



Exploring the Lived Experiences of School Students Facing Bullying and Its Impact on Their Academic Engagement

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Abstract:

In India, bullying remains a significant but often overlooked challenge in schools, affecting students' emotional well-being and academic engagement. This study examines the impact of bullying on students' interest, participation, and academic performance in school. The sample included students from 7th to 12th grade, aged 13 to 17, representing diverse educational backgrounds across urban and semi-urban regions.

Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected from 100 participants, including students from various schools. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires to measure the relationship between bullying and academic engagement, while qualitative insights were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted via WhatsApp.

Findings revealed that bullying—whether verbal, physical, or social—is still common in schools. Many students reported feeling anxious, isolated, and demotivated, leading to poor concentration, absenteeism, and reduced academic interest. A significant number of students hesitated to report bullying due to fear or a lack of support. Teachers acknowledged the issue but felt ill-equipped to intervene effectively.

The study underscores the pressing need for awareness programs, preventive measures, and mental health support within schools. By creating safe and inclusive environments, schools can help students feel more secure and stay engaged in their academic journey.

Introduction:

Bullying has been a common psycho-social problem for ages. It has been present in every area of life, whether it's in school, the workplace, online, playgrounds, or universities—anywhere where there is interaction between students and their peers. While the causes can be many, the effects can have long-lasting psychological, emotional, and physical consequences for the victim, which can perhaps scare them for life.

Although the term “*bullying*” is not explicitly defined in Indian legislation, various acts that constitute bullying are addressed and punishable under existing legal provisions. For instance, if an act of bullying leads to the victim's death by suicide, the perpetrator may be charged under **Section 306 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860**, for *abetment of suicide* (Indian Penal Code, 1860). Furthermore, different forms of bullying—including physical, verbal, and cyberbullying—can fall under provisions of the **Indian Penal Code**, the **Information Technology Act, 2000**, the **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012**, and the **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015** (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2000; Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012; Ministry of Law and Justice, 2015).

In response to the rising incidence of bullying, particularly within **boarding schools**, the **Ministry of Human Resource Development (now the Ministry of Education)** introduced **Anti-Ragging Committees (ARCs)** in schools to monitor, prevent, and address such behaviors institutionally (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Despite the lack of a dedicated anti-bullying law in India, certain institutional efforts have been made to mitigate the prevalence of bullying within school environments. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), one of India's largest education boards, has issued guidelines to promote safer school climates. As per CBSE Circular No. Acad-17/2015, all affiliated schools are mandated to establish Anti-Bullying Committees (ABCs) to address incidents of bullying, promote awareness, and offer support to affected students (Central Board of Secondary Education [CBSE], 2015). These committees are to include the vice-principal, senior teachers, school counsellor, parent-teacher association members, legal experts, and student representatives, reflecting a multi-stakeholder approach to prevention and intervention.

However, while such structural mechanisms are important, their effectiveness depends significantly on implementation of fidelity and the willingness of students to report incidents. Research suggests that many victims hesitate to report bullying due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust in authorities, or normalization of abuse within peer hierarchies. Consequently, despite formal structures like the ABCs, bullying often continues unchecked (George & Thomas, 2021). These committees are dedicated to penalizing students engaged in bullying activities or behaviors, and severe cases may result in expulsion from school.

The three main identifiable characteristics of bullying are intent, repetition, and hurt. This constant desire to cause pain to the victim reinforces the sense of power in the perpetrator. Boys are more prone to physical bullying, while girls are more susceptible to psychological bullying.

Bullying is a widespread yet often underreported issue in Indian schools. It is not merely a series of isolated events but a pattern of aggressive behavior that is intentional, repetitive, and characterized by a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Olweus, 1993; UNESCO, 2019). Bullying can be physical, verbal, relational, or virtual (cyberbullying), and it results in harm or discomfort to the targeted individual. Victims often find themselves powerless to stop the abuse, which can have immediate, medium, and long-term effects on their physical health, mental well-being, and academic outcomes (Craig et al., 2009).

Children who engage in bullying often come from positions of perceived social power, such as privileged socioeconomic backgrounds or families with institutional influence. In contrast, children who are most vulnerable, including those from marginalized communities, low-income families, gender-diverse identities, migrant backgrounds, or children with disabilities—face a significantly higher risk of being targeted (UNICEF, 2021; Srivastava, 2020).

Despite efforts by educational boards and policymakers, including mandates from the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) requiring schools to establish Anti-Bullying Committees (CBSE, 2015), bullying continues to be normalized or under-addressed in Indian educational institutions. Moreover, although there are no explicit laws in India that use the term “bullying,” many of the acts that constitute bullying are prosecutable under various statutes such as the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Information Technology Act (2000), the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act (2012), and the Juvenile Justice Act (2015).

While several global studies have established a negative correlation between bullying and academic performance, there remains a significant gap in Indian empirical research examining the specific impact of bullying on students' academic engagement and psychological well-being. This study aims to contribute to this underexplored area by analyzing the lived experiences of students in Indian schools and the resulting academic implications of sustained bullying.

