

Prevalence, Contributing Factors, and Implications of Cyberbullying: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is one of the most prevalent issues facing global education, affecting students from various cultures and social backgrounds. Despite the abundant literature on anti-bullying programs generated over several decades, aggressive behavior persists as a barrier to learning and mental well-being. Moreover, the advent of cyberbullying in conjunction with changes in learning environments has added another layer of complexity to peer relations and victimhood. Although existing studies provide a wide range of empirical information, many of them focus on either the factors contributing to aggression, its prevalence rates, or negative effects on the victims in isolation. To overcome theoretical limitations of prior research, the current integrative literature review will analyze existing literature on the topic using the same ecological framework. Specifically, drawing on studies in education, psychology, sociology, and public health, we will explore how personal traits, family, peer groups, schools, and broader cultural factors influence bullying. Additionally, we will consider the implications of bullying for the educational process for victims, bullies, and bystanders, and evaluate the effectiveness of school-based strategies currently in use.

Keywords: bullying, school bullying, cyberbullying, school climate, educational implications, integrative review

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions play an important role in ensuring that students perform well academically and emotionally, as well as in maintaining their psychological well-being. While educational institutions are centers for learning, they are also important in helping students acquire social skills, become resilient and empathetic, and feel a sense of belonging within the institution. It is therefore important for an educational institution to be a conducive environment for developing such outcomes. Bullying is a behavior that prevents the realization of these outcomes by disrupting the learning process, compromising the psychological well-being of the students, and reducing school connection. Despite numerous policy changes and initiatives aimed at solving bullying in schools, the problem has persisted for decades (UNESCO, 2024; World Health Organization [WHO], 2024).

Bullying is a multifaceted social, psychological, and educational problem, rather than being regarded as an inherent part of the developmental process of children and young people. Specifically, Olweus's classical definition of the notion states that bullying is intentional and repeated aggressive behavior accompanied by an inequality between the bully and the victim in terms of physical force, social position, psychological influence, or technological skills in the online environment. Modern literature supports the view that the phenomenon emerges from dynamic interactions among individual characteristics, peer relationships, the family environment, the climate of the educational establishment, and societal influences (Espelage & Swearer, 2011; UNESCO, 2024). Globally, millions of children and teenagers of different economic backgrounds, ethnic groups, genders, and educational levels are affected by bullying. As the latest international reports show, school violence and bullying are still widespread all over the world irrespective of the country's level of economic and cultural development. Despite various definitions, measurements, and

cultural contexts of the phenomenon, bullying appears to be the most frequent threat to students' safety and well-being in educational institutions (Ariani et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2024; WHO, 2024).

Furthermore, the growth in digital technology has changed the nature of bullying. Traditional bullying such as physical, verbal, or relational aggression continues to be widespread among youth; however, cyberbullying is becoming increasingly relevant. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is not limited to the schoolyard, as it is continuous and can occur through social media websites, instant messaging applications, computer games, and other digital means of communication (Peprah et al., 2023; Llorent et al., 2021). The anonymity provided by digital communication, together with the rapid spread of negative information, makes the psychological harm even more severe for the victims.

The effects of bullying reach far beyond the interpersonal aspect. Multiple studies confirm that the academic performance and academic engagement of students experiencing bullying on a regular basis become worse; moreover, such students tend to be less motivated to learn and attend classes. Victims of bullying have a higher level of anxiety, emotional distress, depression, loneliness, and poor self-image; such psychological issues hinder the learning process (UNESCO, 2024; WHO, 2024; Arseneault, 2023). The adverse effects of bullying are not limited to only the victims of the acts of aggression. Children who participate in bullying have a higher likelihood of behavioral issues and antisocial development, and bystanders feel fear and guilt, perceive the school as being unsafe, and suffer from emotional distress (Gaffney et al., 2021).

The existence of bullying despite the prevention attempts that have been made over time shows that the problem of bullying is beyond single-factor theories. It is increasingly common among researchers to describe bullying as a multidimensional issue that involves interactions across multiple ecological systems. The characteristics of the individual include empathy, emotion management, aggression, and self-respect, together with the family system, peer relationships, school setting, leadership style, and society, which contribute to the development and maintenance of bullying behaviors. (Garbarino, 1980; Espelage &

Searer, 2011; UNESCO, 2024).

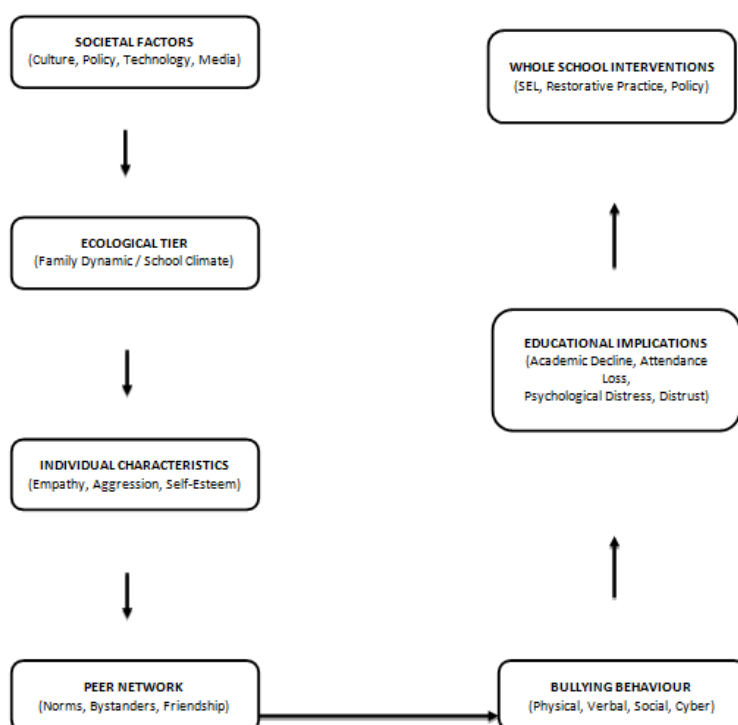


Figure 1. An Ecological Framework of Bullying in Schools: Contributing Factors, Bullying Behavior, and Educational Implications

Despite advances in understanding school bullying in the last three decades, there is still a lack of integration

in the body of literature. There is a large body of research on prevalence rates, and another body of evidence on bullying risks, psychological impact, interventions, and school climate, but very few studies have synthesized these findings into a single conceptual framework to explain how different ecological forces interact to affect bullying and learning processes. The fast-changing technological environment, greater attention to youth mental health, and changes in adolescents' social life create a need for an updated synthesis of contemporary evidence (Gaffney et al., 2021; Llorent et al., 2021).

The purpose of this integrative review will be to partially bridge these gaps by synthesizing the available knowledge on the topic of bullying and its prevalence rates, determinants, effects on education, and possible prevention measures. The approach to be used to study the phenomenon in question is ecological, based on findings from the educational, psychological, sociological, and public health sciences. Moreover, this integrative review will critically analyze existing anti-bullying interventions and develop a conceptual framework for bullying.

Specifically, this review addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the current prevalence of bullying across different educational settings and student populations?
2. What individual, familial, peer-related, school, and societal factors contribute to bullying behavior?
3. What educational implications does bullying have for students, teachers, and school communities?
4. What gaps remain within the current literature, and what directions should future research and educational practice pursue to strengthen bullying prevention and intervention?

By synthesizing the literature on these interlinked themes, the present literature review seeks to enhance awareness of bullying as a challenging issue in educational settings, which calls for the implementation of strategies at various ecological levels. Synthesizing literature is essential to laying a solid foundation for developing sustainable strategies to address bullying.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The integrative review approach was used in this research to synthesize the most recent data on bullying in educational institutions, including its prevalence, causes, effects on the learning process, and evidence-based interventions. The use of the integrative review approach is relevant to analyzing complex educational issues because it enables the integration of data from diverse methodologies (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

Unlike a systematic review, which evaluates studies using the same methodology, an integrative review enables the rigorous synthesis of heterogeneous evidence. Thus, researchers can better understand complex educational issues by integrating evidence from different schools of thought, theories, and disciplines (Cariaga, 2025). The fact that bullying is emerging as a complex phenomenon whose dimensions result from interactions that take place in dynamic ways among different factors such as individual factors, family factors, peer factors, school-related factors, community factors, and societal factors makes it imperative to use an approach that would give an incomplete picture of the problem when applying only one research paradigm. Therefore, using the integrative review research methodology, it will be possible to generate a conceptual understanding of bullying.

The review followed the five-stage integrative review framework proposed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005), comprising:

1. Problem identification, where the research problem, objectives, and review questions were clearly defined;

2. Literature search, involving a systematic and comprehensive search of multiple electronic databases using predefined search terms and eligibility criteria;
3. Data evaluation, in which the methodological quality and relevance of eligible studies were critically appraised;
4. Data analysis, in which extracted findings were compared, coded, categorized, and synthesized into overarching analytical themes; and
5. Presentation of findings, in which the synthesized evidence was organized into a coherent narrative highlighting current knowledge, research gaps, and implications for educational policy and practice.

To ensure methodological accuracy and clear representation of the results, the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement was employed in this review (Page et al., 2021). While this statement is intended for use in systematic reviews and meta-analyses, structured guidance for reporting findings has frequently been applied to integrative reviews to promote methodological clarity in reporting of literature search, screening, eligibility, and selection (Snyder, 2019). Thus, the review process was reported using a PRISMA flow diagram.

In addition to providing information on the current state of the field of interest, an integrative review entails critical and interpretive synthesis. Unlike other reviews, which simply report the results of previous studies, an integrative review involves the comparison of methods for studying the problem, the examination of the consistency of results obtained in different educational environments, the critique of the conceptual frameworks of previous studies, and the formation of an ecological perspective on school bullying.

