

Educators' Views on Bullying Among High School Students in the O. R. Tambo Inland: Implications for Social Work Practice

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Abstract: Bullying is a pervasive issue in high schools, with profound detrimental effects on students' academic performance, social well-being, and emotional health. This study examines educators' views on bullying among high school students in the O. R. Tambo Inland and explores its implications for school social work. Employing a qualitative approach and an interpretive paradigm, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten educators selected using convenience sampling. The findings reveal that physical and verbal bullying are the most prevalent forms, often exacerbated by peer dynamics and a lack of parental involvement. Bullying was also found to diminish students' motivation and engagement, resulting in lower academic achievement and heightened emotional distress. Educators underscored the importance of collaborative efforts among schools, parents, and social workers to address bullying comprehensively. The study recommends implementing robust anti-bullying policies, enhancing parental engagement, empowering bystanders, and integrating school social workers into intervention initiatives. These findings highlight the need for holistic, multi-stakeholder approaches to effectively reduce bullying and cultivate safer,

more inclusive school environments.

Keywords: Bullying, students, educators, school social work, Sustainable Development Goal 4.

1. Introduction

Globally, bullying in schools is recognised as a widespread issue that violates children's rights and poses significant public health concerns (Slee & Skrzypiec, 2016; Smith & Kilpatrick, 2017). It manifests in various forms, ranging from physical and verbal aggression to more covert behaviours such as social exclusion and property-related offences, as well as emerging challenges like cyberbullying (Murat & Lee, 2017; Saarento et al., 2015). These behaviours often extend beyond the perpetrator-victim relationship to involve the broader social environment, including bystanders and peer dynamics (Saarento et al., 2015). Factors such as grade level, class size, and educator involvement influence the prevalence of bullying in schools (Pouwels & Garandau, 2021; Saarento et al., 2015). In specific contexts, such as Jamaica, high rates of bullying are associated with increased mental health challenges among children, underscoring the need for comprehensive anti-bullying policies and interventions (Smith & Kilpatrick, 2017). Across the globe, countries are addressing bullying through legal frameworks and school-based prevention programmes (Murat & Lee, 2017; Slee & Skrzypiec, 2016).

Over the past four decades, extensive research has examined bullying among adolescents, elucidating its prevalence and profound impact (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Investigations in Brazil, for instance, reveal a high incidence of bullying, linking it to risky behaviours and serious consequences for adolescents' mental health (Pigozi & Machado, 2015). A multitude of factors contribute to bullying behaviour, including individual traits, family dynamics, peer influences, school environments, and the role of mass media. These influences can culminate in emotional distress, manifesting as stress, depression, social withdrawal, and even suicidal ideation (Febrianti et al., 2024).

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While traditional bullying has declined in some contexts, cyberbullying has emerged as a growing concern, particularly within schools (Parveen et al., 2019). This issue necessitates a collaborative approach involving adolescents, families, schools, and communities. Effective prevention and intervention strategies emphasise the cultivation of positive values, the encouragement of open communication, and the implementation of social initiatives (Febrianti et al., 2024). However, there remains an urgent need for further intervention studies and the integration of restorative practices within school environments to address bullying more comprehensively (Pigozi & Machado, 2015).

Bullying in schools remains alarmingly prevalent, posing a significant threat to students' well-being and academic success (Laas & Boezaart, 2014). An ideal school environment should function as a sanctuary of safety, inclusivity, and learning, enabling students to thrive without fear or harm. Protecting children in schools constitutes a moral imperative and a legally and policy-driven responsibility in South Africa. While legal remedies such as the Protection from Harassment Act and the Children's Act exist to address bullying, their effectiveness is questionable due to the lack of explicit definitions for bullying and cyberbullying (Reyneke & Jacobs, 2018). Nevertheless, the Children's Act 38 of 2005 emphasises the duty to safeguard children's rights to dignity and protection from abuse (Reyneke & Pretorius, 2017), while the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 mandates schools to maintain discipline and ensure conducive learning environments (Matsebele, 2020). Furthermore, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) advocates for quality education, which cannot be realised in environments characterised by bullying and intimidation (Nazar et al., 2018). Despite these initiatives, some schools remain hotspots for bullying, highlighting the necessity for more robust interventions.

