



Exploring the Challenges of Student Bullying in Rural Secondary Schools.

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores the challenges of student bullying in rural secondary schools focusing on its prevalence, underlying factors and impacts on students. Guided by the question, "What are the key challenges associated with bullying in rural secondary schools?" the study employs a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm reviewing recent scholarly literature from (2016 to 2024) to analyse the social and cultural contexts influencing bullying behaviors. Findings reveal that bullying in rural secondary schools encompasses factors like socio-economic disadvantages, limited resources, inadequate teacher training and insufficient parental involvement. These factors adversely affect students' mental health, self-esteem, academic performance and social development. The study enhances understanding of bullying in rural contexts and provides insights for policymakers, educators, parents, and stakeholders to create safer school environments.

Keywords: bullying, rural, secondary schools, challenges, students

Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive issue in schools worldwide marked by persistent aggressive behavior and a power imbalance between the bully and the victim (Mahome, 2024). This behavior manifests in various forms such as verbal, relational and cyberbullying and is not confined to specific cultures or locations impacting students' well-being globally (Cahill & Gowing, 2024). In rural secondary schools, particularly in African contexts, bullying is exacerbated by factors such as social status, violence in the community and educational performance pressures. In Kenya, approximately 40% of secondary school students are reported being bullied (Njuguna and Mbugua, 2019) which is indicating a pressing need for effective and urgent intervention strategies to curb this malpractice. The causes of bullying in rural secondary schools are multifaceted. Family dynamics, poverty and community violence significantly contribute to normalizing aggressive behavior among students. Students from violent communities may use bullying as a means of coping or asserting dominance over other students (Grothaus, 2024).

The rise of cyberbullying which is fuelled by increased access to social media adds another dimension to the issue (Cretu & Morandau, 2024). The effects of bullying on students are adverse and impacting on their emotional, psychological and academic well-being. Victims often experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, which can adversely affect their social and academic performance (Shattnawi et al., 2024), with long-term consequences extending into adulthood (Augustine et al., 2024). Bullying in rural secondary schools is thus a complex problem influenced by multiple factors which include community dynamics and socioeconomic conditions. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive strategies involving teachers, parents and policymakers to create safer and more supportive educational environments.

Background of the Study

Bullying in rural secondary schools is an acute issue that significantly affects students' well-being and the overall educational environment. Bullying is characterized by aggressive behavior and an imbalance of power takes various forms like physical, verbal and relational hostility (Mahome, 2024). In rural areas, factors such as socioeconomic disparities, peer dynamics and environmental stresses may contribute to the high prevalence of bullying (Horton et al., 2024). Physical bullying involves direct violence like hitting or pushing; verbal bullying includes name-calling and threats while relational bullying entails social exclusion and spreading

rumors (Zhang, 2024). Contributing factors in rural secondary schools include overcrowded classrooms, lack of supervision and high-stress conditions (Steel, 2024). Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies involving teachers, parents, and school officials to create safer, more supportive environments.

Kim et al., (2024) found that bullying in rural secondary schools has a significant impact on students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who experience higher rates of victimization. This link underscores structural issues that perpetuate cycles of violence and marginalization. The negative consequences of bullying are profound, including poor academic performance, mental health problems, and low self-esteem (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024). Victimized students may develop anxiety and depression, leading to school avoidance and decreased academic achievement (Mbatha & Tlale, 2024). The effects extend beyond individuals, deteriorating the overall school climate and eroding trust among peers and between students and teachers.

Bullying also intersects with social justice and educational goals by reinforcing inequalities, particularly among marginalized groups and undermining efforts to ensure inclusive, equitable quality education (UN, 2015). Addressing bullying in rural secondary schools is essential to fostering an environment where all students can thrive. Effective interventions, such as school-wide anti-bullying programs and community engagement initiatives are crucial for resolving this complex issue and promoting safe learning environments for all students, regardless of background.

This paper seeks to explore the challenges of bullying in urban primary schools focusing on its prevalence, underlying factors and impacts on students and the main question guiding this study is: "What are the key challenges associated with bullying in urban primary schools?"

