



# The dynamics of learners' bullying behavior in schools – A case study of selected secondary schools in the O.R. Tambo Inland Education District, South Africa

Sakumzi Poswa<sup>1</sup>  & Thabisa Nodayinge<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Continuing Professional Teacher Development, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha. South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, Humanities and Social Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha. South Africa.

## ABSTRACT

This research explores the multifaceted nature of bullying behavior in South African schools. Bullying is a systematic and deliberate misuse of power in relationships, involving verbal, physical, or social behaviours intended to inflict physical, social, or psychological harm. To support learners' social well-being, it is essential to grasp the underlying dynamics of bullying behavior. The underlying causes of school violence and bullying include gender and social norms, and wider contextual and structural factors. To examine bullying behaviour in schools, this paper adopted a positivist paradigm and quantitative approach, prioritizing large-scale data collection to inform evidence-based conclusions. The analysis of primary data reveals that factors such as family, peers, social norms, culture, school climate, educator effectiveness, and parenting styles contribute to learner behavior. Implementing behavior modification strategies and strengthening support systems could mitigate bullying in schools. By strengthening school and district-based support teams with professionals such as psychologists and social workers, schools can promote a bullying-free environment and foster a positive school culture.

**Keywords:** Bullying, Social-Ecological Framework, Religious Intolerance, Parenting Style, School Climate and Culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Schools play a vital role in equipping learners with the skills to navigate the rapid physical, emotional, mental, and social changes they experience. However, the persistence of bullying, violence, vigilantism, lawlessness, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and femicide in South African societies poses a significant challenge to this endeavor.<sup>1</sup>

Some factors directly or indirectly affect learners' individual behavior and interpersonal and social relationships with others. These include family, peers, school, technology, culture, and the lack of stakeholder involvement in their education journey. Physiognomy, religious intolerance, complexion, stature, a love triangle, and academic performance increase peer pressure (including jealousy) among learners and result in bullying when learners develop low self-esteem on those issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Mashaba, "Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Is Human Cruelty in Action," *The Saturday Star*, 2020.

Learners who lack self-concept, self-confidence, self-awareness, self-worth, self-satisfaction, and self-value are emotionally unstable.<sup>2</sup> These social problems manifest as disruptive behavior by learners in schools. These may affect the quality of learners' relationships with educators, principals, non-teaching staff members, and their schoolmates.<sup>3</sup> Behavior modification and support should focus on the influence of a learner's environment and its role in encouraging positive behavior. Preventing, reducing, and replacing bullying is the key to effective teaching and learning.<sup>4</sup>

Multifaceted forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, social, and cyber, significantly affect the general well-being and academic performance of learners. As cultural diversity in schools continues to grow, the need for effective strategies to address and prevent bullying becomes increasingly critical. The application of cultural understanding within educational settings is an important approach to reducing and preventing bullying. As our schools become more diverse, it is essential to foster an atmosphere that promotes respect and inclusivity for all learners. Cultural awareness involves acknowledging, respecting, and appreciating the diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds of learners.

Using a quantitative approach, this paper examines the social backgrounds of learners and the socioeconomic status of their families, both of which can influence bullying behavior. In addition, it argues that drug and substance abuse has a detrimental impact on learners' conduct.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Learners' bullying behavior might also be influenced by socio-economic status, negative peer pressure, access to technological devices, societal lawlessness, cultural influence, lack of effective bullying policies at school, lack of effective role of educators, lack of support from the Department of Basic Education, lack of stakeholders' involvement, environmental context, physiognomy or sexual orientation of learners, religious intolerance and parenting style.

### Parenting Styles

Parenting style encompasses the complex combination of attitudes, behaviors, and emotional tone that parents exhibit towards their children.<sup>5</sup> It has a profound impact on various aspects of a child's life, including his or her physical health, self-esteem, and overall well-being.<sup>6</sup> A supportive parenting style is crucial to foster healthy growth and development in children. How parents interact with and discipline their children shapes their experiences and influences their development for years to come.<sup>7</sup> At times, the relationship that children have with their parents means that they are often unable to tell them what they are going through because there is a sense that one should not burden someone else with their own problems.<sup>8</sup>

Parenting styles and approaches vary significantly from one family to another, reflecting the unique diversity of family dynamics and cultural backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> A family's cultural heritage plays an important role in shaping its structure and influencing child development. Factors such as immigration, socioeconomic status, and single-parent households introduce diverse cultural, ethnic, and spiritual perspectives, ultimately contributing to the wide range of parenting styles observed among families.<sup>10</sup> Culture encompasses a shared set of customs, values, language, and behaviors common among

<sup>2</sup> Othman Ab Rahman, Norsyahima Nadira Shahrin, and Zuliana Kamaruzaman, "The Relationship between Parenting Style and Self-Concept," *Journal of Education and Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2017): 190–94.

<sup>3</sup> Sukandhya Kumari and Parmod Kumar, "Student Alienation among College Students in Relation to Their (Restrictive-Permissive) Parental Behaviour," *International Journal of Advanced Education and Research* 2, no. 3 (2017): 204–11.

<sup>4</sup> Pradeep Kumar, "Morality and Life Skills: The Need and Importance of Life Skills Education," *International Journal of Advanced Education and Research* 2, no. 4 (2017): 144–48.

<sup>5</sup> Sofie Kuppens and Eva Ceulemans, "Parenting Styles: A Closer Look at a Well-Known Concept," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 168–81; T Trautner, "Authoritarian Parenting Style," *Michigan State University*, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Priyansha Singh Jadon and Shraddha Tripathi, "Effect of Authoritarian Parenting Style on Self Esteem of the Child: A Systematic Review," *International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education* 3, no. 3 (2017): 909–13.

