Strategies for controlling bullying in High Schools in South Africa

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Abstract. This study explores practical strategies for controlling bullying to enhance the school environment in a selected high school within the Chris Hani West District. Bullying remains a pervasive issue in educational settings, profoundly impacting students' psychological well-being, academic performance, and overall school climate. This research employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with students, teachers, and parents to identify the prevalence of bullying behaviours and the effectiveness of existing interventions. The findings suggest that fostering open communication and strengthening community partnerships can significantly reduce bullying incidents and enhance learners' experiences. Additionally, findings highlighted that implementing a buddy system can help mitigate bullying by ensuring students have someone to rely on during vulnerable periods, such as breaks. This study recommends designating safe spaces within the school for at-risk students, integrating social-emotional learning into the curriculum, and increasing adult supervision in common areas as further measures to mitigate bullying. This study advocates for a holistic and collaborative approach, engaging all stakeholders in creating a safer, more supportive educational environment. By drawing on best practices and evidencing successful interventions, this research aims to provide actionable recommendations that school administrators and policymakers can utilise to combat bullying in high school settings effectively.

Keywords: Bullying, School Environment, Learner Well-being, Anti-bullying Policies, Interpersonal Violence

1. Introduction

In recent decades, extensive research has illuminated the pervasive nature of bullying in educational institutions, revealing its rapid development and diffusion across many schools. This alarming trend has sparked an increased interest among scholars in identifying effective strategies to combat bullying and enhance the school environment for learners. Singla et al. (2021) emphasise that bullying is a critical issue impacting schools nationally and internationally. According to Dorio et al. (2020), bullying is defined as a pattern of intentional behaviour that is repetitive, persistent, and aimed at harming, frightening, or upsetting another individual. From this perspective, bullying can be seen

as the ongoing mistreatment of one person by another, leading to significant consequences for all involved whether they are bullies, victims, or bystanders who witness interpersonal violence.

Empirical literature further underscores the gravity of bullying by highlighting its long-term psychological, emotional, and academic impacts on victims. For instance, a study by Modecki et al., 2014) found that victims of bullying are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, which can persist into adulthood. Additionally, grey literature reports, such as reports from the World Health Organisation (WHO), emphasise that bullying not only affects individual well-being but also disrupts school climate, leading to decreased student engagement and academic achievement. The significance of understanding bullying extends beyond its immediate effects; it is crucial for developing preventative interventions and fostering safe, inclusive environments that promote positive development. Recognising the multifaceted nature of bullying through empirical and grey literature informs the necessity of this study, which aims to address the gaps and enhance intervention strategies in educational settings.

Despite increased awareness and research on bullying's prevalence and impact in schools, there's a significant gap in empirical studies on effective strategies to mitigate these behaviours. While existing literature outlines the psychological and social implications for victims and perpetrators, few studies focus on actionable interventions for educators and communities. Much of this research overlooks the unique cultural dynamics of specific regions, like the Chris Hani West District in the Eastern Cape Province, leading to underrepresented localized solutions. Additionally, there is a lack of longitudinal studies assessing the long-term effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies over time, crucial for understanding their sustainability and impact on school climate. This study aims to bridge these gaps by examining tailored bullying prevention and intervention strategies for a high school in this district, ultimately contributing to a safer and more supportive educational environment for all learners.

1.1 Research questions
- What strategies are most effective in addressing the root causes of bullying to create a supportive school climate?
- what ways do emotional intelligence workshops impact students' ability to manage conflicts and foster respectful peer relationships?

2. Literature Review
2.1 Fostering a Supportive School Environment
Creating a supportive school environment is universally acknowledged as a key strategy for reducing bullying and promoting positive peer relationships. Peer support initiatives, such as buddy programs, have been demonstrated to foster a sense of belonging and safety among students, which in turn decreases victimisation and aggressive behaviours (Ahinkorah, 2021). These programs serve to strengthen social bonds and promote inclusivity, acting as protective factors against bullying (Bokhove et al., 2022). However, support systems alone are insufficient unless underlying behavioural issues are addressed. Effective anti-bullying strategies should combine support with proactive behavioural interventions, including education on respect, empathy, and emotional regulation (Dorio et al., 2020). Such a dual approach aims to modify negative behaviours and foster a school climate that discourages bullying at its core.

Open communication within the school community is another vital component of a supportive environment. Normalising discussions about bullying reduces stigma and

encourages students to share their experiences, which can lead to collective action and increased accountability (Elliott & Davis, 2020). Creating smaller, safer spaces for dialogue, such as small-group discussions, facilitates more honest and meaningful conversations (Bear, 2020). Practical measures like increased adult supervision, particularly in high-risk areas, have also been shown to deter bullying behaviours (Varela et al., 2021). However, supervision is most effective when combined with efforts to empower students to intervene safely, fostering resilience and mutual support within the school environment (Bokhove et al., 2022).

