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<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02470-8>

OPEN

Preventing bullying of students with special educational needs through dialogic gatherings: a case study in elementary education

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Scientific literature has clarified that bullying is a global challenge and students with special educational needs (SEN) are at a higher risk of experiencing it. Educational actions focused on dialogue and interaction as dialogic gatherings (DG) have been widely studied as a successful educational action (SEAs) rooted in egalitarian dialogue that promotes social cohesion. However, its potential to prevent bullying among students with SEN remains to be investigated. This qualitative case study explores the impact of implementing DG in two elementary classrooms and its potential to prevent school violence in a comprehensive school setting (43 students, 10–12 years old, from which 5 had SEN). Classroom observations of DGs and focus groups with teachers and students were conducted. Data analysis indicated that DG effectively contributed to students' increased awareness regarding the distinction between violent and non-violent relationships, and influenced their personal preferences, guiding them towards non-violent behaviours. Implications for practice highlight the potential of DG to enhance non-violent behaviours among elementary students, which is particularly relevant to ensure students with SEN's protection and inclusion.

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Introduction

Violence in schools is a global challenge that affects one out of three students in the world (WHO, 2020). The devastating consequences of suffering bullying include low academic achievement, and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). While this issue could affect all students, those with Special Educational Needs (hereinafter, SEN) are particularly vulnerable, as they are twice more often at risk of suffering school violence than their peers without SEN, according to studies conducted in Sweden (Annerbäck et al., 2014), Finland (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2014) and the U.S. with school-aged children (Sentenac et al., 2013). Perceived differences in terms of physical and verbal limitations between students with and without SEN might explain the higher risk of suffering school violence (Malecki et al., 2020). This type of bullying, specifically targeted to students with disabilities, whether in a regular classroom or online setting, is known as, 'Disablist bullying' (O'Moore & McGuire, 2021).

In addition, fewer opportunities to interact with peers appear to be related to a higher risk of suffering victimisation among students with SEN (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). These findings are reinforced by Bowker et al. (2006), who showed that when students with SEN do not have peer support in the classroom are more likely to be victimised. These results highlight the crucial role peer interactions and supportive classroom environments might play in preventing school violence for all students, which is particularly important for those with SEN.

Building on the potential of peer interactions and dialogue-based actions to prevent school violence (Ríos-González et al., 2019), some educational actions have put together those critical components such as family and community participation, to orchestrate a safe and supportive learning environment (Morlà-Folch et al., 2022). In this vein, one of the most studied interventions is dialogic gatherings (DG), which are a reading activity rooted in sharing meanings, interpretations and reflections around a particular text collectively agreed upon beforehand (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023). This particular action is identified in scientific literature as a Successful Educational Action (hereinafter, SEAs), which are school-based interventions identified by the European Project INCLUD-ED: "Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education" (Flecha, 2015) that "can improve school success and contribute to social cohesion in every context where they are implemented" (Flecha, 2015, p. 3). This is aligned with the theory of Dialogic Society (Flecha, 2022), which understands that citizens can participate and benefit from the cocreation of scientific knowledge, which can lead to achieve social impact, following the criteria of the Horizon Europe framework.

As of the present, a systematic review by Ruiz-Eugenio et al. (2023) has identified over 60 scientific articles that delve into the effects of Dialogic Gatherings (DG) across a broad spectrum of academic areas, including reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, as well as their social implications. These studies have highlighted positive outcomes, encompassing enhanced social cohesion and improved classroom climates. Furthermore, when DG is implemented using evidence-based texts that factor in their social impact, as proposed by Soler-Gallart and Flecha (2022), the results have indicated significant benefits. For instance, Buslón et al. (2020) reported that DG has a positive impact on enhancing scientific literacy among adult participants. Additionally, García-Carrión et al. (2020) found that DG fosters a secure and inclusive environment for children, where every contribution is recognised and respected. Numerous studies focusing on DG have shown that this intervention can effectively increase student's awareness of violence when implemented in early adolescence (López de Aguilera et al., 2020), and with girls, some of them victims of

violence against women and living out-of-home care (Salceda et al., 2020), and girls with disabilities (Rodrigues et al., 2021). However, the potential of DG to prevent and counteract violence when implemented in mainstream schools and exploring especially its potential benefits for children with SEN remains to be investigated.