In South Africa, bullying remains a persistent issue, with its forms and prevalence rates varying across different contexts. Physical bullying, such as hitting or pushing, affects between 22.55% and 33.34% of primary school students (Manuel et al., 2021). Verbal bullying, including name-calling, impacts over 30% of students across all provinces, while social exclusion is particularly prevalent in Gauteng and Limpopo (Manuel et al., 2021). Cyberbullying, often facilitated through social networking sites, is also on the rise (Odora & Matoti, 2015). Gender differences are evident, with boys more likely to be bullies and girls more likely to be victims (Nako & Muthukrishna, 2018; Odora & Matoti, 2015). Additionally, socioeconomic factors play a significant role, with schools in lower socioeconomic areas reporting higher rates of bullying (Juan et al., 2018). Teacher-instigated violence is another concern, particularly involving male educators as perpetrators and female students and teachers as victims (Nako & Muthukrishna, 2018).

In the Eastern Cape's O.R. Tambo Inland, bullying profoundly impacts students' psychological well-being and academic progress (Boboyi, 2024a; Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). Victims frequently experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, leading to school avoidance and academic underachievement (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). This issue extends beyond the individuals involved, affecting schools, families, and communities (Masilo, 2018).

School social workers are uniquely positioned to address bullying through targeted interventions (Masilo, 2018; Sekgobela & Malesa, 2024). Boboyi (2024a) advocates for institutionalising school social work services to tackle the psychosocial challenges faced by students, including bullying. The expertise of school social workers enables them to implement strengths-based strategies and ecological approaches to support affected students (Masilo, 2018; Sekgobela & Malesa, 2024). This study, therefore, explores educators' views on bullying among high school students to gain insights into the role that school social workers can play in addressing this pervasive issue.

1.1 Research aim and objectives

This study aims to explore educators' views on bullying among high school students in the O. R. Tambo Inland and examine its implications for school social work. The following objectives apply:

- To investigate educators' views on the prevalence, nature, and impact of bullying among high school students in a selected school in the O. R. Tambo Inland.
- To propose recommendations and implications for enhancing school social work practice in addressing bullying.

2. Theoretical Framework

The ecological perspective on school bullying emphasises the necessity of considering the various interacting factors within a child's environment. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's systems theory, this approach examines how individual characteristics and external influences—such as family, peers, schools, communities, and cultural contexts—contribute to bullying behaviour (Analisah & Indartono, 2019; Volk et al., 2015). Effective prevention necessitates systemic interventions at multiple levels involving educators, schools, communities, and broader societal structures (Hornby, 2016). Significant predictors of bullying have been identified, including family dysfunction, school connectedness, substance use, and school climate (Merrin et al., 2018). Therefore, by adopting this perspective, a comprehensive understanding of bullying among high school students can be attained, thereby enabling the development of targeted and effective prevention strategies (Hornby, 2016; Merrin et al., 2018).

The theory highlights direct micro-level interactions among students, educators, and peers. Educators frequently observe bullying behaviours in various settings, including classrooms, playgrounds, and sports fields (Castillo, 2019). Their responses to incidents of physical, verbal, or relational bullying can either mitigate or exacerbate such behaviours. Furthermore, peer dynamics and teacher-student relationships are critical in determining whether a student becomes a bully, victim, or bystander. The insights of educators are essential for recognising these patterns and implementing effective prevention strategies that address the nuances of individual and group interactions.

The meso-level examines the interplay between microsystems, including schools, families, and community organisations (Taveira et al., 2016). Collaborative efforts between educators and parents are crucial for establishing consistent behavioural expectations across home and school environments. However, misalignments between school policies and parental attitudes often impede effective interventions. School social workers are well-positioned to facilitate these relationships, fostering stronger stakeholder collaboration to create a unified approach to preventing and addressing bullying.

The exo-level considers external factors that indirectly impact students, such as school policies, socioeconomic conditions, and community norms (Gee et al., 2020). Although the South African Schools Act (1996) mandates the creation of safe school environments, challenges such as poverty and community violence continue to contribute to the prevalence of bullying. Educators who witness the effects of these external pressures firsthand provide valuable insights into the broader systemic issues affecting students. Addressing these root causes necessitates systemic changes and targeted interventions to improve both the school environment and the surrounding community.

