

## **Bullying Practices, Causes, and Strategies for Secondary School Students: School Principal's Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*Bullying has been a critical issue in schools for students. This study explores secondary school principals' perspectives on bullying practices, causes, impacts, and coping strategies. Despite extensive research on bullying antecedents and outcomes, frontline insights from administrators encountering incidents firsthand remain lacking. This qualitative study helped fill that gap by eliciting 11 principals' experiences with risk factors, consequences, and change approaches related to bullying. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. According to the findings, principals perceive bullying as arising from aggressive tendencies shaped by adversarial home lives, peer groups, school climates, and societal issues. They expressed facing burnout and distress responding to endemic aggression issues while sharing that targeted youth can suffer declining achievement, isolation, and dropout risks long-term. Principals also noted how unchecked bullying erodes schools' social fabric and learning capacity schoolwide. Accordingly, participants advocated for coordinated ecological prevention and intervention across school programming, student support, families, community partners, and media campaigns. By conveying principals' applied perspectives, the study underscores key levers across social ecologies requiring attention to curb bullying and its academic, emotional, and institutional harms. Multitiered initiatives grounded in administrators' frontline insights show promise for translating research into supportive policy and practice changes.*

**Keywords:** *Bullying, Principals, Causes, Perspective, Strategies.*

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### **1. Introduction:**

Bullying is defined as unwanted and aggressive behavior by an individual or group directed against another person that involves a real or perceived imbalance of power and is repeated over time (Gladden et al., 2014). It can take many forms, including physical (hitting, pushing), verbal (name-calling, threats), relational (social exclusion, spreading rumors), and cyberbullying involving electronic communication. Bullying is an ecological phenomenon involving factors at the individual, peer, family, school, and community levels (Espelage, 2014)). Relevant personal

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variables include a lack of empathy, low self-control, emotional regulation problems, and learning difficulties. Peer influences like group dynamics and power relations are impactful. Dysfunctional family environments with poor monitoring and harsh discipline promote bullying, whereas parental support protects against it (Bowes et al., 2009). Schools permitting aggressive subcultures facilitate bullying. Discriminatory societal attitudes marginalizing vulnerable groups for characteristics like disabilities or ethnicity enable victimization (Scherr & Larson, 2009). Multilevel models incorporating such variables better explain bullying behaviors.

School-wide anti-bullying programs represent the predominant prevention approach, commonly implementing disciplinary methods, parent partnerships, classroom rules, conflict resolution training, and awareness campaigns. Meta-analyses establish anti-bullying programs to decrease perpetration and victimization rates; components like parent training, improved playground supervision, classroom rules, and management boost effectiveness (Ferguson et al., 2007). Thus, programs with multiple elements at school and community levels are most successful for primary prevention. Bullying in schools is a global issue impacting millions of students worldwide. The World Health Organization has described school bullying as a major adolescent health problem (Lee & Cornell, 2009).

Bullying encompasses direct physical and verbal forms as well as indirect, relational aggression. Cyberbullying involving electronic communication like social media, texts, and email has emerged as a newer form (Kowalski et al., 2014). As students advance developmentally, direct bullying tends to decline while indirect and cyberbullying increase, facilitated by greater verbal skills and technology access. Student roles in bullying differentiate key actors like victims, bullies, bully victims, and bystanders. Passive victims display submissiveness, whereas provocative victims behave aggressively, irritating classmates. Bullies feel a need to dominate and derive satisfaction from inflicting injury (Kowalski et al., 2014). Bully victims are perpetrators and targets; their dysregulated behavior evokes negative responses. Bystanders witness bullying without intervention, thereby enabling bullies. Victim attributes like disability, ethnicity, obesity, and LGBT status increase vulnerability (Kljakovic & Hunt, 2016). While bullies may possess individual traits, peer and school cultures substantially shape roles and behaviors.

## **2. Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study was as follows:

1. To explore bullying practices, causes, and strategies among students at secondary schools.

## **3. Research Questions:**

1. What are the bullying practices of the secondary school students?
2. What are the causes of bullying among secondary school students?
3. What are the strategies to cope with bullying among secondary school students?

## **4. Literature Review**

Bullying among school-aged youth has been a widely researched phenomenon globally over the past few decades. This literature review synthesizes key areas of inquiry in this domain, encompassing conceptualization, forms, roles, theoretical models, outcomes, risk factors, and interventions.

Most researchers define bullying as aggressive behavior involving power imbalance, repetition, and intention to harm. Power imbalance distinguishes bullying from ordinary peer conflict; victims have difficulty defending themselves due to disadvantages like smaller physical stature or social marginalization. Intention to harm means bullies find gratification in inflicting injury, contrasting accidental acts causing distress. Repetition over time is necessary, although varying thresholds

exist regarding duration or frequency qualifying as bullying (Arora, 1996). Variations in these defining criteria explain differing operationalization in studies.