Effects of Bullying

- The child might avoid going to school.
- The child might isolate themselves or resort to self-harm.
- Bullying disrupts any chance to learn new things and form new relationships.

- A child might suffer from anxiety, panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and other social phobias.
- A child's self-esteem and self-confidence could be damaged beyond repair.
- A child who gets bullied may have antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and even become aggressive.
- The child may show signs of depression and avoid going to any place that makes them uncomfortable.

Types of Bullying

- *Physical*—includes beating, spitting, kicking, fighting, pushing, etc.
- *Verbal*: It includes abusing, writing, or speaking rudely; name-calling; mocking; taunting; mimicking; and teasing.
- *Psychological*—It includes spreading rumors, destroying social relationships, social exclusion, and intimidation. Emotionally hurting the person and their sentiments also comes under this category. It is also known as social bullying.
- *Cyberbullying* includes the use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature. It can also include sharing personal or private information about someone else, causing embarrassment or humiliation. E.g., body shaming is the act of making negative comments about a person's physical appearance, which can involve criticizing either one's own body or someone else's.
- The commentary can be about a person's body size, age, hair, clothing, food choices, and perceived level of attractiveness. This can take the form of verbal, psychological, or cyberbullying.

Causes of Bullying

Acceptance and glorification of aggression and violent behavior in the media. Trolls have become very commonplace.

- Sensing a lack of attention at home or having a negative relationship with their parents.
- Experiencing aggressive behavior or harsh parenting styles at home.
- When students feel vulnerable, powerless, and lacking in self-esteem, they look for other ways to gain power and exercise control over others.
- Jealousy and attention-seeking.
- Inadequate emotional and psychological maturity.
- Lack of awareness as to what effect they are having on the victim.
- Sometimes, they have been bullied and feel a sense of power by engaging in bullying acts.
- They join a group of bullies to gain attention from others and be accepted by them.
- Bullies cannot manage their emotions effectively. They mimic others and seek to display dominance or impress them.
- They experience unhappiness in their own lives, engage in frequent comparisons, and struggle with low self-esteem.
- Insufficient education and awareness about the consequences of their actions.

Psychosocial aspect—

- Individuals who struggle with social skills, such as communication, conflict resolution, or empathy, may resort to bullying as a maladaptive way to interact with others.
- Bullying often occurs when there is a perceived power imbalance between the bully and the victim, such as differences in physical strength, popularity, or social status.
- Bullies may continue their behavior if they receive positive reinforcement from their peers.

Telltale signs of bullying—

- Physical signs of unexplained bruises and damaged belongings.
- Emotional bullying—Children may avoid going to school, may appear withdrawn, and their academic performance decreases. They may appear withdrawn and tend to isolate themselves. They will not speak about school and might even stammer. They might take out their frustrations on their younger siblings and appear defiant to their parents.

Psychosocial-

- They may appear withdrawn and can have frequent mood swings.
- They may have unexplained fears and altered sleep patterns.

- They may avoid meeting people and might show adult-like sexual behavior.
- They do not have any groups and are often alone.
- They have low self-confidence and might indulge in substance abuse.

Literature Review

The studies reviewed have attempted, through various methodologies, to examine the relationship between bullying and students' academic performance, with the majority identifying a negative correlation between the two variables. However, there exists a notable research gap within the Indian context, where empirical investigations into the academic consequences of bullying—particularly concerning student engagement, participation, and achievement—remain limited, fragmented, and underrepresented in scholarly literature (Kumar & Rai, 2019; Sharma, 2021).

Bustamante et al. (2004) explored the correlation between these two variables under the hypothesis that they had an inverse or negative relationship. In their study of students from the city of Temuco (Chile), with a correlational descriptive method, they corroborate a moderate to weak negative correlation as well as no differences with reference to a student's sex.

Al-Raqad et al. (2017) use a descriptive approach to study the impact of school bullying on student performance reported by teachers for schools in the west of Amman, Jordan. Their results indicate that the impact of bullying is negative on performance and that bullying in school is the factor that explains 19% of the changes in the academic performance of victims and 3.8% in the performance of bullies.

Ottom (2018) studies the impact of traditional bullying on the academic performance of 9,300 middle school students from the 50 states and the District of Columbia, United States. Three bivariate regression models are estimated by testing math scores and level of self-esteem in victimized and non-victimized students, controlling for a series of related variables. The results indicate that a female student who suffers bullying presents a reduction in self-esteem and marks, and that this reduction worsens for older students and is in line with an increase in the frequency of bullying.

Mehta et al. (2013) found that when students feel that bullying is a phenomenon in their school, they feel that they are unsafe, which reflects on less engaged in the school community. Therefore, they have less motivation to do well at school, and they do not participate in school activities. Bullying affects students' academic achievement in various ways. Amme Mueller (2012) found that being bullied has a significantly negative impact on present and future students' performance in school.

