

## Peer Bullying Experiences of Students Attending Multigrade and Transported Primary Schools

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### Abstract

This qualitative research study investigated the experiences and perceptions of peer bullying among students attending multigrade and transported primary schools (TPS) in Tokat, Turkey. Data were collected through interviews with 19 students from three multigrade village schools and 12 students from three TPSs. Findings revealed a stark contrast in peer bullying prevalence between the two school types. Bullying was rare in multigrade classrooms, while TPS students reported frequent exposure to bullying, both during their commute and on school grounds. Students highlighted the challenges of daily travel, including early separation from families and extended time spent with peers, as contributing factors to bullying in TPS settings. Conversely, the close-knit environment of multigrade classrooms appeared to discourage bullying behaviors. This study illuminates the influence of school structure and organization on peer bullying dynamics, suggesting the need for targeted interventions to address the unique vulnerabilities of students in transported education systems.

**Keywords:** Peer Bullying, Multigrade Classroom, Transported Primary School, Transported Education, Bullying, Primary School

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of bullying comes from the Scandinavian term “mobbing” (Olweus, 2010). Mobbing refers to violence against a weaker victim by a group (Smith et al., 2002). In his first study, Olweus expanded this definition to include attacks carried out by one student against another and encompassing broader social interactions among children (Olweus, 2010). Bullying is a process in which the individual characteristics of students, the relationship between the bullying student and the victim, the presence of peers, teachers or other adults, and the wider social environment determine the nature of the bullying relationship (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Swearer & Doll, 2001). Considering that bullying is a variable, socio-ecological process, it may not be healthy to categorize students as bullies or victims (Crawford, 2002; Elinoff et al., 2004). To understand the social nature of bullying, Swearer et al. (2010) defined the process of involvement in bullying as a process in which students may bully others, be victims of bullying, be the both, be a bystander or an observer, or stay completely out of the bullying behaviour.

Bullying behaviors are a common social problem in all cultures, in different work or school environments, and among all genders and age groups. According to Olweus (2003), bullying is "a type of aggression perpetrated by an individual or a group against a defenseless person, which has physical or psychological consequences and shows continuity." As students attending primary schools, which is the first stage of compulsory education, move away from their immediate environment and enter unsupervised environments where adults are present, the likelihood of encountering bullying behaviors increases. This research focuses on the experiences of students who attend multigrade primary schools in the area where they live or in TPS that are far from the environment they live in, regarding bullying behaviors.

### Problem Statement

While pre-school education is optional in Turkey, four-year primary school, four-year secondary school, and four-year high school are within the scope of twelve-year compulsory education. In general, the practice of multigrade classrooms (MGC) is defined as a teaching method in which more than one class is combined in the same classroom, and the lessons are carried out by one teacher (Erdem, 2008; Sahin, 2003). The concepts of "primary school" and "secondary school" were abolished with Law No. 4306 enacted in 1997 and replaced with "primary school," which refers to an uninterrupted eight-year school. Since it was not possible to convert MGC primary schools into primary schools, these schools were closed, and students were transported to primary schools daily using the transportation means provided by the state in the 1997-1998 academic year. This practice is called "Transported Primary Education Application."

In transported education practice, students who move to a different central school from the villages or towns they live in may encounter problems from the moment they leave their homes. Yeşilyurt et al. (2007) state that students may have to stand while commuting because the villagers use transportation services and that weather conditions disrupt transported education. Ağırkaya (2010) stated that transportation service drivers mistreat students in transportation education practices. In his study examining transported education in the context of social problems, Taşbaşı (2011) stated that transportation service drivers sometimes behave rudely to students.

The aim of the study is to describe and make sense of the frequency of peer bullying; the experiences, feelings and thoughts of students who attend primary schools that practice MGC in their immediate environment, and those who move to primary schools that practice independent classes which are quite far from their immediate environment. It is stated that the attitudes of children who experience peer bullying towards school also change, that children have negative feelings towards school and do not want to attend classes (Hamurcu, 2020).

In MGC, peer bullying is an anticipated problem when students of different ages and levels are in the same environment. There is no study in the literature on comparing peer bullying in primary schools with MGC and transported primary schools.

Peer bullying is one problem they may experience. Students may experience bullying verbally, physically, or emotionally. In the study conducted by Arı et al. (2004), it was concluded that students who attend boarding schools or primary schools with transportation have higher levels of homesickness, low motivation, and reluctance than their peers studying in regular schools. Since bullying is a social phenomenon and social interactions between students vary according to age and gender, these variables are important in terms of examining different forms of bullying (Underwood and Rosen, 2011). Bullying, which is examined according to different variables, is examined in this study according to the type of school. In MGC; students of different ages and levels have the opportunity to socialize and they constantly cooperate. They are provided with a warm family atmosphere (Yılmaz, 2014). Another positive aspect of MGC is that students of different ages and levels are together and benefit from peer learning. Interaction and cooperation opportunities are also among the positive aspects of MGC (Güler, 2016). Although MGC is considered as a practice resulting from necessity in Turkey, studies show that the practice is in the best interest of students in various aspects and has strong pedagogical outcomes. Şentürk and Işık's (2003) research reveals that citizens living in villages want their children to study in villages they live in, and that they hold the view that transported education is not a good alternative for their children. A sense of belonging and security must be ensured for both teachers and students for education and training to be carried out effectively.