<sup>7</sup> Kuppens and Ceulemans, "Parenting Styles: A Closer Look at a Well-Known Concept."

<sup>8</sup> Terrence Sanvictores and Magda D Mendez, "Types of Parenting Styles and Effects on Children," 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Julian Ryall Tokyo, "Why Is Bullying so Vicious in Japanese Schools?," DW Made for minds, 2018, <http://www.dw.com/en/why-is-bullying-so-vicious-in-japanese-schools/a-46074534>.

<sup>10</sup> Tokyo, "Why Is Bullying so Vicious in Japanese Schools?."

individuals within a particular group. Interestingly, cultural differences significantly influence parenting approaches to self-regulation, with varying emphasis on developing skills such as focus, obedience, self-control, decision-making, and emotional management.<sup>11</sup> Every parent affected by culture has a different approach to interacting and guiding children.

Good education about morals and principles begins at home. Parents may not blame a school for failing to nurture social values in their children. A home should instill these values. Without adequate parental supervision, children have to take care of themselves.<sup>12</sup> Children may find that being mean, bossy, and demanding meets their needs.<sup>13</sup> Bullies may struggle to establish healthy relationships, and their behavior backfires in the long term.<sup>14</sup> Parents who resort to physical punishment or employ disciplinary methods that verge on abuse may inadvertently raise children who become bullies.<sup>15</sup> Teenagers who have experienced shame or humiliation often seek to inflict similar feelings on others, perpetuating a cycle of harm.<sup>16</sup> Four types of parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and uninvolved are discussed.<sup>17</sup>

### Authoritarian parents

*Authoritarian parents* are notorious for relying on the phrase 'Because I said so' as a definitive response when children question or seek explanations for rules and expectations.<sup>18</sup> They prioritize obedience over dialogue, refusing to negotiate with their children. Additionally, they discourage children from participating in decision-making and problem-solving processes, instead emphasizing compliance with rules and authority.<sup>19</sup> Instead, authoritarian parents establish strict rules and enforce harsh consequences, often disregarding their children's thoughts and feelings. Rather than using discipline to teach and guide, authoritarian parents may rely on punishment to control behavior.<sup>20</sup> As a result, authoritarian parents tend to focus on instilling guilt rather than teaching children valuable decision-making skills.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, children raised in such environments often prioritize rule following over understanding the underlying reasons and implications, which can limit their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Their obedience comes at a price, and they are at a higher risk of developing low self-esteem as their opinions are not valued.<sup>22</sup> They may also become hostile or aggressive toward others.<sup>23</sup> Instead of thinking about how to do things better in the future, they often focus on the anger they feel towards their parents. Children of authoritarian parents often struggle with low self-esteem, anxiety, poor decision-making skills, and difficulty coping with anger. Since authoritarian parents are often strict, their children may grow to become good liars to avoid punishment.

### Authoritative parents

Authoritarian parenting is a demanding parenting style that lacks warmth and support. It has negative effects on both children and families. Therapy helps parents modify their parenting style and learn tools

<sup>11</sup> Olusolami Okunlola, Abiodun Gesinde, and Adedayo Odukoya, "Parenting Styles and Self-Esteem of Adolescents: A Systematic Review," in *7th International Conference on Education and Social Sciences*, 2020, 20–22.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Waseem et al., "Assessment and Management of Bullied Children in the Emergency Department," *Pediatric Emergency Care* 29, no. 3 (2013): 389–98.

<sup>13</sup> Shelby L Langer et al., "Predicting Child Physical Activity and Screen Time: Parental Support for Physical Activity and General Parenting Styles," *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* 39, no. 6 (2014): 633–42.

<sup>14</sup> Dieter Wolke and Suzet Tanya Lereya, "Long-Term Effects of Bullying," *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 100, no. 9 (2015): 879–85.

<sup>15</sup> Okunlola, Gesinde, and Odukoya, "Parenting Styles and Self-Esteem of Adolescents: A Systematic Review."

<sup>16</sup> Okunlola, Gesinde, and Odukoya, "Parenting Styles and Self-Esteem of Adolescents: A Systematic Review."

<sup>17</sup> Sanvictores and Mendez, "Types of Parenting Styles and Effects on Children."

<sup>18</sup> Ajay Kumar Bakhla et al., "Anxiety in School Students: Role of Parenting and Gender," *Industrial Psychiatry Journal* 22, no. 2 (2013): 131–137.

<sup>19</sup> Suet-ling Pong, Jamie Johnston, and Vivien Chen, "Authoritarian Parenting and Asian Adolescent School Performance: Insights from the US and Taiwan," *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 34, no. 1 (2010): 62–72.

<sup>20</sup> Pong, Johnston, and Chen, "Authoritarian Parenting and Asian Adolescent School Performance: Insights from the US and Taiwan."

<sup>21</sup> Langer et al., "Predicting Child Physical Activity and Screen Time: Parental Support for Physical Activity and General Parenting Styles."

<sup>22</sup> Thomas G Power, "Parenting Dimensions and Styles: A Brief History and Recommendations for Future Research," *Childhood Obesity* 9, no. 1\_suppl (2013): S-14.