Certain key components constitute bullying: physical, verbal, and relational aggression and, more recently, cyberbullying via electronic media. Physical bullying includes hitting, kicking, and other acts causing bodily harm. Verbal bullying encompasses name-calling, insults, racial/sexual remarks, and threats. Relational bullying represents attempts to socially isolate or damage peer relationships and reputations through rumor spreading or social exclusion. Cyberbullying conducts such aggression online (Kowalski et al., 2014). Sexual bullying is another emergent form, more prevalent among adolescents undergoing puberty. Conceptually, bullying constitutes direct acts involving confrontation and indirect acts through social manipulation showing nuance matching developmental level (Card et al., 2008).

Bullying results from a constellation of individual, peer, family, school, and community risk factors (Espelage, 2014). Relevant individual variables include poor empathy, low self-control, externalizing behaviors, and disabilities, making children easy targets. Family dysfunction like parental conflict, domestic violence, abuse or neglect, and lack of monitoring predicts greater bullying and victimization. Peer group dynamics like competition for popularity and dominance promote bullying to gain status, conform, or avoid estrangement; friends provide protection. Unsafe school environments permitting aggression, lacking supervision, and response policies coupled with poor parental involvement enable bullying (Barboza et al., 2009). Cultural discrimination against vulnerable groups like immigrants, ethnic minorities, or non-traditional youth marginalizes victims and normalizes victimization (Scherr & Larson, 2009). Comprehensive models incorporating such multilayered influences explain bullying best with a developmental perspective.

Scholarly evidence shows multi-component school-wide anti-bullying programs to be most successful, typically employing disciplinary methods, behavioral monitoring, classroom management, conflict resolution skills, parent partnerships, and whole-school community building for sustained culture change (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program pioneered such efforts, substantially alleviating victimization through coordinating administrators, teachers, and parents to enforce consistent policies promoting positive behavior (Olweus & Limber, 2018). Components like classroom rules, parent training, student awareness, improved playground supervision, and a sense of community elevate program effectiveness in meta-analyses (Ferguson et al., 2007). Government legislation and school partnerships help sustain programs demonstrating the importance of ecological approaches.

In the Pakistani context, there are different studies reported. A study by Aslam et al. (2022) explored transgender students' experiences of bullying. In another study (Siddiqui et al., 2021), Principals' self-efficacy beliefs about managing bullying were explored in secondary schools. Another qualitative study was conducted by Siddiqui et al. (2021) to explore bullying in universities. Another study by Butt et al. (2021) was conducted to explore dealing with bullying in elite schools. In this study, principals' perceptions and practices were explored.

## **5. Research Methodology**

This study utilized a qualitative approach involving unstructured interviews to gain perspectives from participants flexibly (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The sample comprised 11 principals of higher secondary schools selected via purposive sampling to participate in the study. Unstructured interviews were conducted to elicit principals' perspectives on the causes of bullying behavior, experiences with bullying incidents, steps to minimize bullying behavior, and the effects of bullying on school climate and student learning at the secondary level. Interview questions focused

on understanding the causes, experiences, prevention strategies, and impacts of bullying based on principals' insights. Interview data were analyzed using initial coding to examine, compare, and search for similarities and differences. This multi-stage qualitative coding and analysis aimed to construct frameworks and processes to explain bullying antecedents and outcomes in secondary schools based on principals' perspectives.

## **5. Findings of the Study**

The findings of the study were based on the following aspects.

### **5.1. Causes of Bullying Behavior**

The interview data revealed that principals viewed aggression and violation as the primary causes of bullying behavior. Most of the participants indicated that problematic home environments and family conflicts contributed to bullying tendencies. Additionally, principals cited adverse social conditions as an antecedent, suggesting that societal-level issues may cultivate bullying actions. Institutions were also implicated as potential ecological contributors to bullying through organizational structures, policies, and cultures. At the individual level, principals identified several psychological factors that could motivate bullying, including desires for satisfaction, responses to isolation, and needs for attention. Participants also noted that teachers' attitudes and interactions with students could mitigate or trigger bullying. Finally, peer group influences were cited as important social dynamics that can shape bullying, with groups potentially reinforcing or inhibiting negative behaviors among youth. Overall, principals perceived the causes of bullying as multifaceted, stemming from aggressive tendencies, home life adversity, societal problems, organizational shortcomings, psychological motivations, teacher-student relationships, and peer group impacts. These insights illuminate the complex interplay of individual, relational, and environmental contexts that give rise to and sustain bullying behaviors.