Search Strategy

A systematic review of the literature has been conducted to gather research on bullying and cyberbullying within the framework of formal education. The purpose of the literature review methodology is to identify relevant research papers addressing issues such as bullying, its causes and consequences, educational outcomes, the school environment, and ways to intervene. Four well-known international online bibliographic databases have been selected for the literature search: Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and PsycINFO.

The literature search was conducted during the publication period from January 2015 to March 2025 to capture recent developments in bullying research, given the emergence of cyberbullying and digital education over the last decade. Additionally, some seminal articles published before 2015 have been used in the process of literature review when they served as original frameworks for bullying studies (e.g., Olweus's definition of bullying and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory).

Keywords and controlled vocabularies were used to perform a literature search using Boolean operators ("AND" and "OR"). Initially, some search terms were refined to optimize sensitivity and specificity in the first database search. Keywords for the main literature search strategy were as follows:

- "School bullying" OR bullying
- cyberbullying
- victimization OR victimization
- School violence
- prevalence
- risk factors OR contributing factors

- educational implications
- academic achievement
- school climate
- student well-being OR student wellbeing
- intervention OR prevention
- education OR schools

Backward citation searching (scanning the bibliographies of the selected literature and reviews) was used as a supplement to the electronic search to retrieve additional papers not found in electronic databases. If the need arose, forward citation searching was also employed by identifying more recent studies that cite the influential papers using Scopus and Web of Science. This step ensured that no important empirical studies were excluded and improved the completeness of the evidence (Page et al., 2021). All the identified sources were exported into a reference manager software program before the screening stage to organize and eliminate duplicates. All search strategies were reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. (Page et al., 2021).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clear and explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were pre-established to ensure the consistency, transparency, and relevance of the selected sources. The criteria were developed to select empirical and theoretical studies that would be of high quality and provide valuable insights into the topic of interest.

The following studies were included:

1. Published in peer-reviewed academic journals to ensure the inclusion of high-quality scholarly sources.
2. Written in English to allow consistent evaluation and interpretation of the selected studies.
3. Published between January 2015 and March 2025 to allow capturing recent developments in the field of bullying. However, some seminal sources published before 2015 have been included if they contributed to the theoretical or methodological foundations of the topic under consideration, e.g., the definition of bullying and ecological systems theory.
4. Conducted in formal educational settings, including primary and secondary schools and equivalent learning environments.
5. Examining one of the review themes, which includes:
 - prevalence of bullying;
 - contributing or risk factors;
 - educational, psychological, or social consequences;
 - school climate;
 - bullying prevention or intervention strategies.
6. Using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research designs to allow a comprehensive synthesis of various types of evidence in accordance with the integrative review methodology.

To ensure the quality and relevance of the review, the following studies have been excluded:

1. Presented in conference papers, dissertations, theses, editorials, commentaries, opinion articles, book chapters, and other types of non-peer-reviewed sources (also known as grey literature).
2. Related to workplace bullying, university hazing, domestic violence, or other types of interpersonal aggression in environments other than those in which school-aged children or adolescents interact.
3. Not presenting any empirical data or lacking sufficient theoretical or conceptual contribution to the topic of interest.
4. Were found to be duplicate publications across different electronic databases.

5. Were not available in the form of full-text sources even after reasonable attempts were made to obtain them.

The inclusion of both empirically and theoretically significant studies reflects the nature of an integrative review, which aims to synthesize diverse types of evidence to understand complex phenomena (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). On the other hand, limiting the review to peer-reviewed sources helped ensure the methodological rigor and academic credibility of the selected evidence. Applying the criteria for selecting sources allowed focus on studies relevant to the topic of interest while reducing the inclusion of unrelated literature. Thus, the systematic approach was used to increase the transparency, reproducibility, and overall methodological rigor of the review (Page et al., 2021).

Study Selection Process

Following PRISMA 2020 criteria for study selection process methodology and transparency (Page et al., 2021), a four-step selection process (identification, screening, eligibility, inclusion) was used to select appropriate studies in accordance with the inclusion criteria set out in Section 2.3. At the identification stage, records found through searching in Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC, and PsycINFO were saved in reference management software. Duplicates detected in each database were deleted prior to screening to avoid evaluating the same publication twice.

At the screening stage, the titles and abstracts of the records were independently assessed for relevance to the aims of the literature review. Records irrelevant to the problem of bullying and cyberbullying in formal educational environments were excluded at this stage. Studies on bullying at work, hazing at college/university, domestic violence, and any other forms of interpersonal violence that do not occur among learners of school age were excluded at the screening stage. Records potentially eligible based on their titles and abstracts were checked for eligibility. At this stage, each record was assessed for compliance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed in Section 2.3 above. Publications lacking empirical or theoretical evidence, not substantiated by proper methodology, not available in full text, or dealing with topics other than the main topics of the literature review (prevalence rates, contributing factors, educational implications, school climate, or intervention methods) were excluded.

The final stage included records that met all selection criteria. The included studies differed in their geographic locations, levels of education, and methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods). The inclusion of studies conducted across various educational settings broadened the scope of the review and enabled an examination of bullying as a global educational problem. To ensure transparency in the study selection process, the number of records at each stage (identified, screened, excluded, assessed for eligibility, included) is presented in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram is a useful tool for evaluating the quality of the literature review process. Decisions regarding the inclusion/exclusion of studies were made based on the objectives of the review and the inclusion criteria listed in Section 2.3

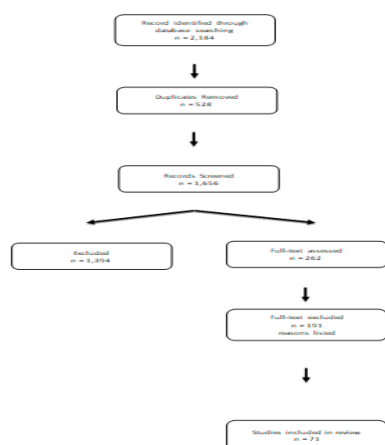


Figure 2. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrates the identification, screening, eligibility assessment,

and final inclusion of studies in the integrative review.

Quality Appraisal

In conducting this integrative review, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies were used. In addition, a detailed quality appraisal process was used to assess the methodological approaches and the overall relevance of the studies. Instead of rejecting studies solely on methodological grounds, a quality appraisal process was used to evaluate the strength of the research and to interpret and synthesize the findings (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Each methodological approach used was assessed against several quality criteria.

Quantitative studies were appraised with respect to aspects such as the appropriateness of the research design, sampling, sample size, validity and reliability of the measurement instruments, statistics used in the analysis, and strategies for minimizing the risk of bias and reporting. The quality of the statistical analysis in relation to the research goals and the adequacy of the conclusions drawn from it were given special attention.

Qualitative studies were appraised using commonly used criteria for qualitative research quality. These included the credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and methodological transparency of the studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, attention was paid to issues such as the appropriateness of data collection techniques, the methods of analysis used, researchers' reflexivity, and the presence of a supportive evidence base.

In mixed-methods studies, each component was appraised first, and then the level of integration between quantitative and qualitative approaches was evaluated. Aspects such as the appropriateness of the design used, the rigor of both quantitative and qualitative components, and the contribution of the integration of findings to the understanding of bullying in education were considered (Hong et al., 2018).

The quality of studies was appraised narratively rather than using numerical scores. Such an approach is consistent with the recommended approach to integrative reviews, which seek to combine evidence from different methodological approaches and take differences in study quality into consideration (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). In this way, findings from methodologically stronger studies carried greater weight in the synthesis, while conclusions from those with notable flaws were interpreted with greater caution. At the same time, quality appraisal allowed us to identify common methodological weaknesses in studies on bullying, including the prevalence of cross-sectional designs, reliance on self-report questionnaires, varied operationalizations of bullying, use of different measurement tools, and a lack of longitudinal evidence. Awareness of these weaknesses made the interpretation of the evidence more balanced and helped identify gaps in research discussed later in this review.

In general, the process of quality appraisal contributed to the methodological rigor of the review by ensuring that the synthesis of evidence considered not only results of individual studies but also the methodological quality of evidence produced.

Data Extraction

After identifying and evaluating the quality of the eligible studies, the next stage of the research entailed the systematic extraction of relevant data using a standardized data extraction matrix specifically designed for this integrative review. Using the data extraction structure made it possible to collect data consistently, compare across studies, and increase the transparency of the review process (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). To achieve the research aims, the extraction matrix included both methodological and substantive information from the selected studies. The following variables were extracted:

- Authors and date of publication;
- Country or geographical region of the study;
- Educational institution and participants' characteristics (e.g., students from primary or secondary schools);

- Sample size and demographics (where applicable);
- Study methodology (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods);
- Methods used for data collection and measurement;
- Theoretical/conceptual framework of the study (where applicable);
- The main aim of the study (e.g., prevalence, contributing factors, educational implication, school climate, intervention measures, or cyberbullying);
- Main findings of the study relevant to the review goals; and
- Implications for educational policies, practices, or further research.

This approach to data collection facilitated comparisons of studies conducted in different educational systems and countries, and across various methodologies. Moreover, it was useful for identifying recurring themes and methodological issues in the literature on bullying. To avoid errors and maintain consistency during the review process, data were collected using the same set of criteria across all included studies, ensuring that the extracted information addressed one or more research questions. When several findings were presented in the study, only those related to the prevalence of bullying, contributing factors, educational implications, school climate, or interventions were included in the review.

The obtained matrix served as the basis for further analysis and became an analytical database for thematic synthesis. Structured organization of the data helped conduct systematic comparisons across studies, made it possible to identify similarities and differences among studies conducted in different educational contexts, and allowed the development of an integrated conceptual framework, which is discussed in this review. Characteristics of the included studies are summarized in Table 1.