2.2 Promoting Open Communication and Emotional Intelligence
Developing emotional intelligence (EI) is central to fostering a school climate characterised by empathy, understanding, and respect (Bear, 2020). EI education helps students manage their emotions, develop empathy, and resolve conflicts more effectively, which collectively contribute to a reduction in bullying behaviours (Modecki et al., 2014). The success of EI programs depends on widespread participation, with some experts advocating for making such training mandatory for all students (Gaffney et al., 2021). Establishing strong, trusting relationships between students and caring adults further reinforces emotional security and provides safe spaces for discussing personal challenges (Bradshaw et al., 2021).
In the digital age, online safety and the prevention of cyberbullying have become increasingly important. Schools need to implement clear protocols and foster open dialogue about digital challenges to cultivate responsible online behaviours. Peer-led digital citizenship programs can be particularly effective in promoting empathy and responsible conduct online, thereby reducing cyberbullying incidents (Mahabeer, 2020).

2.3 Policy, Community Engagement, and Digital Safety
Classroom engagement strategies are instrumental in establishing a positive learning environment that discourages bullying. Engaging, interactive teaching methods help reduce boredom and misbehaviour, creating a classroom climate less conducive to bullying (Juniarti & Susila, 2021). However, disparities in resources and training can hinder consistent implementation. Conflict resolution training is another critical component, as it equips students with skills to manage disagreements constructively, ultimately reducing aggression and fostering cooperation (Lawrence, 2022). Continuous professional development for teachers is essential to sustain these initiatives and ensure lasting behavioural change (Dorio et al., 2020).
Fostering a culture of empathy and respect through classroom discussions supports positive social climates. Implementing anonymous reporting systems further enhances accountability by providing safe avenues for students to report bullying incidents. These systems increase incident reporting and prompt intervention, but their effectiveness depends on proper follow-up procedures to maintain credibility and trust (Llorent et al., 2021).
Bear (2020) assert that effective anti-bullying strategies necessitate active collaboration among school staff, students, parents, and community organisations. Regular staff discussions and coordinated responses to bullying incidents promote a cohesive approach (Dietrich & Cohen, 2021). Well-defined anti-bullying policies are foundational; explicit standards and consequences promote awareness and accountability. The success of these policies depends heavily on stakeholder buy-in, emphasising the importance of active support from teachers, students, and parents (Le Menestrel, 2020).
Parental involvement extends beyond participation in workshops; active engagement at home and school helps reinforce anti-bullying messages and fosters a consistent culture of respect (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Partnerships with local organisations can

leverage community resources, making intervention programs more sustainable and culturally relevant (Singla et al., 2021).

3. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which provides an in-depth framework for understanding human development by focusing on the dynamic interaction between individuals and their surrounding environments (Tudge et al., 2022). This theory is especially relevant for examining bullying behaviours in schools, as it reveals the interconnectedness of various environmental contexts, from direct interactions within families and schools to broader societal influences. Tudge et al. (2022) stressed that by utilising this theory, we could gain insights into how multiple layers of influence shape behaviours, including bullying, and how effective interventions can be crafted to address this complex issue. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory suggests that human development is shaped by interactions across multiple environmental layers (Lawrence, 2022). These layers, each playing a unique role in influencing behaviour, include:

Microsystem: The microsystem encompasses an individual's immediate environment, including family, friends, school, and neighbourhood, where direct interactions occur (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In bullying contexts, the quality of relationships with peers, teachers, and family members can either foster or mitigate bullying behaviours.

Mesosystem: This layer examines the connections between different microsystems, such as how family dynamics influence a child's school experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Parent perceptions of bullying and their engagement in school activities can profoundly affect their child's behaviour.

Exosystem: The exosystem includes broader societal influences that indirectly impact individuals, like local government policies and community resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Policies on bullying prevention and support from community organisations can significantly shape the school environment.

Macrosystem: This layer represents the overarching cultural values, norms, and laws that inform the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Societal attitudes toward violence, discipline, and conflict resolution play a crucial role in shaping school environments.

Chronosystem: The chronosystem considers the dimension of time, examining how changes over time influence individual development and societal trends (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Generational shifts in addressing bullying can affect the long-term success of interventions.

Ecological Systems Theory serves as a robust framework for analysing bullying and designing interventions. Its holistic perspective emphasises addressing bullying within various environments rather than solely focusing on individual behaviours, leading to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions. For instance, understanding how school culture (microsystem), parental involvement (mesosystem), and community support (exosystem) interact allows for a clearer picture of the development and persistence of bullying. Elliott and Davis (2020) highlight that this theory informs the creation of multifaceted anti-bullying programs that integrate family and community involvement with school-based efforts. By promoting awareness and education for students, teachers, and parents, these programs foster positive behaviours and accountability across different settings, forming a unified approach to prevention. The theory also provides a long-term perspective on interventions, showing how changes in one system can influence others (Elliott & Davis 2020). For example, improved school policies can lead to greater parental engagement, affecting community attitudes toward bullying prevention. In the context of this study, Ecological Systems Theory offers a multidimensional lens for understanding bullying behaviours and crafting effective interventions, ultimately supporting the development of positive and inclusive school environments.