### **5.2. Principals' Experiences with Bullying Behavior**

The interview findings revealed that most of the principals felt their administrations responded insufficiently to address bullying behaviors in schools. Many participants expressed feelings of anger, annoyance, and fear about managing bullying problems. Some principals reported avoiding areas of their schools where teasing or bullying occurred between students. Additionally, some principals normalized behaviors categorized as bullying, viewing them as developmentally expected among youth. These participants characterized students targeted by bullying as highly involved in co-curricular activities. Overall, principals largely perceived institutional responses to bullying as inadequate. They experienced emotional distress over dealing with bullying issues firsthand. Some principals physically distanced themselves from bullying interactions. A portion of principals also minimized bullying as typical adolescent behavior and shifted blame towards victims rather than perpetrators or environmental contributors. These insights provide a complex perspective into principals' subjective and behavioral responses to school bullying incidents.

### **5.3. Strategies for Minimizing Bullying Behavior**

Most of the principals advocated launching effective anti-bullying programs within schools to address the issue. They emphasized close interactions between parents, school staff, students, and administrators around anti-bullying efforts. Additionally, principals suggested that focused education and guidance should be for the students who bully to prevent their harmful behaviors. Establishing strong counseling services for targets and perpetrators of bullying was also cited as an institutional prevention approach. Beyond schools, participants highlighted the value of using media to educate local communities about bullying and engage community members in solutions. In summary, principals put forth a multi-tiered framework for bullying prevention spanning school-based programs, enhanced cooperation across groups like parents and teachers,

rehabilitative support for bullying students, in-school counseling services for all students, and community outreach via media. This ecological strategy underscores principals' view that coordinated efforts across multiple systemic levels offer the greatest promise for reducing school bullying behavior.

#### **5.4. Effects of Bullying Behavior on School Climate and Student Learning**

The interview data revealed principals' perspectives on the multifaceted impacts bullying behaviors have on school climate and student academic outcomes. Most of the participants indicated that bullying cultivated constant tension and stress for targeted students. They suggested that severely bullied youth may turn to self-isolation as a coping response, with risks for social disconnectedness. In turn, social adversity can negatively affect academic performance and motivation, with principals observing declines in achievement and school dropouts among highly victimized students. Beyond directly impacting youth, principals noted that students' moods before and after school often correlate with bullying problems, influencing the broader student body.

Additionally, some principals characterized student bullying as efforts to exert control, reflecting dysfunctional social dynamics between youth. Many participants emphasized that bullying corrodes schools' social environments by fostering climates of distress and fear schoolwide. This atmosphere was thought to undermine student capacity for learning and encourage other disciplinary issues. Finally, principals linked bullying to deteriorations in overall perceptions of school safety and the institutional environment.

#### **6. Conclusions**

This interview-based study explored secondary school principals' perspectives on bullying behaviors, including causes, personal experiences, prevention strategies, and impacts on school climate and learning. The principals perceive bullying as a complex phenomenon stemming from multiple interacting factors spanning individual, relational, and environmental domains. Institutionally, dysfunctional policies, cultures, and support systems fail to deter bullying. Societally, prevailing social issues normalize violence and problematic power assertions. Participants expressed feeling angry, annoyed, distressed, and afraid amid rampant bullying problems, with some actively avoiding hotspots for victimization. These effects reflect the human toll endemic bullying takes on administrators. Some principals also normalized bullying as typical adolescent behavior, demonstrating forms of cognitive dissonance that likely impair prevention and intervention efforts from leaders. To address this complex, multilevel problem, principals advocate for multitiered solutions using an ecological framework. At the school level, research-based anti-bullying programs can reinforce positive behaviors and discourage aggression through policies, reporting procedures, and awareness campaigns. For affected students, counseling services, peer support groups, and restorative practices may mitigate adverse outcomes while rehabilitating and educating students who bully to alter unhealthy patterns. Enhanced collaboration among all school stakeholders, including parents, also has value for aligning efforts. Finally, schools can engage media outlets and community partners to convey anti-bullying messaging and initiatives to the wider public. This natural approach targeting individual students, school systems, and community contexts in tandem shows the greatest promise for reducing the prevalence and harms associated with bullying behaviors over the long term. With principals on the front lines witnessing bullying's human costs firsthand, their insights should inform urgent school- and district-level action to support healthy student development systemwide.