Author(s)	Coun try	Educati onal Level	Sampl e	Research Design	Focus	Key Findings
UNESCO (2024)	Globa l	Primary & Seconda ry	Interna tional dataset s	Global Monitorin g Report	Global prevalen ce	Bullying remains a significant educational and public health issue affecting students across diverse educational systems.
WHO (2024)	Europ e	School- aged children	Interna tional survey	Cross- sectional	Student well- being	Bullying is associated with poorer mental health, reduced life satisfaction, and lower educational engagement.
Peprah et al., (2023)	Unite d States	Seconda ry	Adoles cents	Quantitati ve	Cyberbul lying	Cyberbullying was significantly associated with anxiety, depression, and reduced academic engagement.
Kowalski et al. (2019)	Interna tional	Primary & Seconda ry	Meta- analysi s	Systemati c Review	Cyberbul lying	Traditional bullying and cyberbullying frequently coexist and share common risk factors.
Espelage & Swearer (2011).	Unite d States	School- aged children	Theore tical	Conceptu al Review	Ecologic al factors	Bullying develops through interactions among individuals, peers, family, school, and societal factors.
Gaffney et al. (2021).	Multi ple countr ies	Primary & Seconda ry	Meta- analysi s	Systemati c Review	Intervent ion	Whole-school interventions significantly reduce bullying perpetration and victimization.
Llorent et al., (2021)	China	Seconda ry	Studen ts	Cross- sectional	School climate	A positive school climate reduced bullying by increasing peer support and school connectedness.

Arseneault (2023)	International	Children & Adolescents	Literature Review	Review	Mental health	Bullying has substantial long-term psychological and educational consequences.
Ariani et al., (2025)	Multiple countries	Adolescents	International survey	Cross-sectional	Prevalence	Considerable variation exists across countries, although bullying remains consistently prevalent worldwide.
Miskimon et al., (2023)	United Kingdom	Secondary	Students	Longitudinal	Academic outcomes	Victimization predicted declining academic achievement and increased absenteeism.
Oyelade & Adebayo, (2023)	China	Secondary	Students	Structural Equation Modeling	Family factors	Supportive parenting reduces involvement in bullying through improved emotional regulation.
Gülbahar & Sarı, (2022)	South Korea	Secondary	Students	Mixed Methods	Peer influence	Peer norms significantly predicted bullying behavior and bystander responses.
García et al. (2024)	Spain	Primary	Students	Quasi-experimental	Social-Emotional Learning	SEL programmes improved empathy and reduced bullying incidents.
Rocchino & Liang, (2024)	Australia	Primary & Secondary	Teachers & Students	Mixed Methods	Teacher intervention	Teacher responsiveness improved school safety and increased reporting of bullying incidents.
Ajibewa et al., (2025)	Singapore	Secondary	Students	Quantitative	School connectedness	Greater school connectedness reduced both traditional bullying and cyberbullying.

Table 1 : Characteristics of Studies Included in the Integrative Review

Data Synthesis

The thematic synthesis technique was used to analyze the collected data. Thematic synthesis is one of the most widely used techniques in integrative reviews owing to its ability to synthesize evidence from various methodological traditions (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

The thematic synthesis was conducted in three phases. In the first stage, the results of all included articles were analyzed repeatedly to understand the data and identify recurring themes relevant to the research questions. Codes were developed based on substantive content rather than methodological approaches, allowing the combination of evidence from both quantitative and qualitative studies. Next, similar codes were grouped into broader themes based on conceptual similarities and patterns identified in the literature. By comparing, not only were common themes identified, but also differences in relation to the context and methodology of the included articles. Special attention was paid to differences in findings across geographical regions, levels of education, cultural settings, methodologies, and definitions of bullying used in certain studies.

In the final phase, the categorized data were synthesized into analytical themes that answered the research questions. Five main themes have been identified from the synthesis of the literature:

- 1) Prevalence of bullying in educational contexts;
- 2) Multifaceted determinants of bullying behaviors;
- 3) Consequences of bullying for educational outcomes;
- 4) Evidence-based interventions for bullying prevention in schools; and
- 5) Future research directions in bullying.

These themes determined the structure of the Findings and Discussion sections of the current review. At the same time, thematic synthesis helped integrate evidence from multiple fields of expertise – namely, education, psychology, sociology, and public health.

Inconsistencies among the studies were not viewed as such, but the analysis was focused on understanding the reasons behind the discrepancies. This kind of analysis aligns with the goals of integrative reviews, which aim to summarize existing evidence and generate novel ideas by synthesizing diverse research findings (Cariaga, 2025; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Moreover, the thematic synthesis helped develop an integrated ecological approach to bullying, considering interactions among individual, family, and peer relations, school, and other factors that affect bullying behaviors and their impact on education. The results of the thematic synthesis provided the basis for developing the conceptual framework presented in Section 4 of the current review.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several methodological techniques were used to increase the rigor, validity, and transparency of this integrative review. Firstly, a broad literature search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC, and PsycINFO to ensure that as many peer-reviewed papers as possible would be identified while avoiding the publication bias inherent in using only one database. The process of backward and forward citation searching provided greater comprehensiveness to the review and allowed the identification of studies that were missed by the database search (Page et al., 2021).

Secondly, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established and systematically applied throughout the study selection process. In addition to minimizing selection bias and ensuring that the studies included in this integrative review are relevant to its purposes, the systematic application of the criteria enabled documentation of the process in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

Thirdly, the methodological quality of the included studies was appraised according to the features of their research designs. Unlike other methodological approaches, methodological design quality assessment in the context of an integrative review does not require exclusion; however, it helps evaluate each study's contribution to the evidence base (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Thus, the strengths and weaknesses of each study were considered when analyzing its findings.

Finally, a standardized data-extraction matrix and thematic synthesis were used to enhance the consistency and reliability of this integrative review. Consistent application of the matrix ensures standardized data collection, while thematic synthesis helps integrate evidence from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies and identify gaps in literature. However, several limitations should be mentioned. First, the studies under review are limited to those written in English. Second, despite a multistep search, studies indexed elsewhere and unpublished studies may still be overlooked. Finally, there is substantial heterogeneity among the included studies in their research designs, sample characteristics, definitions of bullying, measurement instruments, and reporting practices, which makes comparison difficult and precludes a meta-analysis.

Moreover, most empirical studies included in this integrative review were cross-sectional and thus do not permit causal inference about the relationship between bullying and educational outcomes. In addition, the predominance of self-report measures could lead to various response biases, such as social desirability and

recall biases. Nevertheless, the wide scope of evidence synthesized from various disciplines, education settings, and methodological approaches makes it possible to state that the results presented here form a comprehensive picture of bullying in education.

Ethical Considerations

The current paper includes a literature review based only on peer-reviewed articles. As no human subjects, private information, or any biological material was involved in the study, neither IRB nor REC approval is necessary. However, the review strictly adheres to the principles of research integrity and ethics. Reliability, objectivity, and precision are guaranteed throughout the whole process of literature review. The processes of identification, selection, critical appraisal, and synthesis of the literature have been conducted systematically using a systematic review approach to reduce bias and improve the validity of the findings.

All sources used in the literature review are cited in APA 7th edition format. The goal is to objectively present the results of the reviewed studies. In fact, the literature review was conducted with special attention to issues of transparency and reproducibility of results. Thus, the literature search, article selection, study quality assessment, and data synthesis have been conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Prevalence of Bullying in Schools

Theme synthesis yielded five primary themes aligned with the research questions formulated in this paper. The first focuses on the prevalence of school bullying, a phenomenon of great importance to educational institutions around the globe. School bullying is one of the most common forms of school violence and remains a problem causing serious concerns for the field of education and the public health of children and adolescents. Despite numerous investigations devoted to the issue and the implementation of school-based anti-bullying programs over the last decades, bullying still presents a relevant problem for many children and teenagers enrolled in schools around the world. International organizations consider it one of the barriers to creating a safe and equitable learning environment. It adversely affects children's academic achievement, mental health, and educational equity (UNESCO, 2024; World Health Organization [WHO], 2024).

Recent international studies prove the universal nature of the phenomenon. Bullying is present in both high- and low- and middle-income countries. Even though prevalence rates vary significantly by geographical location, education level, study methods, and definitions used, existing research shows that bullying is a significant problem for many students at any point in their education (Ariani et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2024). However, variations in bullying prevalence rates should be considered carefully, as they often stem from methodological discrepancies.

One of the most critical methodological difficulties concerns the definition of the phenomenon under study. Those papers which use the traditional Olweus' (1994) definition (intention, repeated behavior and power imbalance) show lower rates of prevalence in comparison with the studies which measure isolated peer aggression. Moreover, prevalence rates vary depending on how the information was collected (through students' self-report questionnaires, teachers' or parents' reports, or school disciplinary data). Self-reporting tools identify more cases of victimization, as many bullying cases are not reported to teachers and administration (UNESCO, 2024; Gaffney et al., 2021).

The evidence from cross-national studies proves that bullying is present in all major world regions, although it takes different forms according to the cultural and educational context of children's socialization. Verbal and relational bullying is very common in numerous Asian countries, while physical bullying decreases in adolescence. Similar patterns were found in Europe and North America: relational aggression, social exclusion, and cyberbullying become more popular with the growth of age (UNESCO, 2024; WHO, 2024).

The level of education is a crucial variable influencing bullying incidence rates. According to research,

bullying takes place most frequently at the end of childhood and at the beginning of adolescence, especially when children make the transition from primary school to secondary school. These periods are characterized by changes in peer interactions, development of social identities, and changes in classroom dynamics, which increase students' vulnerability to peer aggression. However, while bullying rates drop at the end of adolescence, relational and cyberbullying are still common problems (UNESCO, 2024; Arseneault, 2023).