### **Research Questions**

Answers were sought to the following two questions regarding the purpose and importance of the research:

1. What are the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of students attending MGC primary schools and bussed primary schools about peer bullying?
2. What features in the structure and functioning of both primary school types prepare the ground for or prevent peer bullying?

### **METHOD**

This research is basic qualitative research since it aims to reveal the experiences, feelings, and opinions of students attending primary schools that employ MGC and TPS regarding the phenomenon of peer bullying and to evaluate the resulting situations together with the structure and characteristics of primary schools. In this research, the basic qualitative research method was used. Basic qualitative research aims to investigate how people understand their lives and experiences (Merriam 2013). In this study, peer bullying was described from the participant's tone of voice, their shyness or self-confidence, the color of their face during the interview, their gestures and facial expressions, the sociocultural structure of their geography, and the researcher's observations.

### **Participants of the research**

The research sample consisted of students studying in multigrade classes and TPS in Tokat province. Students were determined in accordance with the principle of maximum diversity sampling. The study's participants consisted of 19 students from three village primary schools operating as MGC and 12 students from three transported primary schools, one in the city center, one in the town, and one in the village. Participants will be included in the study with codes instead of their names. Multigrade class female students will be listed as MF1, MF2... (multigrade class female), male students will be listed as MM1, MM2... (multigrade class male). Transported female students will be listed as TF1, TF2... (transported female) and transported males will be listed as TM1, TM2...

(transported male). Participants are 3rd and 4th grade students in both school types and they are between the ages of 8 and 10. Students' grades, ages, genders, distances between home and school, and living in villages or centers were evaluated as indicators of maximum diversity. The aim of this study to obtain data from a sample with maximum diversity was evaluated as a feature that will support the transferability of the study.

### Collection of data

The students were given the necessary information about which behaviors constituted bullying and were asked a semi-structured interview form consisting of open-ended questions about their status as bullies and victims.

The questions in the prepared interview form were submitted to expert opinion to ensure their validity. Alternative question and probe suggestions from experts in educational sciences and experts who have researched on qualitative research techniques were taken into consideration. No changes were made to the main lines of the interview form. The interview form was finalized by taking into account the opinions of experts. In order to collect the data, the measurement tool that was finalized after the expert opinions were presented to the Hacettepe University Ethics Commission, and it was deemed ethically appropriate with the Rectorate letter dated 26 June 2018 and numbered 35853172-300-E.00000104713. Afterward, it was submitted to the Tokat Provincial Directorate of National Education, the schools to be included in the application were determined, and research permission was obtained. Before the interview, students were visited at their schools. Since their volunteering would be the basis, they were informed about the type of study in the preliminary interview, and they were told that their names would definitely not be revealed and that their evaluation would not be shared with others. During the interview, consent from the interviewees were obtain to record the interview. Before the application, the necessary permissions were obtained from the parents and the interview was conducted with the parents' knowledge of the day and time of the interview. Since necessary permissions were taken, recording was made and notes were taken. It is thought that supporting the research questions with alternative questions and probes will increase the reliability of the research. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

### Data analysis

Following the research questions, categories and classifications (such as types of aggression) in the relevant literature and theoretical framework were used to create codes (descriptive analysis). In addition, the participants' statements and interpretations of these statements (interpretive analysis) were also included. In the emotional bullying category, the codes "humiliation," "exclusion," "marginalization," and "grouping" were created in the expressions of "not being included in the game / being kicked out of the game." Such codes were used when organizing the raw data. These codes were interpreted with participant statements to answer the research questions. To support the interpretations, prominent participant statements were included in a "narrative" style.

**Table1. Bullying experiences and Reactions**

Category	Codes	Participant View
<b>Verbal Bullying</b>	Swearing Teasing	"My classmates swear. But most people swear in our village." (MM3)
<b>Physical Bullying</b>	Harming objects Pulling hair	"My friend is always pulling my hait but I keep quite because I don't want to offend them." (MF6)
<b>Emotional Bullying</b>	Exclusion Gossiping	"They exclude me in games. They always talk behind me." (MF7)
<b>Reactions to bullying</b>	Complaining to the teacher Complaining to the family Solving the problem on their own Remain as a bystander	"First I tell it to my teacher." (MF1, MF2, MF3, MF6, MM5, MF7)

## FINDINGS AND COMMENTS

This section presents the findings related to the question, "What are the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of students attending primary schools with MGC and students attending TPS regarding peer bullying?". Then, the findings related to the question, "Which features in the structure and functioning of both types of primary schools motivate peer bullying or prevent peer bullying?" are presented. The names used in the presentation of the findings are not real names but rather pseudonyms constructed by the researcher according to their gender.

