



Exploring selected salient dynamics of bullying in South African schools: A literature review

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ABSTRACT

Indubitably, bullying continues to wreak havoc in most schools in South Africa, with little improvement in the proposed interventions to address the quagmire. This calls for stronger interventions to fill the gap. The article aimed to explore some selected salient dynamics of bullying in South Africa, through a traditional literature review narrative whose data were derived from various research engines such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest, ERIC, Web of Science, WSU electronic library, and Sabinet. The authors used the following terms to identify the literature: *bullying in South African schools*, *cyberbullying in South Africa*, *South African school safety frameworks*, *violence and education in South Africa*, and *anti-bullying policies in South Africa*. The findings reflected the following themes: Prevalence and Forms of Bullying in South African schools; Socioeconomic and Sociopolitical Influences informing bullying; Peer Pressure and Adolescent Identity Formation informing bullying; Psychological Support Deficits in schools aggravating bullying; Cultural Norms and Gender-Based Violence informing bullying. The article concludes that the South African government, through the Department of Education, needs to develop strong anti-bullying legislation or reinforce existing ones, which members of the school fraternity need to embrace and implement in the classroom. The article recommends that the Department of Basic Education should give top priority to hiring and assigning qualified school psychologists and social workers to assist the bully and the bullied, psychosocially. The article also contributes to scholarship by providing valuable data to other researchers in the domain.

Keywords: Bullying, Cyberbullying, Peer Pressure, Psychological Support Deficits, Gender Based Violence.

INTRODUCTION

According to Kallman et al., bullying affects approximately one-third of all children worldwide and remains a pressing educational and public health concern in many countries, such as South Africa.¹ Bullying can happen anywhere, including in classrooms and online. Conceptually, bullying—often dismissed as a childhood rite of passage—is a form of aggression that can lead to significant long-term psychological and health consequences for everyone involved. Bullying can cause physical, psychological, social, and educational harm to the victim, as well as serious consequences for the bully,

¹ Joshua Kallman, Jennifer Han, and Douglas L. Vanderbilt, "What Is Bullying?," *Clinics in Integrated Care* 5 (April 2021): 100046, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intcar.2021.100046>.

victim, and bystanders. Clinicians are uniquely positioned to identify and address the negative effects of bullying.²

Bullying is a significant public health issue, impacting 20% of children in the US and UK.³ Bullying is defined as unwanted aggressive behaviour by an individual or group towards a victim with the intention of causing physical or emotional harm. This behaviour involves a real or perceived power imbalance and is likely to occur repeatedly over time. For most students, going to school entails daily, intense social interactions with classmates in a classroom setting. While many of these interactions are positive, resulting in friendships and a sense of community in the classroom, some students experience peer harassment and bullying.⁴

Bullying can take various forms, including verbal, physical, relational, and cyberbullying.⁵ Verbal bullying includes teasing, name-calling, taunting, inappropriate sexual comments, and threats. Physical bullying can include hitting, tripping, kicking, spitting, and stealing or destroying someone's belongings. Relational or social bullying is a covert form of bullying that harms someone's reputation or relationships by intentionally excluding them from a group, spreading rumours, or embarrassing them in public. As youth use electronic devices and social media more frequently, cyberbullying has become a common issue. Cyberbullying is the use of electronic technology to spread negative, false, or hurtful content about others.⁶

According to Reddy et al., bullying is a widespread problem in South African schools, negatively impacting students' psychological, emotional, and academic well-being.⁷ Bullying is broadly defined as repeated aggressive behaviour with the intent of harming or dominating others. It can take many forms, including physical violence, verbal abuse, cyberbullying, and social exclusion.⁸ In South Africa, where inequality, poverty, and social instability are commonplace, bullying frequently reflects broader societal tensions.⁹ Understanding the causes of bullying in this unique sociopolitical environment is critical to developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Bullying affects not only the victims and perpetrators, but also school communities and educational outcomes in general and is prevalent in both urban and rural schools in South Africa, with a particularly high incidence among primary and lower secondary students.¹⁰ Although efforts have been made to address school-related violence, bullying is still not adequately addressed in policy and practice ("Cyberculture Foundation's roadshow takes a stand against school bullying in South Africa," 2025).