<sup>23</sup> Jadon and Tripathi, "Effect of Authoritarian Parenting Style on Self Esteem of the Child: A Systematic Review."

to respond more effectively to their children.<sup>24</sup> These parents invest time and energy into preventing behavioral problems before they start.<sup>25</sup> They also use positive-discipline strategies to reinforce positive behavior, like praise and reward systems. Children raised with authoritative discipline tend to be happy, successful, and more likely to be good at making decisions and evaluating safety risks on their own.<sup>26</sup>

### Permissive parents

Permissive parents, also known as indulgent parents, exhibit a parenting style marked by high emotional responsiveness and low expectations.<sup>27</sup> They prioritize meeting their children's emotional needs but often fail to establish clear boundaries or consistently enforce rules.<sup>28</sup> Instead, they tend to be lenient, only intervening in times of crisis, and are quick to forgive, adopting a laissez-faire attitude that 'kids will be kids.' When consequences are implemented, they may not be consistently enforced, undermining their effectiveness.<sup>29</sup>

They might give privileges back if a child begs, or they may allow a child to get out of time-out early if he promises to be good. Permissive parents often assume more of a friend than a parent role. They often encourage their children to talk to them about their problems, but usually do not put much effort into discouraging poor choices or bad behavior.

Children who grow up with permissive parents are more likely to struggle academically and may exhibit more behavioral problems, as they do not appreciate authority and rules.<sup>30</sup> They often have low self-esteem and may report a lot of sadness.<sup>31</sup> They are also at a higher risk of health problems, such as obesity, because permissive parents struggle to limit junk food intake and use toys or food as bribes to get their children to behave.<sup>32</sup> They are even more likely to have dental cavities because permissive parents often do not enforce good habits, such as ensuring a child brushes their teeth.<sup>33</sup> Permissive parents are lenient and excessively lax. They dislike control and authority over their children.<sup>34</sup> They do not monitor or guide their children's behavior. They have very few rules and standards of behavior.

### Uninvolved parents

Uninvolved parents are often disengaged from their children's lives, having limited awareness of their activities and providing minimal guidance, nurturing, and attention.<sup>35</sup> With few rules and expectations in place, children may be left to fend for themselves without adequate support or parental involvement.<sup>36</sup> Uninvolved parents may assume that children will self-manage, and they often prioritize other responsibilities, such as work and household management, over meeting their children's basic

<sup>24</sup> Karin S Nijhof and Rutger C M E Engels, "Parenting Styles, Coping Strategies, and the Expression of Homesickness," *Journal of Adolescence* 30, no. 5 (2007): 709–20.

<sup>25</sup> Langer et al., "Predicting Child Physical Activity and Screen Time: Parental Support for Physical Activity and General Parenting Styles."

<sup>26</sup> Langer et al., "Predicting Child Physical Activity and Screen Time: Parental Support for Physical Activity and General Parenting Styles."

<sup>27</sup> Nanette V Lopez et al., "Parenting Styles, Food-Related Parenting Practices, and Children's Healthy Eating: A Mediation Analysis to Examine Relationships between Parenting and Child Diet," *Appetite* 128 (2018): 205–13.

<sup>28</sup> Lopez et al., "Parenting Styles, Food-Related Parenting Practices, and Children's Healthy Eating: A Mediation Analysis to Examine Relationships between Parenting and Child Diet."

<sup>29</sup> Hamid Masud et al., "Parenting Styles and Aggression among Young Adolescents: A Systematic Review of Literature," *Community Mental Health Journal* 55, no. 6 (2019): 1015–30.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick Rivara, Suzanne Le Menestrel, and Engineering, and Medicine National Academies of Sciences, "Law and Policy," in *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice* (National Academies Press (US), 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Rivara, Suzanne Le Menestrel, and National Academies of Sciences, "Law and Policy."

<sup>32</sup> Wolke and Lereya, "Long-Term Effects of Bullying."

<sup>33</sup> Lopez et al., "Parenting Styles, Food-Related Parenting Practices, and Children's Healthy Eating: A Mediation Analysis to Examine Relationships between Parenting and Child Diet."

<sup>34</sup> Wolke and Lereya, "Long-Term Effects of Bullying."

<sup>35</sup> Wang Yanxue and Amiya Bhaumik, "The Impact of Parenting Styles on Child Development: A Comprehensive Review," *Prestieesci Research Review* 1, no. 1 (2024).

<sup>36</sup> Vardha Kharbanda, "Case Study Inquiry on Psychosocial Outcomes of Uninvolved Parenting in the Indian Context," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 46, no. 1 (2022): 15–38.

needs. In some cases, uninvolved parents may be overwhelmed by their own challenges or lack knowledge about child development.<sup>37</sup>

### **Cultural influence**

Socio-cultural theories provide a framework for understanding bullying by analyzing how individuals interact within diverse cultural settings while acknowledging that these contexts are constantly evolving, influenced by power dynamics, and subject to multiple interpretations.<sup>38</sup> Conventional masculine stereotypes, characterized by social dominance, misogyny, and homophobia, are harmful as they contribute to a culture of violence, including sexual assault and domestic abuse. Traditional societal expectations often portray men and boys as stoic figures, discouraging them from expressing emotions or vulnerability and encouraging them to withstand pain and pressure.

Patriarchy and toxic masculinity are fuels that exacerbate learner-by-learner bullying. Toxic masculinity manifests itself as a derogatory attitude towards anything associated with femininity, exemplified by the use of phrases like 'don't be a girl' as a pejorative, which perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and reinforces patriarchal norms.<sup>39</sup> Conventional masculine stereotypes may influence men to believe that there is only one way to be a man and that a man must be dominant, aggressive, and devoid of any emotions. Therefore, if boys are victims of bullying, they usually find it very difficult to report the incident. They avoid the social judgment that they are weak, worthless, and vulnerable. They also do not want to be a laughing stock to others. Bullies often take advantage of this misconception and continue to bully their victims, especially if the act is not reported to school authorities or parents at home.