Theoretical framework

The study examines the challenges of bullying in rural secondary schools through the lens of the Social Learning Theory (SLT), developed by Bandura (1977). According to this theory, bullying behaviors are learned when they are observed and copied from those who are encouraged by positive results (Bandura, 1977). In rural school context where there might be increased exposure to aggressive behavior through various media, social environments and peer interactions, SLT suggests that children are likely to model such behavior leading to the perpetuation of bullying. In the same vein, the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is applied to understand how various environmental systems interact to influence bullying behaviors in urban schools. This theory posits that bullying is not just a result of individual characteristics but is influenced by multiple levels including the microsystem (e.g., family and school environments), mesosystem (e.g., interactions between home and school), exosystem (e.g., community and neighborhood contexts) and macrosystem (e.g., cultural norms and policies) (Shattnawi et al., 2024). The complex interplay between these systems contributes to the prevalence and nature of bullying in rural secondary schools. Understanding these theories helps in identifying effective strategies for intervention and prevention (Steel, 2024).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach that utilizes an extensive literature review of scholarly books and articles published between (2016-2024). Through systematically analysing recent research, this method provides a deeper insight of the current intricate challenges and dynamics of bullying in rural secondary schools. The literature review focuses on the salient information regarding the topic under review. This approach allows for the synthesis of diverse perspectives that offer insights into effective interventions and highlighting gaps in existing knowledge which may inform future research and policy development in the field of bullying prevention.

Data collection

Data gathering involves an extensive literature review of recent scholarly books and articles published between (2016-2024). This review focuses on identifying studies that explore the causes, manifestations and impacts of bullying in rural secondary schools as well as the effectiveness of various intervention strategies. It involves systematically searching databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ERIC for peer-reviewed publications that provide empirical evidence and theoretical insights on bullying. Analyzing these sources helps to establish a comprehensive understanding of current trends, challenges, and potential solutions related to bullying in urban primary school contexts (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Data analysis

An interpretive paradigm will be applied to analyse the data focusing on understanding the social and cultural contexts that shape bullying behaviors and responses in rural school settings. This approach allows for the exploration of the subjective meanings and experiences of those involved in accordance with the literature reviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This deeper insight helps to uncover the complexities of bullying phenomena providing a deeper understanding that can inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Discussion and findings

Bullying is a pervasive issue in educational environments especially in rural secondary schools. Siann (2024) found that this phenomenon encompasses various types of aggressive behaviours such as physical, verbal and relational aggression, which can have a substantial influence on the victims, perpetrators and the overall school environment. Acquiring an in-depth comprehension of the intricate nature of bullying is crucial in order to devise efficient tactics for reducing it, which are in line with the objectives of social justice and the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) limitations.

There are various forms of bullying, including direct physical hostility such as striking, kicking, or pushing. Fang et al., (2024) discovered that physical bullying is frequently evident and can result in immediate bodily harm, continuing a cycle of violence in school settings. Again, verbal bullying includes name-calling, mocking, and threatening. According to research, verbal bullying can have long-term psychological consequences for students, including low self-esteem and anxiety (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024). As a result, victims may experience sadness, which can impair their academic performance and social connections. Relational bullying, also known as social bullying, is the act of hurting someone's reputation or social relationships. This can include disseminating narratives or excluding people from social groupings. According to Shattnawi et al., (2024) relational aggression is especially detrimental since it damages the victim's social position and emotional well-being.

Understanding the root causes of bullying is critical to properly resolving this issue. Bullying behaviour in rural secondary schools is influenced by a variety of factors including overcrowded classrooms and low resources which can increase student tensions. (Mbatha & Tlale, 2024) demonstrates how a lack of supervision and assistance fosters an environment conducive to bullying. Similarly, students who are exposed to violence or aggressiveness at home are more prone to engage in bullying behaviour. On the other hand, economic disparities in urban regions might enhance competition among students perhaps creating an environment conducive to bullying. Birni & Eryilmaz (2024) found that lower socioeconomic level is linked to increased bullying and victimisation.

Undoubtedly, victims of bullying often experience depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. According to the National Centre for Education Statistics (2019) bullied students are more likely to have mental health problems that last into adulthood. As a result, bullying can impede a students' academic achievement. Thus, Steel (2024) discovered that bullied students often have lower academic achievement and school participation. This generates a feedback gap in which academic failure exacerbates emotions of isolation and victimisation. As a result, the societal consequences of bullying go beyond the immediate school experience. Victims may fail to build healthy relationships later in life resulting in enduring social issues (Shattnawi et al., 2024). This can lead to perpetuated cycles of violence and aggression within communities.