### Findings regarding the first research question

#### *Experiences and Opinions of MGC Students on Peer Bullying*

The students were asked questions to reflect on their experiences and feelings about verbal, physical, cyber and emotional bullying. The meaning of bullying and the situations of being exposed to bullying were explained with examples, and awareness was created among the participants. MM5, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student, said: "I heard the word bullying on television. In our class, no one yells at me, no one misbehaves. First graders are a bit naughty, but they get wiser as they grow up. We are like siblings. Our teacher and we will teach them the rules." One of the most common answers in the interviews was, "We are like siblings," just like MM5, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student, said.

As for verbal bullying, abusive language is among the frequently repeated behaviors. MF1, MF3, MF4, MF5, MM4 started that there was abusive speech. As another student, MM3, stated, "Our village already uses abusive language." This can be considered a situation arising from the sociocultural structure in the village. " My classmate swear a lot but everyone in our village does. So, it is okay." In expressing his thoughts, it is revealed that the family and social environment affect how they speak. According to social learning theory, observation underlies the learning of behavior. The individual observes, learns, and then applies the behavior. It can be said that abusive speech is a behavior learned from the social environment.

3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student MF1; "The boys in our class swear a lot. They tease girls. I tell my mom, and she laughs. But it's not funny!". Similarly, MM4 said, "Ahmet swears a lot. He goes to the principal's office all the time, but he doesn't change. Transported students come to our class; we don't want those from that village", emphasizing the presence of transported students. Some students come to the multigrade classroom with transportation, and MM4, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student, states that students from that particular village disrupt the order of the classroom. Since they come from another village, he switches from "I" to "we" and says, "We don't want them." Ahmet could not be interviewed because parental permission could not be obtained. Of the 19 MGC students interviewed, 14 stated that there was no verbal bullying. MF9, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student, said, "There is Ali in the second grade. He is very naughty and always interrupts and spoils our games. I guess because he is young. So we don't say anything. He's like our brother." She states that although problems in the classroom environment exist, these are temporary. Some of the responses of the in MGC who stated that they did not experience verbal bullying and that everything was fine in the classroom are as follows: "No one did it to me, and I wouldn't do it either." MM6, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; "Everything is fine, we have no problems with our friends." MM8, 4<sup>th</sup> grade; "I have never had any problems with my friends, I don't think I will ever have any." MM9 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade; "No one yells at me in my class." MF2, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Two of the three village primary schools that implement MGC are children of their village, and no findings of verbal bullying were identified in these two schools. However, there was finding of swearing at the school where students were transported to the school where MGC were implemented. However, abusive speech was not made deliberately and continuously to the same defenseless person. The findings must be evaluated and investigated socioculturally, such as the local accent. It cannot be considered bullying.

Physical bullying behaviors can be described as hitting, pushing, pulling hair, or damaging objects. According to the content analysis findings of the interviews conducted in schools with unified classrooms, it is more common than verbal bullying. The bullying behavior of damaging objects was mentioned by three of the participants. The bullying behaviors are in the lower grades in terms of age. "Ali is in the second grade, and he always damages my books. He tears and scribbles." MM2, 4th grade.

MF6 cannot tell her teacher about her friend because they have been friends for many years. In addition to physical violence, she also suppresses herself emotionally. "I cannot tell you his name, but I have a friend since kindergarten. He is always pulling my hair. I protect myself sometimes and don't tell anyone so my friend doesn't get offended and sulk." Inci, 3rd grade. Participants MF2, MF3, MF4, MM1, MF5, MM5, MF7, MF10, MM8, MM9 stated that they have never bullied others or been subjected to physical bullying themselves by answering "Never happened/no/nothing happened in class."

The participants were asked the question, "Have you been bullied by schoolmates through social media or mobile phones, or have you engaged in such behaviors?" The participants responded that they did not use social media or cell phones. It should also be noted that the participants, being primary school students, have yet to experience using social media due to their young age and living in a village environment.

In the study, when two of the 19 students attending schools with MGC were asked for their opinions about their experiences of being exposed to emotional bullying or bullying, they answered: "I don't want those who come from other villages with transportation. I wish they wouldn't come. They are always disagreeable. They gossip and drive a wedge between us and our friends. The school is very good when they don't show up." MF6, Grade 3: "They exclude me in games. They don't like me. They talk behind me and gossip about me." MF7, Grade 3.