School violence against students with SEN and inclusive learning environments

School violence, also known as bullying, refers to aggressive behaviour aimed at inflicting injury or discomfort on another individual, which involves continuous aggression, (whether physical, psychological, or social) and usually occurs in school settings such as classrooms, the playground, or school surroundings (Olweus, 1978; 1993). According to the results of a longitudinal study developed in the United Kingdom with over 13,000 pupils aged between 7 and 15, the percentage of children who had been excluded from school is 15%, as they suffered bullying daily (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2016). These data show one of the most urgent challenges educational systems must address to guarantee the right to education in schools where children might be safe (Ríos-González et al., 2019), as a prerequisite to learn and thrive.

Indeed, offering a high-quality and inclusive education for all, as the sustainable development goal 4 establishes (United Nations, 2015), entails guaranteeing a safe school environment that includes all students. For this to happen, Iñiguez-Berrozpe and colleagues (2021) highlight the importance of creating collective norms in the school to overcome violence. This collective creation of rules and standards, that set the grounds for a safe and supportive daily life in schools, is more effective if it includes in its entire process the involvement of the families and the community (Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2021). This is consistent with other research that has also evidenced that the participation of the entire school community seems to be fundamental in reducing school violence (Espelage et al., 2015). Thus, this factor seems particularly relevant for students with SEN, since they are highly vulnerable to violence in school (UNESCO, 2019).

Among the multiple variations in the terminology used to refer to students with SEN, a generic term widely used in the literature for decades, include "all children who have developmental difficulties that affect: their learning; their behavioural, emotional and social development; their communication; and their ability to care for themselves and gain independence" (Lindsay, 2007, p. 3). Furthermore, students with SEN often experience more bullying, discrimination, and isolation than their peers without SEN (Turner et al., 2011). Indeed, they are also more likely to suffer incidents of physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual abuse being highly vulnerable (Malecki et al., 2020; Reiter, Lapidot-Lefler (2007)). In addition, this student body might have fewer opportunities to interact with their peers in a mainstream classroom, which also increases the likelihood of being victims of school violence (Bowker et al., 2006). Since the context matters to enable or hinder students' opportunities to learn and feel supported, creating learning environments that generate opportunities for peer interactions seems particularly relevant for students with SEN.

In this regard, decades of research have been looking at what schools can do to foster violence-free inclusive learning environments, which are defined as natural and non-restrictive contexts, where all students are granted the opportunity to interact with each other in egalitarian conditions (Schoger, 2006). For instance, when Draper et al., (2019) explored effective strategies to support peer interactions for students with severe disabilities in music classes in the USA, they found that activities that allowed

students to work together and help each other were significantly efficient to increase positive peer interactions. Indeed, inclusive learning environments prioritise dialogue-based practices to ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to participate, and that the voices of all students are heard and considered (Donnelly et al., 2016). This happens to be crucial since a lack of peer interactions in the classroom has been pointed out as a risk factor linked to school violence (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). In this sense, The report “Achieving student well-being for all: educational contexts free of violence” contracted and funded by the EC to find the programmes that have succeeded in preventing violence against children found that a common element in all programmes that overcome violence against children is the involvement of the whole community, its scientific training and its union in the response to cases, always supporting the victims (Flecha, Puigvert & Racionero-Plaza 2023).

These dialogue-based interventions have been defined by the INCLUD-ED: “Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education” (Flecha, 2015) project as successful educational actions (SEAs hereinafter) (Flecha, 2015). Research has reported these SEAs promote social cohesion and foster academic success among students across the globe, including in special education settings (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2021; Álvarez-Guerrero et al., 2021). There are several benefits SEAs have achieved when implemented accurately; as research has shown students have improved their interpersonal relations (García-Carrión et al., 2020) and communicative competence (Fernández-Villardón et al., 2021), among others. Within the seven successful educational actions (Flecha, 2015) identified in the INCLUD-ED project, this article focuses on the Dialogic Gatherings (DG hereinafter), that have been applied in the frame of the Dialogic Model of Prevention and Resolution of Conflicts, two specific successful educational actions aiming at preventing and reducing school violence.

