

Effective School Bullying Prevention Strategies: A Thematic Review

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ABSTRACT

School bullying remains a persistent challenge that affects student well-being, academic performance, and the overall learning environment. Despite the increasing number of intervention programs worldwide, questions remain about the key determinants that shape their effectiveness. This study aimed to identify and thematise the factors that influence the success of school bullying prevention strategies. Guided by the PRISMA protocol, 19 peer-reviewed articles were identified, screened, and systematically synthesised using a thematic review approach. The analysis revealed six key strategies that contribute to effective prevention: fostering a favourable school climate, ensuring program fidelity, strengthening teacher efficacy, promoting socioemotional regulation, increasing peer support, and incorporating parental involvement. These findings underscore the importance of a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach in designing and implementing interventions.

Keywords: school bullying, prevention strategies, thematic review

INTRODUCTION

Bullying in schools remains a critical issue that disrupts student well-being, hinders academic engagement, and undermines the overall learning environment (Fauzan & Sulaeman, 2024). Victims often experience psychological stress, lowered self-esteem, and disengagement in school activities, while peers and teachers are also affected by the hostile school climate that results (Martinot et al., 2020; González Moreno & Molero Jurado, 2023). Although a growing body of research has examined various anti-bullying approaches—including policy interventions, professional development for teachers, and peer support programs—existing evidence is still fragmented, with findings scattered across various contexts and methodological designs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Merchie et al., 2018; Martinot et al., 2020). This lack of integration makes it difficult for educators and policymakers to determine which measures are the most effective. This study examines the key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of prevention.

The emerging evidence shows an increase in bullying in schools both globally and within Malaysia, raising concerns about the effectiveness of existing prevention strategies. UNICEF (2025) highlights that many schools lack systematic data collection, comprehensive policies addressing all forms of bullying—including cyberbullying—and secure, confidential reporting mechanisms for students. In Malaysia, the Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM) has described this situation as urgent, calling for more vigorous enforcement of anti-bullying measures following several high-profile cases that have resulted in physical injury and psychological trauma among students (SUHAKAM, 2025). These developments emphasise the urgent need for research that combines existing evidence and identifies factors contributing to more effective school bullying prevention.

Although reviews and meta-analyses have shed light on bullying prevention, many questions remain about their efficiency. For instance, studies have thoroughly assessed teacher training (Panosso et al., 2023) and teachers' self-efficacy in intervention (Fischer et al., 2021). Still, they show fragmented approaches and a lack

of integration across all parties involved. Recent studies by Gaffney et al. (2019) and Silva et al. (2018) demonstrate that programs aimed at reducing bullying are implemented; however, they exhibit inconsistencies across contexts, limited descriptions of program components, and non-significant or uneven impacts. Hence, the gaps inspire authors to conduct this study. The objective of the study is to identify and thematise the effectiveness of school bullying prevention strategies. The significance of the study lies in its capacity to enhance both academic research and practical application by demonstrating the collaborative roles of all parties involved in effective bullying prevention, while also informing policymakers and practitioners on how to reduce bullying rates.

METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this review is to analyse the insights derived from previous findings related to school bullying prevention strategies. The review was specifically directed by one main research question using the PICO method. The P stands for ‘population’, which refers to schools; I represent ‘interest’, indicating the determinants that influence effectiveness; and Co signifies ‘context’, referring to the school environment. Hence, the combination of three components generates this main research question: “What are the key determinants that influence the effectiveness of school bullying prevention strategies?”

This research employed a thematic review methodology. A thematic review approach was chosen because the goal of this study was to identify and conceptualise key strategies across diverse contexts rather than statistically aggregate effect sizes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This method allows for capturing patterns, meanings, and contextual implications that might be lost in a pure qualitative synthesis (Lim, 2025; Tracy, 2024). It is therefore well suited to provide a holistic understanding of the complex, multi stakeholder dynamics in bullying prevention. This thematic review utilising the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Moher et al., 2009) to systematically identify and select pertinent studies (refer to Figure 1). The adopted search strategy utilised the subsequent string: TITLE (“school bully*”) AND TITLE (“prevent*” OR “avoid” OR “block*” OR “deterrence” OR “hindrance” OR “intervention”), resulting in 89 documents. During the screening phase, articles were filtered based on publication year (2016-2025), document type (journal articles only), and language (English), resulting in a total of 33 articles. A comprehensive eligibility assessment was conducted, resulting in the exclusion of studies that focused solely on digital bullying, duplicated existing gaps, or failed to address the research question. A total of 19 studies were ultimately included in the analysis.