In patriarchal societies, the socialization of boys often perpetuates a culture of violence and aggression, as evident in phrases like 'boys will be boys' and 'don't run like a girl', which trivialize and normalize harmful behavior, contributing to a tolerance of bullying and aggressive conduct. Toxic masculinity refers to the rigid, outdated, and stereotypical expectations of what it means to be masculine, which can profoundly influence the lives, behaviors, and identities of boys and men.<sup>40</sup> These norms include the expectations that boys and men must be active, aggressive, tough, daring, and dominant. Some men regard themselves as heads of families where women are supposed to obey them. This misconception applies to schools where boys tend to expect girls to obey them at all times.

### **School climate and culture**

The climate and culture of a school play a crucial role in shaping the educational environment and influencing learner behavior, particularly in relation to bullying. A positive school climate serves as a critical foundation for the prevention of bullying, laying the foundation for a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment.<sup>41</sup> Schools that neglect to foster positive relationships, effectively resolve conflicts, prevent bullying and victimization, support staff well-being, and encourage learner autonomy inadvertently create an environment that can exacerbate and perpetuate bullying behaviour.<sup>42</sup> A negative school climate is marked by characteristics that undermine a positive learning environment, including higher levels of risky behavior, reduced feelings of safety, strained relationships, inadequate support, and increased incidents of bullying and victimization.<sup>43</sup>

School climate encompasses the collective perceptions, emotions, beliefs, and attitudes of students, educators, and staff towards their school environment, shaping their individual and shared experiences.<sup>44</sup> It is an overarching experience, feeling, quality and character of school life.

<sup>37</sup> Kharbanda, "Case Study Inquiry on Psychosocial Outcomes of Uninvolved Parenting in the Indian Context."

<sup>38</sup> Guida De Abreu, "Relationships between Macro and Micro Socio-Cultural Contexts: Implications for the Study of Interactions in the Mathematics Classroom," *Educational Studies in Mathematics* 41, no. 1 (2000): 1–29.

<sup>39</sup> Roger Kirby and Mike Kirby, "The Perils of Toxic Masculinity: Four Case Studies," *Trends in Urology & Men's Health* 10, no. 5 (2019): 18–20.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Flood, "Toxic Masculinity: A Primer and Commentary," *XY: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Politics* 7 (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Sabina Valente and Abilio Afonso Lourenço, "Conflict in the Classroom: How Teachers' Emotional Intelligence Influences Conflict Management," in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 5 (Frontiers Media SA, 2020), 5.

<sup>42</sup> Valente and Lourenço, "Conflict in the Classroom: How Teachers' Emotional Intelligence Influences Conflict Management."

<sup>43</sup> Rivara, Suzanne Le Menestrel, and National Academies of Sciences, "Law and Policy."

<sup>44</sup> Diane Kohl, Sophie Recchia, and Georges Steffgen, "Measuring School Climate: An Overview of Measurement Scales," *Educational Research* 55, no. 4 (2013): 411–26.

School culture comprises the collective values, norms, and expectations that govern the behaviors, relationships, and interactions among students, educators, and staff within a school community.<sup>45</sup> It encompasses the unwritten rules, traditions, and belief systems that shape every aspect of school life, from how students dress and interact with one another to the teaching and learning approaches employed.<sup>46</sup> These may influence the way learners dress and the way they interact with each other.<sup>47</sup>

The prerogative of SGBs is to create a bullying-free school environment. SGBs must ensure that the appropriate structures, policies, and promotion of bullying-free programs are in place, as a bully's ultimate aim is to cause a victim's stress.<sup>48</sup> Schools with lax standards lead to the recurrence of bullying.<sup>49</sup> Campbell & Kudenga suggest that all schools must uphold school rules against bullying.<sup>50</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative research approach to statistically analyze data and identify factors that contribute to the escalation of bullying in schools, to reduce bullying behavior among learners. In this study, quantified data represent the number of respondents who provided their opinions on questionnaire probes. Quantitative research relies on numerical data to uncover broad patterns and utilizes statistical analysis to explore the relationships and potential causes between different variables.<sup>51</sup>

The target population in this study includes 6 school principals, 240 parents, 320 learners, and 30 teachers, chosen from six secondary schools in the OR Tambo Inland Education District of South Africa. They are chosen to understand the dynamics of learners' bullying behavior in schools. They are also preferred due to their mandate by SASA, Act No 84 of 1996 (as amended) to govern schools.

In the Likert scale questionnaire used in this study, respondents express their feelings on a scale of agree or disagree on a given probe. Then, by aggregating the scores, the research collected the personal opinions, facts, or attitudes of the respondents. A questionnaire is a tool used to collect data, comprising a series of questions or prompts designed to elicit specific information from participants or respondents.<sup>52</sup> It is a list of written questions aimed at getting information from respondents.

## PRESENTATION OF DATA AND DISCUSSION

The respondents were asked to respond to the following statement: The social background of learners, characterized by social ills (lawlessness), contributes to bullying.

<sup>45</sup> Unal Cakiroglu, Yasar Akkan, and Bulent Guven, "Analyzing the Effect of Web-Based Instruction Applications to School Culture within Technology Integration.," *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* 12, no. 2 (2012): 1043–48.

<sup>46</sup> S Gruenert, "They Are Not the Same Thing. National Association of Elementary School Principles," 2008.