Putting dialogic learning to work to prevent and reduce school violence

Educational research has provided relevant insights on how to prevent school violence using a dialogic approach (Padrós, 2014). Using a variety of texts such as literary or scientific works to open dialogues on bullying or child abuse has been a recurrent tool for deepening the understanding of bullying (Salceda et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). Moreover, it has been used to implement classroom strategies for overcoming bullying among students of different age groups (Aubert, 2015; Rosen et al., 2023).

In this framework, Dialogic Gatherings can be implemented in the classroom to engage students in a collective construction of knowledge and meaning when they discuss a previous reading of the same text (García-Carrión et al., 2020). In DGs, participants choose based on reasoning and validity arguments (Habermas, 1984) one of the greatest works in different cultural or scientific fields, such as literature, art, music, or science. Then, students read the text individually and select a piece or paragraph that appeals to them for any reason to be shared later in the DG where they engage in meaningful and critical dialogues around the previous reading. In addition to the positive effects documented in the utilisation of DG (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023), as previously stated, there has been a paucity of research that has examined its specific potential in cultivating protective factors aimed at mitigating school violence, with a particular focus on children with SEN.

However, DGs can be implemented as a specific strategy within the Dialogic Model of Prevention and Resolution of Conflicts, one of the successful educational actions addressed to reduce and prevent bullying. This dialogic model is characterised by using

dialogue as the tool for fostering egalitarian relationships involving students, teachers, families and community members in creating rules and reaching agreements of school-wide standards for better coexistence through a dialogic process (Villarejo-Carballido et al., 2019). Particularly, the dialogic model promotes a bystander intervention among the students and the entire community to foster solidarity and protective networks in the school (Duque et al., 2021). Hence, spaces for dialogue are created with the aim of promoting a culture of protection and rejection of violence through interactions in which many diverse voices are included. Accordingly, the DGs are one of those spaces where egalitarian dialogues take place among the students, including everyone’s voice in a safe and supportive environment where every single child is included.

Methods

A case study (Yin, 2018) was carried out to achieve an in-depth understanding of how Dialogic Gatherings might have an impact, if any, in preventing bullying, and particularly against students with SEN, as they are more vulnerable to suffer bullying (Farmer et al., 2017). Thus, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

How can Dialogic Gatherings using research-informed texts contribute to improving peer relationships and create safe environments among students with and without SEN in an Elementary school?

To what extent, if any, this environment can protect from suffering bullying students with SEN?

The study was conducted between May and June 2022 in a school located in the Basque Country (Spain) in a low socio-economic area. It serves students from 2 to 12 years. It is a culturally and linguistically diverse school, where over more than 39% of students are migrants and the rest come from migrant families from 28 different countries mainly from Northern and Occidental Africa, Occidental Asia, and South America.

Participants. A total of fifty-one participants, including students, school staff and parents, who volunteered in the school, were involved in the study. In the DG sessions, 43 students between 10 and 12 years old (see Table 1 for more details), three mothers and one father aged between 30 and 45 years old, and two female teachers participated. Then, in the focus groups, three more female school staff members participated: the School Principal, the Special Education Teacher, and the School Counsellor. Students and parents were the participants in the DG, they contributed with their ideas, sharing their arguments and commenting on each other’s opinions, prompted by the text previously read. The teachers acted as facilitators of the discussion, taking turns ensuring the dialogic principles underlying the activity (Flecha, 2000).

As the study has a special emphasis on students with SEN, more details about these participants are provided to frame their specific needs (see Table 2).

Table 1 Students’ characteristics.

	Students without SEN		Students with SEN		Total per group	Total of students
	Female	Male	Female	Male		
Group A	8	11	1	2	22	43
Group B	8	11	1	1	21	

Table 2 Description of students with SEN participating in the study.

Student	Group	Age	Description
Alan	A	10	He requires constant assistance from the educational support specialist due to difficulties associated with communication and dependence.
Martin	A	9	He has a personality disorder diagnosis that is being treated by a psychiatrist, which makes it difficult for him to follow lessons.
Noa	A	11	She has been diagnosed with severe intellectual and physical disabilities.
Rachel	B	10	She has mild intellectual disability and communication difficulties.
Brian	B	10	He has been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (hereinafter, ADHD), he has a mild intellectual disability and experiences severe behavioural problems in his interactions with peers.

Table 3 Data collection techniques.