4. Research design and methods

A research methodology must provide a coherent, logically structured, and sufficiently detailed narrative that enables other scholars to understand precisely how the study was conducted and to assess the robustness, credibility, and replicability of the findings. Research methodology, as defined by Saharan et al. (2020), encompasses concepts and principles that guide the execution of a study. This research employed a qualitative approach, which enhances understanding of motivations and reasons. The researcher engaged with various individuals involved in the school's daily operations, including the School Management Team (SMT), teachers, and students. The aim was to provide a platform for them to express their views on school-related issues, particularly regarding bullying. By adopting a qualitative research style, the study enabled those affected to articulate their perceptions of the school's performance.

4.1 Research design

According to Pandey and Pandey (2021), a research design is the methodical approach a researcher adopts to conduct a systematic investigation. A case study was adopted in this study. A case study is an in-depth investigation of a person, group, situation, or occurrence Kulhari et al, 2020). Case studies frequently involve participant observation, are researcher-centred, and aim to present a comprehensive picture of the research environment (Pandey et al., 2021). Firstly, a case study enables an in-depth investigation of a specific person, group, situation, or occurrence, aligning with the study's objective of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the research environment (Kulhari et al., 2020). Secondly, this approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex phenomena within their real-life context, enabling researchers to observe and analyse detailed interactions and processes (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). The emphasis on participant observation within case studies further supports the collection of rich, qualitative data that can reveal nuanced insights often missed by other research methods.

Thirdly, as a researcher-centred method, the case study facilitates a systematic and thorough exploration by the researcher, ensuring that the investigation remains focused on the specific issues of interest. This method's flexibility and depth make it ideal for capturing the intricacies of the research environment, providing a comprehensive picture that can inform meaningful conclusions.

4.2 Research Approach

The research method refers to the collection of specific techniques we use in a study to select cases, measure, observe social life, gather and refine data, analyse data, and report on results (Nayak & Singh, 2021). In other words, research methods are whatever techniques the researcher employs to analyse the research subject at hand. This study employed a qualitative research technique to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions of bullying, its impact on learners' behaviour, and strategies for prevention at school, drawing on firsthand experiences, genuine reporting, and quotations from actual dialogues.

4.3 Population and sampling procedure

A population is a collection of things, events, or individuals with certain common characteristics that the researcher is interested in examining (Nayak, & Singh 2021). The three members of the SMT, four teachers and four learners from the school, one representative from each school's governing body, and one teacher from each school were the targeted group for this study. The specified population was thought to be the pertinent group from which generalisations may be made by the researcher. Focus group and individual interviews were employed as data collection tools.

The study comprised a total of ten participants. These participants included four students, three two teachers, parents, who were selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives.

The participants consisted of ten students aged twelve to sixteen from one secondary schools, three teachers and two School management team members (SMT) with an equal representation of males and females. The selection criteria included students who have experienced bullying, teachers who have managed bullying cases. These criteria were chosen to ensure relevance to the research questions and to gather data from individuals directly involved or affected by bullying behaviours.

According to Mahuika and Mahuika (2020), a sample is a subset of the broader population selected for measurement or analysis. In this study, purposeful sampling was employed because it allows for the deliberate selection of participants who possess specific characteristics essential to addressing the research objectives. Purposeful sampling enables the researcher to focus on individuals who can provide rich, relevant information such as those with direct experience or expertise related to bullying and intervention strategies. This method is particularly appropriate for qualitative studies or exploratory research where depth of understanding is prioritized over generalizability. By selecting participants who meet these criteria, the study ensures that the data collected will be meaningful and directly applicable to the research aims.

4.4 Data collection procedures

Ocaña-Fernández and Fuster-Guillén (2021) established that a data collection procedure as a method used to administer the research instrument for the aim of collecting data is known as the data collection technique. Individual interviews were used in this study to collect data from the sampled participants.

4.5 Trustworthiness and dependability

Trustworthiness refers to the methods of gathering, organizing, and categorizing data, particularly vocal and textual (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). Using diverse data sources in qualitative research, such as observations and interviews, enhances the reliability of findings. Participants were given ample time to respond during interviews conducted at a selected school during break time, while confidentiality was maintained. In qualitative research, dependability is emphasized over reliability (Pandey et al., 2021). The study employed an interpretivist paradigm, ensuring clear articulation of the research concept and procedures, which helps establish the trustworthiness of the results through consistent outcomes.