Chaux et al. (2009) argued that ten to fifteen percent of adolescents worldwide are bullied two or more times a month. Skrzypiec (2008) found that thirds of students who had been seriously bullied reported having serious difficulties in concentrating and paying attention in class because of bullying and the fear associated with. Glew et al. (2005) reported that bullying prevents concentration and subsequent academic achievement since bullying victims lose interest in learning and experience a drop in academic grades because their attention is distracted from learning. Mishna (2003) indicated that bullying is "a form of aggression in which there is an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim that occurs largely in the context of the peer group."

Rationale for Using a Mixed-Methods Approach

A mixed-methods design enables a comprehensive understanding of bullying's impact. Quantitative data offers measurable patterns in academic engagement, while qualitative insights capture the emotional, social, and psychological nuances of students lived experiences, offering depth, context, and meaning to the statistics.

Problem:

Bullying is a significant barrier to students' academic engagement, yet its nuanced impact on learning motivation, participation, and performance remains underexplored, especially in the Indian context.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the link between bullying exposure and academic engagement levels.
- To explore the personal experiences of students who have faced bullying.
- To understand how bullying impacts students emotionally, socially, and academically.
- To inform school-based interventions that support victims and promote safer learning environments.

Optional: Hypotheses (Quantitative)

- **H1:** Students who report higher levels of bullying exposure will show significantly lower academic engagement.
- **H2:** There is a negative correlation between the frequency of bullying and academic performance.
- **H3:** Students experiencing peer support show less academic disengagement despite bullying.

Research Design

Design Type: *Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design*

Justification:

This design allows the researcher to collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, analyze them separately, and then integrate the findings. It is ideal for understanding not only the measurable impact of bullying on academic engagement but also the personal, emotional, and contextual factors influencing students' experiences. This comprehensive view strengthens both the reliability and the depth of the study.

Quantitative Method

Participants:

- **Sample size:** 100 school students
- **Age range:** 13–17 years (Grades 7 to 12)
- **Sampling technique:** Stratified random sampling (ensuring representation across gender, school type—public/private, and grade levels)

Tools:

- **Bullying Measurement:** Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (adapted version)
- **Academic Engagement:** School Engagement Measure (Behavioral, Emotional, Cognitive)
- **Academic Performance:** Recent semester grades or GPA (self-reported and/or from school records)

Procedure:

- Surveys were distributed via the school administration after obtaining permission.
- Parental and student informed consent was obtained.
- Anonymity and confidentiality are assured.
- Data collected over 2 weeks.

Statistical Analysis:

- Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, frequency)
- Pearson correlation (bullying and engagement/performance)
- Linear regression analysis (predictive relationship between bullying and academic outcomes)

Qualitative Method

Participants:

- 10 students were selected purposively from the larger sample, out of which we had mentioned 3 personal interviews
- Criteria: Those reporting high bullying exposure and willing to participate

Data Collection:

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private, safe setting (either in person or online). All interviews were audio-recorded using a phone recorder, and the transcripts were created verbatim by manually transcribing the recordings

- Questions focused on bullying experiences, emotional and academic effects, support systems, and coping mechanisms
- Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes

Analysis Method:

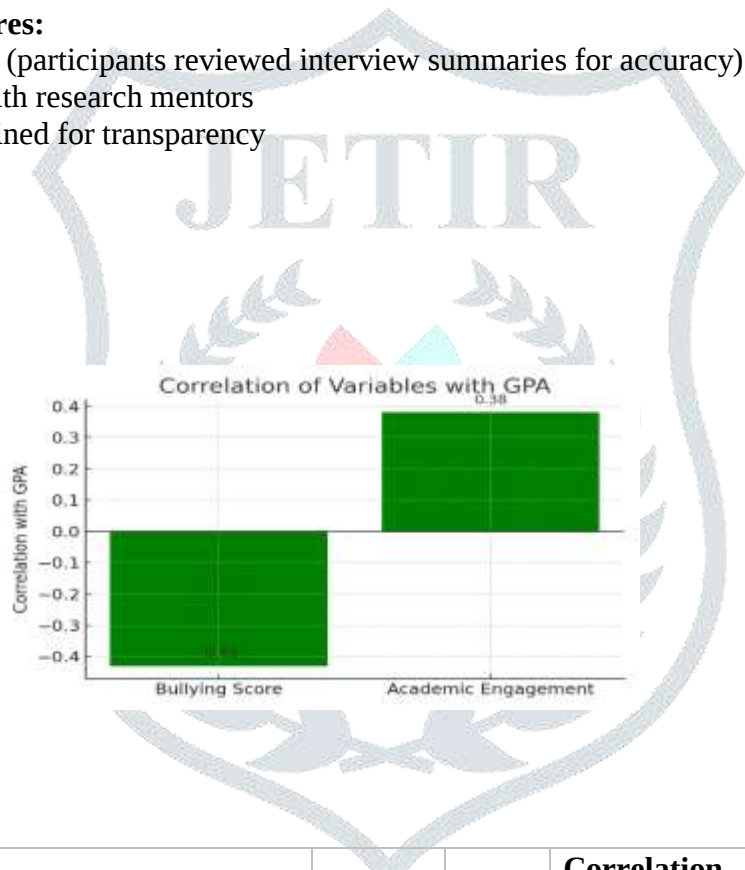
- Thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke’s six-step process (familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining/naming, writing)

