



Exploring the influence of bullying on learners' well-being in rural secondary schools: A systematic literature review

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Abstract – Bullying remains a pervasive challenge in educational settings, significantly affecting learners' emotional well-being and academic performance, particularly in rural schools where resources and support systems are limited. This study explores the influence of bullying on learners' well-being in rural secondary schools through a qualitative systematic literature review grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. Relevant literature published between 2015 and 2025 was sourced from databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. The review examines the forms of bullying, contributing factors, and their impact on learners' psychological and academic outcomes. Findings reveal that learners commonly experience physical, verbal, and cyberbullying, with physical bullying being the most visible form. Key contributing factors include socio-economic conditions, family environment, peer influence, and inadequate school policies. Bullying negatively affects learners' self-esteem, concentration, academic performance, and emotional stability, often leading to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. The study highlights the need for comprehensive, context-specific interventions, including whole-school strategies, teacher training, parental involvement, and strengthened reporting mechanisms. Addressing bullying in rural schools requires collaborative efforts from educators, policymakers, and communities to foster safe and supportive learning environments.

Keywords: Academic performance, Bullying, Cyberbullying, Learner well-being, Rural schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

BULLYING is widely recognised as a repeated aggressive behaviour involving an imbalance of power, intended to harm or intimidate others (Olweus & Limber, 2019; Chang, 2021; Mochoge, 2021). It manifests in various forms, including physical aggression, verbal abuse, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. Globally, bullying remains a persistent issue that negatively impacts learners' psychological well-being, emotional health, and academic achievement. Despite the implementation of anti-bullying policies, the prevalence of bullying continues to rise, particularly in under-resourced rural schools. Learners exposed to bullying are at increased risk of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and poor academic outcomes (Ingram et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding the nature, causes, and consequences of bullying in rural contexts is essential for developing effective intervention strategies.

Bullying in schools is a widespread problem affecting the social and academic well-being of learners. Bullying is generally defined as a repeated aggressive behaviour intended to harm, distress, or intimidate another learner, after involving an imbalance of power. Bullying has been defined in different ways by different scholars. First and foremost, add Mochoge (2021), who defines bullying as an intentional act of harm, harassment directed at vulnerable targets, and usually repeated. Bullying includes a wide range of malicious, aggressive behaviour, including physical acts, violence, verbal abuse, ostracism, and gossip spread by either social media or other means of communication, such as the internet. Second, Chang (2021) defines bullying as a repeated, aggressive, and intentional act of offensive or intimidating conduct directed at a person perceived as weaker. Bullying has emerged as a pervasive and significant influence on the psychological well-being, emotional health, and academic performance of learners locally and

globally. Despite the implementation of various anti-bullying initiatives, the occurrence of bullying persists in educational settings, underscoring the necessity for more comprehensive research into its root causes. According to Olweus and Limber (2019), bullying involves persistent aggressive actions directed towards an individual who is unable to protect themselves, with the intention to cause harm or distress. The bullying ramifications are significantly multifaceted and affect not only the victims but also the perpetrator and bystanders. Ingram et al. (2020) highlight that individuals who are bullied are at an increased risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Initially, Stephenson et al. (2024) indicate that the prevalence of bullying escalates significantly as children mature, reaching its highest level during early adolescence. Notable gender differences are also evident, with numerous studies revealing that boys engage in bullying their peers more often than girls, typically targeting other boys. However, observation may partially stem from a limited understanding of bullying, which often emphasises overt aggression while neglecting subtler forms such as rumour spreading and social exclusion. According to Loch et al. (2020), bullying is pervasive and can have detrimental effects on both the victims and perpetrators. Clayton (2023) cites a 2019 survey conducted by the Youth Risk Behaviour, which revealed that 19.5% of students in grades nine through twelve experienced bullying on social media within the year preceding the survey. Additionally, as highlighted by the WHO, UNICEF, and UNESCO (2020), a study by the World Health Organisation conducted in 2013-2014 across 21 countries in Europe and North America found that, on average, 14% of boys and 11% of girls aged 11 were bullied at least twice a month. Bullying represents a significant adverse childhood experience that is prevalent

globally. It adversely affects all individuals involved, including victims, perpetrators, and bystanders who witness such incidents. A 2019 survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that approximately one in five high school students has reported engaging in bullying behaviour on school grounds in recent years. Additionally, over one in six high school students has experienced electronic bullying, which includes harassment via text messages and social media platforms. Bullying is a persistent disciplinary issue within educational settings. According to Tang et al. (2020), a national survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) found that 28% of middle schools, 15% of high schools, and 10% of elementary schools reported incidents of bullying occurring at least twice a week. Furthermore, around 37% of middle schools, followed by 25% of high schools, and 6% of elementary schools experienced cyberbullying at least once a week.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social learning theory

Social Learning Theory, formulated by Bandura in 1997, elucidates how individuals acquire behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. This theory is especially pertinent to the examination of bullying in educational settings, as it underscores how children may eliminate aggressive behaviours by observing and mimicking peers, family members, and media representations. Abdelaziz and Harraz (2021) assert that within the educational environment, bullying may continue when students observe aggressive actions being either rewarded or ignored. Research by Bolden (2024) indicates that children who witness bullying without facing repercussions are more inclined to imitate such conduct. Furthermore, Olweus and Limber (2019) highlight that social reinforcement, including peer approval, can strengthen bullying behaviour, leading to increases in both frequency and severity. Zhai et al. (2023) emphasise that Observational Learning theory is a fundamental aspect of SLT, in which children acquire knowledge and behaviours by observing their role models, including older peers and teachers. Hammarén (2022) notes that when bullying behaviours are normalised in school settings, they become ingrained in the institution's social culture. For example, Nhambura (2020) notes that students who regularly witness their peers engaging in verbal or physical aggression may come to view these actions as acceptable methods of resolving conflicts.

