ADDRESSING BULLYING IN MADAGASCAR'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

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Abstract: *This study explores bullying prevention and intervention strategies in five public and private elementary schools in Sakaraha, Madagascar. Using a qualitative descriptive research design, the study employed three data collection methods: observation, semi-structured interviews with teachers and school principals, and documentary analysis of school records and policies. The primary aim was to investigate the prevalence and types of bullying, the awareness of bullying among students and staff, and the effectiveness of current prevention programs. Findings revealed that bullying, particularly verbal and social exclusion, is prevalent during unstructured times such as recess and transitions between classes. While teachers and principals expressed awareness of bullying issues, their responses varied in consistency and effectiveness, with some schools having more active prevention measures than others. School policies on bullying were generally available but lacked detailed, practical guidelines for addressing the issue. Triangulation of data from the three sources confirmed the need for more consistent implementation of anti-bullying practices, clearer communication of policies, and greater student involvement in prevention efforts. The study highlights the importance of a cohesive, school-wide approach to bullying prevention, emphasizing the need for teacher training, student empowerment, and ongoing evaluation of intervention outcomes.*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a serious issue that continues to occur frequently in elementary school environments and can have a negative impact on students' psychological, social, and academic development (Beran et al., 2004). Although often dismissed as a normal part of growing up, studies have shown that bullying at an early age can lead to long-term trauma, declining self-confidence, and even early school dropout (Emynorane et al., 2024). In elementary schools, the most common forms of bullying include verbal abuse, physical aggression, and social exclusion (Earnshaw & Morrow, 2019). These behaviors often take place outside of direct teacher supervision, such as during recess or in between class transitions.

The issue of bullying extends beyond the aggressor and the victim, it also involves the broader school environment, including the roles of teachers, school leaders, and school policies (Farell et al., 2001). Inconsistent responses, lack of teacher training, and minimal parental involvement often hinder effective prevention and intervention efforts (Kyriadikes et al., 2014). Therefore, it is essential to explore how bullying is

understood, prevented, and addressed at the school level, particularly in contexts such as Sakaraha, Madagascar, where educational and social dynamics may differ from more commonly studied settings.

Previous study has highlighted the importance of a whole-school approach to prevention of bullying. For example, Olweus (1993) emphasized the need for school-wide engagement in implementing structured and sustained anti-bullying programs. Similarly, studies by Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) suggest that a positive and supportive school climate plays a crucial role in reducing bullying cases. However, much of this study is concentrated in high-income countries, with limited attention given to bullying dynamics in low- and middle-income nations, especially in African contexts.

There is a notable research gap regarding the specific dynamics of bullying in public elementary schools in Madagascar. Existing studies tend to focus on general educational challenges or policy issues, without specifically examining the phenomenon of bullying and how schools respond to it (Musarirwa, 2017). This lack of context-specific research limits the development of effective interventions that are culturally and socially appropriate for the local setting.

The findings of this study are expected to be useful not only academically but also practically by informing local government agencies, education authorities, and school administrators in designing more effective and contextually appropriate anti-bullying programs. By understanding the current practices and the challenges faced at the school level, policymakers and educators can better develop strategies that foster a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment for all students (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Through this qualitative descriptive approach, the study aims to fill a critical gap in knowledge regarding bullying prevention practices in elementary schools in Madagascar. It also contributes to the broader global literature on bullying in education, particularly in under-researched, low-resource settings (Sam, 2020). As such, this study aspires to provide meaningful insights that can influence both local educational practice and international understanding of bullying prevention in diverse cultural contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design to explore and understand bullying dynamics in elementary schools in Sakaraha, Madagascar. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study as it seeks to describe the experiences, perceptions, and practices of key school stakeholders both teachers and principals regarding bullying prevention and intervention strategies (Emynorane et al., 2025). The descriptive approach is used to provide a detailed, in-depth account of the situation, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of bullying prevalence, types, awareness, and the effectiveness of current prevention strategies in the selected schools.

Study Settings

The study was conducted in Sakaraha, a city located in southwest of Madagascar, involving five of mixed public and private elementary schools that represent urban and semi-urban contexts. The schools were selected based on their proximity to each other, allowing for ease of data collection. These schools were chosen to provide a broad

spectrum of insights into how bullying is perceived and managed in different school environments within the same geographical region.