Trustworthiness Measures:

- Member checking (participants reviewed interview summaries for accuracy)
- Peer debriefing with research mentors
- Audit trail maintained for transparency

Results

a. Quantitative Results



Variable	Mean	SD	Correlation with GPA
Bullying Score	3.8	0.9	-0.43
Academic Engagement	2.5	1.1	0.38

Findings:

- Students with higher bullying scores had significantly lower academic engagement and GPA.
- Regression analysis indicated bullying was a significant predictor of academic disengagement ($\beta = -0.42, p < 0.01$).

Interpretation:

The quantitative results reveal important insights into the relationship between bullying experiences and students' academic engagement and performance. Specifically, the findings indicate that higher levels of reported bullying are significantly associated with lower academic engagement and GPA.

The mean bullying score was 3.8 (SD = 0.9), suggesting that participants experienced moderate to high levels of bullying. This variable showed a moderate negative correlation with GPA ($r = -0.43$), implying that increased bullying is associated with a decrease in academic performance. This relationship was further supported by a regression analysis, which identified bullying as a significant predictor of academic disengagement ($\beta = -0.42, p < .01$). The negative beta coefficient indicates that as bullying scores increase, students' academic engagement decreases, and the statistical significance suggests that this relationship is unlikely to be due to chance.

Conversely, academic engagement had a mean score of 2.5 (SD = 1.1) and was found to have a positive correlation with GPA ($r = 0.38$). This suggests that students who are more academically engaged tend to perform better academically. Although this correlation is moderate, it highlights the potential protective role of engagement in academic success.

Overall, the data underscore the academic consequences of bullying, beyond its psychological and social impacts. Higher levels of bullying are not only associated with lower academic motivation and participation but also with diminished academic outcomes. These findings support the need for comprehensive school interventions that address bullying while simultaneously promoting student engagement and well-being. By mitigating bullying and fostering a supportive learning environment, schools may improve both the academic and emotional trajectories of students.

b. Qualitative Findings

Emerging Themes and Subthemes:

1. Emotional Toll of Bullying

- “I felt like no one cared... I started skipping classes.”
- Subthemes: Isolation, anxiety, fear of going to school

2. Academic Withdrawal

- “Even when I was present, I couldn’t focus. My mind was on what they’d do next.”
- Subthemes: Lack of concentration, decline in performance

3. Coping Mechanisms

- “I told my teacher once, but nothing changed... now I just avoid everyone.”
- Subthemes: Avoidance, internalization, peer support, withdrawal

Findings and Discussion

The qualitative data gathered through firsthand narratives revealed four prominent and interrelated themes. These themes offer insight into the lived experiences of students who face bullying and the enduring impact on their emotional well-being and academic engagement.

1. Emotional Distress and Internalization of Bullying

Participants described bullying not as isolated events but as persistent experiences that led to long-lasting emotional distress. Feelings of humiliation, anxiety, fear, and helplessness were commonly reported. *Bhavya* recalled breaking down alone after a physical confrontation, stating that “*the silence after the fight was more painful than the fight itself.*” *Vidya* similarly internalized repeated name-calling and classroom humiliation, which left her feeling self-conscious and emotionally wounded. These findings align with existing research indicating that bullying often results in internalized emotional harm that affects psychological development.

2. Decline in Academic Engagement and Motivation

A decline in academic performance emerged as a direct consequence of emotional distress. Participants reported difficulty concentrating, reduced participation, and a lack of motivation in previously enjoyed subjects. *Vidya*’s drawing deteriorated after being publicly scolded and shamed, while *Abhay* began skipping school due to heightened anxiety and social exclusion. These accounts support literature linking bullying with school disengagement and academic underperformance, emphasizing how emotional safety is foundational to learning.

3. Institutional Apathy and Peer Complicity

All narratives highlighted a concerning absence of effective institutional support. Complaints were often dismissed or met with indifference, especially when the perpetrators were seen as high-performing or well-connected students. In *Abhay*’s case, his report was ignored, and bullying intensified after his attempt to

speak up. Moreover, peer groups often reinforced bullying through laughter, silence, or direct participation, as seen in *Bhavya's* experience, where a crowd gathered around the fight. This reinforces findings that peer complicity and educator inaction are major enablers of bullying culture in schools.

