

# **Bullying and Risk Factors of Involvement in Public Secondary Schools. A Case of Selected Schools in Machakos County, Kenya.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Bullying in schools is a global problem that has short- and long-term negative health consequences on both the bullies and victims. A report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) shows that one out of every five (20.2%) students report being bullied. Many studies have focused on causes and effects of bullying but not on risk factors contributing to bullying. This has long term physical, psychological and academic negative impact among students. The study tries to assess the risk factors of bullying in public secondary schools in Machakos sub county and is guided by research objective; to examine risk factors contributing to bullying in selected public secondary schools in Machakos schools in Machakos County. The researcher employed descriptive research design, purposive sampling and simple random sampling with a sample size of 280 respondents. The study used both open and closed ended questionnaires to collect data which was analyzed using SPSS version 23.0. The study used both descriptive and inferential statistics to describe quantitative data which were then analyzed, interpreted, and presented in form of tables and figures. The risk factors of involvement included socio-economic status of the family, academic performance, parental status, family size and school environment. The study concluded that Social economic status of the parents which included their state of income or financial stability was the leading risk factor of involvement followed by poor academic performance and the least factor was the school environment.

**Key terms:** Bully, Bullying, Bully bystander, forms, Prevalence.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

School bullying occurs in all countries and includes physical, verbal, emotional, sexual violence and psychological and this has existed for many years in most parts of the world (Alison, 2016). Globally there are over 246 million children and adolescents who experience bullying in some form yearly (United Nations Educational Scientific & Cultural Organizations [UNESCO] Institute for Statistics, 2023). School bullying can be defined as an intentional activity with repeated aggressive acts on the student or students mostly on other weaker students (Smith, 2018). The power imbalance means that the dominant group, or individual tends to cause disturbance or harm to the less dominant one for a long time (Smith, 2019). As noted by Kibriya, Xu and Zhang (2015) bullying constitutes a complex problem that affects the academic performance of learners especially in schools. There is a higher percentage of male than of female students who are physically bullied and more females than males being bullied verbally or through rumors. A report by UNESCO (2019), indicated that both victims and perpetrators of bullying do suffer negatively in personal social development, health, and education in childhood as well as in adulthood. Bullying is more

common in boys and young children than in girls. Bullying has been noted to be more on the West and Central Africa as well as in South Africa.

Kenya is one of the countries most affected by frequent fatal bullying in many public schools and the rate of bullying in Kenyan schools is higher than the world rate according to Okwemba, (2018). Some of the counties that have witnessed bullying are Bungoma County, Baringo, Mombasa, and Nairobi, among others.

Shafqat (as cited in Al-Raqad, Al-Bourini, Al Talahin, & Aranki, 2017) noted that bullying in schools do occur anywhere in the school compound including in the corridors, dormitories and in the classes. It affects school students in many parts of the world and is a distress to their lives either professionally, academically, or psychologically (Sherri, 2018). A study conducted by Sekol and Farrington (2016) established that many bullies than non-bullies had been bullied before. As noted by Burton and Leoschut (2013), other studies in German and Belgium showed a ratio of 1.1% and 6.2% respectively of girls who had experienced sexual harassment in 2005. Another study done by Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, and Ólafsson (2011) on traditional bullying and cyberbullying from 25 European countries revealed that 19% of 9-16-year-olds had something nasty happening to them in the past 12 months. However, only 5% indicated that bullying happened more than once a week and another 4% once or twice a month and 10% indicated that it was less.

