



Understanding bullying in Nigerian schools: Insights on prevalence, impacts, and solutions

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Abstract

Bullying represents a significant issue in Nigerian schools, with a detrimental impact on students' psychological, social, and academic well-being. This systematic literature review aims to comprehensively understand bullying in the Nigerian context, examining its prevalence, contributing factors, impacts, and intervention strategies. The review included studies published in the last ten years and sourced from Google Scholar. The findings indicate that bullying in Nigeria manifests in diverse forms, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying. These forms exhibit variations based on age, gender, and regional factors. The contributing factors are numerous and complex, encompassing individual characteristics, family dynamics, school environments, and socio-cultural influences. The consequences of bullying for victims are significant, resulting in anxiety, depression, social isolation, and a decline in academic performance. Despite implementing various intervention strategies, including school-based programs, community involvement, and technology-driven solutions, their efficacy remains inconsistent due to challenges in enforcement and resource limitations. This review emphasizes the necessity for more robust, context-specific interventions and calls for further research to address the identified gaps, aiming to enhance the well-being and safety of students in Nigerian schools.

Keywords: bullying; Nigerian schools; prevalence; contributing factors

Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive issue that affects millions of children and adolescents worldwide, transcending geographical, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries. It encompasses various forms of aggressive behavior, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying, which are often repeated over time and involve a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Johansson & Englund, 2021; Torkos & Anwer, 2022). In Nigeria, bullying is a significant concern, particularly in educational settings, where students face frequent harassment and abuse from

their peers (Fareo, 2015; Fenny & Falola, 2020). The Nigerian context presents unique challenges due to socio-cultural factors such as rigid hierarchical norms, societal acceptance of aggressive behavior, and inadequate enforcement of anti-bullying policies. As a result, the negative impacts of bullying on the mental health, academic performance, and social development of Nigerian students are profound and often overlooked, necessitating a thorough investigation into the scope and nature of the problem.

Studying bullying in Nigeria is crucial because of its extensive social, cultural, and educational impacts, which are deeply intertwined with the broader societal fabric. In many Nigerian communities, aggressive behaviors are often normalized or dismissed as part of growing up, which can lead to underreporting and a lack of accountability (Bishop et al., 2020). The cultural acceptance of corporal punishment in some educational institutions further complicates efforts to address bullying, as it blurs the lines between discipline and abuse. Additionally, bullying contributes to an unsafe learning environment that undermines students' ability to focus, learn, and thrive academically. By systematically examining bullying in Nigeria, this review aims to shed light on the unique factors driving the phenomenon and to highlight the urgent need for tailored interventions that address the specific cultural and social dynamics at play.

The primary objectives of this systematic literature review are fourfold. First, it seeks to identify the prevalence and types of bullying prevalent in Nigerian schools, including physical, verbal, and cyberbullying. Second, the review aims to explore the factors influencing bullying, such as individual characteristics, family dynamics, school environment, and broader socio-cultural influences. Third, it will assess the impact of bullying on victims, focusing on psychological, social, and academic consequences. Lastly, the review will evaluate current intervention strategies implemented in Nigeria, including school policies, community programs, and technology-based solutions, to determine their effectiveness in mitigating bullying and supporting affected students. Through these objectives, the review intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of bullying in Nigeria and offer evidence-based recommendations for future actions.

To achieve the objectives outlined, the review will address the following key research questions: What are the common forms of bullying in Nigeria? This question will help identify the most prevalent types of bullying, providing insights into which forms are most common and why they persist. What factors contribute to bullying in Nigerian schools? This question will explore the root causes of bullying, including individual, familial, and environmental influences that shape aggressive behaviors. What are the psychological, social, and academic impacts of bullying on victims? By answering this, the review will highlight the far-reaching consequences of bullying, emphasizing the need for immediate and effective interventions. Finally, which intervention strategies have been implemented, and how effective are they? This question aims to assess existing approaches to combat bullying, evaluating their success and identifying areas for improvement to guide future policies and programs.

Materials and Methods

SLR Design: Explanation of the Systematic Review Approach

The systematic literature review (SLR) approach is a structured and rigorous method used to collect, evaluate, and synthesize existing research on a particular topic. For this review, the SLR design is employed to provide a comprehensive and unbiased summary of the literature on

bullying in Nigeria. This approach follows a predefined protocol that outlines the steps to be taken, including search strategy, selection criteria, data extraction, and analysis, ensuring transparency and replicability. The SLR method is particularly useful in identifying patterns, gaps, and trends within the literature (Ghuge et al., 2024; Pintas et al., 2021), enabling a detailed understanding of the prevalence, factors, impacts, and intervention strategies associated with bullying in Nigerian schools. By systematically reviewing and synthesizing relevant studies, this SLR aims to generate evidence-based insights that can inform future research, policy, and practice.