The ecological perspective is highly relevant to this study as it offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex nature of bullying in South African schools. Based on Bronfenbrenner's systems theory, this approach highlights that bullying is not solely an individual issue; rather, it arises from dynamic interactions across various layers of a child's environment. Therefore, by applying the ecological perspective, this study can more effectively identify and address the interconnected factors contributing to bullying in South African schools. This theory elucidates why bullying persists despite existing policies by uncovering the layered, systemic issues—from individual interactions to broader societal challenges—that create an environment conducive to bullying. Understanding these factors is crucial for designing targeted, multi-level prevention

strategies that involve educators, parents, communities, and policymakers in a unified effort to reduce bullying and promote a safer, more inclusive school climate.

3. Methodology

The study employed an interpretive paradigm, which emphasises understanding the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals associate with their interactions and social contexts (Boboyi & Kang'ethe, 2024). Rooted in the belief that reality is socially constructed, this paradigm seeks to explore phenomena from the perspectives of those experiencing them (Omodan, 2024). In this investigation, the interpretive paradigm was particularly relevant as it enabled the researchers to delve into educators' personal insights regarding bullying among high school students. Consequently, by amplifying educators' voices, the study uncovered how they perceive, interpret, and respond to bullying in their schools. This approach provided a deeper understanding of the issue, which is critical for developing context-sensitive interventions within school social work practice.

The study adopted a qualitative approach, exploring and understanding the depth and complexity of human experiences within their natural settings (Ormston et al., 2014). This approach emphasises the collection of rich, descriptive data through interviews, observations, and document analysis (Boboyi, 2024a; Ormston et al., 2014). In this research, the qualitative approach was particularly suitable as it captured educators' detailed perspectives, feelings, and insights regarding bullying among high school students. This comprehensive understanding was crucial for uncovering the contextual and relational factors influencing educators' experiences, aligning with the study's aim of exploring how their views inform school social work practice.

The study employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling, with a sample size of ten educators. Convenience sampling was chosen as it allowed the researchers to access readily available participants who were willing to share their experiences (Robinson, 2014). A sample size of ten was deemed appropriate for a qualitative study, enabling an in-depth exploration of perspectives while facilitating manageable data analysis. To ensure diversity and relevance, the inclusion criteria required teachers to have been teaching at the selected school for more than two years and to be registered with the South African Council for Educators (SACE). This approach ensured the collection of rich, detailed narratives aligned with the study's objectives and highlighted how, through literature, school social workers could contribute to addressing this issue.

The study utilised semi-structured interviews as its primary method of data collection. This qualitative technique allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while providing flexibility in the questioning process (Ruslin et al., 2022). The method was particularly relevant as it guided discussions around key themes related to bullying, enabling educators to share their unique experiences and insights. The open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews facilitated the collection of rich, detailed data, which is essential for understanding the complex and nuanced ways educators perceive and address bullying in high schools. This approach was instrumental in achieving the study's objectives.

The researchers ensured the quality of the findings without relying on traditional triangulation methods by adopting a rigorous and transparent methodological approach. This involved maintaining a detailed audit trail that documented every step of the data collection and analysis processes, allowing for the tracing and verification of decisions made. Regular peer debriefing sessions were held, during which researchers critically reviewed each other's interpretations to identify and challenge potential biases. Additionally, the researchers implemented member checking by inviting participants to review and validate the findings, ensuring that the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' experiences. These practices provided robust internal validity, credibility, and dependability to the study, despite the absence of multiple triangulation methods.

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to identify, organise, and interpret patterns or themes within the qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The process began with familiarisation, during which the researchers thoroughly reviewed the interview transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Coding was then performed by assigning labels to meaningful segments of data, which were grouped into categories reflecting recurring ideas. These categories were refined into themes that encapsulated the core issues and insights regarding educators' views on bullying. The thematic analysis allowed the researchers to systematically examine the data while preserving its depth and richness, providing nuanced insights into the implications of educators' perspectives for school social work practice.