Axiomatically, the history of violence, socioeconomic hardship, and systemic inequality in South Africa still influences interpersonal relationships, especially among young people. Additionally, exacerbating the problem are the cultural normalisation of aggression, low parental involvement, a lack of psychological support in schools, and overworked teachers.¹¹ Based on this background, the study

² Hajar Alawi Al Shaikh Abubakar, Mariam Anil Ciby, and Alison Thirlwall, "Unveiling Silent Struggles of Workplace Bullying: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study from Middle-Eastern Context," *Future Business Journal* 11, no. 1 (May 27, 2025): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-025-00550-6>.

³ Kallman, Han, and Vanderbilt, "What Is Bullying?"

⁴ Mattias Kloof, "Individual and Classroom-Level Associations of within Classroom Friendships, Friendship Quality and a Sense of Peer Community on Bullying Victimization," *Social Psychology of Education* 28, no. 1 (December 28, 2025): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10027-7>.

⁵ Kallman, Han, and Vanderbilt, "What Is Bullying?"

⁶ Carmen Dueñas-Casado et al., "Moral Disengagement in Primary School Children Involved in Cyberbullying, Bullying, and Cybergossip," *Social Psychology of Education* 28, no. 1 (December 19, 2025): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10042-8>.

⁷ Kriyana P Reddy et al., "Racial, Ethnic, and Socioeconomic Inequities in Access to Left Atrial Appendage Occlusion," *Journal of the American Heart Association* 12, no. 5 (2023): e028032.

⁸ Natalie Chantal Pretorius, *South African Youth's Self-Awareness of Cyberbullying Behaviour* (University of Johannesburg (South Africa), 2022).

⁹ Ogujiuba Kanayo et al., "Poverty-Inequality-GDP Nexus and Social Grants: Implications for SDGs in South Africa," *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues* 15, no. 5 (August 25, 2025): 46–54, <https://doi.org/10.32479/ijefi.19237>.

¹⁰ Kemist Shumba, Venencia Paidamoyo Nyambuya, and Samukelisiwe Khumalo, "Chanting for Social Change: An Analysis of Makhadzi's Song Muvhili Wanga (Tribute to Lufuno) and the Scourge of School Cyberbullying in South Africa," *Journal of African Films and Diaspora Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 1, 2023): 79–103, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2516-2713/2023/6n1a5>.

¹¹ Al Shaikh Abubakar, Ciby, and Thirlwall, "Unveiling Silent Struggles of Workplace Bullying: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study from Middle-Eastern Context."

aims to review the literature to examine the challenges South Africa faces in tackling the quagmire of bullying.

Bullying is a widespread global issue, with several African countries, including South Africa, reporting alarmingly high prevalence rates.¹² It poses a serious social, emotional, and psychological problem for those in schools and impedes their productivity. Inter alia, bullying takes many forms and is driven by factors such as peer pressure when learners attempt to create social networks and identities. Social media influences exacerbate these endeavours by. According to Hendricks and Mutongoza, a learner may adopt aggressive behaviours and attitudes to gain their peers' social acceptance and validation, and, in the process, their actions may become bullying or hurt their colleagues.¹³ Such aggressive behaviours in both primary and secondary South African schools manifest in gang violence, gender-based violence, and domestic abuse.¹⁴ Moreover, bullying in both primary and secondary schools in South Africa is exacerbated by children's exposure to violence in their homes or communities, normalising aggressive behaviour that makes bullying in schools more likely. Further, the proliferation of social media platforms and smartphones has resulted in an increase in cyberbullying.¹⁵ This is because many parents and school authorities lack the resources to monitor or address online harassment, and few programmes teach digital literacy. The purpose of this article is to explore the dynamics of bullying among learners in primary and secondary schools in South Africa, to offer suggestions for reducing it or developing more effective deterrents to the problem.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the traditional literature review narrative to explore the nuances and dynamics that drive bullying in South Africa and other countries. The inclusion criteria entailed the review of English-only peer-reviewed publications published between 2019 and 2025, based on a qualitative synthesis of government reports, media sources, and NGO publications. On the flip side, the exclusion criteria excluded all articles in the domain published before 2019. According to Berdanier and Lenart, a literature review is a critical assessment of earlier studies that highlights areas for further research and provides a framework for understanding the current state of knowledge.¹⁶ Snyder defines a literature review as a primary research method that is excellent for synthesising research findings.¹⁷ This paper reviewed the literature on bullying in South Africa using databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest, the WSU electronic library, and Sabinet. The following search terms were used: *Bullying in South African schools, cyberbullying in South Africa, South African school safety frameworks, violence and education in South Africa, and anti-bullying policies in South Africa*. The data served as the basis for the following thematic findings.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the results synthesised from the literature thematically.

