
Understanding Bullying in Schools: Social Workers' Views on Professional Responses and Practice Realities

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Abstract: Bullying in South African schools has surged, affecting educators, learners, and communities. This study aimed to understand bullying in schools and social workers' views on professional responses and practice realities in educational settings. Employing a qualitative approach, an exploratory research design was used, with face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted with 21 purposively selected social workers from Limpopo Province. This study employed thematic content analysis to interpret data, guided by the ecological theory to understand the environmental influences on bullying. The study identified six key themes: the nature and dynamics of bullying; its psychosocial and social impacts; barriers and effective interventions; resilience and protective factors; evidence-based intervention strategies; and professional competencies and training needs. The findings highlight the complexities and difficulties of bullying and the need for multi-level, trauma-informed, and restorative approaches in social work practice. Understanding bullying provides practical guidelines for social workers to address it through education, advocacy, and psychosocial support. They promote inclusive, culturally sensitive, and collaborative practices that involve stakeholders, such as families, educators, and communities. These views aim to enhance social workers' capacity to uphold learners' rights to dignity and protection, and to create a safer school environment.

Keywords: bullying; learners; psychosocial; schools; social work

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Introduction

Bullying is a global and public health concern and takes place in different forms. It is broadly defined as a violent, aggressive, and repeated behavior involving an imbalance of power to inflict harm on another person (Wachs et al., 2019; Mguye & Omodan, 2023). Bullying, violent, and aggressive behavior can manifest in various forms, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying (Graham, 2023). The emergence of globalization has increased bullying that takes place through the use of digital platforms, technology, and social media, which is referred to as cyberbullying (Orben, 2020). Bullying is defined and characterized by three fundamental components. These components include intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance, which can be used to inflict harm on victims (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Manuel et al., 2021). In

the contemporary context, bullying is beyond behavioral problems. It is recognized as a global public health concern that has significant effects on the lives of learners, educators, the school community, families, stakeholders, and the entire community (Fry et al., 2018; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). Although bullying is common and prevalent among learners in educational settings, it affects people from different life stages with profound consequences that include mental health, psychological distress, low self-esteem/confidence, academic decline, poor school attendance, isolation, social withdrawal, self-harm, and suicide ideation (Nickerson, 2019; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024).

Bullying is relevant to social work practice in multifaceted ways. Social workers are ethically obligated and responsible for promoting advocacy, transformation, and social justice, as well as social functioning (Gaffney et al., 2019; Pillay, 2021). Social workers protect vulnerable populations and fight for the well-being of individuals, families, and communities (Orben, 2020). Bullying has direct disrespect for human rights, social justice, and perpetuates violence, aggression, discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization (Lumadi, 2024; Wachs et al., 2019). Social workers provide both proactive and reactive services to victims and potential victims of bullying, as well as to bystanders. They conduct assessments and develop interventions relevant to the bullying phenomenon experienced (Kowalski et al., 2018; Herbst & Roux, 2023). Social workers provide psychosocial support services and counseling to the victims of bullying, bystanders, perpetrators, educators, families, and the entire community. They are instrumental in preventing bullying by developing, advocating for, and implementing anti-bullying programs and policies (Olweus 2012). Social workers ensure that these policies and programs are culturally inclusive, sensitive, and diverse. They also monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the bullying programs and interventions. They conduct educational programs to provide knowledge about the effects of bullying on all parties involved in the incidents (Makwela & Smit, 2022; Toseland & Rivas, 2017; Zych et al., 2018).

Globally, bullying continues to be a pervasive social problem with destructive consequences affecting millions of learners in educational settings (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2018). In South Africa, bullying is an increasing concern, especially in educational settings. According to the Department of Basic Education reports for 2025, a total of 548 bullying cases were recorded across South Africa, of which 305 cases were reported in Limpopo Province, highlighting a disproportionate concentration in the province. Limpopo Province recorded a concerning number of 305 cases of bullying (Yibas, 2024). The Department of Basic Education has since taken a position to implement the National School Safety Framework (Makwela and Smit 2022). This empowers schools to involve various stakeholders in addressing bullying and in developing action plans and policies. These figures show the urgent need to address the phenomenon of bullying within educational settings. The impact of bullying contributes to mental health problems, poor academic performance, and long-term maladjustment (Graham, 2023). The global and local prevalence of bullying indicates the need for holistic research and evidence-based interventions. As frontline professionals, social workers have the responsibility to promote social justice and advocacy, and to manage the bullying phenomenon (Zastrow, 2017; Pillay, 2021).