Techniques	Total		Participants	
	Group A	Group B	Group A	Group B
DG Observation 1	1	1	24 (22 students, 1 teacher, 1 volunteer)	26 (21 students, 4 parents, 1 teacher, 1 volunteer)
DG Observation 2	1	1	24 (22 students, 1 teacher, 1 volunteer)	23 (21 students, 1 teacher, 1 volunteer)
Student's focus group	2	2	With SEN (n = 3) Without SEN (n = 7)	With SEN (n = 2) Without SEN (n = 8)
Teacher's focus group	1		School principal (n = 1) School counsellor (n = 1) Special education teacher (n = 1) Teachers (n = 2)	

Data collection. Four classroom observations were conducted during the Dialogic Gatherings (two in each group) in which students discussed the previous reading of the research-informed texts. Following the guidelines of the dialogic gatherings, the participants sat in a circle and participated in the discussion. They were not asked to do anything beyond participating in the session. All sessions were video recorded for a later in-depth analysis to explore dialogues about key elements that help overcoming bullying at schools, and specifically against students with SEN.

After the implementation of the DGs, five focus groups of approximately 30 min each were conducted, and audio recorded between May and June 2022. Four with 5 students from each group -A and B-, and one with teachers and school staff: two teachers, the special education teacher, the school counsellor, and the principal. This technique enabled us to explore both individual and collective perspectives, leading to a more profound comprehension of the experience of bullying, the higher risk that students with SEN have and the factors that might protect them following the Communicative Methodology (Gómez et al., 2010). The techniques described in this section were carried out inside the school, and all the participants and they were asked to give their opinions about the intervention. They were also asked if there was something that particularly helped them in the dialogic gatherings to prevent violence. Table 3 summarises the data collection techniques and participants involved.

Procedure and materials. Prior to starting the school year, in June 2021 this school was contacted as it was interested in preventing bullying or any kind of school violence. After reaching a consensus with all members of the community (students, teachers,

and families) the school agreed to implement the dialogic Model and the dialogic gatherings using research-informed texts. The study was conducted in the 2021–2022 academic year and two elementary education fourth-grade classrooms (Group A and Group B) implemented the DG. These groups were selected because (a) having a higher number of conflicts among the students and (b) having a higher number of students with SEN than in the rest of the classrooms.

Thus, from May to June 2022, a rigorous implementation of DG was ensured through a close collaboration between the teachers and the researchers. The DG lasted around one hour and a half. The texts used in DG were two scientific dissemination articles about bullying prevention, published in “Kaiera,” a free open-access online journal that publishes research-informed articles. The dissemination article read and discussed in the first session was based on the results of the study by Palikara et al. (2021) on the mediating role of school belonging in school-aged children, entitled “The relationship between school sense of belonging, emotional well-being and feeling of loneliness”. The second DG was an adaptation of the article ‘A Friend Is a Treasure and May Help You to Face Bullying’ (Navarro et al., 2018), which included examples of bullying situations.

During the gatherings, all the participants sat in a circle, so that everyone could see each other. The classroom teacher facilitated the gathering ensuring an equitable participation and a respectful environment, that values arguments and rejects power-based interventions. During the sessions, students share what appeals to them from the text and link it to their own daily experiences, engaging in meaningful dialogues that ultimately lead them to a deeper understanding of the given text.

Students with SEN participated in the DG sessions alongside their peers. In order to ensure their equitable participation, those students had the opportunity to prepare for the gathering beforehand by reading the text in advance with the support of the special education teacher. This was an initiative of the school to support the participation of these students in the DG because they present some level of difficulties in reading skills. The preparation consisted of 2 group sessions with these students, where the assistant teacher helped them to read, underline the information they wanted to share, and assist them in drafting what they wanted to talk about during the session.

Ethics. The present study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Deusto (ETK-45/21-22). Informed consent was ensured before the study started, which included the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Participants’ identity is protected by pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. In terms of data protection, this study has securely stored data in an online cloud only accessible by the researchers. The data collected from the study is treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for the purposes of the study. This study is also part of the competitive project funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain: “CHILDPRO: It is never too early to prevent gender-based violence: identification and

overcoming of risk behaviours in childhood” (REF: PID2020-115581RB-I00).