Participants

The study involved key informants including teachers and school principals from the five public and private elementary schools. A total of 25 participants were selected, consisting of 15 teachers (3 from each school) and 5 principals (1 from each school). These participants were chosen because of their direct involvement in school operations and their potential to provide valuable insights into the school climate, bullying incidents, and preventive measures. All participants were invited to participate voluntarily and provided informed consent before data collection began.

Data Collection Methods

Data for this study was collected using three complementary methods: observation, interviews, and documentary analysis. Observation involved non-participant observation in classrooms and common areas to identify instances of bullying and how teachers responded. The researchers focused on key times when bullying was likely to occur, such as recess and transitions between lessons. Interviews were conducted with teachers and school principals, using semi-structured questions to explore their perceptions of bullying, current prevention efforts, and challenges faced in addressing bullying within the school. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the practices and perspectives of those directly involved in managing bullying. Lastly, documentary analysis involved reviewing official school documents, including schools policy, disciplinary records, and reports of bullying incidents, to gain an understanding of the formal strategies in place and their alignment with actual practices. Combining these methods allowed for a holistic view of the bullying situation in the schools, ensuring comprehensive data collection and rich insights.

Data Analysis

Data from all three sources (observation, interviews, and documentation) were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is appropriate for qualitative research. Thematic analysis involved identifying patterns and themes across the collected data, coding responses, and categorizing them into major themes such as prevalence of bullying, types of bullying, teacher and staff involvement, and the effectiveness of current prevention strategies. The data was transcribed and reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and completeness.

Data Credibility

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, triangulation was employed. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources, methods, or perspectives to cross-check and validate findings. In this study, triangulation was achieved by comparing and contrasting the findings from observations, interviews, and documentary analysis. For example, if observations revealed frequent verbal bullying during recess, this was cross-checked with teachers' reports during interviews and corroborated by the disciplinary records. This method helped to ensure that the findings were robust and reflected a comprehensive understanding of the bullying dynamics within the schools.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Consent forms were signed by all participants, ensuring that their privacy and confidentiality were respected. The identities of all participants and schools were anonymized in the study to maintain confidentiality.

RESULTS

The following table 1 summarizes the key findings from the data collected through observation, interviews, and documentary analysis regarding bullying in the elementary schools of Sakaraha, Madagascar. It highlights the prevalence, types, awareness, current prevention strategies, and outcomes of interventions based on the perspectives of teachers, principals, and school documentation.

Table 1. Summary of Results on Bullying in Elementary School

Key Focus Area	Observation	Interviews	Documentation
1. Prevalence of Bullying	Regular incidents observed during recess and transition periods.	Teachers and students report bullying occurs 2–3 times per week, mostly unreported.	Disciplinary records show an average of 5 bullying cases per month.
2. Types of Bullying Identified	Physical pushing and verbal teasing were most common; social exclusion noted among girls.	Students mentioned name-calling, exclusion from groups; teachers noted cyberbullying emerging via mobile devices.	Incident logs categorize 60% verbal, 30% physical, and 10% relational bullying.
3. Student and Teacher Awareness	Some students did not recognize verbal teasing as bullying.	Teachers generally understand types but vary in how they define and respond. Students show limited understanding.	School handbook defines bullying but lacks specific examples or visual aids.
4. Current Prevention Strategies in Use	Rules are posted in classrooms but not always reinforced.	Teachers refer to moral education lessons and class discussions; no consistent school-wide program.	School policy includes anti-bullying rules, but no detailed implementation plan.
5. Intervention Outcomes	Teachers intervened inconsistently; some cases resolved quickly, others ignored.	Students feel safe with certain teachers; others feel nothing changes after reporting.	Follow-up reports show mixed success; repeat cases noted in several incidents.

The results indicate that bullying remains a common and ongoing issue in the elementary school environment. Through observations, it was evident that most bullying incidents occurred during unstructured times such as recess and classroom transitions,

when teacher supervision was less intense. Interviews with both students and teachers supported these findings, revealing that bullying incidents occur regularly often two to three times per week. However, documentation such as disciplinary records shows only around five reported cases per month, suggesting that many incidents are not formally recorded. This gap between observed and documented cases highlights a serious issue of underreporting, likely due to students' fear of retaliation or a belief that reporting will not lead to meaningful action.