Literature review

Bullying in African and South African school contexts

Bullying in a learning environment is increasingly considered a serious educational, social, and public health concern within the global south and African context. Initially, bullying emerged as a phenomenon from the global north. Recently, African and South African scholarship shows that bullying is deeply embedded in local cultural, socio-economic, and historical realities (Herbst & Roux, 2023; Sikhakhane et al., 2018). In the South African learning context, bullying often intersects with violence, poverty, gender norms, linguistic marginalization, inequality, and racialization, making it a difficult, complex, and contextualized problem. It should not be viewed as a mere individual behavioral problem (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019; Graham, 2023). Bullying is manifested in multiple forms, such as physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying, with significant incidents reported in rural, townships, and under-resourced schools. School environments characterized by weak disciplinary structures, overcrowding, gangsterisms, insufficient psychosocial support systems, and violence tend to exacerbate bullying (Mguye & Omodan, 2023).

Resilience and protective factors in African school settings

African scholarship emphasizes resilience and protective factors in addressing bullying in schools. In the Global South contexts, resilience is understood as an individual trait and also as a collective and relational process supported by peers, families, communities, and schools (Masilo, 2023; Zych et al., 2018). The South African literature shows that strong supportive educators, culturally affirming school environment, peer networks, and family involvement can buffer learners against the harmful effects of bullying (Pretorius, 2020). Protective factors such as peer support programs, inclusive school policies, mentorship, and restorative dialogue have been shown to foster social connectedness and coping skills among learners (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018; Cretu & Morandau, 2024).

Role of school social work in addressing bullying

School social workers play a significant role within the South African learning environment (Pretorius, 2020). School social work in South Africa and many countries in the Global South continues to experience a shortage of school social workers, limited institutional support and policies, and role ambiguity, unlike in many Western countries where school social work is clearly established (Khumalo & Pretorius, 2025; Hall, 2017). Despite this, African scholarship holds that social workers possess specialized skills to address bullying through early intervention, prevention, policy development, and advocacy (Boboyi 2024). School social workers provide assessment and psychosocial support, family engagement, counseling, group interventions, and community-based programs to prevent bullying (Masilo, 2023; Khumalo, 2026). They address the symptoms and the structural root causes of bullying to provide a safe learning environment (Reyneke, 2024).

Types and effects of bullying

Bullying takes different forms, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying. Physical bullying is the repeated use of force on the victim with the intention to cause harm. This includes physically assaulting another person/ learner in an educational setting, pushing, and using physical force on another learner (James, 2017; Khumalo & Pretorius, 2025). Verbal bullying involves using words that are harmful to other learners with the intention of inflicting harm on the victims. Name-calling, using inappropriate language, and insults are some examples of verbal bullying. Cyberbullying is increasingly becoming a concern for learners (Herbst & Roux, 2023; Xu et al., 2016). This is because of the accessibility of smartphones, digital devices, technology, and the internet. This is one of the devastating forms of bullying because it has the potential to reach many people. This is because it can be accessed through social media applications, text messaging services, and email (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2018; Mguye & Omodan, 2023). Inappropriate pictures and videos are shared about the victim of bullying without their knowledge. Bullying has destructive effects on the victims, bystanders, perpetrators, educators, stakeholders, and the family (Pretorius, 2020). The effects range from social isolation, psychological distress, mental health problems, academic decline, poor school attendance, and suicide ideation. Victims contemplate and commit suicide because of being exposed to bullying incidents (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2019). Bystanders require counseling or debriefing to be able to deal with their exposure to bullying. School performance is also affected by incidents of bullying because other learners are exposed to them, and some fear they might be next to experience it (Seidel & Oertel, 2017; Graham, 2023).