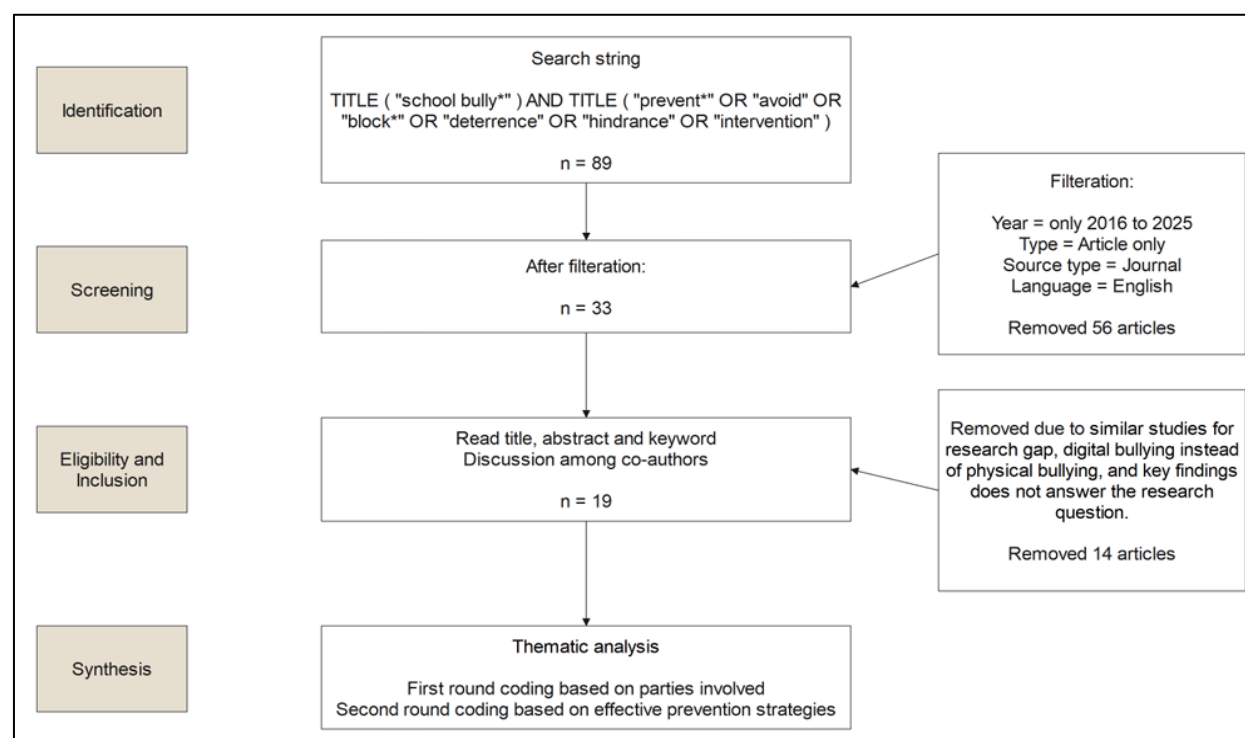


Figure 1: Process of searching and selecting the focal literature via the PRISMA protocol

All included studies were peer-reviewed journal articles, ensuring a baseline level of scholarly rigour (Menon et al., 2022). While a formal quality scoring tool such as a risk of bias assessment was not applied, given that the focus was on synthesising themes rather than evaluating effect sizes. The consistency of peer-reviewed sources provides confidence in the robustness of the thematic patterns identified (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Then, the synthesis process was conducted through a thematic review, which served as the primary methodology of the study. A two-round coding procedure was implemented. The first round was categorised by the involved parties (e.g., teachers, students, families, or schools), while the subsequent round identified determinants based on the strategies and conditions that facilitated effective prevention. This thematic review is transparent because it mapped, clustered, and interpreted recurring patterns, resulting in the identification of key determinants for school bullying prevention strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents the distribution of included studies across countries. The findings indicate that China contributed the highest number of studies (4), followed by the United States (3) and South Korea (2). Collectively, these three countries account for the majority of the literature on school bullying prevention, underscoring their central role in shaping current scholarly debates. However, contributions from other regions, including Italy and the United Kingdom, as well as several countries with only a single study each, remain scattered and less frequent. This uneven distribution highlights the dominance of research from a few countries, raising questions about the generalizability of the identified determinants of effective school bullying prevention across diverse cultural and institutional settings.