A study by Bandura (1986) demonstrates that, according to SLT, behaviours are reinforced when they lead to favourable outcomes. Mahaye (2024) notes that, in the context of bullying, reinforcement can manifest in various forms, including enhanced social status, compliance induced by peer fear, and the absence of disciplinary measures. Research by Salmivalli et al. (2011) emphasises the significant role of bystanders in either reinforcing or preventing bullying behaviour. In contrast, Saliu (2024) asserts that schools implementing anti-bullying interventions grounded in SLT principles can effectively diminish the prevalence of bullying by promoting positive social interactions. The social learning theory serves as a fundamental framework for developing effective strategies to address bullying. Fauzan and Sulaeman (2024) suggest that approaches such as positive role modelling, fostering empathy, and implementing immediate consequences for bullying behaviour can transform the school environment. For instance, Gaffney et al. (2021) demonstrate that peer-led anti-bullying initiatives have effectively reduced bullying by using prominent learners as role models. Additionally, Gutzwiller Helfenfinger (2021) asserts that training teachers to identify and respond to bullying can help mitigate the reinforcement of negative behaviours.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Typical forms of bullying experienced by learners in educational institutions

Physical bullying

When considering the concept of bullying, one may first envision the physical and verbal aggression that school-aged children often face from their classmates. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that bullying manifests in various forms. Vinney (2021) indicates that bullying can be categorized into several types, some of which are more apparent than others. These categories include verbal bullying, physical bullying, cyberbullying, sexual bullying, and prejudiced bullying. According to Vinney (2021), physical bullying is the most apparent form of bullying and is often the first type that comes to mind when individuals consider aggressive behaviour. Vinney (2021) describes physical bullying as encompassing any form of assault on an individual's body, which may include actions such as biting, kicking, tripping, or pushing. Additionally, it can involve an inappropriate gesture or the theft or destruction of a victim's possession. Vinney (2021) further asserts that physical bullying is typically carried out by individuals or groups who possess greater size or strength than those targets. Martin (2023) highlighted that physical contact with another person. This contact may occur directly, such as through hand-to-hand interaction, or indirectly, through actions like throwing objects, tripping, or acting on others to inflict physical harm on the victim.

Verbal bullying

Vinney (2021) clarifies that verbal bullying encompasses the use of spoken or written language to demean or intimidate an individual. This behaviour can manifest as name-calling, teasing, and even threats. Vinney (2021) further notes that verbal bullying is often challenging to identify, as it frequently occurs in the absence of authority figures. Additionally, a perpetrator may disguise their actions as playful banter among friends, making it difficult for the victim to substantiate their claims. Consequently, this type of bullying can lead to prolonged periods of stress and anxiety. According to Siddique et al. (2024), verbal bullying is aggressive behaviour characterised by a power imbalance and carried out through spoken or written communication. This can include name-calling, insults, taunting, harassment, and sexual or discriminatory remarks, whether in person or through written channels. Despite being perceived as less severe than physical violence, Myklestad and Straiton (2021) found that verbal bullying can result in significant and enduring consequences, such as an increased likelihood of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and substance abuse. Conversely, Mutunga (2023) defines verbal bullying as the use of language to inflict distress on another individual, including profanities, hurtful language, negative comments about a person's appearance, derogatory terms, or teasing.

Cyberbully

According to Casas et al. (2020), cyberbullying is characterised as an aggressive behaviour that manifests through digital media, exhibiting a power imbalance among individuals. This form of bullying occurs on various devices, including smartphones, computers, and tablets, and can take the shape of text messages, direct messages, emails, or interactions on social media platforms. Casas et al. (2020) note that cyberbullying is a relatively recent phenomenon, while traditional bullying has been a longstanding issue; cyberbullying emerged with the advent of the internet. Amalia et al. (2024) clarify that cyberbullying involves harassment conducted through electronic devices. Malik and Dadure (2024) further indicate that this form of bullying can occur via text message, online forums, and includes the dissemination of harmful content, such as messages, images, and the sharing of personal information that leads to humiliation.

Sexual bullying

Odacı and Türkkkan (2023) define sexual bullying as a form of harassment that can manifest through physical, verbal, or online means, characterised by unwanted sexual actions or behaviours. This may encompass non-consensual touching, sexual jokes, inappropriate gestures, and sexting. Additionally, Raj et al. (2020) reference a 2019 national survey revealing that 81% of females and 43% of males reported experiencing sexual harassment. Odacı and Türkkkan (2023)

emphasise that sexual bullying can lead to a range of negative short- and long-term effects, including symptoms of depression and anxiety, social withdrawal, and substance abuse.

Leemis (2019) elaborates that sexual bullying can occur both online and in-person, involving sexual remarks or actions such as inappropriate jokes, name-calling, crude gestures, the dissemination of sexual images or videos, and non-consensual touching. Smith et al. (2022) highlight the alarming prevalence of sexual bullying and harassment, indicating that 81% of females and 43% of males have encountered sexual assault at some point in their lives. Furthermore, Brewu (2022) notes the rising trend of sexting, defined as the exchange of sexually explicit messages or images via electronic devices among adolescents aged 13 to 18, with 15% reporting that they have sent sexts and 279 indicating they have received them. The incidence of this behaviour appears to increase with age. Henry et al. (2020) warn that when sexts are shared without consent, particularly private nude images or videos circulated among peers, it can escalate into sexual bullying and potentially lead to sexual assault.