Gaps in current Interventions

Many schools in South Africa lack school social workers to assist with the early detection and management of bullying (Khumalo, 2026). In schools where social workers exist, there is no clarity about their roles and no resources to support them in effectively performing them (Hall, 2017; Graham, 2023). Social work-embedded policies to address the psychosocial issues, such as bullying, do not exist. The poor or inconsistent application of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 to the phenomenon of bullying is one of the gaps identified as hindering current interventions (Masilo, 2018; Pillay, 2021). The Act identifies bullying as violent behavior and abuse, but it is not consistently implemented in schools because of a lack of understanding of the legislation. Lack of designated social workers in schools may be a reason for enforcing the Children's Act in educational settings (Mguye & Omodan, 2023). A lack of a universal protocol to address bullying in schools was identified as one of the existing gaps in addressing bullying. Schools lack standardized guidelines, procedures, and protocols to address bullying. Social workers do not have specialized training to address bullying (Smith, 2016; Khumalo & Pretorius, 2025). Continuous professional development is essential to ensure that social workers keep their knowledge, skills, and interventions up to date to address bullying. The lack of parental involvement in cases of bullying is a significant

gap. Parents are fundamental stakeholders who need to be involved in developing effective interventions to address bullying (Pijoo, 2017; Graham, 2023).

Theoretical framework

The study employed the ecological theory to provide background about bullying in educational settings. This theory was found to be relevant and significant because of its emphasis and focus on the person in the environment (Zastrow, 2017; Pillay, 2021). It was fundamental to consider this theory because bullying occurs within the environments where learners are found. Educational settings encompass a range of environmental factors that contribute to bullying (Teater, 2020). The theory argues that environmental factors influence learners' behavior in educational settings (Mguye & Omodan, 2023). The learners and school community experience social dysfunction due to the environmental factors within the educational settings. Some of the environmental factors that influence bullying are violence, aggression, gangsterism, poor policies, weapons, and substances (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019; Masilo, 2023). These factors are found within the educational setting and expose learners to bullying behavior. This theory indicates that learners are exposed to deviant behavior and learn unacceptable behavior from the educational settings. The focus on the environment and its effects on learners shapes how learners behave towards other learners. This theory helps address complex problems and situations in the environment (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018; Khumalo & Pretorius, 2025).

The ecological theory was significant because it provides an understanding of how learners' environments can influence and cause violence, aggression, gangsterism, and bullying (Sikhakhane et al., 2018; Khumalo & Pretorius, 2025). Learners engage in socialization and interact with the environment, which influences their behavior. Learners' interaction with their environment significantly influences the prevalence of bullying in educational settings (Mthethwa, 2016; Pillay, 2021). In social work practice, ecological theory is essential because it provides an understanding of learners' behavior within the environment and the influence of certain approaches and behaviors. Social workers understand that behavior is learned and the environment influences how learners behave within the educational setting (Brandt, 2017; Mguye & Omodan, 2023). Social workers understand how learners behave within the environment and the influences the environment has on learners that lead to strange behaviors. Learners are exposed to a violent, aggressive, and bullying environment, and this leads to them engaging, interacting, and socializing with the same environment. Their engagement and socialization with the environment lead to bullying and gang-related behavior (Herbst & Roux, 2023; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016).

Ecological theory is enhanced across different levels, including the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. At a microlevel, bullying is influenced by the interaction between peers, learners, family members, and peers. At this level, bullying is closely associated with individual psychosocial experiences like anxiety, trauma, fear, low self-esteem, and emotional vulnerability (Zastrow, 2017; Graham, 2023). The mesosystem level encompasses interactions between microsystem levels. This includes engagements among families, school social work, and multidisciplinary teamwork. This level enables early detection of bullying, coherent intervention planning, and shared responsibility. The exosystem level is essential to direct the institutional and organizational context that influences learners' experience (Teater, 2020). This includes social service systems, professional workloads, resource allocation, policies, and the education department. Bullying is influenced by broader socio-cultural norms at the macrosystem level. Interventions at this level require policy engagement, advocacy, and a rights-based approach. Social workers are expected to contribute to policy development, inclusivity, transformation, and challenge systems that perpetuate bullying (Brandt, 2017; Pillay, 2021).