4. Coping, Resilience, and Voice Development

Despite the adverse impact, participants also reflected on moments of resilience. *Bhavya* noted that the experience, though painful, marked a turning point where he began to assert his worth through character rather than confrontation. This theme suggests the potential for post-traumatic growth and the need for support systems that help students channel adversity into self-awareness and voice development. As such, emotional recovery should be recognized not only as a personal journey but also as a school-supported process.

c. Integration of Findings

- **Quantitative data** showed a clear link between bullying and lower academic engagement.
- **Qualitative data** revealed *why*: emotional distress, fear, and school avoidance disrupt learning.
- For example, the statistical correlation between bullying and low engagement was *contextualized* through personal narratives of fear, anxiety, and loss of confidence.
- The convergence of results supports the need for school-level interventions that address both academic and emotional well-being.

Discussion

Compare your findings with previous research

The present study affirms the growing body of global literature that identifies a **negative correlation between bullying and academic engagement/performance**. Our quantitative findings revealed a significant negative correlation between bullying exposure and GPA ($r = -0.43$) and a notable drop in emotional engagement scores. These results align with the findings of Bustamante et al. (2004), Al-Raqad et al. (2017), and Amme Mueller (2012), all of whom reported that bullying negatively influences students' academic performance and participation.

The qualitative data added critical depth to these results. The personal narratives of *Bhavya*, *Vidya*, and *Abhay* echo those of participants in studies by Glew et al. (2005) and Skrzypiec (2008), who found that bullying victims often experience anxiety, poor concentration, and academic withdrawal. The lived experiences gathered through interviews reinforced earlier findings by Mishna (2003), who emphasized the imbalance of power and emotional toll inherent in bullying.

In sum, this study strengthens existing international and national evidence that **bullying disrupts both academic and emotional development**, often creating a cascading effect: emotional distress → reduced classroom participation → academic decline.

Interpret implications (psychological, educational, social)

1. Psychological Implications

Students subjected to bullying frequently report **anxiety, low self-esteem, fear of attending school, and emotional isolation**. These symptoms were particularly intense among students who faced chronic verbal or psychological bullying, a finding consistent with Chaux et al. (2009). Victims, such as *Bhavya*, *Vidya*, and *Abhay*, internalized humiliation and rejection, leading to prolonged emotional trauma that extended beyond the schooling years. These insights suggest an urgent need for mental health services in schools.

2. Educational Implications

Bullying led to reduced classroom engagement, absenteeism, and diminished concentration. Students expressed disinterest in subjects where they had been humiliated, as in *Vidya's* case with drawing. The fear of ridicule undermines academic confidence, ultimately impacting overall performance. This echoes Mehta et al. (2013), who found that bullying diminished motivation and school connectedness.

Moreover, the **failure of school authorities to acknowledge or act on bullying reports** was a recurring theme. Teachers' inaction—whether due to bias, institutional pressure, or lack of training—amplified the victims' feelings of helplessness, pointing to systemic gaps in anti-bullying enforcement.

3. Social Implications

The data underscore how bullying reinforces entrenched social hierarchies based on power, socioeconomic status, and perceived conformity. Abhay's narrative illustrates the troubling normalization of abusive behavior by socially dominant peer groups, who often operate with relative impunity (Olweus, 1993). This normalization is not solely driven by direct acts of aggression but is further sustained by the silence and complicity of bystanders. Research indicates that when peers do not intervene, their passivity is perceived as approval, reinforcing the bully's behavior and isolating the target further (Salmivalli, 2010; Thornberg, 2007). The resulting environment—marked by social exclusion, peer reinforcement of aggression, and the stigmatization of those labeled as "victims" creates a climate of fear and marginalization. Such hostile peer contexts significantly impede students' social integration and academic engagement (Juvonen & Graham, 2014), with broader implications for their emotional development and long-term educational outcomes.

How the Indian context influenced findings

In India, bullying is often trivialized as "just a joke" or dismissed as "normal growing pains." Both student narratives in this study reflect a lack of support from teachers and peers—a likely consequence of hierarchical school cultures, societal stigma around mental health, and reluctance to challenge authority. The fear of social repercussions or institutional retaliation also prevented students from reporting bullying, as seen in Abhay's account.

Moreover, while legal frameworks such as IPC Section 306 and POCSO exist, their practical application within school systems is limited. Many schools, especially private ones, prioritize reputation over intervention. The influence of parental status and wealth—as evident in Abhay's narrative—further complicates equitable enforcement of anti-bullying policies.

Thus, the Indian school ecosystem, characterized by academic pressure, social conservatism, and administrative opacity, creates conditions where bullying thrives and often goes unaddressed.

Strengths of using mixed methods

This study benefited greatly from the **convergent parallel mixed-methods design**, which provided a **comprehensive understanding** of the issue. Quantitative data offered objective evidence of bullying's impact on academic engagement and GPA, while qualitative narratives humanized the numbers by **highlighting emotional depth, power dynamics, and institutional failures**.