Prejudicial bullying

Sapouna et al. (2023) identify a specific type of bullying known as prejudicial bullying, which encompasses both online and face-to-face harassment directed at individuals based on their race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. Scott (2021) indicates that this form of bullying stems from a belief that certain individuals are less deserving of respect than others. Although prejudicial bullying has received less attention in researching compared to other forms, Kahle's (2020) findings suggest that individual from ethnic and sexual minority groups are at higher risk of being targeted than their counterparts. Similarly, Daniel (2020), defines prejudicial bullying as any instance of harassment motivated by an individual religion or sexual orientation, emphasising that such behaviour is rooted in the bully's preconceived biases. This may mark the initial occurrence of prejudicial bullying.

Influence of bullying on the academic performance and emotional well-being of learners

Bullying has a profound effect on students' academic performance and emotional health. Those who experience bullying face not only the emotional and psychological distress that comes with it, but also a range of emotional consequences that can manifest in different ways. Initially, Esquivel et al. (2023) highlight that heightened anxiety and stress are significant consequences of bullying that adversely affect students' academic performance and emotional well-being. Children and adolescents who endure bullying frequently experience elevated levels of anxiety and stress, leading to a persistent fear of further victimisation. This anxiety can create an unsafe environment in the school, making it difficult for students to concentrate during lessons, complete homework, or engage in group discussions. Shean and Mander (2020) emphasise that when students are preoccupied with concerns about their emotional safety, their cognitive functions, such as memory, attention, and problem-solving abilities, are compromised. Furthermore, Ziyani and Kadri (2024) identify low self-esteem as another detrimental effect of bullying. Continuous bullying can significantly undermine a student's self-worth and confidence, leading them to question their capabilities. Low self-esteem often leads to a lack of motivation to excel academically, as students may come to see themselves as incapable of succeeding. This mindset can ultimately result in disengagement from academic responsibilities and poor performance on tests and projects. Lastly, regarding the emotional impact of bullying, Hameurlaine and Gasmi (2023) characterise depression and withdrawal as significant consequences. Victims of bullying may begin to distance themselves from school interactions, isolate from peers, and avoid participation in school activities. Barker and Mostert (2024) underscore that depression can drain energy and motivation, making it increasingly difficult for students to meet academic demands. As students become more withdrawn, their ability to connect with teachers and classmates diminishes, further obstructing their academic progress. One of the less frequently addressed yet

equally important consequences of bullying is its effect on academic performance. The detrimental influence of bullying on educational outcomes is substantial. Victims of bullying frequently suffer from lower grades, reduced test scores, and diminished academic accomplishment. The factors contributing to this decline are complex, encompassing both psychological repercussions of bullying and the practical difficulties arising from absenteeism and disengagement.

Ziyani and Kadri (2025) highlight that bullying can result in lower test scores and grades, suggesting that victims of bullying often perform worse on standardised assessments and report cards compared to their non-bullied counterparts. The stress and anxiety associated with bullying can hinder cognitive functions essential for academic achievements, such as memory retention and problem-solving abilities. Consequently, affected students may struggle to keep pace with lessons, perform inadequately on examinations, and experience a notable decline in their overall academic performance.

Furthermore, Block (2014) notes that bullying leads to difficulties in concentration during class. Concentration is vital for effective learning; however, students who are bullied frequently find it challenging to focus in the classroom. The organisation elaborates that the mental strain resulting from bullying can hinder students' ability to pay attention to instructors, absorb new information, and engage with educational content. In some instances, a bullied student may even exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress, further obstructing their capacity to concentrate and retain knowledge. Lastly, Huang (2022) identifies another consequence of bullying on academic performance as reduced participation in class activities. Victims of bullying often feel alienated from their peers and may be reluctant to engage in class discussion and activities due to the fear of drawing attention to themselves. This hesitance to participate can restrict their opportunities for collaborative learning and class interactions. Students who do not actively engage in the learning process miss critical opportunities to enhance their understanding of the subject matter.

Strategies to mitigate bullying

Although there is no universal solution to combat bullying, school staff and parents can implement various strategies to enhance safety and mitigate bullying in educational environments. The initial step is accurately identifying instances of bullying and implementing proactive measures to address them. Effectively reducing bullying in schools requires a comprehensive approach that includes immediate interventions, appropriate consequences, and support following significant incidents.

According to Espelage and Swearer (2023), both youth and adults have significant responsibilities in the fight against bullying. Their involvement is crucial for fostering safe communities where individuals can flourish. Witnesses to bullying can contribute positively by becoming bystanders who intervene. There are several strategies that parents can implement to combat bullying. Firstly, school staff and other responsible adults can help children understand bullying and how to respond to it, and encourage them to communicate with a trusted adult if they experience or observe it, thereby maintaining open lines of communication. Research conducted by the WHO (2024) reveals that children often seek guidance from their parents and caregivers when making decisions. The organisation suggests that dedicating just 15 minutes a day to conversation can reassure children that they can approach their parents with any issues they may face. Furthermore, as highlighted by Gerli (2019), the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 is instrumental in tackling bullying in South African educational institutions by establishing a legislative framework for students.