Table 1: Country distribution of included studies

Country	Count	References
China	4	Wang et al. (2024); Tian et al. (2023); Yu & Bikar (2023); Li et al. (2017)
United States	3	Bowser et al. (2020); Farley (2018); Gerlinger & Wo (2016)
South Korea	2	Han et al. (2021); Lee et al. (2021)
Italy	2	Acquadro Maran et al. (2017); Begotti et al. (2017)
United Kingdom	2	Tzani-Pepelasi et al. (2019); Lester et al. (2017)
Australia	1	Cross et al. (2021)
South Africa	1	Adewoye & Du Plessis (2021)
Kosovo	1	Arënliu et al. (2020)
Spain	1	Martínez-Sánchez et al. (2019)
Netherlands	1	Garandeau et al. (2016)
Turkey	1	Albayrak et al. (2016)

Table 2 summarises the distribution of methodologies employed across the selected studies. The majority of the studies used a quantitative approach (12 studies). This dominance indicates a preference for measurable outcomes and generalisable findings within the field. The mixed-methods approach appears less common, with a total of five studies, but demonstrates a growing recognition of the value of integrating statistical data with contextual insights. In contrast, only two studies relied solely on qualitative approaches.

Table 2: Distribution of Methodology

Methodology	Count	References
Quantitative	12	Wang et al. (2024); Tian et al. (2023); Yu & Bikar (2023); Han et al. (2021); Lee et al. (2021); Bowser et al. (2020); Arënliu et al. (2020); Martínez-

		Sánchez et al. (2019); Li et al. (2017); Begotti et al. (2017); Gerlinger & Wo (2016); Albayrak et al. (2016)
Qualitative	2	Acquadro Maran et al. (2017); Farley (2018)
Mixed Method	5	Cross et al. (2021); Adewoye & Du Plessis (2021); Tzani-Pepelasi et al. (2019); Lester et al. (2017); Garandean et al. (2016)

Table 3 summarises the themes emerging from the first-round analysis, focusing on the main parties engaged in bullying prevention efforts. The majority of studies (11) emphasised the role of the school as an institution, reflecting its central position in implementing structured policies, programs, and monitoring systems. Teachers were the next most frequently identified group (5 studies), reflecting their roles as frontline professionals in detecting, addressing, and shaping classroom environments that discourage bullying. Students themselves were the focus of three studies, highlighting the importance of empowering young people as active participants in prevention efforts rather than merely as recipients of interventions. Additionally, families have also been mentioned in one study, suggesting that the parental and household dimension of bullying prevention remains underexplored.

Table 3: Result on First Round Theme (Parties Involved)

Theme	Count	References
School	11	Tian et al. (2023); Cross et al. (2021); Han et al. (2021); Bowser et al. (2020); Arënliu et al. (2020); Tzani-Pepelasi et al. (2019); Martínez-Sánchez et al. (2019); Li et al. (2017); Lester et al. (2017); Gerlinger & Wo (2016); Albayrak et al. (2016)
Teacher	5	Yu & Bikar (2023); Farley (2018); Acquadro Maran et al. (2017); Begotti et al. (2017); Garandean et al. (2016)
Students	3	Wang et al. (2024); Adewoye & Du Plessis (2021); Lee et al. (2021)
Family	1	Lester et al. (2017)

Thematic Results on Effective School Bullying Prevention Strategies

A review of 19 selected studies identified six primary themes related to effective school bullying prevention strategies. Themes were identified through a two-round thematic review process, with the first-round categorising broader themes and the second round refining them into more specific strategies. The six themes are school climate, program fidelity, teacher efficacy, peer support, socioemotional regulation, and parental involvement. Those themes underscore the complex dimension of prevention. They collectively illustrate, as shown in Table 4, that effective strategies rely not on a single intervention but on the integration of institutional, interpersonal, and individual factors.