Data analysis. All the data collected were transcribed verbatim and analysed. Thus, inductive thematic analysis was carried out which allowed us to determine themes found within our research data (Clarke, Braun (2017)). A total of four main themes were identified: (1) Raising awareness of violent behaviours; (2) Importance of reading evidence-based texts about friendship; (3) Fostering safe inclusive learning environments; (4) Sustainability of the intervention over time.

After that, the data was categorised to explore the barriers and the opportunities of the dialogic gatherings based on the two components of the Communicative Methodology: exclusionary, and transformative dimensions (Gómez et al., 2010). The first one, the exclusionary dimension, identifies the obstacles to social transformation. The second one, the transformative dimension, includes the elements that overcome these barriers. Considering this transformative approach is particularly important when doing research with students with SEN, because of their vulnerability to being bullied and excluded.

Results

A total of 863 utterances were analysed. From those, 90% emerged as transformative dimensions of the dialogic gatherings and 10% reported barriers or exclusionary dimensions. Accordingly, this section is structured within these two main dimensions that include the results of the thematic analysis illustrated through participants’ voices. All the participants were asked to fill out an informed consent. In the case of children, their parents signed it, and they were also asked to give their verbal consent. Their participation was voluntary and there were no economic or material compensations for participating in this research.

Transformative dimension

Raising awareness of violent behaviours and challenging them. The dialogues shared in the gatherings helped students to reflect on their own behaviours and raised their awareness about violent behaviours, their consequences and the possibility to change them. In this regard, Brian, a student with ADHD and mild intellectual disability, usually misbehaved in the classroom and disturbed his peers. In the second DG, dialogues were shared about hypothetical situations when someone tries to force you to do something you do not want to do, and he raised his hand and asked the following question:

For example, someone is with me, tells me to do something I don’t want to do... What can I do? I think I did something wrong, and I regret it. I have also realised that I don’t like being told what to do... (Brian, DG 2, group B).

Later, in the focus group Brian shared he wanted to improve his own attitude, as he realised after the DG that his peers with violent attitudes were influencing and shaping his behaviour. Also, Brian’s mother expressed in one of the DG her concerns about children’s mental health when they misbehave, and she told the students they have to behave appropriately at school with their peers. The following dialogue illustrates how Brian reflected about his own attitude and the behaviours of colleagues from whom he was receiving pressure to do things he didn’t like. In this sense, his classmates Mike, and Ethan, encouraged him to change his attitude to release himself from such pressures.

Brian (student with SEN): Some of those who misbehave to be funny, they make other people follow them and for example. I have done it and I keep... Sometimes I misbehave and I follow them around, and I don’t know how not to follow them around

because they only talk nonsense... And after the DG I want to improve my attitude, I want to change, I don’t want to keep misbehaving.

Mike: I can tell you that those who have driven you to misbehave, don’t listen to them, because they won’t help you to be better.

Ethan: Brian, you... Even if they made you misbehave, try not to have that attitude. I know you have got used to having that attitude but try to get rid of it. I know, it’s very difficult, when you get used to something it’s very difficult to change it... But at least try! And if you can’t... At least you have tried! (Students, group B).

After these dialogues, Brian stayed in silence for a few seconds and answered to Mike and Ethan saying he would change his attitude, respecting others and letting them participate in the sessions without interrupting them.

Well... I’m going to try it; Now I understand that I need to change my attitude and I will. If I don’t change it some people are going to get angry with me, and if I continue misbehaving, my classmates won’t be able to participate in the sessions. (Brian, student, group B).

Also, students reported that the DG has helped them to be more aware of who is their friend and who has violent behaviours towards them, so they do not consider this attitude as desirable when choosing with whom they want to establish their friendships.

Amber: I have friends, but they are not my friends, because they misbehave and have violent behaviours. That’s why I don’t want to be with them, I don’t like it. That’s why they are not my friends.

Sophia: I have good friends who help me in general, who help me to do my work... and when I’m sad they come to me and ask me if I’m fine.

Researcher: And who wouldn’t be your friend Sophia?

Sophia: Well, they wouldn’t be my friends if they hit me, if they treat me badly, if they behave badly... like... if they hurt me. (Students, group A).

The importance of reading research-informed texts about friendship. It was also identified that reading texts that reported scientific evidence about school violence during the DG sessions supported some students in improving their behaviour. In the case of Amber, a girl from group A, she mentions that it has been very significant to read this type of text, as it has helped her to better identify how aggressors behave and that she has perceived how some of her peers also started acting differently after participating in DG.