The Act addresses bullying in several key ways. Chabalala and Naidoo (2021) note that the South African Schools Act establishes a framework for school governance, providing explicit guidelines for school management and delineating the roles of governing bodies, principals, and educators. A safe and supportive environment implicitly addresses bullying.

Secondly, the significant provision of SASA is the mandate for each

school to create a Code of Conduct for learners. According to Zondo (2022), this Code of Conduct is intended to encourage positive behaviour, respect for others' rights, and the maintenance of discipline in the school setting. As stipulated in section B of the Act, the Code of Conduct should aim to cultivate a disciplined and purposeful educational environment dedicated to enhancing the quality of the learning experience. Thirdly, SASA offers guidelines for disciplinary actions that a school may take in response to various forms of misconduct, including bullying. The South African Schools Act of 1996 permits the suspension and expulsion of students involved in severe bullying incidents, provided that due process is observed. This provision ensures that the rights of all students, including those accused of bullying, are upheld. Finally, while SASA does not explicitly require the implementation of Anti-bullying programs, it does not provide a framework that allows schools to establish such initiatives. Osborne (2024) notes that schools are encouraged to adopt a comprehensive approach to bullying prevention, which encompasses educational programs, counselling services, and peer support initiatives. These programs aim to inform students about the repercussions of bullying, foster empathy and respect, and offer support to both victims and offenders.

According to Nank and Murawska (2024), the adage "kids will be kids" implies that bullying is a typical aspect of childhood development. However, bullying has escalated into a perilous epidemic that many children find inescapable. The involvement of parents, political entities, and the media complicates the ability of teachers and schools to address and mitigate bullying effectively. Nudin et al. (2024) suggest several strategies that educators and parents can implement to foster a safe and nurturing environment conducive to learning and personal growth. These strategies include addressing behavioural issues without labelling students as "bullies or victims", promoting collaboration between teachers and parents at the national level, and approaching learners' behaviour with a non-judgmental attitude. Paljakka (2024) further emphasises the importance of understanding the context of incidents before labelling them as bullying. It is crucial to examine the specific behaviours involved so they can be appropriately addressed later, ideally with the student exhibiting bullying behaviour in the discussion. Kaliampos et al. (2022) stress that bullies must recognise the negative impact their actions have on their peers. If bullying persists, it becomes necessary to involve the parents or guardians of the offending student.

Stives et al. (2021) assert that engaging parents is one of the most effective ways to prevent bullying, as many individuals play a role in a child's life. When the stakeholders collaborate, they can significantly influence a child's experience. However, it can be challenging for teachers to communicate effectively with parents about their child's behaviour, underscoring the need for educators to build strong relationships with families. Seghier (2024) states that informing parents about their children's academic performance, social interactions, and school behaviour is crucial for fostering collaboration between educators and families. This partnership can lead to a unified strategy to promote more constructive and appropriate behaviour. Furthermore, Dwiningrum and Wahab (2020) emphasise that bullying can be mitigated by identifying and monitoring areas where it frequently occurs. Staff and teachers play a vital role in prevention efforts by being aware of common bullying locations and recognising its associated signs. When there are clear and accessible methods for reporting bullying, students are more likely to feel secure in coming forward if they witness or experience such behaviour.

Lori (2023) discusses various strategies aimed at preventing bullying, collectively referred to as the three R's of bullying prevention. According to Lori (2023), these three R's represent a comprehensive approach to addressing bullying. The first R stands for Recognise, emphasising the necessity of identifying signs of mental, physical, or emotional distress in children who may be reluctant to discuss bullying with their parents or teachers. It is essential to find ways to initiate

conversations and gradually approach the subject. The second R is Refuse, which highlights the importance of not allowing bullies to gain confidence through inaction. Educators and parents should encourage children to understand that it is both safe and crucial to confront bullies who target them or their peers. The final R stands for Report, underscoring the importance of reporting bullying incidents to the appropriate authorities. Children should be guided to follow a logical reporting hierarchy when addressing a bullying situation.

V. METHODS

Research paradigm

The research will utilise interpretivism as its guiding paradigm. According to Acharya (2025), interpretivism is a research framework that aims to comprehend and interpret social phenomena and meanings through a subjective lens. This approach highlights the individual experiences, beliefs, and values, as well as the significance of context in influencing those interpretations. It seeks to examine social phenomena to reveal the underlying realities present within society (Fuhse, 2022). Interpretivism is an appropriate framework for this study, as it enables researchers to investigate the impact of bullying on learners' well-being in rural secondary schools. Employing interpretivism given that bullying is a multifaceted experience shaped by social constructs that differ amongst individuals, cultures, and contexts. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings, emotions, and perceptions linked to bullying, rather than merely quantifying its occurrence. Interpretivism is well-suited to bullying research because it emphasises understanding the lived experiences, meanings, and social contexts associated with bullying, rather than solely focusing on its frequency.

Research approach

This research will adopt a qualitative methodology to collect data focused on the impact of bullying on learners' well-being in rural educational settings. According to Crossman (2020), qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that involves collecting and analysing non-quantitative data. This methodology seeks to extract insights from such data, thereby deepening understanding of social dynamics through the study of specific populations or geographical areas. Employing a qualitative research approach in this study enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of human experiences, behaviours, and interpretations by exploring them in detail. Tracy (2024) describes qualitative research as an investigative method that emphasises understanding the significance of textual and visual data. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for examining bullying in an educational setting because of its intricate nature, which encompasses emotions, behaviour, and perceptions. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of an individual's lived experiences, which cannot be adequately captured by numerical data alone. It enables researchers to investigate unforeseen themes that emerge during data collection, ultimately providing a more nuanced understanding of bullying dynamics.