Table 4: Results on Second Round Theme (Effective Bullying Prevention Strategies)

Theme	Count	References
School climate	5	Tian et al. (2023); Cross et al. (2021); Martínez-Sánchez et al. (2019); Li et al. (2017); Gerlinger & Wo (2016)
Program Fidelity	6	Tian et al. (2023); Cross et al. (2021); Han et al. (2021); Bowser et al. (2020); Arënliu et al. (2020); Martínez-Sánchez et al. (2019); Albayrak et al. (2016)
Teacher Efficacy	5	Yu & Bikar (2023); Farley (2018); Li et al. (2017); Acquadro Maran et al. (2017); Begotti et al. (2017); Garandean et al. (2016)
Peer support	3	Wang et al. (2024); Han et al. (2021); Arënliu et al. (2020); Tzani-Pepelasi et

		al. (2019)
Socioemotional Regulation	5	Wang et al. (2024); Han et al. (2021); Adewoye & Du Plessis (2021); Lee et al. (2021); Begotti et al. (2017); Garandeanu et al. (2016)
Parental Involvement	1	Lester et al. (2017)

School Climate

A positive and authoritative school climate consistently serves as a key factor in determining the effectiveness of prevention efforts. Gerlinger & Wo (2016) demonstrated that authoritative disciplinary approaches resulted in lower bullying rates compared to security-driven measures. Tian et al. (2023) found that schools implementing structured bullying disposal processes saw notable decreases in victimisation rates. On the other hand, Cross et al. (2021) emphasised that a whole-school commitment, especially when backed by school counsellors, is crucial for sustaining impact. These selected findings indicated that climates characterised by trust, fairness, and shared responsibility are essential for the effectiveness of prevention strategies.

Program Fidelity

The fidelity of implementation of anti-bullying programmes is equally critical. Bowser et al. (2020) demonstrated that the Wisconsin Bullying Prevention Program Assessment Tool helped schools identify weaknesses and implement effective improvements. Meanwhile, Han et al. (2021) showed in South Korea that the consistent implementation of the Youth Police Academy Program improved empathy and anti-bullying attitudes among students. In contrast, research by Tian et al. (2023) indicated that inconsistent application of interventions resulted in negligible impacts. The findings suggested that program fidelity, achieved through faithful implementation and ongoing monitoring, is critical to the success or failure of prevention efforts.

Teacher Efficacy

Teacher efficacy was identified as a critical determinant influencing prevention outcomes. Yu & Bikar (2023) identified that teachers' positive attitudes and effective classroom management skills are significant predictors of reduced aggression and victimisation levels. Acquadro Maran et al. (2017) and Begotti et al. (2017) found that in-service teachers with high self-efficacy were more likely to intervene than pre-service teachers or those with an external locus of control. Farley (2018) highlighted the importance of institutional support, particularly from administrators, in enhancing teachers' confidence. Hence, it highlights that this approach depends on both the teacher's commitment and systematic structures that empower teachers to act confidently.

Peer Support

Peer support initiatives emerged as an effective strategy for mitigating bullying. Tzani-Pepelasi et al. (2019) demonstrated that the Buddy Approach promotes friendship and protection, yielding advantages for both mentors and mentees. Arënliu et al. (2020) demonstrated in Kosovo that even ultra-short iterations of the ViSC Social Competence Program effectively reduced bullying rates, underscoring the efficiency of scalable peer-led incentives. Wang et al. (2024) noted that bystander interventions are more probable when students perceive emotional support from their peers. These examples demonstrate that prevention is effective not only through top-down policies but also through peer-driven initiatives in which students collaboratively uphold safe and inclusive norms.

Socioemotional Regulation

Socioemotional regulation emerged as a consistent theme across various interventions. Adewoye & Du Plessis (2021) demonstrated that cognitive restructuring helps bystanders manage negative emotions, leading to more constructive reactions. Lee et al. (2021) showed that bullying prevention camps effectively decreased depression and impulsivity in perpetrators, while also enhancing self-esteem. Garandeanu et al. (2016) demonstrated that empathy arousal techniques prompted bullies to re-evaluate their actions. These strategies,

when integrated with comprehensive prevention programs, improved resilience and prosocial coping, demonstrating that sustained effectiveness relies on addressing the emotional foundations of bullying behaviour.