Research methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach. This is the approach used when researchers aim to gain an in-depth understanding and explore the natural feelings of the environment (Saunders et al., 2018). Qualitative research is essential in this study to gather a deeper understanding of the bullying phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was essential to explore participants' feelings and attitudes in their natural settings. An exploratory research design was used to examine the understanding of bullying and social workers' views (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2019). This design was relevant and critical to the study because it provided insight into social workers' perspectives in practice. The design provides insight into and a deeper understanding of the research-informed, evidence-based intervention guidelines for addressing bullying (Simons & McGannon, 2018). An exploratory research design sought information that was not readily available and would ordinarily be

difficult to obtain. The design allowed the researcher to gather in-depth data about the phenomenon of bullying (Matthew & Ross, 2018).

To determine social workers' understanding and views on addressing bullying in social work practice, the study developed criteria for analysis. The criteria required that social workers become professionals to gain an understanding for addressing bullying in social work practice. The criteria were that social workers should be registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions, have over three years of experience working with bullying, and be employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development. Social workers employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development comprised the study population. These populations were chosen because they are the first point of contact for professional help for victims of bullying, perpetrators, bystanders, stakeholders, and the school community. The reason for choosing Limpopo Province was the increasing number of bullying incidents in learning institutions. Limpopo Province has witnessed a surge in bullying incidents over the past few decades.

The study used non-probability sampling because it aligns with the qualitative research approach (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). This is a non-random method of selecting the participants for the research study. Not everyone in the population has an equal chance of being selected to participate in the study. Participants needed to meet the inclusion criteria to be included in the study. The non-probability sampling method was fundamental to the study, enabling the selection of participants based on their knowledge of the subject and eligibility criteria (Saunders et al., 2018). A purposive sampling technique was adopted for this study. This was because the researcher had prior knowledge of participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. A total of 21 participants were sampled to answer the research questions. The principle of data saturation determined this number because participants were repeating information submitted by other participants (Kumatongo and Muzata 2021).

The study used semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the participants to collect data. An interview guide with questions was developed to guide the researcher in the questions to be answered (Moreno, 2017). The interview guide provided the researcher with an opportunity to probe when participants did not answer the questions clearly. The average time spent in interviews with participants was about 35 min (Kumatongo and Muzata (2021). The participants were from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities, and, as a result, the researcher consulted with them about the use of English during the interviews (Matthew & Ross, 2018). As such, all participants were familiar and comfortable with English. The researcher was responsible for the data collection process, which lasted for a month. The researcher followed Creswell's data analysis steps using thematic content analysis. Data analysis was an important process to ensure that the collected data was interpreted to yield research findings (Habib, 2022).

Ethical principles are critical components of research studies to ensure the protection of the research subjects. The study adhered to the ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, non-harm, and debriefing. Informed consent was fundamental to the study because the researcher ensured that participants understood the study's purpose, the risks, and the benefits of participating (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2017). Participants were informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time. The researcher further sought participants' consent for the interviews and audio recordings. Participants were given an informed consent form to sign, indicating their permission to participate in the study (Shophi, 2024). The researcher maintained the confidentiality of the information received from the participants throughout the study. Confidential information was stored in lockable cupboards accessible only to the researcher supervisor. The participants' personal identifying information was never used at any stage of the study (Blanche et al., 2021). Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants and avoid compromising them. The researcher ensured anonymity and ensured that personal information was not made public. The researcher was sensitive in asking questions to avoid harm to the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2017). Although it is not easy to avoid harm, the researcher was very cautious considering the sensitivity of the bullying phenomenon. Debriefing was provided to participants who experienced emotional difficulties as a result of participating in the study. The researcher contracted a clinical psychologist from the Department of Health to provide debriefing and counseling services to the victims who may be triggered. This service was provided free of charge to ensure participants did not incur costs for participating in this research study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The study received ethical clearance from the College of Human Sciences Research Committee, with ethics approval number 69719675_CREC_CHS_2022.