Research design

Roller and Lavrakas (2015) characterise research design as the comprehensive framework that directs the research process. It is an essential element of research, serving as a blueprint for how a study will be conducted for data collection and analysis. This investigation will adopt a desktop research design, as described by Quan et al. (2023), which involves acquiring information and insights through the analysis and synthesis of pre-existing data and sources rather than through data collection methods such as fieldwork or surveys. Li and Yao (2024) emphasise that desktop research is generally more economical than primary research, as it uses existing data and sources, thereby reducing the need for costly data collection.

Sampling

Ahmad et al. (2023) indicate that sampling involves selecting a small fraction of a large population that represents the population's overall characteristics, thereby ensuring that the findings are generalisable and relevant. In this study, the researcher will examine seven journal articles

on the various forms of bullying, their effects, and strategies to combat them.

Table 1: Reviewed articles

Author and year	Title
1. Dimitrios et al. (2023)	School bullying in high school students: prevention and coping strategies.
2. Suardimanand Nurlia (2020)	The phenomenon of bullying among junior high school students nowadays.
3. Fauzia (2012)	Bullying at school: What are the Motives and Causes?
4. Saldiraner and Gizir (2021)	School Bullying from the Perspectives of Middle School Principals.
5. Cervantes (2025).	Bullying prevention in k8 schools: Integrating students' engagement and anti-bullying curriculum.
6. Armitage (2021).	Bullying in children: impact on child health.
7. Ponce et al. (2021)	Bullying and self-concept among high school students

Data collection

As noted by Bhandari (2023), data collection involves systematically gathering information from various sources to facilitate research and provide the researcher with valuable insights into the subject under investigation, and exploring the effects of bullying on learners' well-being in rural schools. This study is literature-based, and as previously mentioned, the researcher will employ a desktop research design. This approach enables the researcher to gather data by using existing literature sources.

Data analysis

Crabtree and Nehme (2023) describe data analysis as the process of examining and transforming raw data into useful information, which helps researchers interpret data from various sources. Creswell and Creswell (2014) point out that data analysis is the process of extracting insight and meaning from data. This involves employing a range of techniques and tools to summarise, organise, and analyse data to answer research questions or test hypotheses as indicated by Etikan et al. (2016). The information collected from literature and academic articles is analysed and interpreted, which is vital for researchers to select the most effective tools to achieve successful study outcomes. Mayring (2021) highlights that content analysis is a method for evaluating the content of various sources and datasets, aiding researchers in categorising experiences, phenomena, and events, thereby making data analysis and interpretation more manageable. Neuendorf (2017) further explains that content analysis design includes analysing text, images, and video to detect patterns and themes. Thus, content analysis will be particularly beneficial in this study as the researcher is required to interpret and narrow down the experiences associated with exploring the effects of bullying on learners' well-being in rural schools.

Strategies to ensure validity and reliability.

To maintain the validity and reliability of this study, the researcher must implement the necessary strategies and procedures. There are instances when the researcher may inadvertently introduce bias in their analysis and interpretation of data reflecting individual experiences. Desktop research, as noted by Snyder (2019), is secondary literature that relies on previously validated and analysed sources, thereby ensuring data reliability. Given the study's reliance on published materials, the researcher will ensure the accuracy of this investigation by cross-referencing all utilised articles.

Ethical consideration.

As noted by Gajjar (2013), ethics are defined as the procedures, methods, or perspectives an individual can adopt to analyze problems and make decisions about actions. Gajjar (2013) further indicates that these ethical guidelines are essential for researchers to cultivate public trust. In this research, the investigator applied for ethical clearance and received approval from the University of the Free State Committee, which assigned Ethical Clearance number UFS-HSD2025/0940. This ethical clearance is indicated in the project's reference, confirming that all ethical procedures were followed to protect the rights of all

stakeholders involved in the study. Furthermore, the researcher implemented in-text referencing and compiled a reference list to credit all authors of the literature and articles utilised in this research.

VI. RESULTS

Typical forms of bullying that learners experience in rural school settings.

According to Sarries et al. (2023), bullying is a common challenge in high school, correlated with numerous harmful outcomes for victims and offenders. Sarries et al. (2023) further reference a study by Bradshaw (2015), which indicates that bullying can occur in various forms, including physical, verbal, cyberbullying, and psychological.

Physical bullying

Sarries et al. (2023) state that physical bullying involves actions such as hitting, pushing, or tripping. This form of bullying can be particularly harmful, as it may lead to physical injuries and long-lasting health complications. Sardiman and Nurlia (2020) explain that physical bullying often occurs between seniors and juniors, characterised by physical contact through hitting or fighting. They suggest that teachers can recognise physical bullying when the victims' parents file complaints with the school. Cervantes (2025) defines physical bullying as the act of causing harm to an individual's body or possessions through actions like kicking, hitting, biting, punching, shoving, hair pulling, or damaging belongings. These actions are usually repetitive and can escalate in severity over time. Victims of physical bullying may show signs of physical injuries, report unexplained pains, or engage in avoidance behaviours, such as skipping school. Ponce et al. (2021) assert that physical bullying is commonly known as schoolyard bullying. This type of bullying, akin to social and verbal bullying, usually features a power imbalance between the bully and the victims. According to the findings of Ponce et al (2021), physical bullying includes aggressive behaviours like kicking, pushing, choking, and violently victimising individuals. This type of bullying is the most conspicuous and, therefore, the most easily recognised. It makes up less than one-third of bullying occurrences and involves actions where the offender may punch, hit, or steal money from the victim.