Parental Involvement

Finally, parental involvement was an understudied but important factor. The intervention program increased parent-child communication, with mothers providing prosocial guidance (Lester et al., 2017). However, the same study found that dads sometimes supported retaliation, illustrating the complexity of family dynamics. Although less research has been conducted on this issue, sustainable prevention requires congruence between school and home.

DISCUSSION

Schools and students are frequently regarded as the focal point in designing and implementing effective bullying prevention strategies, as the school environment is the primary setting where bullying occurs and where interventions can be systematically applied. Students spend the majority of their daily lives within the school context, making it the most influential environment for shaping behaviour and social interactions. Positioning students at the centre of prevention efforts is crucial, as they are not only the most affected stakeholders but also active participants in fostering positive peer relationships. Empowering them through awareness programs, peer mentoring, and leadership initiatives enhances their ability to recognise bullying behaviours, cultivate empathy, and promote a culture of respect and inclusivity.

Teachers and parents, in turn, play a pivotal role in the effectiveness of bullying prevention strategies, as they provide consistent guidance, supervision, and reinforcement of positive behaviours across both school and home settings. Teachers serve as primary observers capable of identifying early warning signs, intervening promptly, and modelling respectful communication in classroom environments. Their active involvement in implementing anti-bullying programs creates a strong protective framework within the school ecosystem. Parents, on the other hand, reinforce these efforts by shaping children's values, emotional regulation, and conflict management skills at home. When parents collaborate with schools and openly communicate with their children, they strengthen the continuum of care and accountability. The partnership between teachers and parents, therefore, strengthens the overall effectiveness of prevention initiatives, ensuring that positive behavioural expectations are reinforced across both school and home environments.

From a policymaker's perspective, comprehensive frameworks are necessary to systematically reduce bullying rates. As designers of systematic reform, policymakers should introduce and enforce comprehensive policies that address the root causes and long-term consequences of bullying. Policies must emphasise mandatory anti-bullying guidelines in all schools, invest in teacher professional development, and create parental engagement programs to address both the immediate and long-term impacts of bullying. Additionally, policies should adopt a holistic view by integrating bullying prevention within broader agendas of student well-being, mental health, and inclusive education. Policymakers should also allocate resources for counselling services and mental health support, recognising the psychological impact of bullying on victims and perpetrators. Establishing standardised accountability structures and providing adequate resources at all levels will ensure that anti-bullying measures are sustainable and effective. Therefore, implementing proactive policies by governments and educational institutions can cultivate safer, healthier, and more resilient school communities.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

School bullying continues to pose a serious threat to student well-being and the overall sense of safety in educational institutions. The purpose of this study is to identify and thematise the key elements of effective bullying prevention strategies using a thematic review of 19 articles. The findings highlighted six key strategies that influence preventive effectiveness: school climate, program fidelity, teacher efficacy, socioemotional regulation, peer support, and parental involvement. Together, these strategies highlight the importance of both structural interventions and relational dynamics in addressing bullying in schools.

Drawing on these insights, a future model is proposed to guide empirical validation and the advancement of the theory as per Figure 2. The six identified strategies highlighted earlier can be logically connected to the four domains of the proposed model. Teacher efficacy and program fidelity represent key elements of institutional mechanisms. A positive school climate reflects the role of policy and legal enforcement. Peer support together with parental involvement contributes to community-based awareness and engagement. Finally, socioemotional regulations align with technological and programmatic interventions that promote student well-being. This mapping demonstrates how the thematic findings directly inform the structure of the future model.

Despite these contributions, some limitations are evident. Parental involvement is frequently viewed as peripheral rather than key. Most research is conducted in specialised situations that limit generalisability, and there is an overreliance on secondary data. To fill these gaps, future research should emphasise the involvement of parents, widen the scope of the study across cultural settings, and use longitudinal studies or intervention-based methodologies that can track changes in preventive effectiveness over time.