4.6 Data Collection Process

The data collection process involved several steps:
1. **Preparation:** The researcher prepared interview guides and focus group protocols, ensuring questions were aligned with the research goals and sensitive to participants' contexts.
2. **Scheduling:** Appointments were arranged with participants, ensuring a comfortable and private environment to promote openness and honesty.
3. **Administration:** The researcher conducted the interviews and focus groups, recording the sessions with participants' consent. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.
4. **Ethical Considerations:** Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality measures. Written consent was obtained prior to data collection.
5. **Data Management:** The collected data were organized systematically, with transcripts stored securely, ready for coding and thematic analysis. The individual

interviews allowed for comprehensive data collection, capturing personal insights related to the study topic of bullying and intervention strategies.

4.7 Data analysis

The primary data collection method employed in this study was qualitative, utilizing individual interviews. These methods are instrumental in gathering rich, detailed insights into participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes regarding bullying and intervention strategies. According to Mahuika and Mahuika (2020), data collection involves systematically gathering information through various techniques to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the data. In this context, interviews and focus groups served as the tools for collecting in-depth, contextual data directly from participants, allowing the researcher to explore complex social phenomena within their natural setting. This approach is particularly important because it captures the nuanced perspectives of individuals involved, which quantitative methods might overlook. Furthermore, employing a case study methodology for data analysis, as described by Pandey et al. (2021), enables an in-depth investigation of the bullying phenomenon within its real-life context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its environment are often blurred.

The data analysis in this study was primarily conducted through thematic analysis, which is well-suited for examining qualitative data obtained from individual interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis involves systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data, allowing the researcher to interpret the meanings and underlying ideas expressed by participants. This analytical approach was justified because it enables a detailed and nuanced understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes concerning bullying and intervention strategies. By coding the interview transcripts and focus group discussions, the researcher could organise the data into meaningful categories, highlighting commonalities and differences across participants' responses. This process helps to uncover recurrent themes related to the social dynamics of bullying, barriers to intervention, and potential solutions, providing a rich interpretative framework.

The justification for choosing thematic analysis also stems from its flexibility and compatibility with the case study methodology. It enables the researcher to thoroughly explore complex phenomena within their real-life contexts, capturing the depth and richness of participants' perspectives. Moreover, thematic analysis facilitates the integration of multiple data sources such as interviews, observations, and documents by identifying overarching themes that cut across different evidence types, thus supporting a comprehensive understanding of the bullying phenomenon.

4.8 Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was the inability to interview all teachers and learners due to time and resource constraints. Conducting interviews with every potential participant could have been time-consuming and potentially disrupted normal school activities. As a result, a sample of participants was selected to represent the broader population. While this sampling approach provided valuable insights, it also means that the findings may not fully capture the perspectives of all teachers and learners within the school, which could affect the generalizability of the results.

4.9 Ethical consideration

According to Mahuika (2020), "ethics" refers to the suitability of your actions in relation to the rights of others affected by or the subject of your work. The ethical evaluations of research studies are governed by several governing moral principles (Nayak & Singh, 2021). The school's principal granted permission to conduct the study, and the parents

agreed to have their children participate in the interview. Firstly, permission was obtained by securing formal approval from the school's principal, who acted as the gatekeeper and authorised the researcher to conduct the study within the school environment. This step aligns with Mahuika (2020), emphasising the importance of obtaining institutional approval to ensure the research is conducted ethically and responsibly. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians before interviewing the children, ensuring they were aware of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions.

Secondly, anonymity was maintained by ensuring that participants' identities were not disclosed in any reports or publications resulting from the study. Pseudonyms or codes were used instead of real names to protect participants' identities, especially considering the sensitive nature of bullying-related topics.

Thirdly, confidentiality was safeguarded by securely storing all data collected, such as interview transcripts and notes, in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential, and any identifiable information would be anonymised during data analysis and reporting. This reassures participants that their personal information and opinions would not be disclosed or used in a manner that could identify them.

5. Findings

5.2 Generation of Themes
In the quest to combat bullying effectively within schools, diverse perspectives articulate the multifaceted nature of this issue. Feedback from learners, teachers, and members of the School Management Team (SMT) shed light on both supportive and contradictory views, creating a well-rounded dialogue about potential strategies.

Theme 1: Supportive and Preventive School Strategies
Question: *What strategies are most effective in addressing the root causes of bullying to create a supportive school climate?*
Sub-theme 1.1: Fostering a Supportive School Environment
Creating a supportive school environment is fundamental to effectively addressing bullying. One of the most widely recognised strategies is implementing a buddy system, which pairs students together to provide mutual support during the school day, especially during moments of vulnerability, such as breaks or unstructured times. Learner A highlighted this by saying, *"Having a buddy to rely on can make all the difference, especially during breaks when tensions seem to rise."*

This underscores how peer support can foster a sense of belonging and safety, empowering students to look out for one another and reducing opportunities for bullying. When students feel supported and connected, they are less likely to engage in or become victims of bullying, creating a more inclusive and caring school climate.

