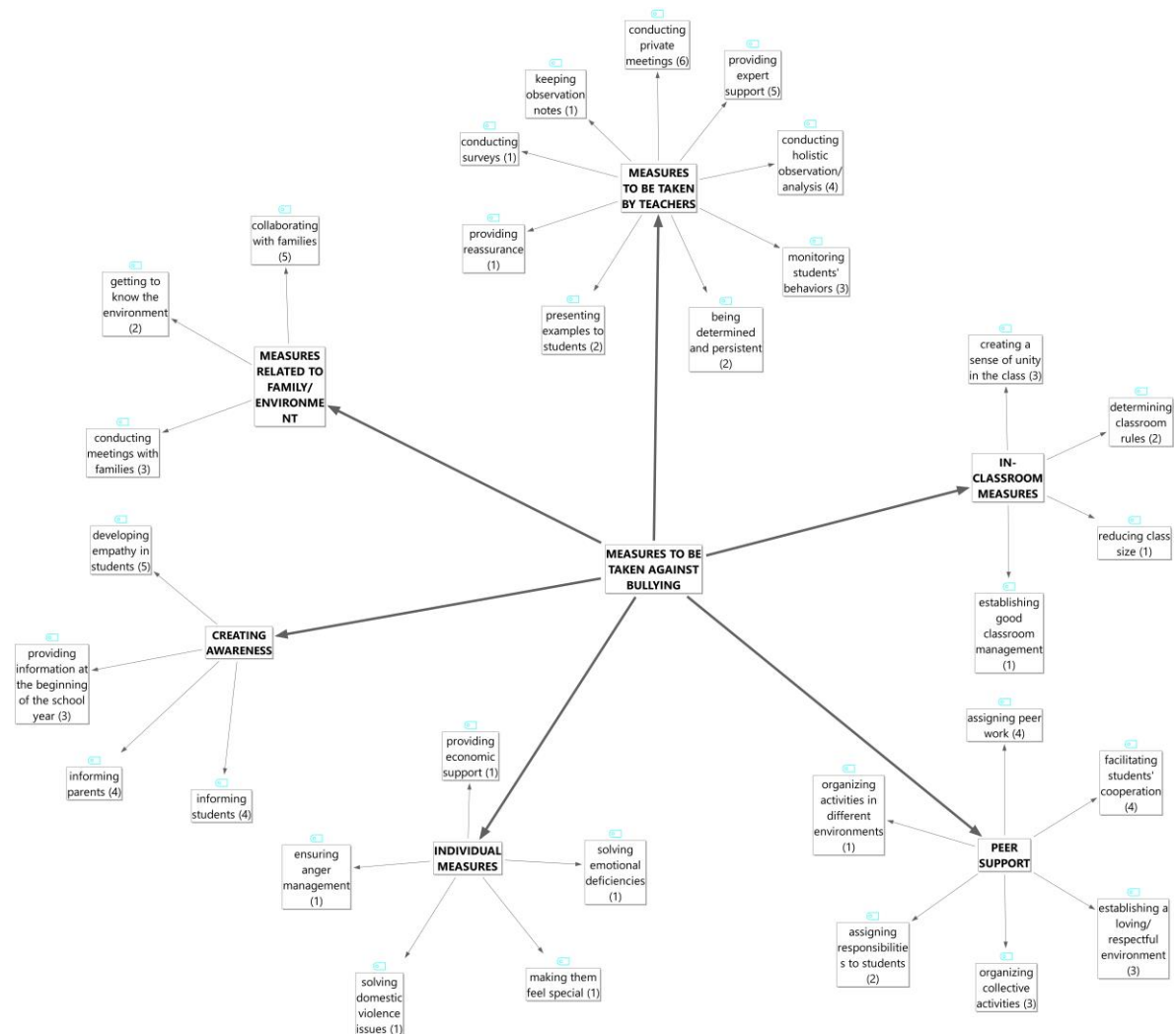
It was seen that measures such as conducting private interviews, providing expert support, and conducting holistic observations or investigations are necessary for teachers of multigrade classrooms to prevent bullying behaviors in the classroom. For example:

> Monitoring student behavior is important. Private conversations should be held with students who exhibit bullying behaviors. It is important to constantly communicate with parents and have parent visits (t6).

> ...communication should be made with guidance services, especially to provide friendly relationships, and activities should be carried out with their guidance.

However, resolving violence at home is essential. Students continue their behaviors from home at school (t7).

Setting classroom rules is also important for preventing bullying behaviors at school. For example:

> The perception of a single classroom can be created. The older class/younger class perception can be eliminated. If this distinction is eliminated and they feel like a single class, this [bullying] situation can be eliminated (t1).

Participants stated that peer work should primarily be done with the aim of providing peer support to prevent bullying behaviors and help establish friendly relationships among students. Creating a loving or respectful environment among students and doing group activities were also mentioned as important activities for preventing bullying behaviors. For example:

> Careful observations should be made, and families and circles of friends should be researched. Creating environments where they can do activities together at school, at home, and outside with their friends will solve bullying (t2).

The individual measures that could be taken to prevent bullying behaviors were listed as providing economic support, eliminating emotional deficiencies, making students feel special, resolving violence at home, and helping students control their anger. For example:

> Private conversations should be held with students who exhibit bullying behaviors (t6).