3.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental principles and guidelines that ensure research is conducted responsibly, protecting participants' rights, dignity, and well-being (Cacciattolo, 2015). This study received ethical approval from an institution of higher learning, with protocol number REC/11(XXXXXXVIX)/2024, and permission from the school principal to conduct the research at the selected school. Strict ethical guidelines were followed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Before providing written consent, participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential implications. Participation was entirely voluntary, with assurances that educators could withdraw at any time without facing repercussions. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants, ensuring their identities were protected. Confidentiality was upheld by securely storing data, limiting access to the research team, safeguarding participants' information, and fostering a trusting environment that encouraged open and honest discussions.

4. Discussion of Findings

This section presents the demographic details of the teachers involved in the study. The findings are discussed within the central theme of the study.

Table 1: Demographic details of participants

Code names	Gender	Experiences	Qualification	Age
P1M27	Male	3 years	PGCE	27 years
P2F50	Female	20 years	Dip. Ed.	50 years
P3F27	Female	2years	PGCE	27 years
P4M27	Male	2 years	B.Ed.	27 years
P5M55	Male	23 years	Dip. Ed.	55 years
P6M30	Male	5 years	PGCE	30 years
P7M38	Male	12 years	B.Ed.	38 years
P8F36	Female	8 years	B.Ed.	36 years
P9M32	Male	5 years	B.Ed.	32 years
P10F32	Female	5 years	PGCE	32 years

Table 1 presents the demographic details of the educators who participated in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect each participant's identity and privacy. The table includes the code name, gender, age, years of teaching experience, and educator qualifications. Both male and female educators were represented in the study, reflecting a balanced gender distribution. Participants were selected based on a minimum of two years of teaching experience and possession of valid teaching qualifications. The group encompassed a diverse age range, capturing the perspectives of both younger and more experienced educators within the school.

Table 2: Presentation and discussion of the main theme

Study research question	Themes
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- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are your views on bullying among students in your school? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical and verbal bullying• Lack of parental involvement• The influence of peers• Decreased motivation for school activities |
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4.1 Physical and verbal bullying

Physical and verbal bullying has been identified as the most prevalent forms of bullying occurring in schools. Educators frequently observe students employing physical aggression or hurtful language to dominate or intimidate their peers. These behaviours typically occur in classrooms, on playgrounds, and even on the way to or from school. Below are the responses from educators:

"During break time, it's not unusual to see students pushing and shoving each other, and sometimes these altercations escalate into serious fights. It's something we are constantly trying to manage." (P1M27)

"Some students have a habit of mocking others, whether it's about their looks or something they've done. These words can really chip away at someone's confidence over time, and it's heartbreaking to see." (P3F27)

"The thing with verbal bullying is that it often flies under the radar. Unlike physical aggression, which is easy to spot, hurtful words leave invisible scars, but the damage is just as real, if not worse." (P8F36)

"We've had several students come to us in tears after being called horrible names in front of their peers. It's humiliating for them, and you can see how much it affects their self-esteem and willingness to participate in class." (P2F50)

"I've witnessed older students cornering younger ones, taking their lunch money, or even their snacks. It's an ongoing issue, and sometimes these kids don't even report it out of fear." (P6M30)

"In group settings, bullying tends to take a more verbal form. Students gang up on one individual, and the victim often feels completely powerless to fight back or defend themselves." (P7M38)

"What starts as minor teasing or playful arguments sometimes spirals into physical fights. It happens so quickly that, by the time we intervene, students are already throwing punches." (P4M27)

"We've seen incidents where students throw books, pens, or even chairs at each other during class. Not only does it disrupt learning, but it creates an unsafe environment for everyone involved." (P9M32)

"Physical bullying doesn't stop at the school gates. On buses, where there's less supervision, we often hear of students being pushed around or teased in ways that cross the line." (P5M55)

The findings confirm that verbal and physical bullying are the most common forms of bullying in high schools, aligning with research by Hesapçioğlu and Yeşilova (2015) and Antiri (2016). Educators reported frequent physical altercations and verbal taunts, mirroring global studies that highlight the high prevalence of these behaviours (Antiri, 2016) and their tendency to co-occur with other forms of bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2015). According to Shiba and Mokwena (2023), 73.91% of South African students are involved in bullying, with many serving as both perpetrators and victims. This dual role may explain the retaliatory nature of some incidents described by educators.