Prevalence and Forms of Bullying in South African Schools

In South African schools, bullying is a widespread problem that impacts a sizable portion of primary and secondary school pupils.¹⁸ It can take many different forms, including verbal, physical,

¹² Robyn Cook, "Unequal Stories (V1): Surfacing Stories of Gender Inequality in Design," *The International Journal of Design in Society*, 2025.

¹³ Eleanor Alvira Hendricks and Bonginkosi Hardy Mutongoza, "Drivers of Learner Aggression in Selected Schools in the Amathole District Municipality in South Africa," *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, February 20, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/13936>.

¹⁴ Hendricks and Mutongoza, "Drivers of Learner Aggression in Selected Schools in the Amathole District Municipality in South Africa."

¹⁵ Dueñas-Casado et al., "Moral Disengagement in Primary School Children Involved in Cyberbullying, Bullying, and Cybergossip."

¹⁶ Catherine G.P. Berdanier and Joshua B. Lenart, *So, You Have to Write a Literature Review: A Guided Workbook for Engineers* (Wiley, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119555063>.

¹⁷ Hannah Snyder, "Designing the Literature Review for a Strong Contribution," *Journal of Decision Systems* 33, no. 4 (October 31, 2024): 551–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12460125.2023.2197704>.

¹⁸ Muvhoni Edward Lidzhegu, "A Whole-School Approach to Managing Bullying Behaviour among Learners in South African Primary Schools" (2019).

relational/social, and cyberbullying, with social bullying becoming increasingly common ("Cyberculture Foundation's roadshow takes a stand against school bullying in South Africa," 2025). Rumours, public humiliation, and social exclusion are frequent, especially among teenagers. The problem is made more complex by the rise in cyberbullying, which is driven by the widespread use of smartphones and access to the internet. As many people are increasingly using the internet, even young kids and teenagers, bullying on the internet is increasing.¹⁹ One form of abuse that can harm the mental health and way of life of the victim is cyberbullying, which frequently results in the victim developing depression, social anxiety, and, in the worst situations, suicidal thoughts.²⁰

According to Blumenfeld et al., Cyberbullying has emerged as one of the most prevalent types of bullying in schools, workplaces, and athletic settings worldwide.²¹ "Negative activity aimed at deliberate and repeated harm through the use of a variety of electronic media" is how cyberbullying is defined. Three key features of cyberbullying are anonymity, flaming, and public versus private. Using an electronic device, such as a mobile phone, to hide their identity while making fun of, harassing, and intimidating others is known as anonymity. Flaming occurs when someone who knows the victim makes fun of them in public to get attention or "likes" from onlookers ("Cyberculture Foundation's roadshow takes a stand against school bullying in South Africa," 2025).

The public vs. private aspect of cyberbullying arises when the bully targets others in public or private settings, such as an email or webpage, to humiliate or hurt them. Cyberbullying frequently occurs through email, voting booths, small text messaging (SMS), and online "chat rooms".²² These findings show that it is challenging to deal with bullying in South Africa because people, when doing cyberbullying, use anonymity; therefore, it is hard to locate them and hold them accountable to address the issue of bullying. An exponential rise in cyberbullying has resulted from students' increased use of smartphones. Parents are ill-prepared to handle their children's online behaviour, and schools frequently lack cyber safety instruction. The existing policy frameworks do not adequately address online harassment, and victims have few options. Indeed, bullying remains a prominent feature of increasing mental health deficits among learners.

Socioeconomic and Sociopolitical Influences Informing Bullying

School environments are significantly shaped by South Africa's history of violence, inequality, and systemic marginalisation. Bullying frequently reflects larger social tensions such as domestic violence, gang culture, and poverty.²³ Learners often imitate aggressive behaviours observed in their communities or at home. Bullying is made worse by structural injustices such as socioeconomic status and race, which also make it more difficult to establish inclusive school cultures.²⁴ Numerous studies have shown a clear correlation between bullying and demographic risk factors, including age, grade, and gender. Another risk factor that has been linked to bullying is low socioeconomic status (SES); however, the results have been contradictory due to its complexity and differences in definition and measurement. Additional risk factors are associated with students' perceptions of fair treatment and belonging to school.²⁵

¹⁹ Talya Blumenfeld, Hlologelo Malatji, and Roshini Pillay, "Cyberbullying Knowledge and Intervention Strategies: Perspectives of Educators in a Johannesburg Secondary School, South Africa," *Gender and Behaviour* 21, no. 3 (2023): 21994–3.