When we started to read Kaiera’s texts in the DG, some people started to behave better when they read them. Because I think, in my opinion, they saw the aggressor’s behaviour and they didn’t want to be like those aggressors. (Amber, group A)

During the DG students engaged in discussions about their daily experiences at school, particularly focusing on their own behaviours and attitudes. In this specific interaction, the researcher directs the students’ attention to an image showing a playground and a situation where a group of students is bullying another student. Anthony, one of the students, acknowledges that he has experienced a similar situation where a student was mocking another one, and he mentions that he has taken action to help. This illustrates how Dialogic Gatherings can help students reflect on their own experiences and actions, helping students to have a better understanding of bullying and friendship.

Researcher: Look, in this image you can see a playground and how someone is reporting when they see that a group is bullying someone ((points the picture)).

Anthony: I have seen myself in that situation ((referring to a scene in the illustration where a student is mocking another one)) and I have helped.

Researcher: That's great, Martin has something to add.

Martin: That's true, he has helped and comforted me. Now I know that to help a friend means to be a true friend. (DG 2, group A).

In that session, the teacher added that this idea seemed very important to her, and another student, Gemma, replied to her, that being a good friend meant being treated well and not letting others hurt you. Julia responded that the text highlights the importance of having good friends who help you getting over bullying.

Group A teacher: Yes, I have also seen that and think it is so important to give support.

Researcher: Definitely, Gemma.

Gemma: I also like it when they are with me and treat me well. A friend is someone who listens to you and doesn't leave you alone when they pick on you.

Researcher: ((Assents)) Julia.

Julia: As the text says it's super important to have good friends who help you end bullying. (DG 2, group A).

Finally, when students were asked in the focus group if anything had been done during the academic year had increased their sense of being safe in the school, two of the students, Amber and Sophia answered that the DG helped them to feel safer, highlighting that evidence-based text provided them with relevant information to better understand friendship.

Researcher: Is there anything that has made you feel safer in the school during this school year?

Amber and Sophia: The Dialogic Gatherings.

Researcher: And what do you think is the most remarkable about them?

Sophia: Well, the texts like the one about violent behaviour and the other one about friendship.

Amber: Now after reading the texts we know better who our friend is and who is not. (FG students, group A).

Fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment. Students underline that they have learned that friendship can prevent bullying by reading and sharing the article of Navarro et al. (2018) about friendship, which made them reconsider the definition of what it means to be a true friend. This also helped bullying prevention, as the text provides them with science-based actions that help to overcome violence in school. In this line, when the students of group A were asked during the focus group if they feel safer at the school after the DG, they answered that now they all feel safer because they know that their friends will protect them if something happens.

Researcher: So, after the DG do you feel safer at school?

All: Yes.

Researcher: And why?

Amber: Because now after talking about this we know that when you have friends, they help you not to suffer aggression or abuse, because as it says in the text: "a friend is a treasure that helps you to prevent bullying" and we are better friends now. (Focus group students, group A).

This student, Amber, who is seated in class next to Noa, also underlined that after participating in DG, what they have learned is that being alone increases the risk of suffering bullying, and now they know that if they want to combat bullying, they need to address this issue. Having this in mind, Amber, Sophia, and Anthony, students without SEN who took part in the focus group, reported that after the DG sessions they and other peers began to play with Noa, a student with SEN that was excluded regularly before the implementation:

Amber: Noa (student with SEN) she was always alone, but then we started to understand that you have to play with everyone and not leave someone alone. So, some people started to play with her!

Sophia: I started to play with her too!

Anthony: Me too! (Focus group, students, group A).

In the case of Noa, she had previously reported that she did not have any friends at school, and after the DG sessions, other pupils noticed this and started interacting with her in class and in the playground. The teacher from group A shared in the focus group that the implementation of DG has helped to overcome isolation in the school context:

I think that to prevent violence it is important to say that what happens to you happens to everyone and that everyone is not an isolated individual, but that we are all one. We are group A, and that's it! That was so important. (Classroom teacher, Group A).