<sup>47</sup> Dawson Church and Dennis House, "Borrowing Benefits: Group Treatment with Clinical Emotional Freedom Techniques Is Associated with Simultaneous Reductions in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Anxiety, and Depression Symptoms," *Journal of Evidence-Based Integrative Medicine* 23 (2018): 2156587218756510.

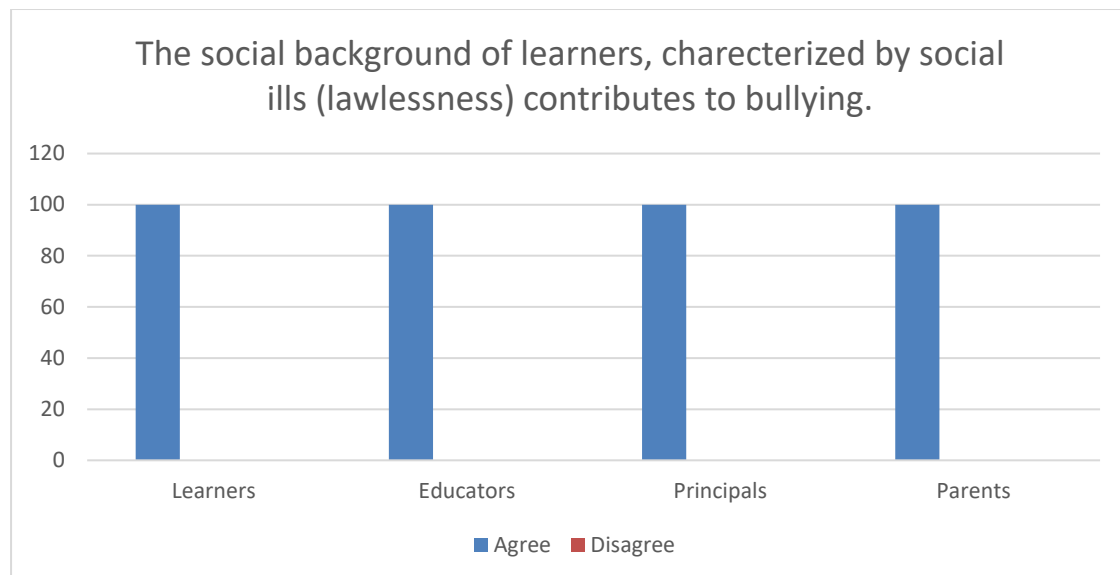
<sup>48</sup> Church and House, "Borrowing Benefits: Group Treatment with Clinical Emotional Freedom Techniques Is Associated with Simultaneous Reductions in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Anxiety, and Depression Symptoms."

<sup>49</sup> Walter Feinberg, "The Idea of a Public Education," *Review of Research in Education* 36, no. 1 (2012): 1–22.

<sup>50</sup> Bruce Campbell and Kristine S. Lewis Grant., *Getting the House in Order: Lessons from Multicultural Education for Principals Leading Today's Diverse Schools* (Pennsylvania Educational Leadership, 2016); K Mugove, "Causes of Bullying in Boarding High Schools in Zimbabwe," *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 7, no.12 (2017): 652–57.

<sup>51</sup> Jennifer L Hardesty, Megan L Haselschwerdt, and Kimberly A Crossman, "Qualitative Research on Interpersonal Violence: Guidance for Early Career Scholars," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 34, no. 23–24 (2019): 4794–4816.

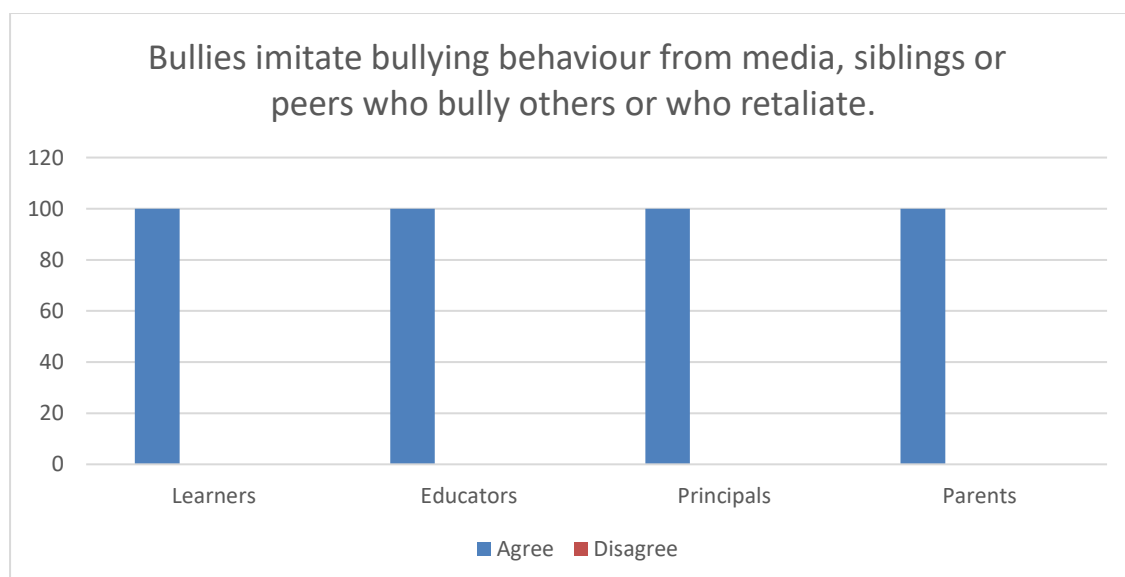
<sup>52</sup> Siddegowda Roopa and Menta Satya Rani, "Questionnaire Designing for a Survey," *Journal of Indian Orthodontic Society* 46, no. 4\_suppl1 (2012): 273–77.