Gender differences represent another widely recognized factor in bullying research. Boys are more predisposed to the use of and being victims of direct forms of bullying that include physical aggression and verbal intimidation. Girls, on the contrary, are more likely to participate in relational bullying that is associated with social exclusion, friendship manipulation, and spreading rumors. However, recent evidence shows that these gender differences are substantially reduced in cyberbullying, with equal participation of boys and girls in the problem. The anonymity and ease of access to the Internet apparently eliminate gender distinctions typical of face-to-face bullying (Peprah et al., 2023; Llorent et al., 2021). The digital technology revolution has brought a new dimension to bullying. Cyberbullying has become one of the key challenges of today's schools since it can happen at any time, regardless of the school schedule, and continue indefinitely using social media and messaging applications. More empirical data indicates that cyberbullying is usually not an isolated phenomenon. Students subjected to traditional bullying are likely to suffer online victimization too. This finding proves that cyberbullying should be treated as an integral part of peer relationship problems (Peprah et al., 2023; Gaffney et al., 2021).

The school environment also contributes to variations in bullying prevalence. Schools with supportive administration, positive teacher-student relations, proper supervision, and a good climate report lower prevalence of bullying compared to schools where the disciplinary approach is inconsistent and/or there are no support mechanisms for students. At the same time, schools with overcrowded classes, poor supervision, or poor organizational climate are characterized by a higher prevalence of traditional bullying and cyberbullying (UNESCO, 2024; Rocchino & Liang, 2024). These data demonstrate that bullying needs to be analyzed within ecological systems rather than attributed solely to certain student characteristics. Another issue recognized in the literature is the underreporting of bullying incidents. Many students do not report victimization for fear of revenge, social stigma, doubts in the ability of teachers to help, or unwillingness to make the situation worse. Official statistics of schools underestimate the prevalence of bullying for this reason. Therefore, multiple methods of bullying detection should be used (WHO, 2024; Gaffney et al., 2021).

Despite progress in documenting the prevalence of bullying, methodological limitations remain in most studies. Specifically, most researchers continue using cross-sectional designs, failing to examine bullying development and students' transitions between victim, perpetrator, bully-victim, and bystander status. Moreover, the heterogeneity of measurement tools and definitions prevents comparability of findings. Longitudinal research and internationally standardized measurements should be used in future research to improve cross-cultural comparability (Ariani et al., 2025; Gaffney et al., 2021).

Summarizing, the synthesized evidence demonstrates that bullying represents a widespread global educational issue with prevalence rates varying depending on methodology and context but always undermining academic performance, psychological well-being, and attachment to schools of students. Therefore, knowledge of prevalence is crucial for prevention but does not explain the causes of bullying. Understanding of these causes requires analysis of multifaceted influences on children's behavior. The following section synthesizes contemporary evidence on these factors.

Contributing Factors to Bullying in Schools

To understand bullying, one needs to step away from oversimplified approaches that reduce aggressive behaviors to individual traits of character or disciplinary problems. Current research recognizes that bullying is a complex social phenomenon that develops because of interactions between individual factors, family background, peer relations, school environment, and sociocultural influences. The ecological approach recognizes that bullying is not driven by a single risk factor; rather, it is shaped by a complex combination of factors across different levels of interaction that define children's socialization (Garbarino, 1980; Espelage &

Swearer, 2011; UNESCO, 2024).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides an effective model for analyzing bullying as a social phenomenon by focusing on the interconnectedness of environmental systems that influence children's behavior, from family and school contexts to cultural and societal contexts. Adding to this theoretical approach, Bandura states that children learn aggressive behaviors by observing, imitating, reinforcing, and repeating social interactions (Bandura, 1977). These theories explain the persistence of bullying despite implemented interventions and recognize the importance of coordinated efforts across multiple ecological levels.

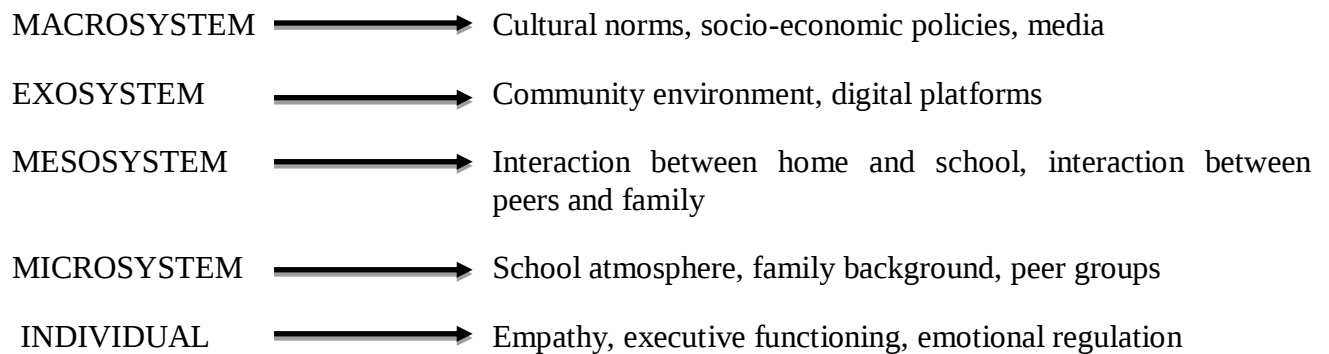


Figure 3: Ecological Factors in Bullying in Educational Settings

Individual Factors

There is no doubt that individual traits can be an important factor in bullying participation. But now, there is no empirical evidence that a personality trait determines the likelihood of becoming a perpetrator or of being bullied. On the contrary, bullying is understood as a combination of emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and developmental features that emerge during childhood and adolescence (Arseneault, 2023). Aggressiveness, impulsiveness, hostile attribution bias, and poor emotional regulation have repeatedly been found as predictors of bullying perpetration. Individuals who cannot manage their frustration and accurately perceive social cues are more likely to react aggressively to any provocation from peers. However, it would be wrong to say that these traits determine the behavior. There are plenty of individuals with aggressiveness who never became bullying perpetrators due to the influence of environmental factors (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Among protective factors, empathy seems to be the most powerful one. Students who have developed cognitive and affective empathy can understand what effects their actions might have on others and, therefore, are unlikely to commit the same aggression again. That is why empathy training is today an integral part of numerous social and emotional learning programs that seek to reduce bullying (UNESCO, 2024; García et al., 2024). Mental health can also be a significant predictor of bullying. Anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavioral disorders, and emotional dysregulation have repeatedly been found as risk factors for both victimization and perpetration. Moreover, it is important to note that it is a two-way relationship since mental problems can increase the probability of bullying while repeated aggression can make psychological problems worse (WHO, 2024; Arseneault, 2023).

Family Factors

The family is the primary socializing agent for children and plays an important role in the development of behavioral, emotional, and interpersonal norms and competencies. Parenting styles have consistently been shown to be among the most significant predictors of bullying. Authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth, responsiveness, consistent discipline, and communication, is typically associated with lower levels of aggression and better social skills in children. On the other hand, authoritarian parenting, which involves harsh disciplinary measures, neglect, and lack of emotional support from parents, can lead to higher chances of bullying, perpetration, and victimization. Exposure of children to aggressive behavior in the family can influence them to adopt coercive conflict resolutions, leading to similar behavior towards peers (Bandura, 1977; Oyelade & Adebayo, 2023).

Monitoring of children has become increasingly important due to the rise of technology. It has been shown recently that the more parents monitor their children's online behavior, the less likely their children are to engage in cyberbullying, because of responsible digital behavior and timely intervention when it occurs (Peprah et al., 2023). Other risk factors at the family level include conflict, domestic violence, separation, and economic difficulties. However, the importance of contemporary research on bullying lies in the recognition that these factors are probabilistic rather than deterministic. Many children experiencing difficult family circumstances demonstrate resilience through positive relationships with teachers, peers, and other adults (UNESCO, 2024).

Peer Factors

However, in most cases, bullying occurs not as an isolated interaction between two people but as part of the broader peer dynamics that shape students' social identity, behavior, and acceptance into the social group. Peer reinforcement is one of the most reliable predictors of bullying, since aggression is often rewarded with attention, laughter, praise, and social status (Bandura, 1977). Merely observing such behavior and remaining silent may also signal agreement to peers.

Therefore, the role of bystanders in bullying is increasingly being studied. Bystanders represent the largest category of people involved in bullying and have huge power to either promote or prevent aggressive behavior. Victim intervention by students will help reduce the duration and intensity of the incident. However, the major reasons why some bystanders fail to speak out include fear of retaliation, fear of rejection by their peers, and uncertainty about what actions to take in such cases (Gaffney et al., 2021). Friendship and support from peers also act as protective measures. Generally, children with a strong social network are safer and less likely to face repeated bullying (Rocchino & Liang, 2024).

School Factors

The school environment is one of the ecological systems that play an important role in whether bullying continues or stops. Research shows that a positive school climate, which includes strong teacher-student relationships, fair disciplinary practices, effective supervision, inclusive policies, and student engagement, has consistently been linked to low rates of bullying (UNESCO, 2024; Llorent et al., 2021).

Teacher responsiveness plays a vital role. Bullying is less likely to take place and be reported when students feel that teachers are supportive, responsive, and able to handle the situation effectively. The lack of consistency in discipline, poor supervision, and lack of communication between teachers and students lead to high rates of bullying and lack of confidence in the school's ability to help (Rocchino & Liang, 2024). Leadership in education also plays an important role. Leadership at the school shapes its culture, allocates funds for bullying prevention programs, and sets behavioral expectations. Successful bullying prevention programs have always had whole-school leadership focused on inclusiveness and students' well-being (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Community and Societal Factors

In addition to the school's immediate environment, other communities and societal influences may affect bullying. Aspects such as community violence, safety in neighborhoods, socio-economic inequalities, media exposure, culture, and public policy work together to form the understanding of aggression, power, and interpersonal interactions that children get.