However, while support systems like the buddy program are vital, some participants emphasise that addressing the root causes of bullying behaviour is equally critical. Learner A pointed out, *"But addressing the behaviour itself is crucial. If we only focus on support, we might avoid confronting the real issue."*

This suggests that support alone cannot eradicate bullying; it must be complemented by proactive education on respect, empathy, and emotional regulation.

Balancing peer support with direct interventions that focus on changing negative behaviours fosters a more comprehensive and supportive school environment, one that discourages bullying at its core while providing students with safe avenues for support and intervention. In addition to fostering a supportive atmosphere, promoting open

communication within the school community plays a pivotal role in creating an accepting environment. Learner A emphasised,

"When we talk openly about bullying, it helps make it less taboo."

By normalising conversations about bullying through activities like assemblies and classroom discussions, schools can cultivate a culture of openness and accountability. Such dialogue encourages students to share their experiences without fear, empowering them to collectively address issues and promote a culture of inclusivity.

Recognising that not all students feel comfortable speaking in large settings, Learner B suggested,

"Still, speaking in front of the whole school can be daunting; maybe smaller discussions would foster real conversation."

Offering a mix of large assemblies and smaller, more intimate discussions ensures that every student feels safe and heard, fostering honest communication and stronger peer connections.

Practical measures like increasing adult presence in high-risk areas such as hallways, playgrounds, and cafeterias are also essential. Learner B noted,

"More adults supervising means more eyes watching out for anyone feeling unsafe."

Active monitoring in these hotspots can significantly deter bullying and make students feel protected.

However, creating a truly supportive environment extends beyond supervision. Empowering students to stand up for each other and intervene safely is crucial. Learner B emphasised, *"We also need to learn how to stand up for each other and intervene safely."* While adult supervision is necessary, it is not sufficient. Students should be equipped with conflict resolution skills and intervention techniques that enable them to act confidently and responsibly, fostering a culture of mutual support and resilience.

Sub-theme 1.2: Promoting Open Communication and Emotional Intelligence

Developing emotional intelligence is fundamental in creating a school environment that is empathetic, understanding, and respectful. Equipping students with these skills can significantly reduce conflict, improve peer interactions, and foster healthier relationships. Learner C expressed this sentiment by stating, *"We need to learn about emotions to deal better with each other."*

This highlights how emotional intelligence workshops can be instrumental in helping students understand and navigate interpersonal relationships more effectively.

Findings from the study suggest that implementing workshops focused on emotional awareness and empathy empowers students to better manage their emotions and respond compassionately to others. Such training can promote a culture where respect and understanding are the norms, reducing the likelihood of conflicts escalating into bullying. However, the effectiveness of these workshops depends heavily on full participation.

Learner C emphasised, *"But what happens if kids don't attend? It has to be mandatory to ensure everyone learns this."*

This underscores the importance of making emotional intelligence training mandatory rather than optional, so that every student, especially those who might benefit the most, gains access to essential tools for emotional regulation and empathy. Ensuring universal participation helps foster a harmonious and inclusive school environment.

In addition to developing emotional awareness, the findings underscore the crucial role of fostering strong, trusting relationships between students and caring adults.

Learner C noted, *"Having someone to trust, like a teacher or counsellor, can change a student's experience."*

Establishing mentorship programs and fostering genuine connections with trusted adults can have a profoundly positive impact on a student's well-being and overall school experience. These relationships provide a safe space for students to express concerns, seek

guidance, and navigate challenges, contributing to a more supportive and inclusive climate.

Beyond individual relationships, a collaborative effort across the entire school community is vital.

Learner D pointed out, *"With the rise of social media, we must learn how to protect ourselves online."* This highlights the need for comprehensive online safety programs that educate students about responsible digital behaviour and cyberbullying. Such initiatives foster open communication about digital challenges and promote a culture of empathy and responsibility.

While teaching about online safety is essential, the study stresses that having clear, actionable plans for addressing cyberbullying incidents is equally crucial.

Learner D suggested, *"But teaching students isn't enough; we need plans for when things go wrong online."*

Proper protocols and close monitoring of reporting systems help ensure that cyberbullying cases are handled effectively, maintaining trust and safety within the digital space.

Ultimately, cultivating a culture of empathy and responsibility among students is a powerful strategy for mitigating cyberbullying and fostering a supportive school community.

Learner D emphasised, *"Educating peers about the impacts of cyberbullying creates a community of caring."*

By raising awareness about the consequences of cyberbullying, schools can empower students to act as proactive allies and cultivate a climate where kindness and respect are the norm, ultimately contributing to a safer and more harmonious school environment.