The findings also identify unsupervised areas, such as playgrounds and school buses, as hotspots for bullying. This observation aligns with Bradshaw et al.'s (2015) emphasis on school contextual factors, including physical disorder and a lack of positive behavioural expectations. Furthermore, educators highlighted that verbal bullying often goes unreported, echoing Hesapçioğlu and Yeşilova's (2015) findings that students frequently feel uncomfortable discussing bullying with authority figures.

These behaviours are also linked to individual factors such as anxiety and depression, as noted by Shiba and Mokwena (2023). Overall, the findings underscore the necessity for systemic interventions that address both individual behaviours and the broader school environment. These measures are essential for effectively combating bullying and creating a safer, more supportive school atmosphere.

4.2 Lack of parental involvement

Educators emphasised the critical importance of parental involvement in tackling bullying. They observed that parents are often either unaware of or dismissive of their children's behaviour, which significantly hampers efforts to address bullying incidents and promote better conduct among students. The educators shared the following insights:

"Some parents simply refuse to accept that their child could be a bully. Instead of working with us, they turn around and accuse the school of unfairly targeting their child, which makes it harder to address the issue effectively." (P5M55)

"When we reach out to parents to discuss their child's behaviour, many don't bother to show up for the meeting. Some tell us outright that they're too busy, which is frustrating because their involvement could make a huge difference." (P9M32)

"I really feel that parents should take on more responsibility when it comes to teaching their children about respect and empathy. Too often, they leave it all up to the school, as if it's not their problem." (P7M38)

"There are cases where parents defend their child's behaviour, saying things like 'They were provoked,' or 'That's just how kids are.' It's disheartening because it normalises bullying and undermines our efforts." (P2F50)

"From my experience, when parents are actively involved and willing to engage, we can resolve bullying incidents much more quickly. It shows how critical their participation is in these situations." (P8F36)

"Parents tend to step in only after things have escalated to an extreme level. Preventative measures are so rare, and by then, the damage is already done." (P10F32)

"A lot of parents dismiss bullying as something trivial, calling it 'kids being kids.' This attitude makes it nearly impossible to address the issue properly because they don't take it seriously." (P6M30)

"Sometimes, parents fail to discipline their children appropriately at home, and it shows in their behaviour at school. When that happens, it undermines everything we're trying to achieve in managing bullying." (P3F27)

"For schools to tackle bullying effectively, parents and teachers need to work as a team. Unfortunately, that kind of teamwork is often missing, and it's the students who end up paying the price." (P1M27)

The findings underscore the vital role of parental involvement in addressing bullying, a perspective strongly supported by existing research. Educators highlighted the challenges posed by disengaged parents, such as their refusal to acknowledge their child's role in bullying and their reluctance to attend meetings. These observations align with Axford et al. (2015), who emphasise that involving parents in anti-bullying programmes can reduce bullying, although further research is needed to establish direct causality.

Proactive parental engagement, as noted by educators, enhances the effectiveness of resolving bullying incidents. This reflects Christiana's (2023) findings on the importance of parenting styles that promote character development and monitor children's activities. Supportive and warm parenting, in particular, is associated with reduced bullying behaviours, fostering better problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills (Rinaldi et al., 2023). Conversely, parents who dismiss bullying as trivial or fail to discipline their children adequately, as noted in the findings, impede efforts to create a consistent and cohesive approach to managing bullying.

Furthermore, educators called for stronger collaboration between schools and parents. This aligns with Gradinger et al. (2017), who found that educators are more willing to participate in prevention programmes when their students are directly affected. Building effective partnerships between parents and educators, alongside improving parent-child communication, could help address the root causes of bullying and equip students with the skills to navigate conflicts constructively.