According to a report by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2014), the most common perpetrators of physical violence among adolescent boys were their peers and teachers. Among the adolescent girls, parents and other caregivers were the most common perpetrators of physical violence. The report also noted that teachers were being mentioned by a good proportion of girls in some countries such as Zambia (10%), Democratic Republic of Congo (11%), Timor-Leste, Moldova, and Zimbabwe (12%), Cameroon (16%), Tanzania (28%), Nigeria (32%), Kenya (42%), and Uganda (48%). The study has also revealed that children from vulnerable families such as broken families, low-income families, enmeshed, abusive families or overprotective families may experience violence hence lack warmth (Troop, Gordon & Quenelle, 2010). Such children also tend to have inconsistent discipline and may be both bullies and victims or aggressive victims (Nickerson, Mele & Osborne-Oliver, 2010). Several researches have been conducted on the causes and effects of bullying on academic performance of students in secondary schools. However very few studies have focused on risk factors of bullying in public mixed day and boarding schools. Therefore this study focused on assessing risk factors of bullying in public day and boarding in Machakos County, Kenya. This is supported by study findings by Nickson, Mele & Osborn (2010) that factors such as socio-economic status of the family and poor relationship between the parents and their children and poor academic performance in schools can also trigger behavioral problems due to increased stress and anxiety that can lead to depression (Vinnakota & Kaur, 2018). Other causes that can trigger acts of bullying are like issues of disability where the students with such tend to use it as a defense mechanism or suffer as victims due to inability to protect themselves (Fry, D., Cameron, A., Vanderminden, J., & Lannen, P., 2017). The study was limited by the prevailing circumstances of the covid-19 pandemic of wearing of masks and social distancing which affected free interaction as before. To overcome this issue, the researcher tried to adjust accordingly to ensure such measurements were not violated.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive study design specifically on selected public day and boarding schools in Machakos sub-county, Machakos County. This study adopted quantitative research method using a questionnaire for collecting the numerical data. The numerical data was then analyzed using SPSS Version 22. The questionnaire was used in this study to allow data collection through different respondents. The respondents selected for this study represented the entire population from which the findings were drawn. According to Glazer and Rubinstein (2014), questionnaires aid the researcher in having a forthright comparison with other previous work. The study was conducted in four selected public mixed day and

boarding schools in Machakos Sub-County which is within Machakos Town Sub County. The Sub-County has three educational zones namely, Muvuti zone, Mutituni zone and Mumbuni zone. With a total of thirty-nine (39) schools. In Muvuti zone the researcher selected one mixed day and boarding school called Katoloni. In Mumbuni zone, Centre for Excellence was selected which is boys boarding school while in Mutituni, Kwanthanze mixed day and boarding school and Mumbuni girls boarding school were selected.

The target population consisted of form one and form two students from the selected secondary schools from all the three zones in Machakos sub-county and the total was 935 students. The selection of the schools was purposely made to ensure good representation from different zones and depended on the specific schools which are few with mixed day and boarding. The study selected them purposively to avoid choosing schools with other unwanted characteristics and in addition the study focused on the schools within the Machakos municipality which had the needed.

The study purposively used 30% of the sampled target population as a representative of the population. This is in line with Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) who stated that a sample size of between 10% and 30% is representative of target population and hence 30% is adequate for this study. The study used random methods to get the number of boys, girls' boarding schools as well as public mixed day and boarding per zone. Stratification started from the zones whereby Machakos sub county which has three zones with thirty-nine (39) schools and each zone formed a strata and the schools within the zones were stratified into public mixed and boarding schools as well as girls and boys boarding schools. The schools were proportionally selected using convenient sampling method whereby there was one boarding school for boys and for girls, two public mixed day and boarding schools. The target population included all the form one and two students from the four sampled schools. In this case, every item or element in the entire population had equal chances of being selected in the study sample (Ranjit, 2011). Among the four selected schools, a total of 280 (students) formed the sample size and, according to sampling procedures by Kothari (2012), this was a convenient sample.

## RESULTS

### Respondents' Views on Involvement of Bullying Risk Factors

Risk factors	Rarely		Often		Strongly		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Disability	140	50.60	56	20.48	78	28.92	280	100.00
School environment	123	44.58	100	36.55	50	18.88	280	100.00
Academic achievement	89	32.13	98	35.33	98	35.34	280	100.00
Family size	151	54.22	61	22.49	64	23.29	280	100.00
Parental status	123	44.58	70	25.30	84	30.12	280	100.00
Socio-economic status	114	41.37	56	20.08	106	38.55	280	100.00

The findings in the table above show the respondents' views on involvement in bullying risk factors. The most risky factor which influences students' involvement into bullying is socio-economic status of the family with 38.6% strongly agreeing, 20.1% said often and 41.4% indicated rarely. On academic achievement, 35.3% of the students strongly agreed it was a risk factor, 32.5% indicated it was often while 32.1% said it was rare. The participants were asked for their views on parental status as a risk factor and 30.1% strongly agreed, 25.3% said it was often while 44.5% said it was rare. On disability as a risk factor of involvement into bullying, 28.9% strongly agreed, 20.4% indicated often, while 50.6% said it was rare. Family size was another factor that the participants were required to express their views and the following were their views; 23.29% strongly agreed, 22.49% said it was often, while 54.2% said it was rare. In the

school environment 18.9% strongly agreed, 36.6% said it was often and 44.5% indicated it was rare.