MF6 and MF7, students in schools practicing MGC, stated that they were exposed to emotional bullying. The other 17 students said "No." as the answer. Gossip is a common point in both responses as emotional bullying. Another common point is that gender and class levels are the same. Inci stated that the students who come with transportation create disharmony in the school environment.

Participants in schools with MGC were asked the question: "When you are subjected to bullying, do you share it with anyone?". 3rd-grade students MF1, MF2, MF3, MF6, MM5, MF7 answered: "First I tell my teacher; then I tell my mother and father." 4th Grade students MF4, MF10, MM9 answered: "I only tell my mother." 4th-grade students MF5, MM2, MM3, MF8, MF9 and 3rd-grade student MM6 answered: "I only tell my teacher. What happens at school stays at school." 3rd-grade students MM9 and MM4, 4th-grade student MM1 answered: "I don't tell anyone. I solve it if I can do it myself." 3rd grade student MM7 said: "I only tell my friend". While 12 of the 19 MGC students interviewed found it appropriate to tell the teacher, three participant students did not tell anyone and tried to solve it themselves.

The participants were asked, "How do you act when you have friends exposed to these types of bullying?". 3rd-grade students MF1, MF2, MF3 and 4th-grade students MF4, MM1, MF9, MF10 answered: "I don't know. I don't do anything. I just watch." The students who responded, "I remain as a spectator without reacting to bullying" are the students who have not been exposed to bullying in the classroom environment when the interview is considered. "I tell my teacher and wait for them to find a solution. The teacher will get angry with them." Eight students who answered, "I tell my teacher and wait for them to find a solution." view the teacher as the source of intervention and solution. 3rd grade student MF6 said, "I don't just watch. I immediately protect my friends by asking why they are doing it. Those who come with transportation disrupt our order. They fight among themselves. If the bully is right, I don't touch them, and I don't interfere. But if they are from our village, I intervene." A similar statement was made by MM9, a 3rd grade student, and MM8, a 4th grade student, who said, "I protect

my friends and try to find a middle ground." MF6, one of the students who would intervene herself without being a bystander when she witnesses bullying, stated that she would be a bystander if the bullied student was one of her friends who came with the transportation education practice.

### *Experiences and opinions of students attending TPS regarding peer bullying*

In this section, the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of students attending TPS regarding peer bullying are given. The experiences of students who are transported to an independent primary school located far away from their immediate surroundings are presented together with the participants' views in terms of being exposed to peer bullying or being bullied.

When the participants' views on verbal bullying were analyzed, four of the 12 students attending a primary school with transportation stated that they had never been verbally bullied. 3rd-grade student TF2 stated: "They always call us losers. They don't like us because we come from the village." while TF3, also a 3rd-grade student, said, "I have a friend who lives here in the city, he always calls me naive. He throws me out of the game and yells at me. In fact, he always yells not only at me but also at girls from our village." It is evident that there is discrimination between urban and rural students in the school environment. Students are verbally aggressive on a continuous basis. TF5, one of the 4th-grade students who was exposed to verbal bullying, said: "They insult me. A boy named Osman says 'your very existence is filth' to people from our village. He says, 'You are peasants, you are dirty, you stink, the classroom stinks because of you'", indicating that there is a deep segregation.

In transported education practice, students who move from their villages or towns to a different central school may encounter problems from the moment they leave their homes. The students' evaluations of the bus driver may also be considered as being exposed to bullying behaviors. TF6, a 4th-grade student, said, "Our bus driver yells a lot; he uses profane language. He gets very angry if we are late. But we can't say anything when he is late, of course."

Similarly, 4th-grade student TM6 said, "Our bus driver yells and swears a lot. He does not make a sound when he is late, but if we are late, we are scolded and sworn at. We can't do anything to him, but if someone swears in class, I first beat them and then we go to the principal." Here, TM6 projects the behavior he learned and coded to his peers. As mentioned in the literature, the transportation process is also a very problematic one. There are many service problems ranging from the lack of training of the bus drivers, mistreatment of the students, and the use of the bus by the village people. TF6 expresses her discomfort with the bus driver, while TM6 reflects on the bullying he is exposed to on the bus by his peers at school. He applies the verbal bullying he suffered in the bus service to his peers as verbal and physical bullying in the school environment.

When we examined the opinions of 12 participant students attending primary schools with transportation about physical bullying, 3 students stated that they were bullied, while one student (TM6) emphasized that he was the bully. They stated that physical bullying occurred during lunch. TF4, a 4th-grade student, said, "There is a lot of pushing during lunch. At every meal, the same people push and shove their way to the front." Students attending transportation education expressed difficulties such as the eating environment, the cleanliness and temperature of the environment, and brawls during meals.