Every empirical research study must have quality criteria to ensure that study results are reliable, valid, and transferable. Credibility was achieved through the accurate reflection of participants' perspectives and

experiences. Member checking was used to improve credibility, and participants were given the opportunity to confirm, clarify, and ensure that their views were correctly and adequately interpreted (Fusch and Ness 2015;; Creswell 2014). Dependability was essential to ensure consistency and reliability of the research process over time. An audit trail was used to ensure dependability. This was done through several stages, including sampling procedures, research design decisions, the interview guide, and analytical steps. The researcher outsourced the services of an independent coder to identify emerging themes and analyze data (Habib, 2022). The researcher used raw data from the participants to ensure and achieve confirmability. This was done to avoid bias and assumptions and to ensure the study's credibility. Reflective practice was essential to focus on the participants' data rather than an emotional approach. This further ensured that the findings were not biased or driven by emotion (Shophi, 2024). Thick, rich descriptions of the research context were essential to achieving transferability. Detailed scientific process, such as participants' characteristics, study settings, and sampling criteria, was used to ensure transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings of the study

The study has significantly enhanced social workers' understanding of professional responses and practice realities related to bullying. The findings provide guidance on the effective procedures social workers should follow when providing services to address bullying. The following are the themes developed from the study findings (Wachs et al. (2016).

Theme 1: Nature and dynamics of bullying

The study revealed that social workers need to understand the nature, complexity, and dynamics of bullying. It revealed that, as part of understanding bullying, social workers need to comprehensively know the nature and complexity of bullying. This was identified as the initial part of the intervention addressing bullying. The study further found that social workers need to understand different types of bullying and the effects they have on the victims, bystanders, educators, and different stakeholders. The study found that social workers need to understand the context in which bullying occurs. Social workers need to comprehend that bullying takes place mainly in schools, families, societies, and through cyberspace, technology, or social media. Additionally, the study found that social workers need to appreciate the power imbalances, the hierarchies within the social environment, marginalization, and identity-based bullying. The following are the excerpts submitted by the participants on this theme:

“Bullying is a dynamic and complex phenomenon and requires an intentional approach with expert knowledge from social workers. I think social workers need to understand bullying holistically and understand different types of bullying, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying, and their effects. This is the first important part of addressing bullying comprehensively.” P2

“Social workers need to have knowledge of contexts where bullying takes place. This is important to ensure that interventions are responsive to the needs within the environment in which they take place. We need to know that bullying takes place in schools, families, communities, and through cyberspace. Comprehending this information is critical to developing a relevant program and material.” P7

“It is significant for social workers to know how power imbalance plays a role in the bullying phenomenon. Social hierarchies, identity-based bullying, and marginalization need to be understood as they play a fundamental role in bullying. Social workers first need to understand all these elements to ensure that they have a foundation for addressing bullying comprehensively.” P15

Sargeant and Gillett-Swan (2019) concur with the study's findings and argue that social workers need to understand what bullying is and its effects on learners, educators, and families. Kennedy et al. (2024) argue that understanding the context in which bullying occurs is fundamental to effectively addressing it. This is important for designing programs targeted to the phenomenon of bullying within the context where it occurs. It is important that bullying is addressed, looking at the social hierarchies, identity-based bullying, and marginalization of victims (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016). Werth et al. (2015) agree with the study's findings and further allude that social workers need to address the power imbalance within bullying.

Theme 2: Understanding the impact on individuals and communities

The study revealed that social workers need to have knowledge of the psychosocial effects as part of an intervention mechanism to address bullying. Social workers need to understand the anxiety, trauma, low self-esteem, and depression associated with bullying. This is significant to ensure a tailored intervention to address each effect in social work practice. Social consequences were also identified as fundamental in addressing bullying for social work practice. These include social isolation, family stress, and poor academic performance. The study further established that social workers need to understand the long-term effects of bullying. It outlined that social workers need to understand that some of the outcomes are self-harm, risk of abusing substances, and violence. Understanding these aspects is critical to addressing bullying in social work practice.

“This is an important step that social workers who are working with bullying must know and follow. Social workers need to understand the psychosocial effects of bullying, such as anxiety, low self-esteem, trauma, and depression. This is a fundamental step to address bullying in social work practice.” P5

“The impact of bullying needs to be understood by social workers to ensure that they render preventive programs to address bullying. The social consequences of bullying negatively impact the lives of learners, bystanders, and stakeholders. This requires an intentional approach to address the severe impact.” P13

“Social workers need to focus on the long-term effects of bullying. This includes outcomes such as self-harm, risk of substance abuse, and violence. If social workers can understand these aspects, it would ensure the development of effective intervention guidelines.” P19

Zastrow (2017) concurs with the study’s findings regarding the psychosocial effects of bullying in educational settings. Understanding these effects guides social workers on how they can address bullying and mitigate its consequences. Smith (2016) agrees with the study’s findings and believes that social workers need to know the social consequences of bullying. Social workers must understand that learners isolate themselves, develop low self-esteem, and struggle with academic work. Therefore, these social workers must provide interventions that address the specific social consequences (Horton, 2016). Interestingly, social workers need to focus on the long-term effects that include violence, risk of substance abuse, and self-harm. This stage is fundamental to ensuring that social workers are well prepared to address bullying, focusing on its psychosocial and social effects, as well as its long-term effects in social work practice (Masilo, 2023).