Verbal bullying

Sarries et al. (2023) highlight that verbal bullying consists of using language to harm others, which includes name-calling, teasing, or making threats. This type of bullying can be particularly harmful, as it may result in feelings of anxiety and depression. Sardiman and Nurlia (2023) explain that verbal bullying involves learners ridiculing their peers with inappropriate names. This occurs among classmates and can also happen between juniors and seniors. Additionally, they mention that some learners deliberately exclude their friends from social interactions by forming their own groups. As noted by Cervantes (2025), verbal bullying is characterised by repeated, uncountable threats, name-calling, insults, teasing, or offensive comments. These types of bullying have internal effects, leading to lower self-esteem, increased stress, and long-term harm.

According to Ponce et al. (2021), verbal bullying transpires when an individual employs language to dominate another person. Ponce also emphasises that, despite the absence of physical consequences, the bullying can be severe. Additionally, this type of bullying may involve comments related to weight, appearance, and can include racist, sexual, or homophobic insults. Ponce et al. (2021) contended that verbal bullying manifests as name-calling, teasing, and verbal threats. While the immediate impacts of physical bullying may appear more often subtle, they gradually erode an individual's self-image and self-esteem over extended periods. Ponce et al. (2021) indicate that verbal bullying can lead to physical repercussions, even if the aggressor does not physically assault the victim. Ultimately, it can be difficult for educators, counsellors, and other school officials to detect verbal abuse, given the lack of physical evidence.

Cyberbullying

Sarries et al. (2023) suggest that cyberbullying is a variant of bullying

that occurs in online environments or through digital devices, such as smartphones and computers. This digital form of bullying includes sending damaging messages, spreading rumours, or sharing embarrassing images or videos online. According to Nixon (2014), cyberbullying has become increasingly prevalent among youth, with research showing that up to 34% teenagers have experienced it. Yudianto et al. (2024) define cyberbullying as a form of bullying that uses social media, noting that it occurs when learners create social media posts with the intent to insult other learners. It is characterised by Cervantes (2025). Cyberbullying is a repetitive act conducted through electronic means to inflict psychological harm, which may involve sending harmful or threatening messages, sharing inappropriate or misleading content, or engaging in online harassment. Digital communication is often anonymous, widely accessible 24/7; thus, cyberbullying can be relentless and hard to escape. Ponce et al. (2021) highlight that cyberbullying is also known as social cruelty or electronic bullying in the online environment. This form of bullying gained prominence with the introduction of electronic devices such as cell phones, computers, and social media sites, which enable the dissemination of hurtful texts and emails, as well as the sharing of embarrassing images of victims. Based on the study by Bernad and Li (2005), Ponce defines cyberbullying as the intentional act of online digital intimidation, embarrassment, or harassment, including name-calling, threats, spreading rumours, sharing another person's private information, and social accusations. Additionally, Ponce et al. (2005) indicate that the form of research conducted by Nocentini et al. (2010) classified cyberbullying into four primary categories: visually written/verbal behaviour, visual behaviour, and exclusion.

Factors contributing to bullying within rural school premises.

A multitude of factors play a substantial role in the occurrence of bullying in rural school locations. According to Ezpelage and Swearer (2010), individual factors, such as a history of aggressive behaviour, low self-esteem, and poor social skills, contribute to bullying. They also highlight peer factors, which include social reactions, the desire for power and status, and exposure to violence or aggression. Furthermore, school-related factors involve inadequate supervision, a competitive and aggressive school culture, and a lack of effective policies to tackle bullying, resulting in its uncontrollable nature. Some further assert that the research conducted by Olweus and Limber (2019) highlights that family dynamics, including neglect or abuse by parents, family discord, and lack of positive parental role models, play a significant role in the prevalence of bullying.

Secondly, Fauzia (2021) highlighted several factors that incite bullying on school grounds, notably the desire for dominance. He indicated that bullying is associated with an unequal distribution of power, which leaves the victim in a vulnerable position, unable to counter the negative behaviour directed at them effectively. Moreover, bullies frequently assert control over their peers, resembling individuals with substantial authority. In this regard, adolescents who engage in bullying often display an air of superiority, which they use as a cover to rationalise the humiliation of others, thereby reinforcing their own elevated status. Fauzia (2021) also noted that how teachers respond plays a crucial role in the prevalence of bullying. The results of the research indicate that teachers who lack assertiveness and label learners as bullies inadvertently encourage these children to persist in their bullying behaviour without being recognised by the teacher. A teacher's failure to assert themselves can significantly impact children's delinquent behaviour in school. Additionally, labelling a person as 'naughty' is inappropriate, which can lead to reluctance to change. The frequent neglect of bullying incidents by schools allows the perpetrator to gain confidence in their ability to intimidate other learners. Furthermore, learners who have been stigmatized with a negative label at school are likely to continue being viewed in that light. In the third place, Saldiraner and Gizir (2021) indicate that the principal factors related to bullying in schools were examined within five categories: family factors, personal factors, and environmental factors. All

principals agreed that family is the most influential factor in whether learners display or experience bullying behaviours. Their opinions in this respect were categorised into punctual attitudes and the family's socio-economic status. They highlighted that if parents are careless, insensitive, or neglectful towards their children, or if they resort to violence and abuse, the children may exhibit or be exposed to bullying behaviour in schools. They also noted that oppressive attitudes and punitive behaviours by parents can lead learners to exhibit similar behaviours. When discussing personal factors, Saldiraner and Gizir (2021) mention that certain characteristics of the adolescent period, personal traits, academic failures, physical characteristics, and past experiences with bullying are significant factors that facilitate bullying in schools. Saldiraner and Gizir (2021) stated that during adolescence, learners feel the need to validate themselves to others, wish to showcase their abilities, and believe they can act as they please, which may lead some to engage in bullying.