Within the scope of the research, it was aimed to evaluate the experiences and feelings of the participants related to cyberbullying regarding the use of cell phones, access, and use of social media. However, all 12 students attending primary schools with transportation do not use cell phones and social media. It should also be noted that although the participant students are young and attend a center with transportation, they do not yet have experience in using social media because they are primary school students.

After the students attending primary schools with transportation were informed about emotional bullying, it was examined whether they were exposed to this type of bullying. TF3, a 3rd-

grade student, said, "Derya always calls me 'naive'. She kicks me out of the game. She has a clique; they all treat me the same way. I want to stay in my village. Our village has a school like this, but it is closed. I am very unhappy here." TF3 sees herself as weaker than her friends because she comes from the village. The fact that she wants to play games but is not allowed and is thrown out of the game makes her feel alienated. If she attended school in her village, she would feel that she belonged to the environment and would not feel marginalized. TM4, a 4th grade student, stated that he had the same problem and was not included in the games. TF5, a 4th-grade student, was not included in the games for a similar reason and stated that she was offended: "They say that we stink because we come from the village, and they don't let us play. They are disgusted because we smell like a barn. I am always excluded from the games." Expressing that the teacher is also aware of this discrimination, TM6 said, "They always exclude us who come from the village. They discriminate. Actually, i think the teacher is also aware of it. They don't let us in the games, so I play with people from my village." There is a school environment where the distinction between urbanites and villagers is felt, and the language of "we" is used instead of "I" based on discrimination and social class.

The question "Do you share with anyone when you are bullied?" was posed to 12 students attending primary schools with transportation. Eight participants answered: "First, I share it with my teacher, then with my mother." It is shared with the teacher first to find a solution, and when they return home, the family is informed. Sharing with the teacher and family is very important to cope with bullying. On the contrary, 3rd grade student TM3 said, "I don't share it with anyone. What happens at school stays at school." She states that she does not share her bullying with anyone. TM3 states that she was bullied during lunch in the schoolyard but did not share it with the teacher or her family. Similarly, TF4, a 4th-grade student, said, "I tell the teacher, but I don't tell my mom because she might get upset. We are not in our village; it will preoccupy her. She can't come here since it is quite far from our village." TF4 is a student who stated that she was subjected to bullying during meals and shared the situation with her teacher. She stated that her teacher could not prevent the bullying and that the same student continued bullying at every meal. Since she is far away from her village, she thinks that her family will be disturbed by the situation and that they will not be able to come because it is far away, so she hides it from her family. TF3, a 3rd-grade student, and TM6, a 4th-grade student, stated that they would overcome bullying behaviors on their own by saying, "I solve it myself; I don't tell anyone."

Twelve students attending primary schools with transportation were asked, "How do you behave when your friends are exposed to this kind of bullying?". Seven participants said, upon witnessing the bullying, "I told my teacher and they punished them." The students, who said that they warned their friends but also informed the teacher, stated that they would tell the teacher about every bullying behavior they encountered, but that it was not a complete solution. TF1, a 3rd-grade student, said, "Our teacher punishes them by not allowing them to go out for recess, and the next recess, they continue the same behavior in the classroom or the schoolyard. So, it is not a solution. I wonder if the teacher should make the punishment more severe?" and emphasized that bullying did not disappear and continued at the same level. TF3, a 3rd-grade student, and TM6, a 4th-grade student, responded as follows: "I intervened, and I will intervene again."

During the interview, the participants were asked, "Do you have anything you want to tell other than what we discussed?". The answers received were about the negative reflections of the transportation education practice. MF6, one of the students in schools that practice MGC, said: "I don't like those who come to our school with transportation. The children of that village are not like the ones in our village. They are always fighting. They disrupted our order." MF7 had similar thoughts: "I don't like those who come with transportation. They will corrupt the children of our village as well." Children who are transported from their villages to another village are viewed as a threat to classroom order.

MM9, a MGC student, also had some concerns: "Next year, our school will be closed, and we will go to Tokat province. I don't want it at all. Those who go to Tokat go to school when it is dark.



Here, I leave home ten minutes before class and make it to my class. My sister goes to school in the city, and she doesn't like it at all. She leaves almost two hours before me."

TF1, a 3rd-grade student who attends transported primary school, said: "We are standing on the bus. People from the village get on the bus. They sit because they are the elders. When I stand, I feel very nauseous in the morning. The school in my village is closed, and I never attended there. If my school were in my village, I would eat my mother's proper meals at lunch. The food queue is very troublesome. I don't like coming here, I wish I could walk to my school." She wants to go to her village school, which remains unused. She states that she encounters problems from the moment she leaves her home and has problems regarding service and food.