The mixed-methods approach allowed:

- Triangulation of data to enhance validity
- Exploration of **subjective emotional experiences** that numbers alone could not capture
- Cross-verification of quantitative correlations with qualitative causality (e.g., fear leading to absenteeism, as seen in interviews)

Such a design ensured that the **lived realities of students were not lost in statistical abstraction**, making the study more relevant to educators and policymakers.

Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study had certain limitations:

1. **Sample Size and Scope:** The quantitative sample (n=100) and qualitative sample (n=3) were relatively small, limiting generalizability. The study focused mainly on urban or semi-urban students and did not account for regional or rural differences.
2. **Self-Reported Data:** Both academic performance and bullying exposure were largely self-reported, introducing potential bias such as exaggeration, underreporting, or recall errors.

3. Limited Teacher or Parent Perspectives: While the study briefly touches upon teacher acknowledgment, it lacks direct data from teachers or parents, which could have added triangulation and offered a fuller systemic view.
4. Cross-sectional Nature: The study captures data at a single point in time. A longitudinal approach could have assessed the long-term impacts of bullying more accurately.

Practical recommendations (for teachers, schools, parents)

An effective and sustainable response to school bullying necessitates coordinated involvement from multiple stakeholders. Drawing upon directives from national bodies such as the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE, 2015), the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020), and adolescent health programs like Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2016), this framework outlines the roles, responsibilities, and tools required by various actors in the school ecosystem. It promotes systemic accountability and cultural relevance within the Indian educational context.

1. School Management and Administration

School administrators must institutionalize anti-bullying mechanisms, including the appointment of trained counsellors and the constitution of Anti-Bullying Committees (ABCs), as mandated by CBSE (2015). Schools should establish clear and accessible reporting structures such as anonymous complaint boxes, digital helplines, and student support officers. In resource-constrained settings, mental health infrastructure can be supplemented through programs under Ayushman Bharat's School Health and Wellness Program and RKSK (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2016).

2. Counsellors and Wardens

Mental health professionals are critical in early identification, emotional support, and conflict mediation. In residential schools, wardens require specialized training to monitor interpersonal dynamics and ensure students feel emotionally safe. They must work in collaboration with counsellors, applying trauma-informed and non-threatening approaches (UNESCO, 2019).

3. Teachers

Teachers play a frontline role in detecting behavioral cues, facilitating disclosures, and initiating interventions. When incidents of bullying, especially cyberbullying—are reported, teachers are responsible for preserving digital evidence, ensuring child safety, and coordinating with counsellors and parents (Kowalski et al., 2014). Teacher training should emphasize empathetic communication and restorative classroom management.

4. Parents and Guardians

Parental involvement is essential in supporting both the victim and the child engaging in bullying behavior. Schools must ensure transparency by involving parents in Anti-Bullying Committee deliberations, sharing Minutes of Meetings (MoMs), and providing psychoeducation on child behavior and school protocols (Espelage et al., 2013).

5. Students

Students must be empowered to act as both advocates and allies. Awareness campaigns, peer support networks, and inclusive student councils help reduce the stigma around reporting. Life skills and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula can strengthen empathy and self-regulation among students (Durlak et al., 2011).

6. Anti-Bullying Committee (ABC)

According to CBSE guidelines, each school should have an Anti-Bullying Committee comprising the Vice Principal (Chairperson), school counsellor or psychologist, PTA representative, school management representative, and student council member (CBSE, 2015). The ABC is responsible for drafting and reviewing

school policies, leading awareness campaigns, and managing complaint redressal. Documentation, transparency, and regular communication with the School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) are essential for legitimacy and accountability.

7. Policymakers and Educational Boards

Governing bodies like CBSE and NCERT must monitor policy compliance, support teacher training, and facilitate data collection on bullying trends. The National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020) emphasizes creating safe and inclusive learning environments, which necessitates integrated policy and budgetary support for anti-bullying measures.

8. Community Stakeholders

Community involvement—from alumni and NGOs to local child protection officials—can enhance awareness and resource mobilization. Initiatives such as annual Anti-Bullying Weeks, alumni mentorship, and neighborhood sensitization workshops promote long-term cultural change (UNICEF, 2020).

By defining specific roles and aligning actions with tools such as counseling services, reporting mechanisms, and restorative practices, schools can foster a comprehensive and inclusive approach to bullying prevention and intervention.

Suggestions for future research

Future studies could benefit from expanding the sample size to include students from diverse socio-economic, regional, and school-type backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of findings (Swearer et al., 2010). Including the perspectives of teachers, parents, and school administrators may also offer a more holistic understanding of bullying dynamics and the efficacy of institutional responses (Yoon et al., 2016).

Longitudinal research designs are particularly valuable, as they allow for tracking the long-term academic, emotional, and behavioral consequences of bullying beyond the immediate school environment (Arseneault, 2018). Furthermore, to construct a more well-rounded understanding of school bullying ecosystems, future studies should incorporate the perspectives of bystanders and perpetrators. Understanding their motivations, social roles, and perceptions can help reveal why bullying behaviors persist and how social norms can be shifted (Salmivalli, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012).