In addition, Saldiraner and Gizir (2021) indicate that the school environment is a crucial factor in bullying. He pointed out that inaccuracies in educational policies are recognised as a school-related factor contributing to bullying in educational settings. Frequently, the ongoing changes in educational programs, the prioritisation of academic success, and the moral education are identified as inaccuracies in educational policy. This ultimately results in an inability to effectively impart moral values to learners, thereby allowing bullying behaviour to thrive. Saldiraner and Gizir (2021) also discussed teacher-related factors, noting that teachers' negative attitudes and behaviours towards learners, as well as their neglect of learners' work, are significant contributors to bullying in schools. He highlighted that teachers often do not demonstrate respect or interest in the needs of their learners and fail to provide necessary pedagogical and social support, which are associated with bullying in educational contexts. He indicates that teachers may be perceived as negative role models for learners by exhibiting authoritarian attitudes, aggressive behaviour, excessive control, and disregard for learners' needs, leading to a sense of alienation that can prompt learners to engage in aggressive behaviour and bullying.

Lastly, as noted by Sarkiah (2023), drawing on Zaniyah et al.'s (2017) study, bullying can be attributed to both external and internal factors, including the family environment. Sarkiah (2023) indicated that the family environment is the first social context for children, greatly influencing their growth and development. Children may learn bullying behaviour by observing conflicts between parents, which they may then enact with their peers. Additionally, the school environment serves as another external factor; schools often disregard the existence of bullying, considering it a typical behaviour among children. Consequent children who engage in bullying receive reinforcement for their actions. Sarkiah also noted that peers are a significant external factor in bullying behaviour due to their strong emotional connections. In this context, some children interacting in schools and with peers may instigate bullying behaviour. Some children bully others to demonstrate their belonging to a specific group, even if they themselves feel uncomfortable with such action.

Strategies to combat bullying

In the view of Sarries et al. (2023), numerous interventions have emerged in recent years to combat and manage school bullying, including whole-school strategies, targeted interventions, and peer support. Bradshaw (2015) explains that whole-school strategies involve a blend of classroom instruction, teacher training, and policy adjustments to address bullying behaviour. They also mentioned that peer support programs train learners to become allies for victims and to promote positive social norms. The goal of this program is to mitigate bullying behaviour by shifting social norms and fostering positive relationships among learners. Furthermore, as Sarries et al. (2023) noted, research by Espelege and Swearer (2010) indicates that targeted interventions focus on identifying and supporting learners at high risk of bullying or victimisation. These interventions may encompass

individual counselling, social skills training, or mentoring initiatives.

Fauzia (2021) outlines an alternative strategy for managing bullying in schools that consists of several critical components: First, it is vital to cultivate awareness and understanding of bullying and its effects among all stakeholders in the school environment, including learners, teachers, administrators, school personnel, and parents. At this juncture, it is important to engage in socialisation efforts regarding anti-bullying programs to ensure that all parties comprehend what bullying entails and its implications. Next, a system or mechanism must be established to prevent and address bullying incidents in schools. This phase requires the development of all children, thereby reducing bullying prevalence and creating a framework to support bullying victims in each school.

This framework should allow children who have experienced bullying to report incidents without fear of stigma, and then advocate for governmental attention, particularly from the education officer, to the issue of bullying in schools, urging efforts to enhance officials' capacity to address this concern. Strategic actions that should be undertaken include integrating bullying topics into teacher training programs and establishing anti-bullying initiatives in every school. In some cases, bullying may involve legal considerations, making the involvement of law enforcement in anti-bullying efforts particularly beneficial.

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that learners in rural high schools encounter standard forms of bullying, which include verbal, physical, and cyberbullying. Physical bullying is recognised as the most frequently experienced type. The third form of bullying typically results in physical injuries and is not associated with unexplained pain. Findings suggest that physical bullying is commonly known as schoolyard bullying and is frequently unreported. Another more common form is cyberbullying, which is classified as a type of bullying that occurs on online platforms through digital devices. This digital bullying includes the dissemination of rumours or the sharing of embarrassing images or videos online without the individual's consent. The study indicates that cyberbullying has become increasingly prevalent among youth, with research showing that up to 35% of teenagers have experienced it.

A variety of factors play a significant role in the occurrence of bullying in rural schools. Findings indicate that individual factors contribute to bullying, including a history of aggressive behaviour, low self-esteem, and poor social skills. Additionally, peer factor also plays a major role as a contributor to bullying, which encompasses social relations, status, and the desire for power. Bullying has also been linked to an unequal distribution of power, leaving victims in a vulnerable position, unable to counter the negative behaviour directed at them effectively. The study highlights that the school environment is a crucial factor in bullying. Inaccuracies in educational policies are recognized as a school-related factor contributing to bullying in educational settings. Lastly, the study indicates that bullying can be attributed to both external and internal factors, with external factors including the family environment.