Theme 2: Policy, Community Engagement, and Digital Safety
Question: *What ways do emotional intelligence workshops impact students' ability to manage conflicts and foster respectful peer relationships?*
Sub-theme 2.1: Establishing Clear Policies and Definitions
Findings from this study disclosed that Classroom engagement plays a crucial role in shaping a positive and focused learning environment, which can deter negative behaviours such as bullying.

Teacher A reported: *"Engagement in the classroom can drastically change the atmosphere, making it harder for bullying to thrive."*

This participant explained by indicating that engaging teaching methods can make the classroom environment less conducive to bullying, as students are less likely to misbehave when focused. The quotation suggested that by adopting interactive and engaging teaching strategies, educators can foster a more inclusive and focused atmosphere, reducing opportunities for bullying and promoting positive interactions among students.

While engaging teaching methods can significantly reduce bullying, ensuring that all teachers have the necessary resources and training to implement these strategies is essential for a consistent impact. Teacher A Clarified: *"However, not all teachers have the same resources to make engaging lessons; that inconsistency can be a problem."* The quotation suggests that not all teachers may have the necessary resources or training to implement these interactive methods effectively, resulting in uneven application across classes. Findings from the study elucidated that to address this inconsistency, schools should prioritise providing equal access to training and resources, ensuring that all teachers can create engaging, supportive classrooms that discourage bullying and promote positive behaviour.

This study revealed that providing students and teachers with conflict-resolution skills can foster a more harmonious school environment by promoting respect and understanding. Teacher A Substantiated: *"If we teach conflict resolution, we can equip students with valuable life skills that promote respect and understanding."*

This quotation revealed that conflict resolution training for teachers would equip them to handle bullying situations more effectively. By incorporating conflict resolution training into student education and teacher development, schools can create a culture of peaceful problem-solving, empowering everyone to address bullying with greater confidence and effectiveness.

While conflict resolution training is a valuable tool, a comprehensive, school-wide approach is needed to create lasting change in student behaviour and effectively combat bullying. Providing teachers with the necessary training to address bullying is critical to creating a safer and more supportive environment for students.

Teacher B: *"When teachers feel prepared to address bullying, it creates a safer space for students."* Professional development focused on bullying interventions is crucial for teachers, as it helps them feel more prepared and confident in handling these situations. Findings from the quotation highlighted that by investing in targeted professional development, schools can empower teachers with the skills and confidence to effectively intervene in bullying incidents, ultimately fostering a safer and more inclusive environment for all students.

While professional development is essential for preparing teachers to address bullying, the effectiveness of these efforts depends on continuous, comprehensive training.

Teacher B clarify: *"However, sessions need to be ongoing; one-time training won't stick."* This participant explained that teachers may still feel inadequately equipped to intervene effectively if the training sessions are too infrequent or not comprehensive. Findings from the quotation above suggest that to ensure a lasting impact, schools should implement ongoing professional development programs that provide regular support and updates, enabling teachers to stay confident and well-prepared to consistently handle bullying throughout the school year.

Promoting discussions on empathy and respect is a powerful way to create a more positive and inclusive school environment where students are mindful of the impact of their actions on others.

Teacher B explained: *"Discussions on empathy can initiate a strong foundation for creating a respectful classroom environment."*

Empathy and respect discussions can set a positive tone in interactions, helping students understand the impact of their actions. Findings revealed that by fostering these conversations early and regularly, schools can cultivate a culture of compassion and understanding, reducing bullying and encouraging students to treat one another with respect and care.

Implementing an anonymous reporting system can be a powerful tool in empowering students to report bullying incidents without fear of retaliation or judgment.

Teacher C stated: *"An anonymous reporting system could give students the courage to speak up without fear."*

An anonymous reporting system could empower students and remove barriers to reporting bullying incidents, thus increasing accountability. Findings highlighted that schools could increase accountability by providing a safe and confidential way for students to report incidents, ensuring that bullying is addressed promptly, and creating a more secure environment for all students.

While an anonymous reporting system can encourage students to speak up, ensuring that it is properly managed and followed up on is critical to maintaining trust and effectiveness.

Teacher C cautioned: *"But if we don't have a solid follow-up, it could lead to distrust among students."*

Conversely, if not monitored properly, such a system might lead to misuse or false reporting, causing additional issues within the school. Findings from the quotation suggested that to prevent misuse and maintain trust, schools must implement clear

protocols for investigating and addressing reports, ensuring that students feel confident in the system and that incidents are handled with care and fairness.

Sub-theme 2.2: Stakeholder Involvement and Collaboration

Collaboration among school staff is essential for ensuring a unified and effective response to bullying, creating a more supportive school environment for students. Teacher C noted: "*Collaboration among staff can lead to a more cohesive response to bullying."*

Regular discussions about bullying cases in staff meetings can foster a collaborative approach to addressing incidents. This participant suggested that by fostering open communication and collaboration among staff, schools can ensure that bullying incidents are consistently and effectively addressed, leading to a more cohesive and proactive approach to creating a safer school environment.