²⁰ Liezel Cilliers and Willie Chinyamurindi, "Perceptions of Cyber Bullying amongst Student Teachers in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa," *South African Computer Journal* 32, no. 1 (July 22, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.18489/sacj.v32i1.737>.

²¹ Blumenfeld, Malatji, and Pillay, "Cyberbullying Knowledge and Intervention Strategies: Perspectives of Educators in a Johannesburg Secondary School, South Africa."

²² Blumenfeld, Malatji, and Pillay, "Cyberbullying Knowledge and Intervention Strategies: Perspectives of Educators in a Johannesburg Secondary School, South Africa."

²³ Reddy et al., "Racial, Ethnic, and Socioeconomic Inequities in Access to Left Atrial Appendage Occlusion."

²⁴ Hendricks and Mutongozo, "Drivers of Learner Aggression in Selected Schools in the Amathole District Municipality in South Africa."

²⁵ Andrea Juan, Sylvia Hannan, and Jaqueline Harvey, "At Risk: Age, Gender, and Socio-Economic Status in Bullying Victimization among South African Primary School Students," *Perspectives in Education* 43, no. 1 (May 19, 2025): 126–40, <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v43i1.7662>.

Bullying was influenced by socioeconomic status in South Africa, as students from low-income families were more likely to experience bullying regularly.²⁶ Regardless of the school's socioeconomic standing, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to experience bullying than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.²⁷ Consequently, it seems that students with fewer private resources than their peers are the most at risk. Bullying prevalence has also been connected to student perceptions (or psychosocial factors) of the educational setting.²⁸

Observably, bullying is consistently more common among South African secondary school students attending free schools than those attending fee-paying institutions.²⁹ Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attend no-fee schools, which are typically underfunded despite receiving larger government subsidies. On the contrary, Higher SES (socio-economic status) has been associated with higher rates of cyberbullying and victimisation, whereas victims of relational and physical bullying often come from low-SES backgrounds. Bullying has been proposed to be predicted by the level of social inequality rather than by a single factor.³⁰

Bullying frequently reflects more widespread structural violence. Students from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely to be victims and offenders. Aggression in schools is strongly correlated with exposure to crime and domestic violence. As a result, bullying is more common in schools in less developed provinces.

Cultural Norms and Gender-Based Violence, informing bullying

Patriarchal norms and the cultural acceptance of corporal punishment frequently encourage aggressive behaviour in young people ("UNESCO to launch Connect with Respect toolkit for teachers to address bullying and gender-based violence in schools," 2022). Due to stigma and fear of reprisals, bullying involving gender identity, sexual orientation, and perceived masculinity is on the rise, but goes unreported.³¹ Some violent behaviours manifested by learners are a result of observing spates of violence between their parents at home and learners take them to be a normal thing to experiment with their peers in school. Consequently, such learners can start abusing other learners unremorsefully ("Bullying and gender-based violence in schools: UNESCO launching toolkit for teachers in Eastern and Southern Africa," 2022). The social learning theory by Albert Bandura 1977 seeks to say that people pick up knowledge by watching, copying, and modelling others. Attention, motivation, emotions, and attitudes all have an impact on learning. This theory demonstrates how the environment and mental functions such as memory and decision-making influence behaviour. It describes how people influence and are influenced by those around them, as well as how they learn from others.³²

In South African schools and communities, aggressive behaviour is often minimised or normalised. Bullying is misinterpreted in some cultures as a form of discipline or as a natural aspect of childhood development ("United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization: Exploring a new model to explain help-seeking in School-Related Gender-based Violence," 2022). This cultural acceptance lessens the perceived urgency of intervention and discourages reporting. Desensitisation is another effect of media exposure to violence, which reinforces the legitimacy of aggressive behaviour.