There is also a pressing need to examine the experiences of marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ youth, neurodivergent students, and those from minority backgrounds, who often face compounded forms of bullying and exclusion (Kosciw et al., 2015; Rose & Espelage, 2012). The rise of cyberbullying further underscores the importance of exploring digital harassment and its unique psychological effects, particularly given its pervasive and often anonymous nature (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

Lastly, empirical evaluations of school-based anti-bullying interventions—especially within the Indian education system—are necessary to determine what works and why. Contextualized, trauma-informed, and inclusive approaches are essential to building sustainable change in school culture (Olweus & Limber, 2010).

Conclusion

Bullying continues to be a serious and often overlooked issue that affects students emotionally, mentally, and socially. Through this research, it became clear that bullying takes many forms—verbal, physical, and digital—and each can leave lasting damage on a student's confidence and well-being. The findings show that while awareness around bullying is growing, most schools still lack a structured, long-term approach to prevent and respond to it.

Tackling this issue requires more than just awareness campaigns or disciplinary action. It demands collective responsibility from students, teachers, parents, counselors, and school leadership. Each stakeholder plays a role, whether it's creating safe reporting systems, offering mental health support, or building a culture

of empathy and respect. Writing this paper made me realize how important it is to not only identify the problem but to be part of the solution.

Moving forward, schools must adopt more proactive and sustainable strategies. This includes setting up dedicated anti-bullying task forces that meet regularly to assess the school climate, track reports, and recommend changes. Schools can also introduce peer mentoring programs where older students are trained to support younger ones, making it easier for victims to reach out and be heard without fear of judgment.

Another key step is teacher training. Many teachers may not feel equipped to identify the subtle signs of bullying or intervene in a way that de-escalates the situation while supporting both the victim and the aggressor. Regular professional development workshops can help teachers recognize behavioral patterns, learn how to handle sensitive conversations, and build inclusive classroom environments where all students feel seen and valued. Mental health literacy should also be a part of teacher training, so staff can better understand the emotional toll bullying takes and respond with appropriate care.

Incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum is another powerful tool. SEL helps students build empathy, self-awareness, and conflict-resolution skills—traits that can directly reduce bullying and improve peer relationships. When students are taught how to manage emotions and understand others, they're less likely to engage in or tolerate harmful behavior.

Ultimately, real change requires schools to commit to listening to students and acting on their concerns. Policies and procedures must be clear, well-communicated, and consistently enforced. By combining awareness, accountability, and compassion, schools can move closer to creating learning environments where every student feels safe, respected, and supported—not just in theory, but in daily reality.

Appendix

Case Study 1

This is a firsthand account shared by Bhavya, a college student, reflecting on his experiences of bullying during his school years and its lasting emotional and academic consequences:

It began with something small, a water bottle. But it wasn't just a bottle. It had been a gift, something personal, a reminder that I had mattered to someone. When I saw it thrown into the trash, crushed and dirty, it felt like more than just a disrespectful act. It felt like a direct attack not on the object, but on me. I knew who had done it. One of the same guys who always knew how to poke at me, how to test the limits of my patience.

Anger built in me fast enough to drown out the part of me that usually walked away, that usually chose silence over conflict. I walked toward him, fueled by a mix of rage, pain, and disappointment. I just wanted to ask him why he did it. Why did he keep trying to get under my skin. But before I could even fully speak my mind, the situation unraveled.

A circle formed. Students gathered around us, eyes wide, some already smirking as if they'd been waiting for this kind of scene all day. I felt the air change thicker, tense, charged. He said something sarcastic. I fired back. The words grew sharper, more aggressive, until they weren't words anymore. They were shoves. Swings. I barely remember the first hit. Everything became a blur of motion and adrenaline. In that moment, I was fighting not just him, but every time I had been laughed at, pushed aside, talked down to. I was defending myself in the most raw and physical way possible. It felt like the only language anyone around me understood.

When it ended, I was shaking. My fists hurt, my breathing was uneven, my heart was pounding like a drum stuck in the overdrive. People drifted away, already talking about it like it was entertainment. Like I had just performed for them. But what came after staying with me longer than the fight itself. I found myself alone in an empty classroom. I don't even know how I got there. I just remember needing to be somewhere quiet, somewhere no one would see me. And when I sat down, the tears came hard and fast. I didn't cry because I lost. I didn't even cry because I was hurt. I cried because I never wanted it to be a fight. I had just wanted to stand up for myself. I wanted respect. I didn't want fists to do the talking. The weight of it, all the fear, the confusion, the way people looked at me after it hit me like a second wave. I kept thinking: Why did it have to be this way?