Theme 3: Understanding barriers to effective intervention

The study found that social workers need to identify the barriers to effective intervention for bullying. It revealed systemic challenges, including policy gaps, resource shortages, and institutional denial. The study found that social workers should identify and understand these barriers and develop alternative approaches to address bullying in educational settings. Other barriers to effective intervention limit the practitioner’s ability to address bullying. These elements include training gaps, insufficient knowledge about the phenomenon, emotional burnout, and workload. The study established that the workload needs to be adjusted to ensure productivity and effective intervention. It further found that training should be considered to enhance social workers’ skills, knowledge, and expertise in addressing bullying. Contextual factors such as stigma, language barriers, and norms must be better understood within social work practice to ensure that services are not disrupted.

“Lack of resources is one of the barriers to effective intervention. I think we need resources to comprehensively address bullying as social workers in educational settings. The Availability of resources and policy gaps are vital to addressing bullying in social work practice.” P9

“For effective interventions in bullying, social workers need to have specialized training specifically addressing bullying in educational settings. We need to have a workload that is manageable to be able to focus more on what needs to be done to address bullying.” P12

“Bullying is a sensitive phenomenon that triggers emotions. It is important to address emotional burnout. Emotional vulnerability needs to be addressed to ensure that social workers are in a good state of mind to deal with bullying. Employee wellness services need to be

in place to address bullying in educational settings. Moderate workload assists in addressing burnout among social workers who are working with the bullying phenomenon” P14

The literature confirms this study’s findings that a lack of resources is a barrier to effective intervention in addressing bullying in social work practice. Social work services need to be well-resourced to provide research-based, evidence-based services to address bullying in educational settings (Horton, 2016). Social workers need to receive specialized training to be able to respond to the ever-changing bullying phenomenon in educational settings. Zastrow (2017) argues that social workers need continuous training or professional development to update their knowledge of bullying and offer comprehensive, effective services. Well-trained social workers with the knowledge and skills to address bullying can address it. Social workers should receive debriefing services to address their emotional vulnerability and the factors that trigger it. The workload of social workers needs to be regulated to ensure they can focus on their work and effectively address bullying in social work practice (Smith, 2016).

Theme 4: Resilience and protective factors

The study has revealed that social workers need to be resilient, considering the sensitivity and triggering nature of the bullying phenomenon. The study found that social workers need to use their family support as a source of strength and resilience. Peer support and mentorship were also found to be necessary to enhance the protective factors. Social workers who are rendering services to bullying need to be resilient and use a range of both resilient and protective factors. Social workers who are rendering services to address the bullying phenomenon need to be empowered, provided with the skills, and become assertive. The study found that social workers need to provide safe spaces and inclusive programs.

“We need to be resilient if we are to work with bullying because it can trigger emotions at any time. Resilience will help us resolve similar problems should they arise. Social workers can use their peer support, families, and mentorships to guide social work intervention in bullying.” P5

“Skills building is one of the important factors for consideration when developing intervention guidelines. Empowerment is important to ensure that social workers have the necessary skills and assertiveness. Social workers need to have skills and ensure that they are empowered to be resilient throughout intervention in the bullying phenomenon.” P10

“Peer support is one of the fundamental elements of the social work process in addressing bullying. Social workers need to be available to provide support to their peers in dealing with bullying in educational settings. Social workers working with bullying in educational settings need to have mentors who assist them to provide guidance on how to address bullying.” P17

Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2016) states that social workers need to be empowered through training to address bullying. Resilience is significant in social work practice because social workers work with complex, stressful social issues that can challenge their well-being. The literature argues that social workers need to be competent in performing their duties and empowered to provide effective social work services (Getz, 2013). Resilient social workers have the capacity to successfully resolve the prevalence of bullying in education settings and communities. Peer support is important in social work practice to ensure that social workers have reliable support within the profession (Kennedy et al., 2024). Mentorship in social work is also fundamental for effectively addressing the stressful phenomenon of bullying (Nthate, 2017).