According to Dlungwane and Hamlall, gender-based violence in schools (SRGBV) is a significant barrier to universal education and girls' right to education.³³ Stereotypes and unequal gender

²⁶ Juan, Hannan, and Harvey, "At Risk: Age, Gender, and Socio-Economic Status in Bullying Victimisation among South African Primary School Students."

²⁷ Lungelo Ngcobo et al., "Gender-Based Violence in Schools," *Combating School-Based Violence Using African Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Implications for Educational Safety*, 2025.

²⁸ Juan, Hannan, and Harvey, "At Risk: Age, Gender, and Socio-Economic Status in Bullying Victimisation among South African Primary School Students."

²⁹ Reddy et al., "Racial, Ethnic, and Socioeconomic Inequities in Access to Left Atrial Appendage Occlusion."

³⁰ C Madhanlal and M E M Nakedi, "Impact Of Life Science And Life Orientation Teachers' socio-Emotional Practices On Learner Cognitive Achievement," in *INTED2025 Proceedings* (IATED, 2025), 7357–67.

³¹ S N Nyeck et al., "The Economic Cost of LGBT Stigma and Discrimination in South Africa," 2019.

³² Pinar Aylin Yurtici, "Social Cognitive Supervision Model: A Review," *Psikiyatri Guncel Yaklaşımlar* 17, no. 3 (September 30, 2025): 534–43, <https://doi.org/10.18863/pgy.1550952>.

³³ Angel Duduzile Dlungwane and Vijay Hamlall, "Implicit Gender-Based Violence against Black High School Girls in South African Township Schools," *Perspectives in Education* 42, no. 1 (May 30, 2024): 98–112, <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v42i1.7186>.

norms that are founded on hierarchies and subordination intensify and fuel SRGBV. There is a wealth of literature on gender-based violence in South African schools, much of which explains how masculinity and gender-based violence are related. The results showed that the primary offenders of implicit gender-based violence were boys. According to the analysis, teasing, joking, social bullying, alienation, and rumour spreading were all examples of implicit violence. In most instances, however, girls were the victims and boys were the ones who committed the violence.³⁴ It is critical to comprehend the factors that lead boys to harass girls. Power, control, and sexual attraction are common explanations.

Peer Pressure and Adolescent Identity Formation, informing bullying

Axiomatically, students are especially vulnerable to peer pressure and the need for social approval during adolescence. Students may imitate the aggressive behaviours of influential classmates to blend in with the dominant peer groups. This theme is particularly noticeable in group-based bullying, where bullies target weaker students to elevate themselves in society.³⁵

According to Ugwu et al., bullying among teenagers in South Africa is a serious public health concern.³⁶ To predict bullying behaviour, one of the studies investigated the connections between personality traits, peer pressure, and childhood adversity. Data from 769 high school students were analysed using structural equation modelling. Results show that bullying behaviour is predicted by childhood adversity, peer influence, and personality traits such as conscientiousness, extraversion, and emotional stability. These findings are consistent with the Social Learning Theory, which highlights peer dynamics and observed behaviours in bullying. Among the practical ramifications are focused interventions that address childhood adversity and promote constructive peer relationships and personality growth.³⁷

Unmet emotional needs and poor social skills may make adolescents who have faced childhood adversity more vulnerable to peer pressure.³⁸ Weak ties to traditional social institutions, such as family and school, increase the risk of peer-influenced deviant behaviour, according to Social Control Theory.³⁹ Teenagers who lack strong parental support may turn to their peer groups to fit in and be accepted, making them more susceptible to peer pressure.⁴⁰

Furthermore, negative experiences can impede the growth of self-control and heighten the desire for social acceptance. These teenagers may hang out with troublesome peers to satisfy their social and emotional needs, unintentionally exposing them to more behaviours, such as bullying.⁴¹ This makes it harder to address bullying in South Africa. Exposure to such groups can increase the likelihood that their members will engage in problematic behaviours, even when other risk factors for problem behaviour are reduced.

The development of teenage identities and peer pressure are important factors in bullying in South African schools. Due to their intense need to fit in, adolescents frequently follow peer group norms, even when those norms call for harmful or aggressive behaviour. Particularly in settings that

³⁴ Mandlenkosi Richard Mphatheni and Ntsika Edward Mlamla, "Gender-Based Violence against Men and Boys: A Hidden Problem," *African Journal of Gender, Society and Development (Formerly Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa)* 11, no. 3 (September 1, 2022): 59–83, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3622/2022/v11n3a4>.