*Figure 1: Social background of learners, characterized by social ills (lawlessness) which contributes to bullying. Source: Poswa, 2025*

Evidence shows that 100% of these respondents unanimously agree that there is a relationship between a learner's behavior and the environment of origin. Therefore, the social background of learners affects how they behave at school. This concurs with Tokyo and Khaliq et.al. that there are many reasons why victims of school bullying are targets.<sup>53</sup> These include their appearance, where, at times, those who can afford expensive hairstyles and beauty products tend to mock those who cannot afford them. Therefore, learners from affluent families may bully those from non-affluent families based on appearance, accessories, possessions, attire, and hairstyles. On the contrary, those from less-affluent families might also steal or demand money (ransom) and other accessories from those who come from more affluent families.

Respondents respond to the probe: Bullies mimic bullying behavior from media, siblings, or peers who bully others or retaliate.



*Figure 2: Influence of media, siblings or peers on learners who bully others or who retaliate. Source: Poswa, 2025*

<sup>53</sup> Tokyo, "Why Is Bullying so Vicious in Japanese Schools? "; Abdul Khaliq et al., "Socio-Economic Status and Students' Achievement Score at Secondary Level: A Correlational Study," *International Journal of Research in Education and Social Science* 1, no. 2 (2016): 1–7.

Social ills tend to affect learners' behaviour in schools. The lack of discipline among learners interferes with the teaching and learning process. It manifests itself in various ways, including bullying, vandalism, alcohol and substance abuse, truancy, inability or unwillingness to do homework, etc.<sup>54</sup> Ngwokabuenui argues that learners are rebellious to the school authority, non-academic staff and prefects.<sup>55</sup> Parental support begins at home, where parents promote open communication with their children, encouraging them to discuss bullying and feel comfortable sharing their concerns. These conversations can also promote respect for diversity and differing opinions. School Governing Bodies, particularly parent representatives, play a crucial role in creating a supportive learning environment. As the South African government emphasizes education as a collective responsibility, community involvement is essential in shaping school programs and enhancing learner outcomes.

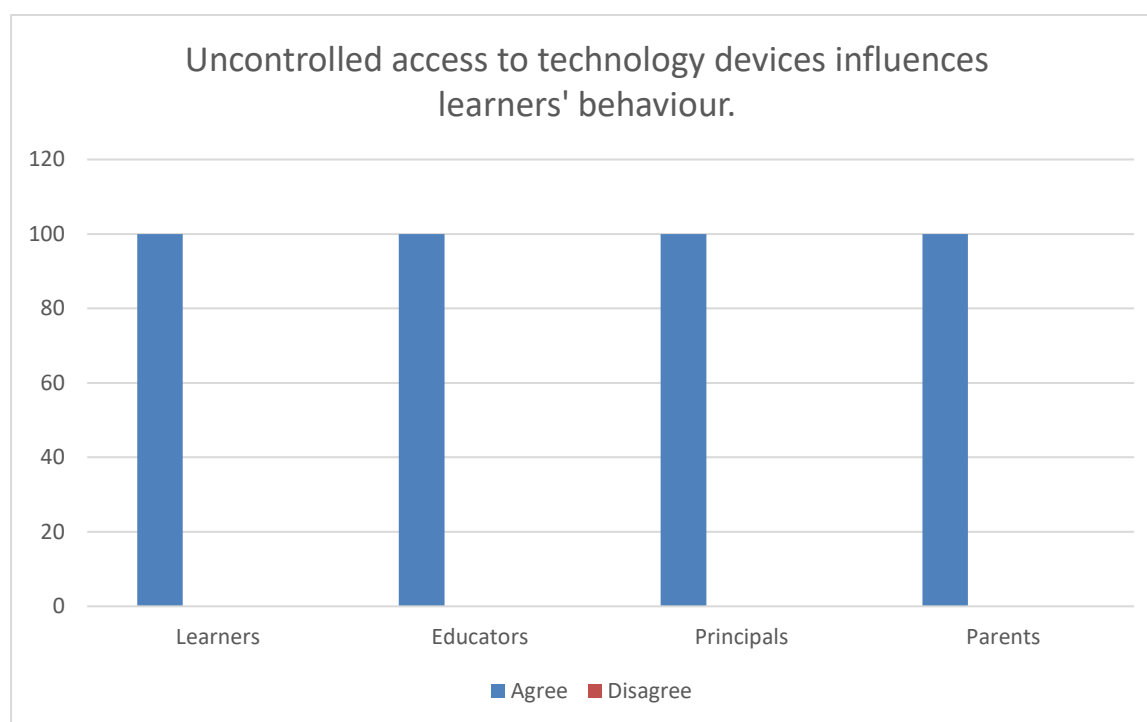


Figure 3: Influence of technology devices on learners' bullying behaviour. Source: Poswa, 2025

All respondents agree that uncontrolled access to technology devices may influence learners' behavior. Even Kudenga suggests that children should watch films and movies that show helping behaviors as heroic.<sup>56</sup> This strengthens the need to manage the influence of television films on the behaviour of learners.

The scourge of bullying witnessed on social media platforms, television, radio, and newspapers has reached alarming and unprecedented proportions.<sup>57</sup> Teenagers with access to cellphones or other gadgets may mimic what they see on social media or download inappropriate videos from the internet.<sup>58</sup> Either they victimize others by practicing what they see, or they become targets of cyber stalkers.