Theme 5: Research and evidence-based intervention strategies

The study has established that social workers need to implement the social work research intervention method. Research was found to be significant for social workers in providing research-informed interventions to address bullying in educational settings. It found that social workers need to use trauma-informed approaches to be able to address the trauma that learners are exposed to. These approaches are fundamental to addressing traumatic situations among learners in educational settings. The study revealed that social workers need to use the restorative approach that involves the victims of bullying, perpetrators, bystanders, educators, families, stakeholders, and the community. The study outlined that social workers need to use multi-level interventions and focus on individuals, groups, the broader school community, and the policy level. The study found that social workers need to work in a multi-disciplinary team, collaborate with stakeholders, and partner.

“Research needs to be conducted on the appropriate action and intervention to take to address bullying in educational settings. I think we also need to use the restorative approaches that will include the victims of bullying, perpetrators, educators, and the stakeholders.” P8

“Trauma-informed approaches need to be central to the interventions provided in social work practice for bullying intervention. These are important approaches because they focus on the impact that has been done to the victims, perpetrators, and the bystanders.” P12

“Social workers need to use levels of interventions in addressing bullying. Working with individuals, groups, families, and the community is important to provide comprehensive intervention for the phenomenon. Social workers' interventions are fundamental to effectively addressing bullying in educational settings. Social workers also need to focus on the development of policies that will be able to address bullying.” P16

“Social workers must collaborate with different interested parties to address bullying jointly. This will assist social workers in setting boundaries for the services they are competent to provide and allow other professionals to take on additional responsibilities. This includes stakeholders such as learners, educators, SGB, families, parents, law enforcement, and the nurses.” P20

Nelson and Sampilo (2014)Makwela and Smit 2021 indicate that trauma-informed interventions are fundamental to addressing bullying. These interventions focus on the trauma inflicted as a result of the incidents of bullying in educational settings. Restorative services are important for addressing bullying comprehensively and involving all interested parties. The restorative approach is essential because it allows the perpetrator to realize their faults and take responsibility for their actions (Staples, 2016). Social workers need to address bullying, focusing on multiple levels such as individuals, groups, families, and communities. These are important because they address the phenomenon at both proactive and reactive levels (Masilo, 2023). Social workers provide services through education, awareness, and psychosocial interventions. Horton (2016) concurs with the study's findings regarding the collaborative work between social workers and other stakeholders with an interest in bullying. These stakeholders are significant for holistically addressing the challenges associated with bullying.

Theme 6: Professional competencies and training needs

The study highlighted that social workers need to be competent in their professional responsibilities when providing intervention to the phenomenon of bullying. The study found that social workers need specific skills, including conflict management/resolution, cultural competencies, and trauma response. The study further found a need for continuous professional development among social workers to improve their skills and knowledge of bullying, enabling them to respond effectively. This training should be ongoing to improve social workers' skills in addressing the continually evolving issue of bullying. The study revealed that social workers must continue to uphold universal standards to ensure confidentiality, consent, and non-discrimination. This is important to ensure consideration of the diverse nature of learners who are victims of bullying, perpetrators, and bystanders.

“We need to be competent in providing social work services on the phenomenon of bullying. We need specialized skills to respond decisively to the complex issue of bullying. Social workers need to understand how to handle conflict, how to be culturally competent, and how to respond to trauma.” P4

Continuous professional development is important, with a focus on addressing the gaps in bullying. Social workers need to improve skills regularly and ensure that they are competent in addressing bullying.” P11

“Social workers must know that they need to avoid discrimination against service users. This is a universal standard for respecting clients' worth and protecting the confidentiality of the information provided. It is important to be free from bias when dealing with conflicts and ensure that you are addressing the problem experienced by all parties involved.” P18

Zastrow (2017) concurs with the study's findings that social workers must always be competent in rendering services to address any social problem, including bullying. Social workers need to understand that competency is

key to improving clients' trust in their services. Training is essential for social workers to enhance their ability to provide effective, responsive interventions (Pretorius, 2020). Social workers need to improve their knowledge and skills through continuous professional development. These trainings should be more focused on the bullying phenomenon to ensure they address the social problem causing trouble in educational settings (Nthate, 2017). Social workers are naturally impartial in the provision of their services and ensure confidentiality in rendering them. Social workers have adequate skills to address the conflict between those involved in bullying. They can address discrimination in educational settings (Horton, 2016).