#### **7. Discussion**

This interview-based study elicited secondary school principals' perspectives on bullying antecedents, impacts, and solutions based on their firsthand practical experiences confronting these

issues. Several key insights emerge around the individual, relational, and systemic factors that give rise to and reinforce bullying behaviors and their academic, social-emotional, and institutional consequences. Principals also underline the need for multitiered, ecological prevention and intervention approaches spanning school-centered programs, impacted students, families, community partners, and media. Overall, principals perceived bullying behavior as stemming from a constellation of risk factors operating across individual, peer, family, school, and societal levels, aligning with social-ecological models of aggression and violence (Espelage, 2014). The potentiating effects of adverse home environments and psychological motivations like status-seeking also corroborate the influence contextual stress and emotional dysregulation can have on provoking aggression (Verlinden et al., 2000). These findings confirm principals' foundational appreciation that bullying encompasses complex biosocial processes across developmental systems rather than dispositional deficits or environments alone. Relationally, principals implicated problematic teacher-student dynamics and influential peer groups as potential releases of bullying tendencies, which past research links to bullying behaviors and outcomes (Duy, 2013). Participants intuited key social cognitive and behaviorist mechanisms that can perpetuate aggression through modeling, rewards, and norm-setting without explicitly citing constructs like observational learning and behavioral reinforcement. Although principals did not seem to blame teachers for students who bully, strained instructor relationships and peer-level norms tolerating bullying likely sustain these harmful behaviors schoolwide. Institutionally, administrators cited deficits in school policies, cultures, and supports that fail to curb aggressive acts, indicating how organizations can passively or actively reinforce bullying (Grossi & dos Santos, 2012). It aligns with ecological perspectives emphasizing school climate factors that cultivate hostility, prejudice, and violence without effective behavioral management and students' social-emotional development (Gendron et al., 2011). Thus, principals not only viewed bullying as a multifaceted phenomenon but largely perceived schools as playing central roles in either inhibiting or enabling bullying behaviors among youth. Similarly, participants put forth ecological notions around how bullying behaviors ripple outward with adverse effects on targets, aggressors, bystanders, administrators, institutions, and society, fully spanning the social-ecological framework (Hong & Espelage, 2012). For individual victims, principals cited withdrawal, absenteeism, declining achievement, and school dropout reflecting extensive research linking bullying victimization to social isolation, psychological distress, somatic complaints, externalizing problems, school avoidance, and educational disengagement over time (Moore et al., 2014). For students who bully, principals noted a lack of rehabilitation and persistence of aggressive tendencies into adulthood, corroborating research indicating increased risks for later academic failure, criminality, and psychopathology among unreformed aggressors (Moore et al., 2014). At the peer level, bullying erodes the school climate and feelings of safety that undermines learning and healthy development for all students. Institutionally, bullying cultivation of fear and distress corrodes the educational mission, while administrations overwhelmed by unchecked aggression are diverted from positive duties that facilitate instruction. Societally, normalized aggression and rights violations in schools contribute to broader cultures permissive of violence with shared costs across communities (Barboza et al., 2009). Thus, administrators directly witnessed how bullying behaviors trigger spiraling, synergistic harms across micro to macro levels of the social ecology absent forceful, systematic interventions. Accordingly, principals advocated for coordinated anti-bullying efforts using cross-level social ecological frameworks spanning school-wide programming, targeted supports for affected students, partnerships with families and communities, public awareness campaigns, and rehabilitating individual aggressors (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013). This echoes best

practice perspectives that single interventions rarely suffice given bullying's multifaceted etiology. Suggested school-level programs reflect the need for clear anti-bullying policies, reporting procedures, and awareness and social-emotional skill building that develop student and staff competencies to reduce risk factors and manage incidents, respectively (Gaffney et al., 2019). Outreach campaigns mobilizing parents, media outlets, and community partners leverage public health models for conveying anti-bullying messages and activating communities as stakeholders while rehabilitating individual aggressors disrupt trajectories towards increasing violence (Evans et al., 2014). In these ways, principals demonstrate an appropriate grasp of dynamics at play and the comprehensive solutions called for, even if lacking academic fluency with pertinent theoretical frameworks.

## 8. Recommendations

1. There is a need to implement comprehensive, evidence-based anti-bullying programs.
2. Teachers and administrators should be provided with professional development to recognize signs of bullying and understand root causes and risk factors.
3. Integrate family and community outreach like local media campaigns and partnerships with stakeholders to raise public awareness about bullying behaviors and prevention while activating diverse groups around inclusive solutions.
4. Conduct further research into secondary school principals' experiences with bullying to better understand professional impacts, resource and support needs for building individual and institutional resilience, and desired policy and programming changes.
5. Create supportive spaces for principals, teachers, and school staff to openly discuss and process bullying incidents and stressors to counter adverse emotional responses, which can normalize victim blaming and inhibit constructive responses.

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