The advent of technology plays an important role in current research on bullying. Social networks, messaging apps, and gaming websites provide opportunities for communication as well as tools that can be used for cyberbullying, which extend beyond the limits of the school environment. The aspects of anonymity, permanence, and quick spread of information make the experience of bullying even more emotionally challenging (Peprah et al., 2023; WHO, 2024). From the societal perspective, equitable, diverse, inclusive, and student-oriented educational policies create environments that reduce the likelihood of bullying. The social norms that allow discrimination and exclusion may unintentionally foster bullying in school environments (UNESCO, 2024).

Integrating Evidence

All the preceding literature describes bullying as a complex ecological problem that stems from the relationship among individual traits, the family, peers, schools, and other societal factors. In other words, there is no single cause for why people bully others; instead, bullying results from the interplay of many systemic factors.

In combination with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory, a strong explanatory model is created to understand this problem. As aggression is a socially learned behavior, it occurs within a variety of relationships in different ecological systems. Therefore, to prevent bullying, the participation of students, their parents, teachers, school management, and the community is necessary. The above theoretical approach explains the following discussion of bullying's impact on education.

Educational Implications of Bullying in Schools

The consequences of bullying do not stop at individual cases of peer aggression but affect several areas of

educational experience and the functioning of the whole educational institution. While bullying can be considered from psychological and behavioral points of view, recent research considers bullying as an important issue in education because it directly influences the quality of learning outcomes, participation of students, school environment, performance of teachers, and educational equality. As a result, bullying can be viewed not only as interpersonal misconduct but also as a serious systemic problem that affects schools' ability to provide students with a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment (UNESCO, 2024; WHO, 2024). This viewpoint is supported by Amjad et al. (2024), who have proven a strong correlation between bullying and worse mental health among adolescents in developing countries, emphasizing the importance of the influence of social networks on adolescents' well-being.

Academic Achievement and Learning Outcomes

Some of the persistent academic impacts of bullying include its negative influence on academic achievement. Children and adolescents who experience victimization on a regular basis tend to perform poorly academically and have poor class attendance, low motivation to learn, and poor educational aspirations. This happens because being repeatedly bullied causes students' attention to shift from learning to dealing with fear, anxiety, and social insecurity (Arseneault, 2023).

Children who have been bullied are likely to find it hard to concentrate on studies, have poor working memory and poor ability to solve problems, and have poor classroom participation as well. All this results in poor immediate academic achievement and lower future educational attainment. Moreover, it has been proven that the connection between bullying and academic performance is reciprocal. Poor academic performance can make children more vulnerable to victimization, and bullying itself makes their performance worse.

School Attendance and Educational Engagement

Bullying affects students' motivation to attend school and participate in school activities. Many studies show that victims often tend to demonstrate higher levels of absence, avoidance, and truancy from school. For most of them, staying away from school is a way to escape their unpleasant experiences at school. Although such behavior can temporarily provide psychological relief for students, absenteeism disrupts the learning process, damages relationships with teachers and peers, and increases the likelihood of poor academic performance and leaving school (UNESCO, 2024).

In addition to that, bullying significantly impacts the emotional participation of the victims in school life. Such students often experience low levels of belonging at their schools and a loss of trust in schoolteachers and the administration. This fact prevents them from participating in classroom discussions, learning projects, and extra-curricular activities (Rocchino & Liang, 2024).

Psychological Well-being and Learning

The educational consequences of bullying are strongly connected with the psychological well-being of the students. The current evidence strongly suggests that bullying victimization has a strong relationship with anxiety, depression, chronic stress, loneliness, poor emotion regulation, low self-esteem, and more general mental problems (WHO, 2024; Arseneault, 2023). Such psychological problems directly affect education because they prevent students from concentrating, completing tasks, regulating emotions, and staying motivated. Students who constantly experience psychological distress tend to have problems with processing information, focusing on learning, and controlling their classroom behavior. Thus, not only is the well-being of students affected by bullying, but also their ability to learn and achieve good academic results.

In recent years, there has been a strong movement among educational scientists in favor of adopting a trauma-informed approach to bullying prevention. Repeated victimization can be considered a chronic adverse experience that changes students' perception of safety, trust, and interactions with other people. Thus, trauma-informed education focuses on emotionally safe classrooms, predictable learning environments, and teacher–student interactions.

Implications for Perpetrators and Bystanders

While victims generally get most of the attention in research, the educational outcomes from bullying also have implications for the perpetrators of bullying. According to longitudinal studies, children and adolescents who are involved in bullying regularly tend to have behavioral problems, experience disciplinary punishment, get alienated from the school, underperform academically, and further go on to participate in antisocial behaviors. This shows that while the notion of bullying mainly affecting victims is widespread, there is a need for educators to focus on addressing the developmental and emotional needs of the perpetrators and not just punish them with discipline (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Bystanders also face certain educational outcomes. When students have seen bullying occur several times, they are prone to feeling fearful, guilty, anxious, and uncertain about what course of action to take regarding such a situation. If students feel that their teachers do not adequately respond to bullying, they might have less trust in school authorities and a decreased sense of safety at school (Rocchino & Liang, 2024).

Teacher Effectiveness and Classroom Management

Bullying affects teachers' instructional efficiency and professionalism. Teachers who teach in environments that are marked by constant bullying often spend considerable amounts of time managing behaviors and resolving conflicts, which leaves less time for instruction and causes more work-related stress and emotional exhaustion. In addition, many teachers feel insecure about how to detect more covert types of bullying, such as relational bullying and cyberbullying. Therefore, continuous professional development is critical to increasing teachers' ability to detect bullying in its early stages and address it through consistent interventions and restorative conversations (UNESCO, 2024; Gaffney et al., 2021).

School Climate and Organizational Effectiveness

Bullying has a considerable effect on the school climate, which refers to students' shared perceptions of safety, sense of belonging, equity, and institutional support. Educational institutions with high levels of bullying have poor teacher-student relationships, low student trust, poor school connectedness, and ineffective organization. Conversely, schools that encourage inclusiveness and respect for one another have low rates of bullying and improve student well-being (Llorent et al., 2021). Leadership is essential in influencing such results. Leaders influence the culture, set behavioral norms, allocate resources, and promote collaboration among teachers, counselors, families, and students. It is evident that strong commitment to leadership leads to effective implementation of prevention programs and better educational outcomes (Rocchino & Liang, 2024).

Educational Equity and Inclusive Education

There are numerous issues related to bullying in relation to the promotion of educational equity and inclusive education. Empirically, there are higher rates of victimization among minority ethnic students, students with special educational needs, disabled students, migrants, refugees, and members of the LGBTQ+ community (UNESCO, 2024). These are cases where exclusion and discrimination take place and do not simply pertain to individual actions. In essence, bullying should be considered an important part of the inclusive education process. Policies that support diversity and inclusion in terms of culture and well-being are important for preventing bullying and providing an equitable and safe learning environment for all students.

Integrating Evidence

As shown by the literature review above, the impacts of bullying on the quality of education are evident in academic performance, student motivation, student well-being, teaching efficiency, the school environment, and educational justice. The problem discussed goes far beyond the disciplinary aspect; it is rather a systemic educational problem that demands a multidimensional solution. From an ecological perspective, the educational impact of bullying results from interactions among personal factors, peer relations, family, school climate, and the broader societal environment. To make educational achievements sustainable, it is necessary to use holistic school strategies grounded in components such as leadership, evidence-based teaching, social and emotional learning, family participation, and educational equity.

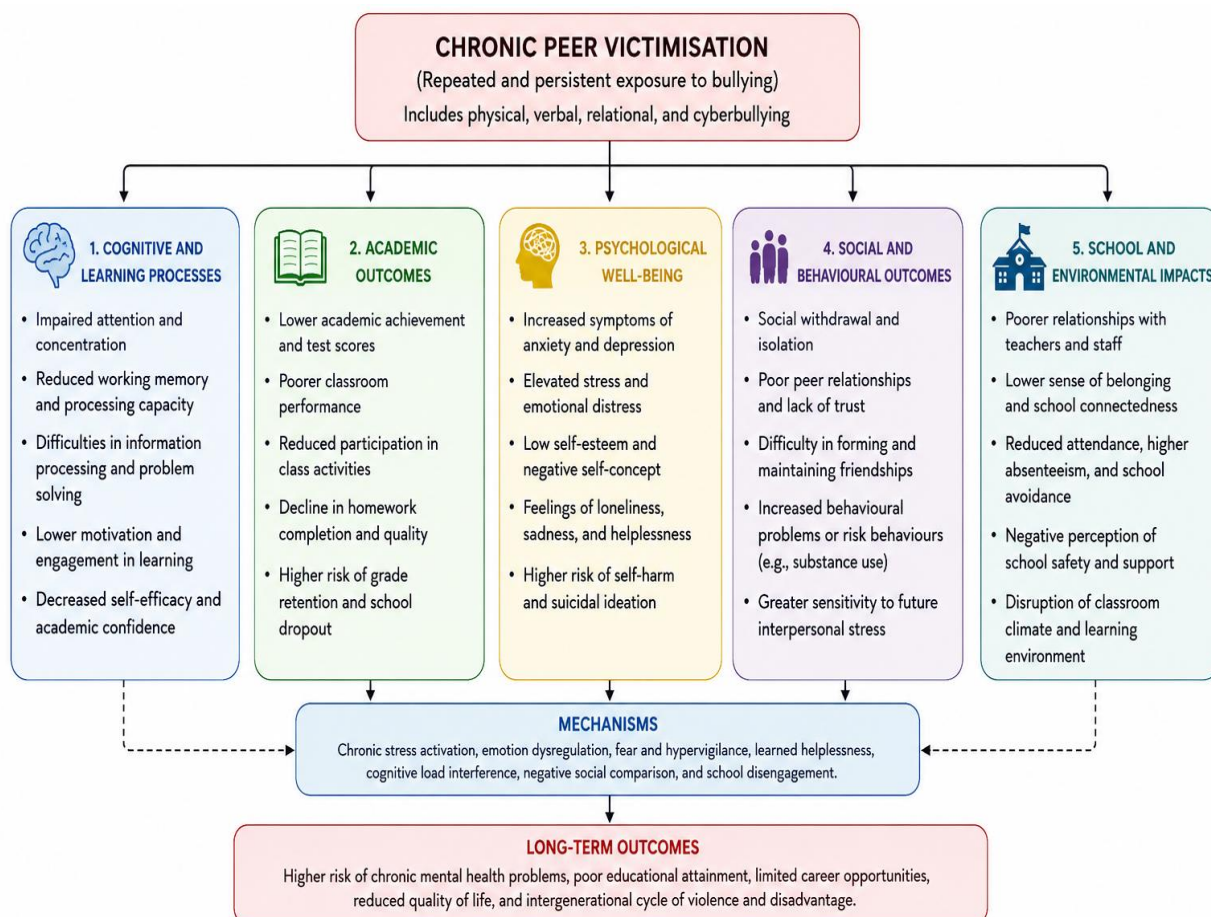


Figure 4 : Educational and Psychological Consequences of Chronic Peer Victimization