In terms of the types of bullying identified, the findings showed a consistent pattern across all data sources. Physical bullying, such as pushing and hitting, was commonly seen during playtime, while verbal bullying including name-calling and teasing was the most frequently reported by students. Notably, girls were more often observed engaging in social exclusion tactics, such as leaving peers out of groups or games. Interviews also revealed growing concerns about cyberbullying, especially among older students using mobile devices. Documentation confirmed that verbal bullying was the most frequently logged type, followed by physical and then relational (social) bullying. This classification provides a clearer understanding of the dominant bullying behaviors and highlights the need for targeted interventions that address all forms, including less visible ones like exclusion or digital harassment.

The results also suggest a significant gap in awareness and understanding of bullying among both students and staff. Many students did not recognize verbal teasing or social exclusion as bullying, especially if it was not physical in nature. Teachers demonstrated a better understanding but varied widely in how they defined bullying and how they responded to it. This inconsistency likely contributes to students' reluctance to report incidents and their confusion about what behaviors are considered unacceptable. Documentation such as the school handbook included general definitions of bullying but lacked clear examples or visual aids to help students fully grasp the concept. This highlights the importance of improving anti-bullying education for all stakeholders in the school community.

Regarding current prevention strategies, the school has basic measures in place, such as posted rules and occasional moral education lessons. However, these strategies were not consistently implemented or enforced across classrooms. Interviews revealed that some teachers actively incorporated anti-bullying discussions and activities, while others took a more reactive or hands-off approach. Observations confirmed this inconsistency, as some teachers intervened efficiently and effectively, while others ignored incidents or minimized their importance. The lack of a unified, school-wide prevention program reduces the overall impact of these efforts and can create confusion for students about the consequences of bullying.

Finally, the findings on intervention outcomes showed mixed results. While some bullying cases were resolved quickly through teacher involvement, others persisted due to inadequate follow-up or lack of action. Students reported feeling safer and more supported in classrooms where teachers took bullying seriously and responded consistently. On the other hand, some expressed frustration and helplessness when their concerns were ignored or dismissed. Documentation also reflected recurring cases, indicating that certain interventions may not be effective long-term. These insights suggest a need for a more systematic and proactive approach to bullying intervention, including regular teacher training, student-led awareness programs, and a reliable system for monitoring and following up on reported cases.

DISCUSSION

Effectiveness of Prevention Programs

The effectiveness of current bullying prevention programs in the studied elementary school appears limited due to inconsistency in implementation and lack of coordination (Sam, 2020). While some preventive measures, such as classroom rules and occasional moral education lessons, were observed, they were not applied uniformly across all classrooms (Schrier, 2021). Teachers varied significantly in their approach to bullying prevention some actively engaged students in discussions and reinforced respectful behavior, while others seemed unaware or unconcerned unless a situation escalated. This inconsistency reduces the overall impact of the program, as students receive mixed messages about what behavior is acceptable and how seriously bullying is taken (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

The lack of a comprehensive, school-wide anti-bullying framework weakens the preventive efforts already in place (UNESCO, 2021). Although the school has basic policies outlined in its documentation, these were often general and lacked practical, age-appropriate guidance. For example, there were no structured programs or campaigns aimed at promoting empathy, conflict resolution, or peer support elements that are essential in fostering a positive school climate. Without a cohesive strategy that includes all staff members, prevention becomes a series of isolated efforts rather than a unified, ongoing process that involves the whole school community (Emynorane et al., 2024).

Another major issue affecting the effectiveness of prevention programs is the limited student awareness and understanding of what constitutes bullying (Olweus, 1993). Many students did not view verbal teasing or social exclusion as bullying, suggesting that the current educational efforts are insufficient. Prevention cannot be effective if students do not clearly understand which behaviors are harmful and when to seek help (Wang et al., 2009). Similarly, some teachers expressed uncertainty about how to respond to certain types of bullying, especially relational or emerging forms like cyberbullying. This gap in knowledge and confidence suggests the need for regular training and support for teachers, so they can recognize and respond effectively to all forms of bullying.

In sum, while the school has made some efforts toward bullying prevention, these programs are not yet fully effective due to inconsistent application, limited student and teacher understanding, and the absence of a coordinated, whole-school approach. For prevention programs to succeed, they must be consistent, clearly communicated, and supported by both leadership and classroom teachers (Winnaar et al., 2018). Introducing structured, evidence-based programs alongside continuous staff development and student education would greatly enhance the school's ability to prevent bullying before it occurs and create a safer, more supportive environment for all students (Zhao et al., 2023).