### **Disability**

The results above show that 50.6% indicated that bullying prevalence was rarely influenced by disability, 20.48% often and 28.9% strongly agreed that disability was a risk factor to bullying activity. This shows that students with disabilities are either more likely to be involved in bullying behaviors or are more prone to bullying activities from other students due to their impairment. This finding is supported by Blake (2016) that children with special needs are two to three times susceptible to being bullied and are more likely to be involved in bullying others. Such children possess a certain characteristic which makes them an easy target for bullying in schools. They are also not social and friendly hence will be exposed to bullying activities. Those with behavioral problems may act in an aggressive way and suffer as victims.

### **School environment**

From the results above 44.58% of the respondents indicated that school environment was a rare risk factor, 36.6% said it was often while 18.6% indicated strongly that school environment was a risk factor for bullying activity. The above analysis shows that school environment factors such as administrative issues were not a major contributing risk factor in most schools although 36.6% indicated that they were often, which can also be a factor for consideration. This finding can also be corroborated by the fact that most bullying took place after classes mostly in the dormitories and this can escalate the aspect of bullying in schools as supported by Muijs (2017).

### **Academic achievement**

From the findings above 32.13% indicated that bullying activities were rare, 32.55% was often, while 35.34% strongly indicated bullying activity was a risk factor. It is therefore clear that academic performance of learners can lead to more bullying activities especially for those not meeting the expected school performance. Such learners involve themselves into bullying activities as a way of compensating for their underachievement by revenging through bullying other students. Such learners suffer low self-esteem and rejection as well as bitterness and they express their displeasure by counter attacking other students to release their anger.

### **Family size**

Family risk factors indicated rare occurrence of 54.2%, often at 22.49%, and strong at 23.3% respectively. This was a clear indication that family size was not a risk factor towards prevalence of bullying in secondary schools in Machakos County. However, about 22.5% and 23.3% indicated often and strong and this is not a small number. Families with huge families as well as few children like one child can bear risk of exposing their children to bullying behavior. Children from large families may find themselves learning how to fight for the few family resources, hence develop defense mechanisms of fighting back for their justice and this can expose them into bullying behaviors. Children also from small families like being the only child in the family or only two children in a family can expose a child to feelings of striving or not being able to obey or submit to others. Such a behavior can escalate bullying activities and such a child can suffer as a victim of bullying.

### **Parental status**

From the results above, parental status risk factors rarely influenced bullying behavior (44.6%), followed by 25.3% who indicated often, and 30.1% strongly supported that parental status were a risk factor to bullying activities. Parental status risk factors included whether the person is single or married or divorced. Parental

status can be a risk factor of involvement to bullying activities especially children undergoing effects of divorce of their parents may find it difficult to adjust into life issues hence displace their anger to other children. Children from single parents, especially boys may suffer from identity crisis and in the search of solution to their problems engage into bullying behavior even unknowingly.

### Socio-economic status of the family

The results above show that socio economic status risk factors were 41.4% rare, 20.1% often and 38.6% strong. Socio-economic factors include financial status of the family and according to the results stipulated above its clear that socio economic factors do affect bullying behavior. Learners from families with stable financial status are less likely to involve themselves in bullying activities while those from extreme low financial status can be victims of bullying and from extreme high financial status can be bullies. However, students from parents who give excessive money to their children can expose them to risk of involvement to bullying because of feeling more superior than the other students hence bully others.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Regarding risk factors, socio economic status of the parents emerged as the most prevalent risk factor, followed by academic achievement and parental status. School environment was indicated as the least risk factor of involvement in bullying. The study findings recommends that there is need for the public secondary schools to find out strategies of dealing with risk factors such as socio-economic status of the parents and academic performance of the students that make them to engage into bullying behavior. This study will be significant in helping researchers, governments and educational policy makers to work for intervention and reduce bullying in secondary schools.

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