Effective School-Based Interventions for Bullying Prevention

The continuous occurrence of bullying despite the implementation of numerous educational reforms implies that there is a need for comprehensive strategies to combat the multifaceted problem of bullying. Current

literature highlights the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to interventions to affect the various ecological systems responsible for students' socialization. An intervention should not limit itself to dealing with the bully and the victim of bullying; rather, the problem of bullying must be recognized as a whole-school problem, requiring a collaborative effort by the whole community, including the students, teachers, school administration, parents, and the larger community at large (UNESCO, 2024; Gaffney et al., 2021).

Several systematic reviews and meta-analyses confirm the superior efficacy of whole-school interventions compared with individual-level interventions. The whole-school strategy seeks to change the school environment by developing shared behavioral standards, positive relationships, inclusiveness, and consistent responses to bullying (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Whole School Approaches

In the case of whole-school interventions, the rationale underlying these programs is that bullying arises from broader organizational and social dynamics in schools, not from an individual behavioral issue. Schools adopting comprehensive anti-bullying policies and promoting clear behavioral expectations, adequate supervision, restorative processes, and Positive Climate strategies consistently report fewer incidents of victimization and bullying than schools adopting mostly punitive discipline (UNESCO, 2024).

Key elements in successful whole-school programs will usually include:

- well-developed anti-bullying policies,
- well-established reporting and responding procedures,
- regular student awareness activities,
- professional development of teachers,
- involvement of students,
- parental and community participation,
- program evaluation.

However, what is crucial here is not only the quality of program design but also its consistent implementation. Programs implemented in schools with strong commitment to the program and good organizational support will perform better than inconsistent or temporary programs (Rocchino & Liang, 2024).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained recognition as an effective pedagogical strategy for addressing bullying and improving learners' overall well-being. SEL programs enable learners to develop competencies such as emotional management, empathy, decision-making, relationship skills, and conflict resolution. According to research, children in SEL programs demonstrate higher levels of emotional competence, stronger relationships with peers, greater empathy, and reduced aggression. In contrast to the traditional approach that focuses solely on preventing bullying, SEL creates protective factors that reduce students' vulnerability to becoming perpetrators or victims by fostering positive classroom relationships (García et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024). Researchers have concluded that there is a need to incorporate SEL into the general education process rather than offering it as a separate intervention program.

Teacher Professional Development

Teachers are at the heart of efforts to prevent bullying, as they are often the first adults to spot it and help create a classroom atmosphere. However, existing literature shows that many teachers lack confidence in spotting subtleties of bullying, especially relational bullying and cyberbullying.

It is therefore important for the professional development programs to ensure teachers' ability to:

- identify early warning signs of bullying;
- differentiate between bullying and regular peer conflicts;
- maintain consistency in handling bullying cases;
- adopt supportive classroom practices;
- develop positive peer relations; and
- create an inclusive learning environment.

It has been found that schools where teachers are regularly trained in bullying prevention tend to have more consistent intervention strategies and higher confidence in students' reports of bullying (Rocchino & Liang, 2024).

Student Participation and Peer Support

Student engagement is an important part of successful bullying prevention programs. Recent literature shows greater attention not only to students as perpetrators or victims but also to students as participants who have the potential to contribute to a positive school culture. Programs including mentoring, leadership development, peer mediation, training bystanders on how to intervene safely, and student-driven campaigns to raise awareness have proven their efficiency in lowering bullying rates and building school connections. Teaching bystanders to intervene safely is an efficient approach, as most bullying occurs when other students are present (Gaffney et al., 2021). Allowing students to be actively involved helps them feel more connected to the school environment.

Family and Community Partnerships

There is evidence that the efficacy of school intervention programs is greater when there is involvement from the family. Parental efforts include reinforcing behaviors children learn at school, as well as providing emotional support and supervision outside the school environment. Involvement approaches may include parent education sessions, communication between schools and parents, developing a behavior intervention plan, and teaching how to use electronic technologies responsibly. In addition, community organizations, mental health professionals, and social service providers offer their expertise and enable schools to respond more effectively to complex cases of bullying. An ecological approach implies that there can be no sustainable prevention of bullying only inside the school (Garbarino, 1980; UNESCO, 2024).

Digital Citizenship and Cyberbullying Prevention

The rapid growth of digital communication technologies has expanded the scope of bullying prevention beyond traditional school environments. Consequently, schools increasingly incorporate digital citizenship education into anti-bullying initiatives.

Digital citizenship programmes typically address:

- responsible for online behaviour;
- respectful digital communication;
- privacy and online safety;
- ethical use of social media;
- cyberbullying awareness;
- reporting mechanisms; and
- critical evaluation of digital content.

Research indicates that combining digital citizenship education with broader school-based prevention

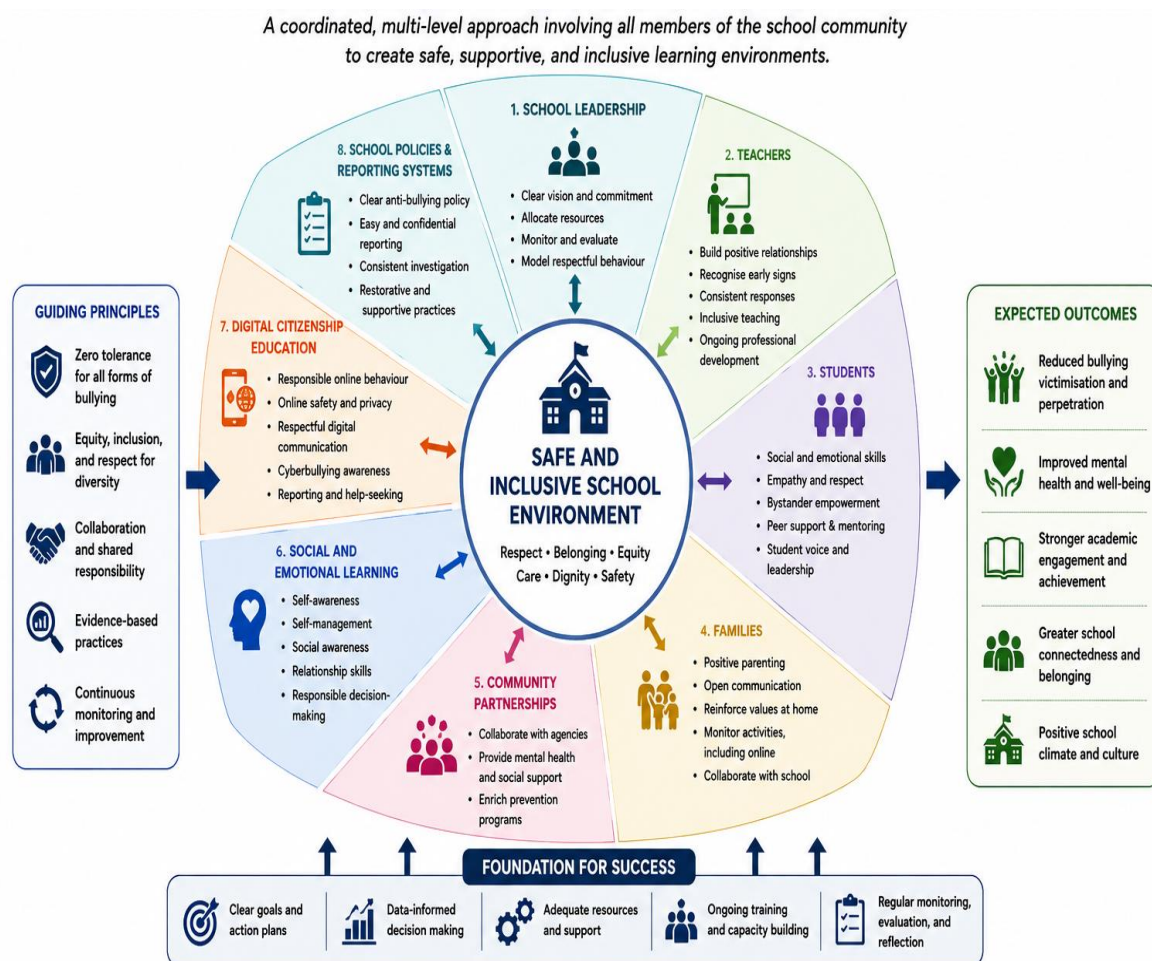
initiatives is more effective than addressing cyberbullying as an isolated issue because traditional bullying and cyberbullying frequently overlap (Peprah et al., 2023).