In terms of creating awareness, the participating multigrade classroom teachers mostly addressed the development of empathy. In addition, they noted the necessity of informing parents and students\ and they stated that information about bullying should be provided at the beginning of the school year. Talking to families, collaborating with families, and getting to know the environment in which the students live are among the measures that can be taken against bullying behaviors regarding families and the environment. For example:

> Studies can also be conducted for parents as well as students. Techniques can be applied for students to control anger. Studies can be conducted to develop empathy in students. The frequency of techniques such as drama and educational games can be increased… (t4)

> [Bullying] can be prevented if studies are conducted to understand the child's environment (t11).

Results and Discussion

In this study, the views of teachers with experience in multigrade classrooms were examined to determine the types of bullying behaviors that occur in those classrooms and the ways to deal with them. Among the results obtained in the study, it was observed that teachers with experience in multigrade classrooms emphasized age differences the most in their definitions of bullying. This finding can be interpreted as a result of the nature of multigrade classrooms, where multiple grades are taught in the same classroom and bullying behaviors may arise due to age differences among the students. The presence of different age groups in the same classroom may lead to a power imbalance in favor of older and stronger students while younger and weaker students are subjected to bullying. Erdem (2008) defined bullying behaviors as repeatable, intentionally performed behaviors with a power imbalance. Therefore, the continuous behaviors mentioned by the participants of the present study in their definitions of bullying, such as increasing the level of violence and continuing the bullying behaviors until a warning is given, can be interpreted as reflecting a high level of awareness of bullying among the participants. The age differences among students in multigrade classrooms should be taken into consideration and the number of combined grades should be kept to a minimum. With those approaches, it can be predicted that the differences in age and physical development among students will decrease and bullying behaviors will also decrease.

In describing the types of bullying encountered in multigrade classrooms, the participating teachers referred to the concepts of physical, verbal, psychological, and social bullying. Considering the large number of subcategories for these types of bullying types, it may be concluded that there is a possibility of multiple types of bullying emerging in multigrade classrooms. While Olweus (1996) categorized types of bullying as direct and indirect bullying, Glew et al. (2000) stated that the types of bullying differ and may include repeated and intentionally performed intimidation, harassment, and physical bullying. The data obtained in the present study are thus consistent with the literature. The type of bullying mentioned least by the teachers was cyberbullying, and its causes were said to be problems arising from distance education. Thus, distance education, which was applied to multigrade classroom students and especially those in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic, may have led to cyberbullying as a relatively new form of bullying behavior.

Younger students may be subjected to bullying by older students in the same classroom. Therefore, the coexistence of different grades and the power imbalance that arises with adolescence can be considered reasons for bullying (Öksüz, Çevik, and Kartal, 2012). The present study has shown that age differences are the most important source of bullying behaviors in multigrade classrooms because the heterogeneous distribution of students in multigrade systems is a significant factor contributing to bullying. A lack of social skills, feelings of inferiority, and a lack of empathy on the part of older students can be cited as other reasons. Participants stated that bullying primarily arises from

student relationships, but it can also stem from individual students and/or their families, the school, and the general environment.

For intervention methods to be effective in addressing bullying behaviors, parental involvement is essential. Peaceful solutions must be produced among the families of all students involved in bullying behaviors, regardless of whether they are bullies, victims of bullying, or witnesses (Özada & Duyan, 2017). In the present study, the participating teachers focused heavily on school-family collaborations and the importance of paying close attention to students when it comes to coping with bullying behaviors. According to the participants, teachers, schools, and families all have significant responsibilities in dealing with bullying. Teachers are expected to be closely involved with their students, and administrators are expected to improve the level of school-family collaboration. It was also stated that schools should have bullying policies and that those policies must be implemented and enforced by school personnel. The research findings revealed that bullying behaviors have an impact on the bully, the environment, the victim, and witnesses. Bullying was described as making the bully feel powerful, thus making it more likely that the behaviors will become permanent. The effects of such behaviors on the environment include negative reflections on the school due to problems between families and the victims and witnesses suffering academically, socially, and psychologically. Therefore, it can be concluded that bullying has negative effects on everyone involved, including witnesses, and must be prevented to the greatest extent possible.

To create an environment where students can express their thoughts comfortably and where a sense of trust and cooperation emerges, a democratic classroom environment is necessary (Erdem, 2007). To prevent bullying behaviors in schools, solidarity programs should be prepared and implemented among peers (Çayırdağ, 2006). The most prominent views on preventing bullying behaviors among the participants of the present study were that teachers should have private conversations with students and seek expert opinions, create perceptions of a single class within multigrade classrooms, create peer groups, help students develop empathy skills, and organize meetings with families. Therefore, the participants highlighted the role of the teacher in preventing bullying behaviors, as well as the importance of school-family collaboration and the development of empathy skills in students.

Recommendations

According to the findings of this study, the implementation of a course on multigrade classroom instruction that addresses the issue of bullying and is required as a practical and mandatory course in the curriculum for primary teacher education would expand teachers' experience in this area. A specialized course on bullying in primary teacher education programs may also be of benefit to those future teachers in dealing with bullying. Teachers' participation in educational activities related to multigrade classroom education and bullying-related activities through distance learning and/or face-to-face training, eTwinning, ERASMUS projects, or projects designed by individual

schools with their own resources may be useful in this area and such activities should be encouraged. Efforts should be made to provide the appropriate materials and technological equipment for multigrade classroom teachers to use in both assigning homework and teaching. Reconsideration of the multigrade classroom system and efforts to keep the number of grades per classroom as low as possible may also be beneficial in preventing bullying behaviors.

Ethics Committee Approval: This study was approved by the Çankırı Karatekin University Ethics Committee on 31.05.2021 with decision number 20.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they were included in the study.

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