Eleven of the 12 students attending primary schools with transportation stated they had something to add. They emphasized that they did not want to attend school with transportation. TF2 said, "I would like to go to school in my village." TM1 said, "I wish my school were in my village. But here, there is a grocery store close to this school. Actually, that's why I like this school. It's good that there is only one grocery store; otherwise, if it were in my village, we would be comfortable at lunch. We could go to the toilet at home. Still, school is not comfortable. Commuting is also tiring, and it takes us half an hour." They emphasized the importance of eating lunch at home and being able to go to the toilet easily. TF3, a 3rd-grade student, started school in her village, but when the school was closed, she had to go to a primary school with transportation farther away from her home. She said: "I went to first grade in the village. The teacher would come occasionally. And the teachers changed all the time. In the end, no teacher came at all. The school in the village was far from home, and it was difficult to walk to school. Now we walk to the mosque and take the bus. The walk is short, but the school is far. I wish a full-time teacher had come and we could have stayed in the village. Our school is very nice. If a teacher said they would come, the whole village would make the school even better. The chief of the village gives tasks to the fathers, and they do them. It is very cold where we eat here. The walking distance to the school in her village is longer than the distance she walks to get on the bus, but she stated that she would be more comfortable if the school in her village opened and she could attend there. TM3, a 3rd-grade student, said: "I wish they took this school and put it in our village. And I wish the teacher always came. The school in our village would look like this school if it was painted and computers were put in. Also, commuting makes me tired. The villagers from our village who go to Tokat province always take our seats before we get on the bus. I would love to be in my own village."

Participants who talk about teachers not coming regularly think that the school in their village will be opened with teachers coming regularly. Most students who said that the closed schools in the villages remained idle mentioned the advantages of going to school in their villages. TF4, a 4th grade student, said, "I would like to study in the village. I already have a school in my village. Actually, we went to another school first, but I guess complaints were made to our mothers about it. Then they assigned us to this school. I also went to school in the village, but the teacher did not always come. I wish my teacher here would come to the village. I would go home for lunch. We can come here in 20 minutes with the shuttle service, which is not long." Similarly, TM6 said, "I wish I were in my own village. It was very good when I was studying there. In the village, I would go home for lunch; here we go hungry." Similar problems were repeated by many participants. TM5, a 3rd-grade student who was transported because the class capacity in the school in his village exceeded the existing capacity, said, "I couldn't go because there was no room in the school in our village. The school in our village is better. I wanted to go there but couldn't, I have friends who go there and we come here in vain. I wish they had built another classroom." Not being able to participate in after-school activities or sports evokes feelings of isolation. A 4th-grade student, TM4, said, "I would love to have my school in the village. I have many friends there. The school was open for a while, but the teachers did not come regularly, so they sent us here. Those of us who come with the school bus cannot participate in anything after school. We rush to the bus." TF5, a 4th grader, is a student who experiences almost all the problems mentioned above.

Bullying, problems in the bus service, adverse physical conditions of the cafeteria, and disruptions in transportation from the village to school; TF5 pointed out a common problem: "My sister is in the first grade, and they make fun of her because she has short hair and they call her a 'peasant boy.' I wish we were in our village; no one would call us dirty villagers. I am not dirty at all. When we get on the bus, there is no room for us. I sit and take my sister on my lap, and sometimes we both stand. Our villagers come to Tokat by bus when we go to school. The dining hall is outside here. Our village is a plateau, the snow blocks our road a lot, and when it snows, the bus can't go up, and we can't come to school that day." A study conducted by Arı et al. (2004) concluded that students attending primary schools with boarding or transportation had higher homesickness, low motivation, and reluctance than their peers studying in regular schools.

### ***Findings related to the second research question***

School structure and teacher attitudes also cause or prevent peer bullying. Firstly, the structure and characteristics of the school with unified classrooms, and then the structure and characteristics of primary schools with transportation were included.

Considering the experiences of students in primary schools with MGC, peer bullying is almost non-existent. There is a family environment at school. The participants were 3rd and 4th graders, and the bullies were 1st and 2nd graders. However, those who were subjected to bullying stated that they were young and would not do it when they grew up. The perception was that the younger siblings of the family were misbehaving. The teacher acted as the solution center. Students said they would share with the teacher if exposed to peer bullying. The teacher was in the role of parent, creating a classroom culture with students as older brothers, older sisters, and younger siblings. Students exposed to peer bullying stated that students who came to school with transportation disrupted the classroom order and that the classroom environment was better without them. Although the age groups were heterogeneous, the older students did not bully the younger students but had a protective and caring attitude. The concern of the students in MGC is that they do not want to go to another school with transportation.