Students were also more aware of the specific needs of other peers with SEN, such as the possible limitations in verbal or social skills. The teacher comments on the case of Martin, a pupil who had self-harming behaviours by hitting his head against the walls when he was alone in the playground. She says that when she told him to stop, he did not, but when his peers told him to go with them, he listened and immediately stopped hurting himself. Since Martin's classmates knew about the importance of including everyone through the DG, this situation changed and now it does not happen because he is no longer alone.

At the beginning of the school year, Martin (student with SEN) usually was all alone during the playground and all the time was banging his head against the walls, and no matter how many times I told him to get off, he wouldn't get off. Now he never does it because he is never alone. Sometimes, he tries to isolate himself, and when I try to speak, he doesn't listen to me. But if someone else from the classroom goes, he immediately pays attention to them. (Classroom teacher, group A).

Rachel's case is worth to mention, as an outstanding case of a student with SEN that showed that being involved in the dialogic gatherings helped her to enhance her sense of belonging and foster her participation in school. Rachel had communication difficulties that prevented her from participating in regular classroom activities but in the DG, she voluntarily raised her hand to read and comment on the paragraph she had selected, expressing her opinion on it. The special education teacher in that moment reported that was the first time she had participated in class. As we can see in the quote, Rachel's intervention triggered further discussions because another student responded to her idea by agreeing with her statement:

Rachel: Bullying is a form of aggression, which means it's behaviour that is used to hurt someone." It's a behaviour that is used to harm someone because I believe hurting someone is wrong, and bullying is also wrong because the victim suffers.

Laia: I have chosen the same paragraph because there are some who don't realise that harm can be done just with words... and I also liked what Rachel said. (DG 2, group B).

Teacher from group B also reported that Rachel has improved in terms of socialisation after the DG as she has started to participate in the class. She explains how Rachel, through this text and the dialogues shared, learnt that the risk of suffering bullying increases with loneliness and this was a crucial realisation since she usually self-isolated. Participating in the DG opened her the door to participate and to feel more included, breaking the dangerous walls of solitude.

There is a student, Rachel (Student with SEN), who joined us last year and usually spent time with two students, but this year those students have left, and she doesn't want to socialise

anymore. It is true that in the last DG we did, when we read about “if you isolate yourself, you are more at risk of being bullied”, it made an impact on her, and she spent a couple of weeks talking more with everyone. In class I also started to notice that she was there, because she was always quiet, and then it was like “I’m listening to your voice! (Classroom teacher, group B).

Exclusionary dimension

Sustainability of the intervention over time. Teachers reported the limitations they encounter to maintain the gains observed during the DGs over time. That is, some students benefitted from being involved in the gatherings, and that opened new possibilities for participation and socialisation, such as the case of Rachel, as reported by the special education teacher:

I think that for Rachel (Student with SEN), DG has opened a door for her to interact with other children. It took a while for her to understand the text, but when she read that if she isolated herself, she could be bullied, she was the one who wanted to socialise. (Special education teacher).

However, she also acknowledged that Rachel did not continue socialising after the gatherings were over.

But after two weeks she was isolating herself again. That’s why I think that if we had continued with the DG, these impacts would not have been lost. (Special education teacher).

Hence, the special education teacher suggests that extending the DG during the entire school year would enlarge its benefits and argues that if the intervention had continued, these benefits could have been maintained.

Discussion

Results reveal that Dialogic Gatherings had a positive impact among students in different dimensions. Firstly, by promoting the creation of a safe and inclusive learning environment in which students can share their thoughts and feelings about issues related to school violence. Previous research shows how dialogic interventions for violence prevention can generate an adequate climate to improve social cohesion in schools (Oliver, 2014). Through DG, we have seen how students with and without SEN started to communicate effectively, creating new relationships with their peers, and taking care of the most vulnerable ones, which is essential for preventing violence in the school context (Dunn, 2004). Through dialogues shared in DG, students have also learned to respect and appreciate differences among their peers, which can lead to a more inclusive and comprehensive school environment (García-Carrión et al., 2018).