Violent television programs or videos may negatively influence learners' behavior.<sup>59</sup> Cyberbullying and vicious harassment, which, at times, are posted anonymously on social media, make

<sup>54</sup> Ponfua Yhayeh Ngwokabuenui, "Students' Indiscipline: Types, Causes and Possible Solutions: The Case of Secondary Schools in Cameroon.," *Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 22 (2015): 64–72.

<sup>55</sup> Ngwokabuenui, "Students' Indiscipline: Types, Causes and Possible Solutions: The Case of Secondary Schools in Cameroon."

<sup>56</sup> Mugove, "Causes of Bullying in Boarding High Schools in Zimbabwe."

<sup>57</sup> Shuti Steph Khumalo, "Implications of School Violence in South Africa on Socially Just Education," *E-BANGI Journal* 16, no. 8 (2019).

<sup>58</sup> Douglas A Gentile, Sarah Coyne, and David A Walsh, "Media Violence, Physical Aggression, and Relational Aggression in School Age Children: A Short-term Longitudinal Study," *Aggressive Behavior* 37, no. 2 (2011): 193–206.

<sup>59</sup> Romeo Vitelli, *Media Spotlight* (Toronto: York University., 2016).

it so easy for learners to ‘join in’ and become part of the bullying. Online bullying includes spreading malicious gossip, posting incriminating images, or even cyberstalking.<sup>60</sup>

### ***The influence of societal lawlessness on learners' bullying behaviour***

Bullying, GBV, and femicide in societies are persistent problems in South Africa. They manifest in schools. The social space, a relationship between the school, home, and community, is vital in influencing learners' behavior.<sup>61</sup> Believe that bullying emanates from society. Therefore, stakeholders must give attention to the influence of social ills on learners' behavior. This study concurs with NSSF (2016, Part A: 11) that schools can play a vital role in instilling a sense of *Ubuntu* in learners because of the relationship between bullying exposure at home or in the community and bullying incidents at school. Therefore, the proximity of learners can determine bullying levels. Learners usually mimic what they see in their community.<sup>62</sup> Lawless activities and transgressions such as vigilantism, vandalism, looting, property destruction, and theft in the community may affect the mental state of learners.

Research reveals that social factors play a substantial role in enacting unruliness and lawlessness in schools.<sup>63</sup> Environmental context: configurations of factors with multiple system levels, each encompassing the others, influence learners' relationships and conflicts with their peers in school. The interaction between learners' maturing biology, immediate family, or community fuels and steers the learners' development.<sup>64</sup> Changes or conflicts in any layer ripple throughout other layers. He further concludes that to study a learner's development, researchers consider the learner's immediate environment (i.e., family and/or community).

### ***Physiognomy or sexual orientation causes bullying***

According to numerous reports from learners, common reasons for bullying include physical appearance, racial or ethnic background, gender identity, disability, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation.<sup>65</sup> Learners tend to mock one another based on physiognomy or sexual orientation.<sup>66</sup> Bullies often prey on individuals who stand out from the crowd due to their unique characteristics, exploiting these differences to assert power. They typically choose victims who appear vulnerable and unlikely to fight back.<sup>67</sup> Frequently targeted students include those with physical differences such as being overweight, wearing glasses, or having noticeable features such as prominent ears, noses, eyes, or severe acne. Such victims are commonly objects of ridicule by bullies.<sup>68</sup> Learners who learn at a different pace, anxious and insecure, are also bullying targets. Lee and Lincoln found that learners who are larger or smaller than their peers are also at an increased risk for bullying.<sup>69</sup> They are at risk even if they are not objectively underweight or overweight. Another group also at risk of bullying is learners who reach puberty earlier (or later) than their peers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Good role modeling by parents is key to the healthy development of children. Dysfunctional families increase the chances of learners' bullying behaviors. Learners who experience inadequate adult

<sup>60</sup> Vitelli, *Media Spotlight*.

<sup>61</sup> Simon Denny et al., "The Association between Supportive High School Environments and Depressive Symptoms and Suicidality among Sexual Minority Students," *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* 45, no. 3 (2016): 248–61.

<sup>62</sup> Kerstin Dautenhahn, Sarah N Woods, and Christina Kaouri, "Bullying Behaviour, Empathy and Imitation: An Attempted Synthesis," *Imitation and Social Learning in Robots, Humans and Animals: Behavioural, Social and Communicative Dimensions*, 2007, 323–40.

<sup>63</sup> Ngwokabuenui, "Students' Indiscipline: Types, Causes and Possible Solutions: The Case of Secondary Schools in Cameroon."

<sup>64</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development* (sage, 2005).

<sup>65</sup> Cristobal De Brey et al., "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018. NCES 2019-038.," *National Center for Education Statistics*, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Linda P Dekker et al., "Complementing or Congruent? Desired Characteristics in a Friend and Romantic Partner in Autistic versus Typically Developing Male Adolescents," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 52, no. 3 (2023): 1153–67.

<sup>67</sup> Dan Olweus, "School Bullying: Development and Some Important Challenges," *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2013): 751–80.

<sup>68</sup> Olweus, "School Bullying: Development and Some Important Challenges."

<sup>69</sup> Andrea Lee and Robyn Lincoln, "Reciprocity and Exchange: Perspectives of Male Victims of Family Violence," in *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behavior* (Elsevier, 2017), 233–56.

supervision or have been victims of abuse are at a higher risk of becoming bullies at school<sup>70</sup>. Socialization processes in such families, which inflict pain and stress on other family members, promote bullying. Interactions among family members in a dysfunctional family structure usually promote power imbalances. Similarly, children raised in households with overly permissive parenting styles, lacking clear boundaries and discipline, are also more likely to exhibit bullying behavior in school settings.