Students attending TPS experiences difficulties such as getting up too early, being exposed to bullying by the driver. They stated that the school they attend with transportation is not physically very different from the schools in their villages. Students exposed to many forms of bullying, such as discrimination, groupings, and being excluded from games, do not feel comfortable in the school environment. Students who came to school early reported that they were hungry until and during lunchtime. Some students expressed problems such as pushing and shoving during meals and feeling cold in the eating environment. There are questions about whether transport schools are physically adequate for the students. The students emphasized the importance of eating hot meals in a warm environment at home. They stated that the dining halls are outside the school and, therefore, cold. Students think that being at home during lunch breaks for toilet needs will make them feel comfortable. It is obvious that physiological needs cannot be fully met in schools. Students attending primary school with transportation wanted to go to school in their villages and stated that they were not satisfied with the school environment they were in.

The students who felt they could not participate in national holiday activities at school and were excluded emphasized that all their friends who came with transportation faced the same problem. Students who come to primary school with transportation have to leave their friends behind after school and this limits their friendship relations only with their friends from their villages. They do not have a sense of belonging. Students who live in the city or town exclude the students who come with transportation and engage in verbal, physical, or emotional bullying behaviors. Even if the students who come to the primary school with transportation share the bullying behavior they are exposed to with their teachers, they believe there is no solution. These students stated that they were exposed to bullying behaviors such as humiliation, insult, and exclusion from games by their peers in the school environment, where they felt alienated, and were hesitant about sharing these behaviors with their

families. According to the students who come with transportation, their families are far away from them, and they will feel sorry for their situation but cannot find a solution.

While an educational environment of tolerance, love, and respect with a family environment was created in the schools with MGC, the situation in the primary schools with transportation is the opposite. While the bullying of students attending TPS starts on the way to school and continues until they return from school, the behaviors that are difficult to define as bullying in the school with unified classrooms are tried to be solved by the students themselves.

To compare the reactions of students to bullying behaviors in the two types of elementary schools, participants were given sample situations related to bullying types and asked how they would react. Students' reactions to verbal, physical, cyber, and emotional bullying behaviors were evaluated. Firstly, the participants were asked: "While you are washing your hands, another child comes and pushes you and puts his/her hands under the faucet. How would you react?" Of the 19 students attending a primary school with MGC, eight said, "I warn, I get angry, I tell them to wait for their turn. If they don't move, I will have to wait. Then I tell my teacher." The other 11 students said, "I get angry, tell them to wait their turn, and I push them. I do the same thing then I tell my teacher." Three of the 12 students attending TPS said, "I get angry, I don't let them go, so I push them." In contrast, nine of them said, "I go to the other faucet, and I don't say anything." According to the study, primary school students exposed to bullying, discrimination, and exclusion were hesitant to respond with tit for tat. Students attending primary schools with MGC, on the other hand, react with the thought that their rights are being taken away because they do not experience bullying. Afterward, they prefer to tell the teacher to find a solution. The theory of moral development based on Piaget and Kohlberg's Four-Component Model comprehensively evaluates students' reactions to sample situations. In this model, the individual's reactions to an event and their decision-making on their behaviors are evaluated.

For example, "A friend from your class scribbled in your notebook and wrote a bad word, and you see that they are laughing and looking at you. How would you react?" Fourteen of the 19 students attending primary schools with MGC responded: "I would get angry, warn them, and tell my teacher so that he/she can punish them." The other five participants responded, "I would go and scribble in their notebooks or books during recess so that we would get even." Eleven of the 12 students attending primary schools with transportation said, "I tell my teacher. I don't do anything else." TF1, a 3rd-grade student, said, "I would scribble in their notebook too." As in the first example, students exposed to bullying behavior do not find it fitting to bully. Participants gave shy answers in a low voice during the interview. Participants who experience bullying react by empathizing and distancing themselves from bullying behaviors because they know how much it affects the victim.

Ignoring, one of the emotional bullying behaviors, was evaluated with the question: "When you come to school you say good morning to your friend, and he ignores you. The same friend continues this situation for days. How would you react?" Six of the 19 students attending primary schools with MGC said, "I would do nothing, I would walk away." Thirteen participants said, "I would talk and try to understand why. I ask my friends. We don't get cross normally." Six of the 12 students attending primary schools with transportation said, "If they sulk, let them sulk. I will not greet him/her again." The rest stated they would be curious about the problem by saying, "I would talk to him and try to figure out why." Students attending primary schools with MGC stated that such a situation would not occur between them and would try to understand the reason even if such a situation occurred. However, students attending primary schools with transportation stated that they would accept the situation at a higher rate and continue their lives. Students attending TPS who are exposed to emotional bullying normalize ignoring and exclusion at a higher rate.