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To address bullying effectively, schools must implement comprehensive strategies that involve students, teachers, and parents. Key challenges in rural secondary schools include:

It is highlighted that many teachers are inadequately equipped to recognise and address bullying. Johnson-Shelton et al. (2024) feel that training programs focused on identifying and dealing with bullying can help teachers establish safer settings. There is a need to empower them with programs that train teachers about the indications of bullying and effective intervention measures to prevent the occurrence of such occurrences. In many cases, urban primary schools are confronted with resource limitations, restricting their ability to undertake anti-bullying initiatives. Advocating for additional funding and support for mental health services is critical. Eden et al. (2024) advise that schools form collaborations with community organisations to give additional services to students and families. Thus, societal attitudes towards aggression can impede efforts to reduce bullying. Zaky (2024) suggests that programs emphasising empathy, respect and inclusivity can help transform cultural norms. It is critical to involve students in talks about the effects of bullying and foster a culture of support and understanding.

Clearly, bullying in rural secondary schools is a multidimensional phenomenon that necessitates a collaborative approach from all parties. Understanding the many types of bullying, their origins, and negative consequences allows us to build effective mitigation techniques that promote social justice and are consistent with the MDGs. Mitigating the major problems associated with bullying is critical to providing safe and supportive learning environments in which all children can thrive (Konishi et al., 2024).

Empowerment strategies for parental involvement in mitigating bullying in rural secondary schools.

Parental involvement is critical in mitigating the pervasive issue of bullying in rural secondary schools. Parents who actively participate in their children's school environment can assist build a culture of respect and safety

(Eden et al., 2024). One useful method is to build open channels of contact between parents and schools. Schools can organise workshops to train parents on the early indications of bullying and the right measures to support both the perpetrator and the victim. Thus, the National Education Association (2020) emphasises the significance of parent-teacher collaboration in identifying and resolving bullying behaviours as they occur.

Training parents in appropriate communication strategies can enable them to discuss bullying with their children and encourage them to report such events as soon as they occur. It is critical to establish support groups for parents that will increase their involvement. These groups allow parents to share their experiences, tactics, and resources that may result in intervention to keep their children safe. According to Evers et al. (2019), such collaborative initiatives can result in greater awareness and preventative steps against bullying. Schools can help these groups by inviting mental health professionals to provide advice on successful bullying-related parenting strategies.

It is also critical for parents to feel empowered to advocate for anti-bullying initiatives in their schools. Encouraging parents to participate in school council meetings, as well as policy development and design processes, ensures that their perspectives and voices are heard in the creation of a safe learning environment. Koonin et al. (2021) argue that parental lobbying can lead to more comprehensive anti-bullying legislation that effectively protect all children, regardless of their backgrounds. Thus, Theoharis (2024) believes that empowering parents through communication, support networks, and advocacy is critical to reducing bullying in urban primary schools. These measures not only increase parental involvement, but also help to create a safer, more inclusive school climate.

Implementation of Ubuntu principles within the curriculum.

Ubuntu is an African viewpoint that highlights interconnectedness and humanity that gives profound understanding for educational practices. The word "Ubuntu" explains into "I am because we are," which suggest the significance of society and related respect (Biko, 2018). Integrating Ubuntu principles into the curriculum fosters a holistic learning environment that values relationships, collaboration and social responsibility. Boboyi (2024) affirms that a core tenet of Ubuntu is the emphasis on community. Teachers can implement this by designing collaborative projects that require students to work together fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Thus, students might engage in community service projects that address local issues thereby reinforcing their connection to the community and enhancing civic responsibility (Nussbaum, 2020). Notably, Ubuntu also emphasizes the importance of respect and dignity for all individuals. Curriculum development can incorporate discussions around cultural diversity and inclusivity ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. Clearly, literature classes can include works from diverse authors by encouraging students to appreciate different perspectives and experiences from the heroes and heroines emergent from their respective communities (Molefe, 2019).