4.3 The influence of peers

Peer influence is a significant factor contributing to bullying, with students frequently feeling pressured to conform to the norms of their peer groups, even when such norms lead to harmful behaviours. Educators have observed that the culture of a peer group can either perpetuate or mitigate bullying. They have:

"I've noticed students bullying others purely to gain acceptance into certain groups. For some, it's all about looking cool in front of their peers, even if it means hurting someone else." (P4M27)

"There are times when students egg on their friends to bully someone, treating it like a joke or something harmless. They don't seem to realise the damage they're causing." (P6M30)

"Standing up to bullying is incredibly difficult when students are afraid of losing their friends or, worse, becoming targets themselves. It's a fear that keeps them quiet." (P2F50)

"In some groups, bullying seems to be part of their culture. If you're in that clique, it's almost expected that you'll join in, whether you want to or not." (P5M55)

"Peer pressure is such a powerful factor, especially for younger students. They see older kids as role models and often mimic their behaviour, even if it's harmful." (P9M32)

"Some students who don't actually want to bully others feel compelled to do it anyway because their friends encourage them. They're scared of being left out, so they go along with it." (P7M38)

"The need to fit in can completely cloud a student's judgment. I've seen kids make choices they clearly regret later, just to stay part of a group. It's heartbreaking." (P8F36)

"Once a group agrees that bullying someone is okay, it becomes so much harder for any individual to resist. Groupthink takes over, and even the quieter students get swept up in it." (P10F32)

"We've had cases where students target others for no reason beyond their friends finding it funny. It's frustrating to see how easily they justify these actions as harmless fun." (P1M27)

The findings emphasise the pivotal role of peer dynamics in perpetuating or mitigating bullying. This aligns with the work of Pouwels and Garandeanu (2021), which highlights the roles peers play, such as reinforcers or defenders, in bullying situations. Educators have observed that students often engage in bullying to gain acceptance, reflecting Nurdianah's (2019) findings on the relationship between peer groups and bullying behaviours. The pressure to conform within cliques frequently overrides individual judgement, especially when moral competence is low, as noted by Doehne et al. (2018).

Bystanders are critical in either escalating or diminishing bullying incidents, significantly influencing outcomes (Gao et al., 2024). Educators' observations of peer influence align with findings that highlight social factors, including physical differences and cultural diversity, as contributors to bullying behaviours (Gao et al., 2024). To effectively address bullying, it is crucial to empower bystanders with tools and strategies that enable them to intervene constructively and disrupt negative peer dynamics.

4.4 Decreased motivation for school activities

Bullying has been reported to affect students' motivation and engagement in school activities significantly. Educators have observed that victims of bullying often lose interest in their studies and may even avoid attending school entirely. The educators shared the following insights:

"Some students who are bullied just give up on participating in class. They stop doing their homework because they feel like it doesn't even matter anymore." (P10F32)

"You can really see the change in their behaviour. They become withdrawn, and before long, they lose interest in school altogether. It's heartbreaking to watch." (P8F36)

"Bullying makes some students dread coming to school. It affects everything – attendance, grades, and overall performance. They just can't focus anymore." (P1M27)

"Victims of bullying often retreat to the back of the class, trying to avoid being noticed or singled out. They don't want any more attention on them." (P4M27)

"I've seen students drop out of sports and other extracurricular activities simply because they're scared of being bullied during practice or matches." (P9M32)

"Bullying leaves students feeling helpless. You can see it in their grades, which usually start to drop. They just don't have the energy or the will to keep up." (P3F27)

"In extreme cases, students are so overwhelmed that they ask to transfer to a different school because they just don't feel safe anymore." (P2F50)

"A bullied student often becomes hesitant to reach out for help. They try to deal with it alone, but that only makes things worse." (P7M38)

"There have even been cases where students pretend to be sick just so they can avoid going to school. It's clear they're struggling emotionally, but they don't always know how to express it." (P5M55)

The findings indicate that bullying has a profound impact on students' motivation and engagement. This is consistent with the research conducted by Samara et al. (2021), which emphasises that victimisation resulting from bullying undermines cognitive and motivational factors, consequently leading to decreased academic performance. Educators have reported that students who are bullied often become withdrawn, avoid participating in class, and, in some instances, feign illness to remain at home. These behaviours reflect a significant reduction in academic engagement and motivation.