³⁵ Hendricks and Mutongoza, "Drivers of Learner Aggression in Selected Schools in the Amathole District Municipality in South Africa."

³⁶ Lawrence E. Ugwu et al., "Childhood Adversity and Peer Influence in Adolescent Bullying Perpetration," *Scientific Reports* 14, no. 1 (December 28, 2024): 30959, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-81978-8>.

³⁷ Ugwu et al., "Childhood Adversity and Peer Influence in Adolescent Bullying Perpetration."

³⁸ Kenni Wujutari Ajele et al., "Mental Health among High School Students in South Africa: Roles of Childhood Adversity, Bullying Behaviour, Peer Pressure, and Self-Esteem," *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 34, no.6(2025): 629–36.

³⁹ Ali Unlu et al., "An Empirical Test of Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory: New Correlates of Youth Deviance," *Crime & Delinquency* 67, no. 2 (2021): 179–211.

⁴⁰ Ugwu et al., "Childhood Adversity and Peer Influence in Adolescent Bullying Perpetration."

⁴¹ Sen Li et al., "Childhood Maltreatment and Adolescent Cyberbullying Perpetration: Roles of Individual Relative Deprivation and Deviant Peer Affiliation," *Children and Youth Services Review* 149 (June 2023): 106957, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.106957>.

value toughness and dominance, bullying can be used as a means of gaining acceptance, preserving status, or demonstrating loyalty among peers. Social categories like gender, race, economic status, and physical appearance influence who becomes a target or an aggressor as teenagers develop their identities.⁴² Peer approval and social rewards frequently reinforce bullying, which is a tactic used by learners to establish dominance or associate with powerful groups.⁴³ Furthermore, teenagers with characteristics such as impulsivity or those from unfavourable homes are more susceptible to peer pressure and may turn to bullying as a coping strategy.⁴⁴ All things considered, bullying is ingrained in the social dynamics and identity struggles of adolescence, necessitating interventions that go beyond discipline and instead concentrate on promoting healthy identity development, altering peer group norms, and addressing the more general social and emotional difficulties that students encounter.⁴⁵

Psychological Support Deficits in Schools Aggravate Bullying

There is a severe lack of certified school counsellors and psychologists in many schools in South Africa. Many schools use Life Orientation instructors, who lack formal training in mental health. It is challenging to address the underlying causes of bullying and aid both victims and aggressors when psycho-social support is deficient.⁴⁶

South African schools' psychological support deficiencies contribute significantly to the ongoing issue of bullying because they foster an environment where victims, offenders, and bystanders frequently experience emotional and psychological deprivation (source). When learning about trauma or peer aggression, students are left to fend for themselves without the proper interventions because many schools lack enough qualified school counsellors, psychologists, or social workers to serve South Africa's underprivileged areas.⁴⁷ As a result, many students who experience bullying endure silent suffering while going on to experience issues in their later years, including chronic anxiety and depression, poor academic performance, and low self-esteem.⁴⁸

However, due to the lack of psychological support, even bullies are rarely offered behaviour-change interventions or rehabilitation programmes that address the underlying causes of their aggression—often rooted in domestic abuse, neglect, or social dysfunction.⁴⁹ This results in action followed by inaction, which further reinforces the use of these behaviours by denying schools a culture of emotional neglect and violence. Teachers who are typically overworked and lack mental health management training may fail to recognise or take appropriate action in bullying cases, which puts additional psychological strain on impacted students.⁵⁰

The stigma associated with mental health in many South African communities exacerbates the problem of people reluctant to seek help when it is available. Therefore, South African schools will continue to fall short of providing safe and nurturing learning environments where all students can

⁴² Phadiel Hoosen et al., “Youth and Adolescents’ Perceptions of Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Systematic Review of the Literature: P. Hoosen et Al.,” *Child Indicators Research* 15, no. 3 (2022): 885–911.

⁴³ Isheachida Manatsa, “Building Peace Via School Peace Clubs in Umlazi, EThekweni Region” (Durban University of Technology, 2024).

⁴⁴ Cliona O’Keeffe et al., “Sticks and Stones: Bullying and Microaggression at School,” *All Means All!-OpenTextbook for Diversity in Education*, 2025.