Search Strategy

The search strategy for this SLR involves identifying relevant studies from Google Scholar. A combination of keywords was used to locate pertinent studies, such as “bullying in Nigeria,” “school bullying Nigeria,” “cyberbullying Nigeria,” and other related terms. The search was limited to English-language articles published in the last ten years (2014-2024) to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant studies. The search strategy also included manual checking of references from selected articles to identify any additional studies that met the criteria. By utilizing multiple databases and a broad range of keywords, this approach aims to capture the full scope of research on bullying in Nigeria.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the studies included in the review, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. The inclusion criteria were as follows: studies must be peer-reviewed, focus on bullying in the Nigerian context, be published in English, and be within the last ten years (2014-2024). This ensures that only empirical studies that provide reliable and up-to-date data are considered. Exclusion criteria included non-empirical studies, articles outside the Nigerian context, literature not available in full text, and studies that did not specifically address bullying. Articles that focused on related topics such as general violence without a specific emphasis on bullying were also excluded. Applying these criteria helped to filter out irrelevant or low-quality studies, ensuring that the review’s findings are based on robust and pertinent evidence.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction and analysis are critical components of the SLR, ensuring that relevant information is systematically captured and synthesized. Data extraction was conducted using Publish or Perish (PoP) software, which allowed for organized and consistent extraction of key information. The extracted data were then subjected to thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. This approach facilitated the identification of key themes related to the types of bullying, contributing factors, impacts on victims, and the effectiveness of intervention strategies. The thematic analysis provided a comprehensive synthesis of the literature, highlighting common findings and discrepancies, and allowing for a nuanced understanding of the complex issue of bullying in Nigeria.

Results and Discussion

Overview of Included Studies and Prevalence of Bullying

The systematic literature review included studies that met the inclusion criteria, utilizing a variety of research designs such as cross-sectional surveys, qualitative interviews, and mixed-method approaches. The majority of the studies employed quantitative methods, using self-reported questionnaires administered to students, which provided statistical insights into the prevalence of bullying (Chikaodi et al., 2019; Ogboghodo et al., 2017; Umoke et al., 2020). A smaller number of studies used qualitative approaches, offering a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of both victims and perpetrators through interviews with students, teachers, and parents (Akanni et al., 2020; Fenny, 2022; Fenny & Falola, 2020; Olumide et al., 2015). The combination of these methodologies allowed for a comprehensive analysis of bullying in Nigeria, capturing both numerical trends and personal narratives that illustrate the complexities of bullying behaviors in different educational settings.

Bullying in Nigeria occurs in various forms, including physical, verbal, relational, and increasingly, cyberbullying (Esther et al., 2023; Johansson & Englund, 2021; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015). Physical bullying, which involves hitting, pushing, and other forms of physical aggression, is predominantly reported among younger students in primary and secondary schools (Chikaodi et al., 2019; Gabriel-Job & Azubogu, 2022; Oladosu et al., 2021). Verbal bullying, including name-calling, insults, and threats, is prevalent across all age groups and often has an immediate negative impact on the victim's self-esteem (Fenny & Falola, 2020; Folayan et al., 2020). Relational bullying, such as social exclusion and rumor spreading, is more common among older students, particularly females, and often goes unnoticed due to its subtle nature. Cyberbullying, driven by the increasing use of social media and mobile devices, is emerging as a significant issue, especially in urban areas with greater internet access. The prevalence of these forms of bullying varies by age, gender, and region, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that address the specific challenges associated with each type.

Factors Contributing to Bullying in Nigerian Schools

The factors contributing to bullying in Nigerian schools are multifaceted, involving individual, familial, school, and socio-cultural influences (Adeyemi et al., 2024; Asiyai, 2015; Chikaodi et al., 2019; Fenny, 2022; Fenny & Falola, 2020; Gabriel-Job & Azubogu, 2022; Mustapha et al., 2023). Individual characteristics such as impulsivity, low empathy, and a desire for dominance are common among bullies, while victim vulnerability, including differences in physical appearance, socio-economic status, or personality traits, makes certain students frequent targets. Family dynamics also play a critical role; children from homes characterized by high levels of conflict, authoritarian parenting, or exposure to domestic violence are more likely to engage in or become victims of bullying. These familial influences often shape children's behaviors and attitudes towards aggression, perpetuating bullying within the school environment.