Implementation Challenges

Even though significant progress has been made in intervention studies, implementation remains a problem. Many schools face a lack of funding, poor teacher training, conflicting curriculum pressures, insufficient policy implementation, and differing degrees of parent involvement. In addition, successful interventions developed for specific cultures or learning environments may require modification before being implemented elsewhere. This research highlights the need to consider context when choosing and implementing bullying prevention strategies. The achievement of sustainable outcomes involves not only the adoption of interventions proven effective through research but also organizational commitment, sufficient resources, continuous monitoring, and institutional support (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Integrating Evidence

The research synthesized in this review highlights the importance of using multilevel, comprehensive approaches to bullying prevention rather than relying solely on behavior-based interventions. Whole-school programs, social and emotional learning, continuous teacher training, student participation, parent involvement, and digital citizenship instruction are just some of the components of this multifaceted approach to bullying prevention. From an ecological perspective, reductions in bullying take place when interventions simultaneously enhance individual skills, build positive peer relations, create supportive family environments, develop school cultures, and engage communities. These conclusions further underscore the importance of policy interventions that combine bullying prevention with other efforts to improve schools.



Note. This framework illustrates how multiple, interconnected components work together to prevent bullying and promote safe, inclusive, and supportive schools.

Figure 5 : Integrated Whole-School Framework for Bullying Prevention

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Nevertheless, despite great progress achieved in this field in recent years, several important theoretical, methodological, and practical issues remain to be addressed. Although the existing literature has produced a significant amount of information concerning the nature of bullying, the factors that contribute to its development, its impact on the educational process, and interventions intended to address this problem, much of this information is fragmented across both disciplines and methodological approaches. There are still plenty of opportunities to improve theoretical foundations, methodologies, and to produce context-specific data. (UNESCO, 2024; Gaffney et al., 2021).

Methodological Limitations

One of the most significant limitations identified throughout the literature is the continued dominance of cross-sectional research designs. While cross-sectional studies have substantially improved understanding of bullying prevalence and associated risk factors, they provide only limited insight into developmental trajectories and causal relationships. Most existing studies measure bullying at a single point in time, making it difficult to determine how students transition between the roles of victim, perpetrator, bully-victim, and bystander throughout childhood and adolescence.

Longitudinal research is therefore essential for understanding how bullying develops across different educational stages, how protective factors emerge, and how early intervention influences students' long-term educational, behavioral, and psychological outcomes. Such evidence would strengthen understanding of bullying as a dynamic developmental process rather than a static behavioral phenomenon (Arseneault, 2023). A second methodological limitation concerns the lack of standardization in the conceptualization and measurement of bullying.

Although Olweus' (1994) definition emphasizes intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance, considerable variation remains in the operational definitions and measurement instruments used across studies. Differences in recall periods, reporting methods, and behavioral indicators continue to complicate cross-study comparisons and contribute to inconsistent prevalence estimates. Greater international consensus regarding measurement tools would substantially improve the comparability and reliability of future bullying research (UNESCO, 2024).

Geographical and Cultural Diversity

Other significant limitations involve the uneven geographical spread of bullying studies. Much of the existing information is based on European, North American, and Australian studies, whereas significantly fewer studies have been done in many areas in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Consequently, the existing perception of bullying is influenced heavily by the schooling and cultural environments of high-income nations.

It is essential for future research to focus on culturally diverse schools to investigate how local values, disciplinary approaches, family organization, education policies, and community standards shape bullying and intervention measures. The expansion of research into different cultures will help develop culturally sensitive prevention methods, thereby increasing the worldwide relevance of bullying research (WHO, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

Intersectionality and Student Diversity

It is now widely recognized that the experience of bullying among learners cannot be fully captured by one single variable such as age or gender. Instead, there could be many aspects of a learner's identity, such as disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, migrant background, language, religion, sexuality, or learning disability, that could have an impact on the issue of bullying among learners.

Future research should therefore adopt intersectional perspectives that examine how multiple forms of marginalization interact to shape bullying experiences across different educational contexts. Such

approaches would support the development of more inclusive intervention strategies that address educational inequities and promote equitable learning opportunities for all students (UNESCO, 2024).

Emerging Digital Technologies

Rapid technological advancement continues to transform students' patterns of communication and social interaction, creating new challenges for prevention of bullying. While cyberbullying has become a major focus of recent research, technological developments including artificial intelligence, immersive virtual environments, online gaming platforms, encrypted messaging applications, and emerging social media ecosystems continue to evolve faster than empirical investigation.

Future studies should therefore examine how these technologies influence bullying behaviour while exploring opportunities for technology-assisted prevention, early identification, digital citizenship education, and school-based support systems.

Artificial intelligence, learning analytics, and predictive technologies may offer innovative approaches for identifying students at risk while supporting timely educational interventions. However, future research must also address important ethical issues relating to privacy, algorithmic bias, informed consent, and responsible educational use of emerging technologies (Peprah et al., 2023).

Intervention Research and Implementation

Although numerous anti-bullying programmes have demonstrated positive outcomes, comparatively little research has examined implementation of fidelity or the organisational conditions that influence long-term programme sustainability. Differences in teacher preparedness, leadership commitment, resource allocation, school culture, and policy implementation frequently explain variations in programme effectiveness more effectively than programme design alone.

Future intervention research should therefore move beyond evaluating whether programmes are effective towards understanding how, why, for whom, and under what conditions interventions achieve sustainable success. Greater attention should be given to implementation science, programme adaptation across cultural contexts, and long-term evaluation extending beyond immediate post-intervention outcomes (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Integrated Ecological Models

Another gap identified in the existing body of research is the inclination towards an independent examination of different levels of individual ecology. There are many examples in which researchers consider either psychological attributes or the roles of the family, peers, the school environment, or education policies independently. Future research will increasingly need to integrate an ecological approach to understand how different systems influence one another as protective and risky factors interact during children's educational development.

The integration of ecological systems theory, social learning theory, developmental psychology, and educational leadership theories can contribute to a better understanding of bullying. The Whole-School Framework (WSF) proposed in this review represents one possible pathway towards integrating universal, targeted, and intensive intervention approaches into a single ecological paradigm. Future research is needed to evaluate the efficiency of this framework empirically.

Policy and Practice Implications

For future research to be effective, cooperation between scholars, teachers, policymakers, psychologists, parents, and communities must be improved. It is difficult to implement the study's findings in educational policies. Policies based on empirical data need to contribute to the development of an inclusive school environment, teacher training, curriculum design focused on social and emotional learning, parental participation, and the continuous evaluation of anti-bullying programs.

Furthermore, research should explore the effectiveness of anti-bullying policies, school leadership, and educational reforms in contributing to the psychological safety of the learning environment. This evidence will be used to create effective educational systems focused on both academic success and children's well-being.

Summary

However, as the literature discussed shows, there remains great potential for further theoretical developments, methodological advancements, and applications of findings from bullying research. Future studies should focus on the use of longitudinal research designs, the inclusion of diverse cultures in the sampling process, the integration of intersectional and ecological approaches, the promotion of implementation research, the assessment of new technologies, and the creation of an integrated intervention framework which would help to handle the complex problem of bullying in modern schools.

The attention paid to the outlined problems will not only help further research in the field but also provide educators and other stakeholders in the education system with more information to develop sustainable prevention strategies that promote the creation of safe and supportive schools. As the review above shows, bullying is a multifaceted problem arising from interactions among various factors at the individual, family, peer, school, community, and societal levels. Taking the findings into account, the next section presents an Integrated Conceptual Framework for bullying.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to the integrative review, bullying cannot be explained by a single-factor theory or by educational interventions alone. On the contrary, all the existing evidence shows that bullying is a complex phenomenon arising from interactions among various factors, including individuals' characteristics, family environment, peer relations, school climate, communities, society, and others. Despite many studies that focus on any of those factors separately, only a few explore combinations of factors to understand the development of bullying and identify ways to implement comprehensive interventions.

Based on the results of the review, a framework integrating various factors of bullying and ways to prevent it is proposed. This Integrated Ecological Whole-School Framework (IEWSF) reflects the principles of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Garbarino, 1980), Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), and recent evidence about school climate, social and emotional learning, and whole-school interventions (UNESCO, 2024; Gaffney et al., 2021). Contrary to many existing frameworks that are based on individual behavior or specific intervention programs, this framework views bullying as a product of interactions among various systems.

It considers that students' behavior is influenced not only by their personal characteristics but also by family, peers, schools, communities, the digital environment, and other aspects of education. Therefore, it is necessary to develop coordinated interventions across different ecological systems to prevent bullying, rather than strategies that could be applied to bullies or victims separately. The suggested framework includes five interrelated domains, each of which plays its role in the development of bullying or its prevention.

Individual Domain

Individuals' cognition, emotions, behaviors, and development constitute the components of the individual domain, including empathy, emotional regulation, resilience, self-esteem, social skills, and behavioral self-regulation. These features affect how students perceive social situations, interact with others, solve conflicts, and behave. Individual characteristics can either predispose to or protect against bullying, but they occur within broader environmental contexts and cannot be considered independent variables in bullying.

Family and Peer Domain

The second domain recognizes the importance of children's close social relationships. Parental behaviors,

communication styles of parents, parental supervision, peer influences, friendship quality, and bystander behavior all together affect the way students perceive violence, empathy, and aggression. Close relationships in families and among peers serve as protective factors; in contrast, coercive family environments and peer influences on aggression are risk factors.

School Domain

The school serves as an organizational context for bullying behavior and the implementation of anti-bullying interventions. The components of the school domain include school leadership, teaching approaches, school climate, inclusion, classroom management, social-emotional learning, reporting system, counseling, and restorative approaches. All the evidence analyzed in this paper reveals that supportive school climate decreases bullying and positively affects students' lives.

Community and Digital Environment Domain

The fourth domain considers factors beyond the school walls, such as the influence of the neighborhood, community organizations, health care services, media exposure, and the digital environment. Cyberbullying cases have been on the rise, indicating that bullying goes beyond the physical school environment. Thus, teaching digital citizenship, proper technology use, and engaging the community in the process have become integral parts of bullying prevention.