Establishing a clear and well-defined anti-bullying policy is a foundational step in creating a safe and respectful school environment. School Management Team A stated: *"A well-defined anti-bullying policy creates clear expectations and helps everyone understand the consequences."* Developing a formal anti-bullying policy is crucial to clarify acceptable behaviours and consequences. This participant disclosed that by implementing a comprehensive anti-bullying policy, schools can ensure that students, staff, and parents know the standards for behaviour and the consequences for violations, fostering accountability and promoting a culture of respect.

Findings revealed that while a well-defined anti-bullying policy is essential, its success depends on the active support and engagement of all stakeholders.

School Management Team A noted: *"However, if teachers and students don't support it, the policy will be ineffective."*

Even the best policy will struggle to be enacted effectively without stakeholder buy-in. To ensure the policy's effectiveness, schools must work collaboratively with teachers, students, and parents to build strong support and foster a shared commitment to creating a bullying-free environment.

The study highlighted that establishing clear definitions of bullying is an essential step in fostering a safe and respectful school environment.

School Management Team A stated: *"Clear definitions of bullying raise awareness and encourage accountability among students."*

Clearly defining what constitutes bullying can help raise awareness and set a standard for behaviour. Findings revealed that by providing clear and precise definitions of bullying, schools can raise awareness, promote accountability, and create a culture where students understand the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and its consequences.

It was asserted that engaging parents in anti-bullying efforts is vital for creating a cohesive approach to preventing bullying both at school and in the home environment.

School Management Team B stated: *"Parental involvement enhances the message and reinforces our anti-bullying efforts at home."*

Engaging parents and the community can foster a unified front against bullying, reinforcing positive messages at school and home. The quotation substantiated that by actively involving parents and the community in anti-bullying initiatives, schools can strengthen their efforts, ensuring that students receive consistent support and messages about respect and kindness in all aspects of their lives.

While parental involvement is crucial in combating bullying, it is essential that this involvement goes beyond attendance at workshops to include active participation in the anti-bullying process. School Management Team B emphasised: *"But we need to empower parents not just to attend workshops but actively participate in the process."*

On the contrary, parents must be held accountable too; involvement must not just be informative but also result in tangible action supporting anti-bullying efforts. By encouraging and facilitating active participation from parents, schools can foster a more

effective partnership in their anti-bullying initiatives, ensuring that the message of respect and accountability resonates in the classroom and at home.

Partnering with local organisations was revealed as a valuable strategy for enhancing a school's approach to preventing bullying, as it broadens the scope of resources and insights available. School Management Team B stated: *"Partnering with local organisations can enrich our resources and provide fresh insights on prevention."*

Collaborating with local organisations can provide additional resources and perspectives, enriching the school's anti-bullying strategies. Findings from the quotation revealed by establishing partnerships with community organisations, schools can tap into diverse expertise and resources, fostering a more comprehensive and practical anti-bullying framework that benefits the entire student body.

5. **Discussion**

The findings underscore the critical role of fostering a supportive school environment in preventing bullying, aligning with existing research that emphasises the importance of positive peer relationships and proactive school climate interventions. For instance, the implementation of buddy systems, as highlighted by Learner A, echoes the recommendations of Ahinkorah (2021), who advocates for peer support programs as a means to cultivate belonging and reduce victimisation. These programs help create a sense of safety and connectedness, which are key protective factors against bullying (Bear,2020). However, the literature also stresses that support systems must be part of a broader, multifaceted approach. Learner A's concern about addressing root causes resonates with research by Bradshaw et al. (2021), who argue that effective anti-bullying strategies must combine support with direct interventions aimed at changing behaviour through education on empathy, respect, and emotional regulation. Such comprehensive approaches foster a school climate where positive norms are reinforced, and bullying behaviours are less likely to persist.

Open communication within the school community further enhances the supportive environment, as suggested by Learner A's emphasis on normalising discussions about bullying. According to Dietrich and Cohen (2021), fostering open dialogue reduces stigma and encourages students to share experiences, thereby promoting a culture of transparency and accountability. Moreover, the importance of smaller discussion groups, as proposed by Learner B, aligns with research indicating that small-group conversations can be more effective in engaging students and facilitating honest dialogue (Ahinkorah, 2021).

The significance of adult supervision in high-risk areas is supported by research from Lawrence (2022), who found that increased adult presence correlates with a reduction in bullying incidents. Nonetheless, the literature emphasises that supervision alone is insufficient; empowering students to intervene safely is equally important. This is consistent with the social-ecological model of bullying prevention (Swearer et al., 2020), which advocates for fostering peer intervention skills alongside adult oversight to build resilient communities.