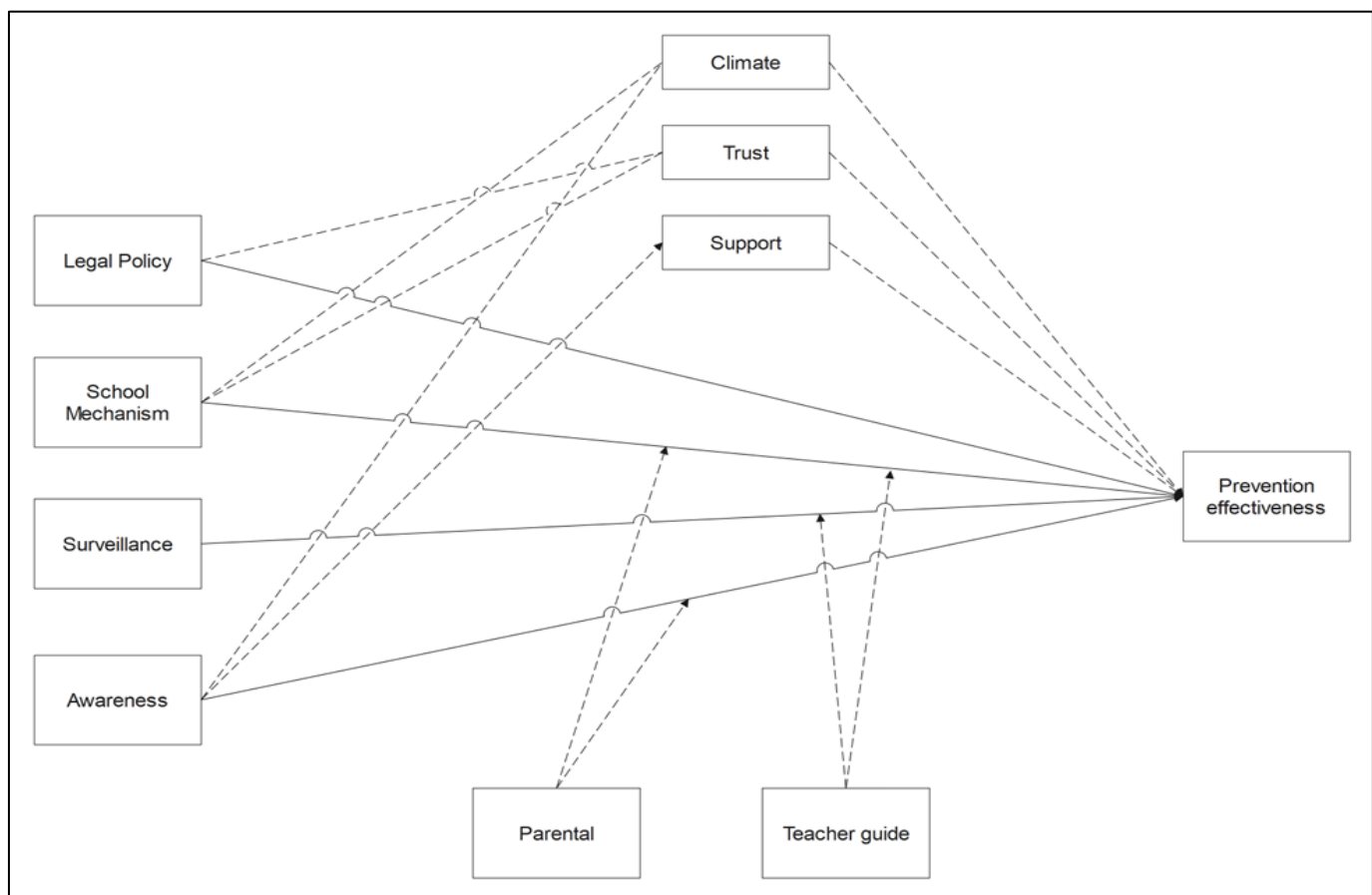


Figure 2: Proposed Model for Bullying Prevention Effectiveness

Future research could implement those constructs and utilise advanced statistical techniques, such as Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM), to examine both direct and indirect effects. The expected outcome will provide policymakers with practical insights for crafting interventions that aim to create safer and more supportive school environments.

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