That moment alone, surrounded by silence and my own thoughts, was more painful than the fight. It made me realize how deeply bullying had shaped me, how it had cornered me into thinking that violence was the only way to be heard. But it also woke something up inside me. I just changed physically. I changed emotionally. That day marked a turning point. I understood, truly and painfully, that if I didn't start protecting myself emotionally, mentally, not just physically no one else would. From that moment on, I began the slow process of building my voice not through fists or shouting, but through strength of character. I realized standing up for yourself doesn't mean losing control. It means knowing your worth and refusing to let others decide it for you.

Case Study 2

This is a firsthand account shared by Vidya, a college student, reflecting on her experiences of bullying during her school years and its lasting emotional and academic consequences:

"My name is Vidya, and I am currently studying in college. During my school years, I was often teased and mocked for being physically small and underweight. Classmates frequently called me 'sukdi'—a derogatory term implying someone who is too skinny. One incident during a windy PT (Physical Training) class still stands out. A girl called out loudly, 'Vidya, hold on to a pole or you'll fly away!' The others burst into laughter. I stood there in silent embarrassment, feeling humiliated and exposed. That moment made me extremely self-conscious and anxious in group settings.

Another event that deeply affected me occurred during a drawing class. I accidentally spilled water on the painted sheet of Meenakshi, a classmate who was both a top-performing student and a teacher's favorite. She yelled at me in front of everyone: 'Don't think I'll tolerate this negligence. You're taking advantage of my niceness,' and then tore up my own drawing sheet in anger. I was shaking—overcome by fear, guilt, and embarrassment. What shocked me even more was that the other students took her side, accusing me of ruining her work intentionally. I silently returned to my seat, feeling defeated.

The drawing teacher scolded me for the incident, gave me a zero, and never asked for my explanation. After that day, I lost confidence in my abilities. I could never perform well in drawing again, and my academic performance in that subject steadily declined.

Looking back, I realize how powerful these small moments were in shaping my self-esteem. These incidents left emotional wounds that lasted for years. I believe that such experiences in childhood—if not acknowledged or addressed—can significantly affect a young person's confidence and academic motivation. They may seem trivial to others, but for the child experiencing them, they can become defining moments that influence how they see themselves and engage with the world around them."

Case Study 3

This is a first-person account shared by "Abhay," a student, reflecting on how long-term experiences of bullying and systemic neglect in school affected his emotional and academic well-being:

"Hi, I'm Abhay (name changed). I am a student and have always been an introverted and sensitive boy. I was also diagnosed with ADHD, which made me more self-conscious and anxious in social settings. I studied in the same IGCSE school from Grade 3 to Grade 10, but sadly, I don't carry many happy memories of those years.

A particular group of students formed a tight-knit clique and considered themselves 'cool.' They would stand outside the classroom in groups, hooting and mocking me, often calling me names like 'monkey' because of my hyperactive behavior. Their laughter and public humiliation made me feel deeply embarrassed and excluded.

I once tried to speak to my class teacher about the bullying, but he dismissed it, saying he hadn't seen anything himself and that those students behaved very well in class. Later, I was told by others that these boys came from very wealthy families and had made large donations to the school, so the school authorities would not take any action against them.

Once they found out I had complained, the harassment worsened. They started taunting me even during class, while the teacher remained unaware or indifferent. I felt helpless and completely alone. I often cried in silence at home but didn't dare share this with my mother, fearing it would worry her or make things worse.

Over time, the constant stress began affecting my academic performance. I struggled to concentrate, and my grades declined. Instead of understanding, my teachers and mother scolded me for not paying attention in class. Going to school became a daily struggle. I started faking stomach-aches just to avoid going. But missing classes made me fall further behind academically, creating a vicious cycle I couldn't escape. This toxic environment pushed me deeper into my shell. School, which should have been a space of learning and support, became a place of fear and anxiety. I counted the days until I could finally leave and be free from the bullying.

I sincerely hope that no other student will go through the emotional turmoil I faced. Schools must take concrete measures to ensure that students have safe platforms to speak up, seek help, and receive peer and institutional support without fear of retaliation."

Survey Questionnaire for Quantitative data

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Grade / Class
4. Type of School / College
5. Years at Current School / College
6. I find it hard to concentrate in class because of bullying.
7. Do you feel like your culture or background is reflected or respected in your school/college environment?
8. Do you feel safe expressing your opinions in class? Why or why not?
9. What do you do to take care of your mental health during busy school weeks?
10. Bullying has reduced my motivation to study.
11. I avoid going to school or class because of bullying
12. Do you think your school/college provides enough support for students struggling emotionally or academically?
13. Since experiencing bullying, my academic performance has
14. If your performance declined, how much has it changed?
15. I feel supported by my teachers or school/college staff when I face bullying.
16. I have friends who support me when I am bullied.
17. My parents/guardians are aware of the bullying and help me handle it.
18. What emotions did you experience when you were bullied?
19. Describe a specific incident of bullying that affected your academic work.
20. Have you seen someone being bullied in school/college? What was your response?
21. Do you think your school/college has taken action on students being bullied?
22. Any other thoughts or suggestions you'd like to share?

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