The findings highlight the pivotal role of emotional intelligence (EI) in creating an empathetic school climate. As Learner C notes, understanding emotions can improve peer interactions, a view supported by Bradshaw, Cohen, Espelage, & Nation (2021), who identified EI as a key factor in reducing conflict and promoting pro-social behaviour. Schools that integrate EI workshops, as recommended by the participants, often see improvements in classroom climate and peer relations (Bear, 2020).

The importance of making these workshops mandatory aligns with research by Elliott and Davis (2020), who argue that universal EI education fosters a shared understanding of emotional regulation and empathy, essential components of social competence. Building trusting relationships with caring adults, such as teachers and counsellors, aligns with the

findings of Dietrich and Cohen (2021), who emphasise mentorship as a protective factor against bullying and emotional distress.

Online safety education is increasingly vital given the rise of cyberbullying, as highlighted by Learner D. The need for clear protocols for addressing cyber incidents echoes the work of Bradshaw et al. (2021), who advocate for comprehensive digital safety policies and effective reporting systems. Cultivating a culture of empathy online, as Learner D suggests, is supported by research indicating that peer-led digital citizenship programs can diminish cyberbullying (Lawrence, 2022).

Classroom engagement and teacher training are foundational to establishing a positive school climate, as evidenced by Teacher A's insights. This aligns with the findings of Elliott and Davis (2020), who demonstrate that engaging instructional strategies reduces boredom and misbehaviour, including bullying. However, the literature also underscores the importance of equipping teachers with resources and ongoing professional development. As Teacher A notes, resource disparities can limit implementation, highlighting the need for equitable access to training (Hargreaves et al., 2020).

Conflict resolution education, supported by Teacher A, is a well-documented strategy for promoting respect and understanding. Research by Bear (2020) shows that teaching conflict-resolution skills reduces aggressive behaviours and enhances cooperation among students. Moreover, teachers' confidence in handling bullying, as emphasised by Teacher B, is directly linked to the quality and frequency of intervention (Bradshaw et al, 2021). Continuous professional development, as recommended, ensures that teachers remain prepared and confident, fostering a safer environment.

Discussions on empathy and respect, as highlighted by Teacher B, are supported by the work of Lawrence (2022), who suggests that fostering intrinsic motivation for prosocial behaviour leads to more respectful peer interactions. Similarly, the implementation of anonymous reporting systems, referenced by Teacher C, aligns with research by Bradshaw et al. (2021), which finds that confidentiality and ease of reporting increase incident reporting and accountability.

The importance of a collaborative approach is reinforced by the literature on whole-school strategies. Teacher C's observation aligns with the findings of Lawrence (2022), who advocate for regular staff collaboration to ensure consistent responses to bullying. Building a unified front requires engagement from all stakeholders, including students, parents, and community organisations.

The establishment of clear policies and definitions, as noted by School Management Team A, echoes the work of Lawrence (2022), emphasising that well-defined standards promote awareness and accountability. Moreover, parental involvement extends beyond workshops; research by Bear (2020) demonstrates that active parental engagement at home reinforces anti-bullying messages and contributes to a cohesive prevention strategy.

Finally, partnerships with local organisations, as highlighted by School Management Team B, are supported by community-based research (Dietrich & Cohen, 2021), which shows that community engagement broadens resource availability, enhances cultural relevance, and fosters shared responsibility.

7. Conclusion

To effectively reduce bullying and enhance the school environment, schools should implement a comprehensive anti-bullying program that fosters inclusivity and respect. Teacher training is essential, as it equips educators with the skills necessary for conflict resolution and intervention, enabling them to respond swiftly and effectively to bullying incidents. Establishing designated safe zones within the school and creating peer support networks provides students with protective spaces, fostering a community-oriented culture. Schools should also engage parents and the wider community, offering resources and workshops to reinforce positive behaviour and extend anti-bullying efforts beyond the

classroom. By incorporating these strategies, schools can foster a safer and more supportive environment for all students.

8. Recommendations

To effectively address bullying and foster a positive school climate, it is essential to implement comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies that involve all stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and school administrators. Schools should prioritise creating a safe and inclusive environment through clear policies, consistent enforcement, and promoting social-emotional learning. Educating students and staff about the effects of bullying, cyberbullying, and the importance of respectful behaviour can help cultivate a culture of kindness and empathy. Additionally, integrating mental health support and conflict resolution programs can reduce instances of bullying and support victims, ensuring they feel protected and valued within the school community. Furthermore, schools should adopt evidence-based practices that monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their anti-bullying efforts. Regular assessments of school climate and student well-being can help identify areas needing improvement. Encouraging active student participation in creating a positive environment, along with providing teachers with training on how to effectively handle bullying incidents, is vital. Promoting collaboration among educators, students, and families creates a unified approach to prevention and response, ultimately fostering a safer and more supportive school community where all students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

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