A range of interventions has emerged in recent years to combat and manage school bullying, particularly through whole-school strategies. Findings suggest that a whole-school strategy to address bullying involves a blend of classroom instruction, teacher training, and modified policy aimed at tackling bullying behaviour. Additionally, the study indicates that another alternative strategy for managing bullying in schools comprises several key components, including the crucial awareness and understanding of bullying and its effects among all stakeholders within the school environment, including learners, teachers, and parents. This study explores the influence of bullying on the emotional health and academic success of learners in rural high schools. This study utilised a desktop method to collect data. Bullying influences many learners in schools, compromising their health and academic performance. Identifying typical forms of bullying,

understanding its root causes, and implementing strategies to mitigate it is of utmost importance. The analysis has revealed that its complications are more than the research initially anticipated. Due to the limited body of literature, this study found that several sources have been published over the last five years. As circumstances in educational institutions shift daily, the relevance of outdated literature undermines the study's credibility. Given that this study employed peer-reviewed literature that primarily investigates the effects of bullying on emotional well-being and academic performance in rural high schools, it raises questions about the relevance of these sources in today's rural high school environment.

Data found on the internet or in publications may not accurately reflect current trends, particularly as bullying behaviours evolve alongside new technologies. Although some aspects of rural life have been digitalised, there is a lack of research on cyberbullying in these areas. Research in urban settings shows a high incidence of cyberbullying, but these findings do not necessarily translate to rural environments. Consequently, there is a pressing need for further and updated studies on cyberbullying in rural high schools.

The challenges are compounded by the fact that desktop research does not involve collecting first-hand data from actual victims or witnesses of bullying, which limits the ability to gather personal experiences or well-articulated perspectives. Moreover, most studies and reports on bullying tend to focus on urban or well-resourced schools, leaving rural contexts inadequately researched. Consequently, the existing literature may generalize findings from urban schools, making it difficult to capture the unique challenges faced in rural areas, such as poverty, limited resources, and cultural dynamics. Investigation on bullying, particularly within rural high schools across South Africa, is restricted and sometimes outdated, as many government documents and academic studies may not adequately reflect modern trends, including the notable rise in cyberbullying in recent years.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Grounded in an understanding of bullying in rural high schools and its potential limitations, various recommendations can be articulated to cultivate a safer, more supportive educational setting. Firstly, the implementation of customised awareness and educational initiatives is vital. These initiatives should be specifically tailored to the rural context, addressing local cultural norms and engaging not only learners but also parents, educators, and community leaders. The educational content should aim to clearly define bullying, explore its various forms, including cyberbullying, which can be notably prevalent even in rural areas, and its negative effects on mental health and academic performance. Secondly, it is essential to provide thorough training for teachers and staff. Educators often serve as the first line of defense against bullying. This training should equip them with the skills to identify signs of bullying, intervene effectively, support victims, and understand reporting protocols. Additionally, it should cultivate a school environment where bullying is not tolerated and where staff members feel empowered to act.

Thirdly, it is vital to establish a clear, accessible reporting mechanism. Learners must have a confidential and safe way to report bullying without fear of retaliation. This could include anonymous suggestion boxes, online reporting forms, or a trusted adult designated for open communication of learners. The school must ensure that all reports are treated seriously and acted upon swiftly. Fourthly, it is necessary to strengthen support systems for victims and perpetrators. This involves providing access to counselling services, peer support groups, and mental health resources. Given the limited resources in rural areas, schools may explore partnerships with regional mental health services or utilise telehealth options to provide professional support.

Fifthly, fostering parental and community involvement is of utmost importance. Engaging parents in anti-bullying initiatives through workshops, informational sessions, and collaborative problem-solving can create a coercive front against bullying. Moreover, community

leaders and local organisations can significantly promote positive social behaviours and support school initiatives. Finally, it is fundamental to develop and consistently enforce clear anti-bullying policies tailored to the school context. These policies should clearly outline the consequences of bullying behaviour, emphasise restorative justice practices where applicable, and be regularly reviewed and communicated to all stakeholders. Additionally, integrating social-emotional learning into the curriculum can proactively cultivate empathy, resilience, and conflict-resolution skills among learners, thereby reducing the likelihood of bullying behaviour.

IX. CONCLUSION

The insight derived from pre-reviewed literature demonstrates that bullying remains a significant issue, manifesting in various forms, including physical, verbal, and increasingly cyberbullying.

Firstly, the research indicates that learners in rural environments often experience greater vulnerability due to limited resources, inadequate supervision, and restricted access to professional psychological support. These factors can have a considerable impact on learners' academic performance by diminishing concentration, lowering motivation, and contributing to high rates of absenteeism and school dropout. Furthermore, the emotional consequences are substantial, with victims frequently developing anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of social isolation, which further hinder their academic achievement. The lack of effective anti-bullying initiatives in rural schools worsens. These challenges are practically leaving many learners without proper protection or support.

Moreover, the investigation reveals the importance of adopting holistic strategies to tackle bullying, including creating nurturing school environments, implementing rigorous anti-bullying measures, and engaging parents, educators, and community stakeholders. Preventative education, peer support frameworks, and augmented mental health resources can substantially alleviate the effects of bullying. In summary, tackling bullying in rural high schools necessitates a collaborative effort from educators, policymakers, parents, and the learners themselves. By increasing awareness, implementing targeted interventions, and promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect, schools can establish safer learning environments that empower learners to achieve their full potential. Ultimately, addressing bullying transcends mere disciplinary action; it is a vital step towards enhancing learners' academic success, emotional well-being, and overall quality of life.

X. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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