The school environment significantly contributes to the occurrence of bullying. Factors such as inadequate supervision, negative peer dynamics, and insufficient enforcement of school rules create conditions where bullying can thrive (Oputa, 2020; Raji et al., 2021). Schools that lack effective anti-bullying policies or fail to provide training for teachers on recognizing and managing bullying behaviors further exacerbate the issue. Socio-cultural factors, such as community norms

that tacitly accept aggressive behavior as a means of asserting power or discipline, also play a critical role. In some Nigerian communities, these cultural attitudes can make it difficult to challenge or change bullying behaviors, highlighting the need for interventions that are culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate.

Impact of Bullying on Victims

The impact of bullying on victims in Nigeria is profound, affecting their psychological, social, and academic well-being (Chikaodi et al., 2019; Mustapha et al., 2023; Nwugo & Nwoke, 2018; Olabiyi, 2021). Psychologically, victims often experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and in severe cases, suicidal ideation. These effects can have long-lasting consequences, impacting victims' mental health well into adulthood and affecting their overall quality of life. Socially, bullying leads to isolation, difficulties in forming friendships, and problems with social integration, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and rejection. These social impacts not only affect students' school experiences but also hinder their ability to build healthy relationships outside of school.

Academically, bullying has a detrimental effect on victims, often leading to reduced motivation, increased absenteeism, and declining academic performance (Ada et al., 2016; Adeniyi & Adedotun, 2019; Fenny & Falola, 2020; Oluwamumibori et al., 2022). In some severe cases, persistent bullying can cause students to avoid school altogether or even drop out, significantly impacting their educational and future career opportunities. The combined psychological, social, and academic effects underscore the urgent need for effective, evidence-based interventions to support victims and create safer school environments. Addressing these impacts is crucial for ensuring that students can learn and thrive without the fear of being bullied.

Intervention Strategies and Their Effectiveness

Intervention strategies in Nigeria have primarily focused on school-based programs, community involvement, and the use of technology (Aliero et al., 2023; Esere & Mustapha, 2018; Fareo, 2015; Nwabueze et al., 2022). School-based interventions include the implementation of anti-bullying policies, teacher training programs, and the establishment of peer support systems. These initiatives aim to create a safer school environment by empowering both educators and students to recognize, prevent, and respond to bullying. Community and parental involvement are also critical, as engaging local leaders, parents, and community organizations helps extend anti-bullying efforts beyond the school setting, reinforcing positive behaviors and providing additional support.

Technology-based interventions, such as anti-bullying apps and digital reporting platforms, offer discreet and accessible ways for students to report bullying incidents, providing an additional layer of support. However, the effectiveness of these strategies varies, often due to challenges such as lack of awareness, limited resources, and inconsistent policy enforcement. While some schools and communities have made progress, evaluations suggest that there is still a need for more comprehensive, well-funded, and culturally sensitive approaches to effectively reduce bullying. Tailored interventions that consider local contexts and involve all stakeholders are essential for the successful mitigation of bullying in Nigerian schools.

Gaps in Literature and Implications for Future Policy and Practice

Despite the insights gained from this review, several gaps in the literature remain. Notably, there is a lack of longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of bullying on victims, which limits the understanding of how bullying impacts individuals beyond their school years. Additionally, the scarcity of empirical evaluations of existing intervention strategies makes it challenging to determine which approaches are most effective in the Nigerian context. Further research is needed to explore the roles of teachers and school staff in both perpetuating and preventing bullying, as well as the influence of socio-cultural factors on bullying behaviors.

The findings of this review have significant implications for policy and practice. Schools need to develop and enforce clear anti-bullying policies, and teacher training programs must be enhanced to equip educators with the skills to effectively manage bullying. Policymakers should prioritize the establishment of national guidelines on prevention bullying and allocate resources to support the implementation of these measures. Community involvement, including engagement with parents and local leaders, is crucial to ensure that anti-bullying efforts are sustained and supported beyond the school environment. Addressing the identified gaps through comprehensive research and culturally sensitive interventions will be vital in creating safer and more supportive educational environments for students across Nigeria.

Conclusions

This systematic literature review highlights that bullying is a pervasive issue in Nigerian schools, manifesting in physical, verbal, relational, and cyber forms, and significantly impacting the psychological, social, and academic well-being of victims. Key findings indicate that bullying is driven by a complex interplay of individual, family, school, and socio-cultural factors, with intervention strategies showing varied effectiveness due to challenges in implementation and enforcement. To address these gaps, future research should focus on longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effects of bullying, evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions, and investigate the role of socio-cultural influences on bullying behaviors. It is imperative to prioritize anti-bullying initiatives, enhance teacher training, and involve community stakeholders to create a safer and more supportive learning environment. Addressing bullying is crucial for the overall well-being and academic success of students in Nigeria, making it a critical area for continued research, policy development, and practical action.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors in this publication declare no conflict of interest regarding the title, data, location, and results of the research.

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Supplementary Materials

This study does not include any supplementary materials.

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