Discussion

The findings of this study show the complex and multiple nature of bullying and the essential role social workers play in mitigating the impact of bullying in educational settings. The findings show that there are six fundamental elements for developing intervention guidelines for social work practice. The adopted ecological theory provided a framework and foundation for interpreting the study's findings and the influence of environmental factors on learners' behavior (Khumalo & Pretorius, 2025). This links with the results of the study that bullying is systemic, grounded in marginalization, identified gaps, and social hierarchies. The study highlights the urgent need for the realization of the trauma response and the restorative approaches to bullying. This was because of the considerations for the psychosocial impact, such as anxiety, isolation, and trauma. The intervention strategies also focus on the long-term plans to reconcile the victims, perpetrators, stakeholders, and the entire community (Pretorius, 2020). The study has highlighted an inclusive, holistic approach through the infusion of a multi-level perspective, including individuals, groups, and the policy level.

The identification of the barriers to effective intervention was an essential contribution to the study. Identifying the lack of resources, emotional burnout among social workers, workload, lack of support, and policy gaps is fundamental. This is in keeping with various studies and the literature on barriers to effective intervention in bullying. The study provides social workers with tools to build resilience to work with complex, sensitive phenomena such as bullying in educational settings (Graham, 2023). It further emphasized the need for peer support and mentorship for social workers. It emphasized protective factors and the empowerment of social workers who deal with bullying in educational settings. It is essential to integrate evidence-based or research-based interventions with continuous professional development to address bullying in educational settings. Social workers require specialized, up-to-date skills and knowledge to resolve conflict, respond to trauma, and understand cultural diversity (Herbst & Roux, 2023). Respect for ethical considerations and standards is vital to maintaining confidentiality, consent, and non-discrimination, thereby supporting inclusive and diverse learning experiences.

Recommendations

- Social workers should receive standardized continuous training focusing on bullying, cultural competency, restorative practices, and trauma-informed care.
- High-risk schools should be prioritized with the deployment of social workers with specific roles of addressing bullying, and this must be accompanied by resources.
- Intervention protocols must be standardized to identify, treat, manage, and address bullying. The development of universal standardized guidelines should be influenced by empowerment and strength-based theories.
- Social workers should work in collaboration with stakeholders such as learners, educators, bystanders, law enforcement, and parents to create a comprehensive support system for all those exposed to bullying.
- Clear legislation and Acts should be developed for anti-bullying. Existing policies should be reviewed to include prevention, management, and education regarding bullying.
- Programs should be designed to build resilience and protective factors among learners and social workers in educational settings. Programs such as peer support and mentorship should be used to enhance coping strategies.

Conclusions

This study emphasizes the critical role of social work professionals in addressing the complex issue of bullying in South African educational settings. The study identified six key themes that support the development of intervention guidelines for addressing bullying in social work practice. Research-informed interventions are

essential to delivering empirically grounded social work practice. It has established the platform for actionable intervention guidelines for social work practice. Implementing these guidelines is crucial to enhancing social workers' capacity to address bullying in educational settings. Implementing these guidelines would also enhance learners' safety and ensure their right to dignity is upheld.

Table 1.

Themes
Theme 1: Nature and dynamics of bullying
Theme 2: Understanding the impact on individuals and communities
Theme 3: Understanding barriers to effective intervention
Theme 4: Resilience and protective factors
Theme 5: Research and evidence-based intervention strategies
Theme 6: Professional competencies and training needs

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This research employs an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates perspectives on bullying in schools. It draws knowledge and understanding from the social work discipline and education. Bullying is a concept relevant across various disciplines within the social sciences. The study seeks to understand professional responses to bullying and to examine practice realities.

Author Contributions: Sekgobela conceptualized the study and was involved in data collection, analysis, and presentation. The author is responsible for the final document.

Conflict of interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare

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