The effects of bullying extend beyond academic challenges, significantly impacting students' emotional and social well-being. Victims frequently experience low self-confidence, depression, and anxiety (Rahman et al., 2023). Furthermore, educators have observed that bullied students tend to withdraw from extracurricular activities, such as sports, and become increasingly isolated within the classroom environment. Addressing these challenges necessitates the implementation of strategies aimed at improving both internal and external motivational factors (Samara et al., 2021). For instance, thoughtfully designed reward systems can enhance motivation (Widhiastuti, 2022), while experiential learning approaches, as highlighted by Kong (2021), can improve engagement and foster positive interactions within the classroom.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions, the following recommendations are proposed to effectively address bullying in schools: Schools should create and implement robust anti-bullying policies that encompass all forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, and peer-related behaviours. Regular workshops and awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate students, educators, and parents about the signs, effects, and prevention of bullying. Parents should be actively engaged in anti-bullying initiatives through regular meetings, workshops, and open communication channels. Parenting programmes that promote supportive parenting styles, conflict resolution skills, and consistent discipline should be introduced to empower parents in preventing and addressing bullying effectively. Schools should promote peer-led programmes, such as buddy systems and anti-bullying clubs, to empower students as defenders rather than bystanders. Providing students with tools and strategies to intervene constructively can significantly reduce the prevalence of bullying. Additionally, schools should integrate interventions that rebuild students' confidence and

motivation into their practices. Strategies such as experiential learning and reward systems can enhance engagement and academic outcomes, particularly for students affected by bullying.

5.1 Implications for school social work practice

The role of school social workers is becoming increasingly prominent in South Africa (Boboyi, 2024b). Given their expertise, school social workers play a vital role in addressing student bullying. Based on the findings of this study, the following implications are proposed for school social work practice:

- School social workers should take a proactive role in designing and implementing comprehensive anti-bullying programmes. These strategies should encompass prevention, early intervention, and support for both victims and perpetrators, ensuring a holistic approach to addressing bullying effectively.
- Social workers should liaise between educators, parents, and students to foster a collaborative approach to bullying prevention and intervention. Open communication and mutual understanding can help build consistent and coordinated responses to bullying across school and home environments.
- School social workers should offer counselling and therapeutic interventions to students affected by bullying, addressing their emotional, psychological, and social needs. Group work initiatives, such as peer support groups and conflict resolution workshops, can empower students to manage and mitigate bullying effectively.
- Social workers can play a pivotal role in equipping bystanders with the skills and confidence to intervene in bullying situations. This includes conducting workshops and peer leadership training to encourage positive peer influence and reduce the passive reinforcement of bullying behaviours.
- Social workers should identify and address the root causes of bullying, such as family dynamics, social inequality, and mental health challenges. This involves conducting thorough assessments of students' environments and providing targeted support for those at greater risk of involvement in bullying.
- Social workers should advocate for policies and practices that foster safe, inclusive, and supportive school climates. This includes working with school leadership to establish clear behavioural expectations, enhance supervision, and create opportunities for positive student engagement.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated educators' perspectives on bullying among high school students in the O. R. Tambo Inland, concentrating on its prevalence, impact, contributing factors, and the essential role of school social work in addressing these challenges. The findings indicate that bullying, particularly in its physical and verbal forms, profoundly affects students' academic engagement, emotional well-being, and overall school experience. Peer dynamics, including cliques and bystanders, exacerbate the issue, while inadequate parental involvement and inconsistent disciplinary measures hinder effective intervention. The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to combat school bullying. Key recommendations include strengthening anti-bullying policies, enhancing parental engagement, and equipping students to navigate peer pressure and intervene constructively. School social workers play a pivotal role in these initiatives by providing support, fostering stakeholder collaboration, and advocating for systemic changes to create safer and more inclusive school environments. A proactive and collaborative approach, tailored to the unique needs of each school community, is essential for addressing bullying effectively. By integrating educators' insights with evidence-based practices, schools can reduce the prevalence of bullying and foster an environment where all students feel safe, valued, and supported. Future research should explore innovative bullying prevention and intervention strategies, focusing on achieving sustainable, long-term outcomes for students, educators, and families.

7. Declarations

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (L.N. & A.B.); Literature review (L.N. & A.B.); methodology (L.N. & A.B.); software (N/A.); validation (A.B.); formal analysis (L.N. & A.B.); investigation (L.N.); data curation (L.N.) drafting and preparation (A.B.); review and editing (A.B.); supervision (A.B.); project administration (L.N.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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