To determine the reactions of the students when steered toward bullying behavior, the following question was asked: "A popular person at school wants you to pull the hair of a girl he always teases. You need to do this to be in the popular group. How would you behave?" Except for one participant, students from both school types answered, "I wouldn't do it. It is unfair." TF6, a 4th-grade student attending a primary school with transportation, said, "I would do it. But while pulling

her hair, I say in her ear that I am just joking." TF6 stated that she was not subjected to emotional or physical bullying. However, she was subjected to verbal bullying by the bus driver.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When examining the experiences of students attending both types of schools regarding any kind of bullying, we find that though they are third and fourth-grade students, the bullying behaviors they experience are quite common. While a family-like environment is more dominant in MGC schools, this situation is the opposite in TPS. MGC students expressed themselves well, were confident throughout the interview, and accepted their friends and teachers as family members. In contrast, TPS students exhibited more reserved attitudes during the interview. The fact that young children from villages are taken away from their families, travel a distance to school daily, and enter an unfamiliar environment at a very young age results in psychological and academic difficulties compared to students attending schools near their homes. Küpeli (2020) stated that students' feelings of fear and loneliness, seeing themselves as weak, and the idea of belonging to a group can cause peer bullying. Alkaya and Avşar (2018) state that the individual's inability to adequately convey the communication problems experienced during the socialization process are the reasons for peer bullying. Students in TPS are more vulnerable to peer bullying.

The findings also show that TPS students are more exposed to peer bullying. "Swearing" and "abusive language" were the most common verbal bullying encountered by MGC students. However, the family structure and social environment in villages also use foul language. They mentioned swearing with subjects like "my father," "my grandfather," and "my neighbor," indicating that it cannot be considered bullying as it is not intentional but rather a local dialect and accent. The research shows that first or second-grade students are usually the bullies in multigrade classrooms, and the students who are subjected to bullying approach with tolerance, stating they will not exhibit these behaviors when they grow up. Some students are transported to the primary school where MGC is implemented, and the bullying experiences of MGC students are mainly caused by those who come with transportation. The inclusion of transported students disturbed the existing village children, and the transported students exhibited bullying behaviors, struggling to adapt to the new environment. The study revealed that verbal and physical bullying were the most common types of bullying, with verbal bullying being a little more prominent. There are studies in the literature that have reached similar conclusions (Gökler, 2007; Karatzias et al., 2002; Pişkin, 2010; Polat and Sohbet, 2019; Atış Akyol et al., 2018).

The opposite is true for students who move to a school many kilometers away. Transported students exposed to much peer bullying experience verbal insults and humiliation. They cope with bullying from bus drivers and peers. Moreover, the buses carry villagers to the city, causing problems such as standing up, insults, and abusive language. Many studies on transportation education report similar issues related to bus drivers, supporting the study's findings. The bullying experience causes students to become disillusioned with school and move away from it (Üstündağ Şener, Başar, Şen, & Göncü, 2015). All these negative experiences, especially violence, turn into an individual, social, and even universal problem (Başar & Çetin, 2013).

TPS students are subjected to bullying by peers in the school environment, including the schoolyard, classroom, and cafeteria. They face exclusion, humiliation, and marginalization and often want to attend school in their villages. The physical conditions of the eating environment are among the most significant problems. While some schools lack cafeterias, others have unheated cafeterias. This study revealed that peer bullying, such as pushing, cutting lines, and ignoring, was common in cafeterias. Students wanted to eat at home during lunch breaks, believing it would be more comfortable if they attended school in their villages. In some studies, students stated that violence occurs in school areas such as classrooms, school yards and corridors (Başar and Çetin, 2013; Bentley and Li, 1996; Çinkır and Kepenekçi, 2003; Kartal, 2008; Kartal and Bilgin, 2009; Özgür et al., 2011; Yalçıntaş-Sezgin, 2017). Burnukara and Uçanok (2012) concluded that students encounter bullying both inside and outside of school.

The bullying experiences of MGC students and TPS students are quite different. In TPS, bullying in the service and eating environments, as well as exclusion by friends, caused timid behaviors in children. However, most students in TPS do not tell their families about the bullying. In MGC, there is a tendency to share with family and teachers when exposed to peer bullying. TF4, a 4th-grade student, said, "I tell the teacher, but I don't tell my mother because she would get upset. We are not in our village; it would preoccupy her. She can't come here; it is quite far from our village." When students in TPS are exposed to bullying, they prefer to share it with their teachers. Teachers are the most influential people for these students far from their families. In interviews with TPS students, they expressed feelings of isolation and a lack of solutions to their problems.

The study's findings on virtual peer bullying situations show different approaches between the two school types. TPS students, who experience peer bullying, do not show bullying behaviors in sample situations and share their experiences with teachers, seeking solutions. They empathize and avoid bullying due to their experiences. However, MGC students respond to peer bullying with bullying, although the rate is very low. They see bullying as a rights violation, defend themselves in virtual situations, and seek solutions with the teacher after their warnings. The findings show that MGC students are more exposed to verbal bullying, while TPS students are more exposed to emotional bullying. Research indicates that emotional bullying, such as humiliation, marginalization, exclusion, and not being allowed to play, is more prevalent in primary schools with transportation.

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