School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) and DBSTs should develop a comprehensive training program to equip educators, parents, and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) with essential knowledge and preventive strategies regarding critical issues such as sex education, substance abuse, bullying, and violence.

Parents should be empowered with a parental guidance program, enabling them to effectively monitor and regulate their children's exposure to age-appropriate media, including television programs, mobile phone usage, internet access, and video games<sup>71</sup>.

This paper recommends that films portraying positive role models and heroes should be a priority over those that normalize or glorify bullying behavior. Additionally, leveraging technological resources can empower young people to develop leadership skills. We can mitigate cyberbullying and other online harm by promoting responsible technology use in schools. The ultimate goal should be to foster a culture and environment in which learners feel encouraged to utilize technology positively and constructively. To achieve this, SBSTs must monitor and promote the effective use of technological devices, particularly in schools with free Wi-Fi access, to ensure that the usage of internet access is limited only to educational purposes.

Parents should receive training and guidance on effective parenting techniques and strategies to provide optimal support for their children's educational and academic endeavors. They need orientation to oppose any criminal behavior by learners or adults. Learners need positive role models who practice socially acceptable behavior rather than negative role models. Adults in society must apply themselves to socially accepted moral values. There should be a clear distinction between ethics, as stated in the Constitution, the rule of law of South Africa, and morality. Ethics are a code of conduct imposed from the "outside" of an individual (home or a community). Morality is a set of principles for socially acceptable behavior that comes from "within" a person's mind.

Parents must teach children to be sufficiently respectful because children often idolize their parents and older siblings, which makes it important for them to be responsible or irresponsible role models. Although high levels of ethnic diversity can contribute to increased crime rates by hindering community cohesion and consensus-building among residents, due to the challenges posed by cultural and linguistic differences<sup>72</sup>, SGBs need to find anti-bullying solutions in their schools. Bullying does not know race, ethnicity, or culture. Therefore, culture or gender should never be a basis for tolerance of bullying. Parents must maintain a positive relationship with their children and establish authority on a healthy basis. Moral degeneration is detrimental to individuals and results in dysfunctional families, communities, and the entire society. An unhealthy society is an unhealthy nation.

Behavior modification and support for learners must be proactive and include learners with disruptive behavior. All learners should acquire, develop, and practice essential life skills that foster positive social-emotional behavior. These skills encompass five key areas: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, decision-making, and relationship management, enabling learners to navigate their emotions, relationships, and decisions effectively.

Educators should find ways to help learners understand and appreciate their identity and help others create opportunities for meaningful connections among learners. The action plan must focus on

<sup>70</sup> Minton, Stephen James, and Mona OâÂ Å²Moore. "Dealing with bullying in schools: A training manual for teachers, parents and other professionals." *Dealing with Bullying in Schools* (2004): 1-120.

<sup>71</sup> Kharbanda, V. A. R. D. H. A. "Case study inquiry on psychosocial outcomes of uninvolved parenting in the Indian context." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 46, no. 1 (2022): 15-38.

<sup>72</sup> Wang, Cixin, Brandi Berry, and Susan M. Swearer. "The critical role of school climate in effective bullying prevention." *Theory into practice* 52, no. 4 (2013): 296-302.

supporting schools, teacher training, research, and raising awareness. It must aim to ensure that all forms of bullying are resolved.

## CONCLUSION

Literature review and discussions in this paper reveal that learners can engage in inappropriate and socially unacceptable behavior. When developing anti-bullying strategies, school authorities should also examine the diverse backgrounds of their learners. Schools play an important role in shaping public education. Attending school is a universal experience that all learners undergo, making it a critical juncture for addressing social issues, including bullying. This implies that a formal education environment is a requirement that many learners have to pass through to acquire the knowledge and skills required in life. The current spate of bullying in schools requires immediate anti-bullying intervention strategies from all stakeholders to maintain law and order in schools, making schools conducive to effective teaching and learning. The SGBs and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) must collaborate to develop and implement comprehensive school policies, providing a structured framework that guides decision-making and actions to ensure a safe, secure, and supportive learning environment for all students.

A strategic whole-school approach and processes to learning, well-being, mental health intervention, and support must integrate learners' behavior. Thus, communities must understand that learning is a treasure that will follow its owner (learner) everywhere. Learners' happiness at school is a consequence of collaboration between SGBs, the Department of Basic Education, and communities in combating the pain and suffering caused by bullying on learners. Everyone has the potential to be part of the solution since the bullying phenomenon affects everyone in South Africa. Lastly, a healthy, drug-free life can be encouraged through learners' participation in sports and cultural activities.

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## ABOUT AUTHORS

Poswa Sakumzi, PhD, is a primary school principal of the Eastern Cape Department of Basic Education. He also graduated with a Doctor of Education degree from Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa. His research focuses on finding strategies that schools can use to reduce bullying. Using a quantitative method, he studies the effects of the environment on learners’ bullying behavior.

Thabisa Nodayinge holds a Master’s degree in Social Work, and her studies focused on Students with disabilities. She graduated from iYuniversity Walter Sisulu. She has extensive experience in the field of Social Work. She served in the following institutions and organisations: Department of

Basic Education (OR Tambo Coastal), Sessional Social Worker in Child-line South Africa – rendering residential therapeutic camp to survivors of sexual assault, Small Project Foundation and Songe Social Change. She also worked as an Academic Advisor under Student Affairs, and she is currently an Acting Coordinator for Students with Disabilities under Disability Unit of iYuniversity Walter Sisulu.