Secondly, there has been an improvement in reducing the attractiveness of violent behaviours. This, in turn, has increased the greater appreciation of positive behaviours, leading students to prefer or prioritise friendships free of violence. These results feed previous research about the effectiveness of Dialogic Gatherings in the prevention of gender violence among girls with intellectual disabilities (Rodrigues et al., 2021). Indeed, dialogues about the importance of not letting anyone behind and friendship were particularly relevant results of DG, as those make students be more aware of the key role everyone holds in ensuring an inclusive and violence-free environments at school. Also, sharing their thoughts, experiences, and beliefs on a particular reading under the dialogic conditions of the DG facilitates the participation of students with SEN, which bridges relationships with their peers without SEN. These kinds of relationships have proven to act as a protective factor to counteract school violence (Farmer et al., 2016).

Thirdly, DG has offered the participants the opportunity not only to read high-quality research-informed texts but also to make students reflect about their own daily experiences and relationships, leading them to choose non-violent friends. Through the dialogues developed during the Dialogic Gatherings and the focus groups, students with and without SEN have developed strategies to distinguish between those who are their friends and those who are not, by reflecting on how their peers treated them and vice versa. It also has helped students with SEN to reflect about their own behaviour, which opens new possibilities to prevent conflicts and to autoregulate themselves, which is essential for human development (Vallotton & Ayoub, 2011). This is consistent with the preventive socialisation theory that raises awareness about the link between violent actions and attractiveness, unveiling violent models in society and eliminating their appeal (Valls et al., 2008).

Limitations and future research. Although this is a highly relevant topic that has been little studied so far, the implementation of DG in mainstream elementary education has shown promising results in overcoming and preventing bullying. The study acknowledges some limitations: on the one hand, the number of participants and the sessions carried out were limited, and even if the results are promising, they cannot be generalised. It has also been noted that the positive impacts on students with SEN were sustained over the period during which the DG was carried out. Also, future research could include playground observations, in addition to DG observations, by a pre-post design to better inform the possible changes in students’ relationships. Also, it may be studied how the sustainability of this action over time would benefit students with and without SEN. Finally, it will also be valuable to explore the transferability of DG to other contexts and settings such as special education, and how it can be adapted to meet the needs of more diverse students.

Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that dialogic gatherings (DG) have had a positive impact on students generating safe inclusive learning environments in a mainstream schools, and resulting in benefiting students with SEN. The DG, as a Successful Educational Action, created and structured an inclusive space where students shared their experiences and engaged in critical readings, reflections, and discussions on important issues in addressing bullying such as friendship as a protective factor and bullying. After the intervention, students have reported feeling safer and more supported in the school environment. Overall, DG fostered a greater sense of belonging to the school and redefined the concept of friendship to exclude all kinds of violence from it. In addition, this inclusive learning environment raised awareness of the situation of loneliness some students with SEN were experiencing and helped in self-harm prevention by generating support networks. Also, participants of this study understood the importance of standing up for those who are particularly vulnerable, such as students with SEN and fostered positive peer interactions towards students that were usually left apart. Furthermore, DG has opened the door to greater empathy towards students with SEN, so that they do not feel alone at school.

In summary, DG about friendship has had a positive impact on students with and without SEN, helping them to develop a greater understanding of what friendship means, reducing the appeal of violent behaviours, raising awareness about bullying, and advancing toward more inclusive school environments. These findings present promising results to enhance safe, supportive,

and inclusive learning environments in mainstream schools, and to ensure quality education for all.

Data availability

All the data is stored by researchers and will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Code availability

The code of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Material availability

The materials of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Received: 25 September 2023; Accepted: 27 November 2023;

Published online: 14 December 2023

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Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the Project “CHILDPRO: It is never too early to prevent gender-based violence: identification and overcoming of risk behaviours in childhood” (REF: PID2020-115581RB-I00) funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain.

Author contributions

RG-C and RF contributed to the conception and design of the study. GÁ-G did the data collection, organised the database. GÁ-G wrote the first draft of the manuscript. RG-C, AK, MS-G and RF revised and edited the manuscript. All authors contributed to the manuscript revision, and read and approved the submitted version.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval

The Ethics Committee of the University of Deusto approved this research. Reference: ETK-45/21-22. All research was performed in accordance with relevant guidelines/regulations applicable when human participants are involved according to European Union regulations (April 2016) in relation to (ii) access to personal data; (iii) use of data; and (iv) responsibilities of researchers of the project.

Informed consent

All the participants were asked to fill out an informed consent. In the case of children, their parents signed it, and they were also asked to give their verbal consent. Their participation was voluntary and there were no economic or material compensations for participating in this research.

Additional information

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