Policy and Societal Domain

The last domain considers the influence of educational policies, legislation, national anti-bullying policies, and societal values and norms. Government educational policies aimed at inclusive education, students' welfare, equality, and the protection of children lay the foundation for the success of bullying intervention.

Interactions among the Domains

The present framework suggests that the five domains function in conjunction with one another within an interrelated ecological system rather than as separate entities. Changes in one domain often impact numerous other domains. For example, improvements in school climate could lead to positive changes in peer relationships, parents' trust in schools, increased students' mental well-being, and increased academic motivation.

In addition, effective educational policies help implement successful interventions in schools and foster cooperation between educators, families, and community organizations. Hence, this framework views bullying prevention as a continual and collaborative process that involves actions in multiple ecological layers.

Implications of the Framework

There are a few implications of this framework from theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives. At the theoretical level, the Integrated Ecological Whole-School Framework provides researchers with a coherent model that integrates prior domains of research on bullying and offers directions for further empirical studies.

From the perspective of policymakers, this framework underscores the need to align national educational policies with evidence-based whole-school prevention strategies that promote equity, inclusion, and students' well-being. In practice, this framework provides educators and school administrators with a structured way to plan multilevel interventions that improve school climate, social and emotional learning, family engagement, digital citizenship, and community cooperation.

SOCIETAL FACTORS

(Culture | Media | Technology | Policy)



FAMILY FACTORS

(Parenting | Monitoring | Communication | SES)

Teachers)

SCHOOL FACTORS

(School Climate | Leadership |



PEER RELATIONSHIPS

(Peer Norms | Friendship | Bystanders)



INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

(Empathy | Aggression | Self Esteem | Emotion)



BULLYING BEHAVIOUR

(Physical | Verbal | Relational | Cyber)



EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Academic Performance

Psychological Wellbeing

Social Development

School Engagement

School Climate



WHO SCHOOL PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Figure 5. Proposed Integrated Ecological Whole-School Framework for Understanding and Preventing Bullying in Educational Settings

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

From the integrative review, bullying is an ecological problem that requires comprehensive strategies to address. All research has consistently proven that bullying cannot be successfully addressed using disciplinary actions or even temporary intervention programs. It can only be achieved through comprehensive policies, collaborative school practices, and evidence-based educational strategies that address students' individual development, family involvement, peer relationships, school climate, community relations, and the wider policy context. Therefore, the developed Integrated Ecological Whole School Framework provides guidance on creating safe and inclusive schools for students.

Implications for Educational Policymakers

From the perspective of policymakers, governments and educational authorities should view bullying as a critical aspect of educational quality, rather than only a discipline problem. Thus, national education policy should focus on integrated approaches to addressing bullying that involve child protection, mental well-being, inclusive education, and student welfare across all school improvement initiatives. Legislative frameworks, national reporting guidelines, and standard procedures for identifying, documenting, and responding to bullying will increase consistency in addressing this problem across educational institutions.

In addition, sufficient resources should be allocated to implement evidence-based bullying prevention programs. This includes investment in teacher training, school counseling programs, digital safety initiatives, and student support programs, all of which are crucial for capacity building in schools. Finally, national monitoring systems should be created to evaluate the program's effectiveness and identify emerging bullying problems, especially those related to digital technologies.

Implications for School Leadership

From the perspective of school leaders, this stakeholder should shape the school's organizational culture and set expectations for appropriate conduct. As the current review shows, effective leadership is not limited to policy implementation; it also includes creating a positive school climate characterized by trust, inclusion, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

School administrators should create comprehensive anti-bullying policies that include transparent reporting procedures, restorative disciplinary measures, and ongoing program evaluation. At the same time, school leadership teams should foster collaboration among teachers, counselors, parents, and community agencies, and ensure that bullying prevention remains the school's priority rather than a one-off initiative.

Implications for Teachers and Classroom Practice

Teacher professional development is important to prepare them to address new educational issues in modern classrooms (Govindarajoo et al., 2025). Teachers are key players in implementing anti-bullying policies in the classroom. Thus, professional development programs must provide educators with the relevant knowledge and skills to identify bullying behavior, respond to bullying situations in the classroom, create space for restorative dialogue, and foster friendly relationships among peers.

The research analyzed also emphasizes the importance of integrating SEL into everyday classroom activities. Teaching students how to empathize, regulate their emotions, make decisions, and resolve conflicts will create a positive classroom atmosphere and reduce the risk of aggressive behavior among peers. Moreover, teachers can use such techniques as cooperative learning, inclusion, and culturally responsive teaching.

Implications for Student Support Services

School counselors, psychologists, and student welfare personnel play an essential role in early identification, intervention, and ongoing support for students affected by bullying. Multi-tiered support systems should provide universal prevention programs for all students, targeted interventions for at-risk groups, and

intensive individual support for students experiencing persistent victimization or engaging in repeated bullying behavior. Mental health services should be integrated into bullying prevention efforts to address the emotional, behavioral, and psychological consequences associated with victimization. Regular screening, counseling, resilience-building programs, and referral pathways to external support services can enhance students' overall well-being while strengthening schools' capacity to respond to complex cases.

Implications for Families and Community Partnerships

The review reinforces the importance of collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and community organizations. Parents should be actively involved in the prevention of bullying through regular communication, parent education programs, and opportunities to participate in school initiatives promoting positive behavior and digital safety. Community agencies, healthcare professionals, social services, and non-governmental organizations can further strengthen school-based prevention by providing specialized expertise, counseling services, awareness programs, and referral support. Such partnerships extend bullying prevention beyond school boundaries and promote consistent behavioral expectations across children's educational and social environments.

Implications for Digital Citizenship Education

Given the increasing prevalence of cyberbullying, schools should integrate digital citizenship education into both formal curricula and co-curricular activities. Students should develop competencies related to responsible online behavior, respectful digital communication, privacy protection, critical evaluation of online information, and safe use of social media platforms. Teachers and parents should collaborate to monitor students' digital engagement, encourage responsible technology use, and promote open communication about online experiences. Educational institutions should also establish clear protocols for responding to cyberbullying incidents occurring both within and beyond school environments.

Implications for Future Educational Research

The findings of this review suggest several priorities for future research. Longitudinal investigations are needed to examine developmental pathways of bullying and evaluate the long-term effectiveness of intervention programs. Greater attention should also be given to culturally diverse educational settings, implementation fidelity, and the application of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence for early identification and prevention of bullying. Furthermore, future studies should empirically validate the Integrated Ecological Whole-School Framework proposed in this review. Testing the framework across different educational systems, cultural contexts, and school settings will help refine its theoretical foundations and strengthen its practical applicability for educators and policymakers.

SUMMARY

The evidence synthesised in this review demonstrates that effective bullying prevention requires coordinated action across policy, leadership, teaching, student support, family engagement, community collaboration, and digital citizenship education. The proposed Integrated Ecological Whole-School Framework provides a practical roadmap for translating research evidence into educational policy and school practice. By adopting comprehensive, evidence-informed, and collaborative approaches, educational stakeholders can create learning environments that not only reduce bullying but also promote students' academic success, psychological well-being, and lifelong positive development.

CONCLUSION

Bullying continues to be considered one of the toughest challenges facing educational institutions around the globe. Bullying affects the academic success of students, their psychological state, social relations, and educational process. As many studies and the application of anti-bullying programs for many years demonstrate, bullying keeps changing according to changes in the educational process, technology, and social environment. Hence, this integrative review shows that bullying cannot be viewed and managed from

a univariate standpoint, as it is a complex phenomenon arising from the interaction of many factors linked to individual characteristics, family background, peer relationships, schools, communities, technology, and educational policy.

To gain a holistic view of bullying as an educational problem, contemporary studies in education, psychology, sociology, and public health have been drawn on in the present integrative review. There are five main themes in the reviewed literature: the global prevalence of bullying in educational institutions, factors associated with bullying, educational consequences of bullying, the effectiveness of school interventions, and future research directions. All the findings highlight the need for an ecological approach and for treating bullying as an educational problem, not an individual's problem.

An important achievement in conducting the review is the development of the Integrated Ecological Whole School Framework for Understanding and Preventing Bullying in Educational Settings. It is based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and modern empirical findings to formulate an integrated framework that explains the emergence of bullying and prevention strategies through interactions across multiple ecological contexts. The main idea of the framework is that, to create a positive learning environment, interactions among students, families, peers, schools, communities, and educational policymakers are needed.

Furthermore, according to the findings of the present review, long-term prevention of bullying is possible only through the combined efforts of various stakeholders in education across all levels of the educational system. Such interventions are successful when there is strong school leadership, high-quality relationships between teachers and students, social and emotional learning among students, student participation in decision-making, parental involvement, digital citizenship education, and the creation of community partnerships. Thus, educational policies should include the implementation of integrated prevention strategies and the evaluation of programs as important components of quality education.

There are some limitations to the existing evidence based on bullying in educational settings, despite a comprehensive literature review conducted during the writing of this paper. The limitations include the dominance of cross-sectional studies, inconsistencies in the definition and measurement of bullying, a lack of longitudinal studies, and limited cultural diversity in the studies. In the future, research on the subject should be conducted longitudinally and cross-culturally, through implementation science, analysis of the impact of modern technologies on bullying, and validation of the proposed integrated ecological intervention framework.

All in all, this integrative review adds to the rapidly growing bullying literature by providing a current synthesis of the evidence and conceptual framework. It shows that the problem of bullying requires not only the efforts of teachers and schools but also constant cooperation among educators, parents, policymakers, community organizations, and students.

The creation of safe, inclusive, and positive learning environments is crucial for obtaining academic success, creating social relationships, and promoting the psychological well-being of all learners. Using an ecological approach that considers all factors contributing to bullying can lead educational systems to transition from reactive to preventive strategies.

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