Ubuntu emphasises critical thought on one's actions and their consequences for others. Teachers can incorporate reflective practices into the curriculum by asking students to explore the ethical consequences of their decisions. Journals or group conversations can help students evaluate their positions within their communities and society as a whole (Moyo, 2021). As a result, incorporating Ubuntu ideals into the curriculum not only enhances the educational experience, but also teaches pupils to be compassionate and responsible citizens. Teachers may cultivate community respect and critical reflection to create a learning environment that represents the essence of Ubuntu.

Indigenous knowledge systems underpinning human values.

Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) represent a rich tapestry of cultural wisdom, practices and beliefs that have been developed over millennia. These systems are deeply rooted in the relationship between indigenous peoples and their environments thereby encompassing ecological, social and spiritual dimensions (Kumar & Lakshminarayana, 2024). This knowledge not only shapes individual and collective identities but also informs societal values and ethical frameworks. Indigenous knowledge systems foster values such as respect for nature, community cohesion and reciprocal relationships. Many indigenous cultures emphasize the interconnectedness of all living things by promoting a sense of stewardship towards the environment. This is evident in practices like rotational farming and sustainable hunting which ensure that resources are utilized responsibly and preserved for future generations (Mbatha & Tlale, 2024). Such practices are underpinned by a worldview that sees humans as part of a larger ecological community rather than separate from it.

In the same vein, IKS often emphasizes collective rather than individual well-being. In many indigenous societies, decisions are made through consensus, reflecting the value placed on communal harmony and social responsibility (Shattnawi et al., 2024). For example, the Māori concept of "whanaungatanga" emphasizes kinship and relationships by reinforcing the idea that individual actions impact the wider community. Indigenous knowledge systems not only preserve cultural heritage but also provide essential insights into sustainable living and ethical governance. By integrating these values into contemporary frameworks societies can foster a more equitable and environmentally conscious future.

Africanization of the curriculum

The Africanization of the curriculum refers to the process of integrating African perspectives, values and knowledge systems into educational frameworks. This approach aims to create a curriculum that is more

relevant to African students and reflective of their cultural heritage. By doing so, it seeks to counteract the colonial legacies that have historically dominated educational content. Among the significant aspects of Africanization is the emphasis on indigenous knowledge systems which incorporates local histories, languages and traditions that can foster a sense of identity and pride among students. According to Lombardi et al., (2024) such integration not only enhances relevance but also promotes critical thinking by encouraging students to engage with their cultural contexts.

Countries like South Africa have made progress in this direction through changing their curricula to incorporate indigenous languages and local history (Dorasamy & Kikasu, 2024). Similarly, in Kenya, educational reforms have attempted to prioritise indigenous cultural practices in teaching methods (Shattnawi et al., 2024). These examples demonstrate how Africanization may enrich the educational experience and empower pupils. Biccand and Meeran (2024) believe that Africanizing the curriculum is an important step towards developing an inclusive educational environment. Recognising and valuing African perspectives can help teachers and parents provide a more fair and meaningful learning experience for all pupils.

Conclusion

Bullying in rural secondary schools presents significant challenges that affect students' emotional and academic well-being. This study highlights the prevalence of physical and verbal bullying with a notable impact on victims' self-esteem and social interactions. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach involving teachers, parents and policymakers to create a supportive environment that discourages bullying behaviors. Moreover, implementing effective intervention strategies can help mitigate the long-term effects of bullying on children's development and foster healthier school communities. Continued research is essential to develop targeted programs that effectively reduce bullying incidents in urban educational settings.

Recommendations

To effectively address the challenges of bullying in urban primary schools, it is crucial to implement comprehensive anti-bullying programs that involve not only students but also teachers and parents. Schools should establish clear policies that define bullying and outline consequences for such behavior ensuring that these policies are communicated effectively to all stakeholders. Training programs for teachers on recognizing and intervening in bullying situations can foster a supportive school environment. Additionally, engaging parents through workshops can enhance their understanding of bullying dynamics, thereby encouraging them to support school initiatives. Finally, fostering a culture of empathy and respect through curriculum integration can significantly reduce incidents of bullying.

Author biographies

Dr. Saltiel Khololo Collen Mataboge is a Senior Lecturer at the University of South Africa in the Department of Educational Leadership and Management. Research interests encompasses instructional leadership in schools, Transformative leadership and management in schools, School safety, violence and social justice for students in schools, Schools' financial management, school governance, mentorship and mentoring. I authored and published several articles regarding contemporary issues in the field of education.

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