⁴⁵ Anri Gretha Adlem, “Unveiling the Digital Landscape: School Social Workers’ Knowledge and Perceptions of Adolescent Sexting in Gauteng Schools, South Africa,” *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 61, no. 1 (2025): 73–105.

⁴⁶ Al Shaikh Abubakar, Ciby, and Thirlwall, “Unveiling Silent Struggles of Workplace Bullying: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study from Middle-Eastern Context.”

⁴⁷ Lerelle Smith, “The Provision of School Social Work Intervention Services: A Case Study of Schools in Johannesburg” (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (South Africa), 2024).

⁴⁸ Azame Mqokweni, Mvuyisi Notole, and Jabulani Gilford Kheswa, “Psychological Well-Being of Adolescents Living with Albinism. A Case of One School in Bizana, Eastern Cape, South Africa,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research* 7, no. s1 (2025): a04–a04.

⁴⁹ Tshilidzi Diana Negota, “The Significance of Psychological Services on Public Secondary School Learners in Luvuvhu Circuit, Thulamela Municipality” (2021).

⁵⁰ Feten Fekih-Romdhane, Alexandre Andrade Loch, and Souheil Hallit, “Preventing Psychosis in Low Resources Settings-Insights, Specificities, and Recommendations to the Study of Clinical High Risk for Psychosis (CHR) in Low-and-Middle-Income Countries,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (Frontiers Media SA, 2024).

flourish unless there is a systemic investment in psychological services and trauma-informed training for teachers.⁵¹

The Way Forward

In the future, combating bullying in South African schools will require a coordinated, systemic strategy that incorporates social, educational, and psychological techniques. The conversation about bullying urgently needs to change from one that emphasises reactive, punitive tactics to one that emphasises proactive, preventive tactics that consider the root causes of aggression. By incorporating restorative justice practices, peer mentorship, and social-emotional learning into the curriculum, schools can become safer places. Crucially, to undermine damaging cultural norms and advance the values of empathy, respect, and inclusiveness, community involvement should be promoted. Targeted programmes should draw on social learning and control theories to support healthy identity development during adolescence and to change peer group norms. Additionally, addressing the growing prevalence of cyberbullying will require teacher training in bullying detection and management, as well as more general digital instruction in literacy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several suggestions are made considering the results to effectively address bullying in South African schools. To support students' mental health, the Department of Basic Education should first prioritise hiring and assigning qualified school psychologists and social workers. Second, anti-bullying frameworks must be revised to specifically address cyberbullying and incorporate unambiguous rules for accountability, monitoring, and intervention. Third, schools must provide teachers with continual training in inclusive classroom management, conflict resolution, and trauma-informed practices. Fourth, with an emphasis on gender equity and non-violence, community-based awareness campaigns should be started to question cultural norms that support aggression. Finally, incorporating peer-led support programmes and encouraging student input in the implementation of policies can foster a resilient, shared-responsibility culture. South African schools can create safer, more welcoming learning environments where all students are safeguarded, encouraged, and given the tools they need to succeed by addressing these systemic inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Bullying in South African schools is a complicated problem with deep roots in larger cultural, societal, and economic contexts. Bullying can take many different forms, such as verbal, physical, relational, and cyberbullying, as this literature review has demonstrated. It is influenced by several factors, including peer dynamics, cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and a lack of psychological support systems. Systemic injustices and the pervasiveness of violence in both domestic and social contexts have normalised aggression and complicated the implementation of interventions. The South African government, through the Department of Education, needs to strengthen the existing anti-bullying laws that members of the school fraternity need to embrace and enforce.

Additionally, there is a serious lack of qualified support staff in schools, which means that students' psychosocial needs, particularly those impacted by trauma or peer pressure, are frequently ignored. These complex issues show that bullying is not just a disciplinary issue but also a social justice phenomenon, an educational, and public health concern that calls for a multipronged approach. This paper posits that the state of bullying in South Africa persists due to institutional, social, and systemic issues. Although significant progress has been made in policy development, sustainable change remains constrained by implementation gaps, emerging digital threats, persistent socioeconomic disparities, and inadequately funded support systems.

⁵¹ Mqokweni, Notole, and Kheswa, "Psychological Well-Being of Adolescents Living with Albinism. A Case of One School in Bizana, Eastern Cape, South Africa."

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