Role of School Culture and Climate

School culture and climate play a critical role in either enabling or preventing bullying behaviors. A positive school climate where respect, inclusion, and safety are emphasized helps to reduce bullying by promoting a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility among students and staff. In the observed school, however, the culture appeared fragmented, with varying levels of teacher engagement and inconsistent enforcement of rules (Wicaksono, 2023). This inconsistency weakens the overall message that bullying is unacceptable, and it may inappropriately allow harmful behaviors to go unchecked, especially during less supervised times like recess or transitions.

The attitudes and behaviors modeled by school staff significantly influence the overall environment (Augustin & Emynorane, 2024). When teachers and administrators consistently reinforce respectful behavior, intervene quickly when bullying occurs, and treat students fairly, they create a culture of trust and accountability (UNESCO, 2022). In contrast, when students observe that some teachers ignore or downplay bullying, it sends a message that such behavior is tolerated. Interviews revealed that students felt more secure in classrooms where teachers were proactive and approachable, further highlighting the importance of a unified approach where all staff share a common understanding of and commitment to a safe, inclusive culture.

Lastly, a strong school culture supports collaboration among students, teachers, and parents, which is essential for long-term prevention. Building a positive climate is not only about discipline and control, but also about cultivating empathy, peer support, and open communication (Emynorane et al., 2024). When students feel valued and heard, they are more likely to stand up to peers and report harmful behavior (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). The current school setting would benefit from intentional efforts to build a cohesive climate, such as regular community-building activities, school-wide anti-bullying campaigns, and recognition programs that celebrate kindness and cooperation. These efforts can transform the school culture into one where bullying is less likely to occur and more likely to be addressed effectively.

Teacher and Staff Involvement

Teachers and school staff are the frontline responders in identifying and addressing bullying, and their involvement is crucial in creating a safe and respectful learning environment (Montero-Carretero et al., 2021). In the school studied, teacher responses to bullying varied widely, which directly affected how students perceived safety and fairness. Some teachers were observed to respond quickly and appropriately to bullying incidents, reinforcing positive behavior and discouraging harmful actions. The others were less consistent or passive in their responses, either overlooking incidents or failing to follow through. This inconsistency undermines prevention efforts and allows bullying to persist in certain areas of the school (Garrity et al., 2000).

Interviews revealed that students feel more protected in classrooms where teachers actively engage with bullying prevention and intervene when problems arise. These students are more likely to report bullying and trust that their concerns will be taken seriously. Conversely, students in classrooms with less responsive teachers expressed frustration, indicating that they often avoided reporting incidents altogether. This contrast shows how the presence or absence of teacher involvement can shape a classroom's social dynamic (Beran et al., 2004). It also reflects the need for all staff not just classroom teachers but also aides, administrative staff, and playground monitors to be trained and aligned in their approach to recognizing and responding to bullying behavior.

To strengthen teacher and staff involvement, ongoing professional development and clear school-wide guidelines are essential. Teachers need tools to recognize not only overt bullying but also more subtle forms such as social exclusion or online harassment (Emynorane et al., 2024). They also require support from school leadership to take consistent action and to participate in developing a positive school culture. Staff collaboration, clear reporting systems, and regular reflection on intervention strategies can empower all adults in the school to play an active, unified role in bullying prevention Farrel et al., 2001). Without this foundation, even well-intentioned efforts may fall short, leaving students vulnerable and reinforcing a culture of silence around bullying.

Student Empowerment and Peer Influence

Student empowerment plays a vital role in creating a school environment where bullying is less likely to thrive (Kyriakides, 2014). When students are taught to recognize bullying and feel confident to speak up, they become active participants in maintaining a safe and respectful community. In the observed school, however, many students lacked a clear understanding of what bullying looks like, particularly when it involves verbal teasing or social exclusion. This gap limited their ability to intervene or seek help. Empowerment begins with education students must be equipped with the knowledge, language, and tools to safely respond to bullying, whether they are targets, bystanders, or even those exhibiting harmful behaviors (Musarirwa, 2017).

Peer influence is a powerful force at the elementary level and can be a key factor in either reinforcing or discouraging bullying behaviors (Schrier, 2021). Children often look to their peers for approval, and social dynamics can play a big role in shaping behavior. If a culture of silence or acceptance around bullying exists, students are less likely to intervene (Sam, 2020). However, if a school promotes positive peer behavior such as upstander training, peer mentoring, or classroom discussions on empathy students are more likely to support one another and challenge bullying (UNESCO, 2022). Interviews showed that some students were willing to help their peers, but many lacked confidence or feared retaliation, which underscores the importance of a supportive school climate and adult reinforcement.

To truly empower students, schools must provide structured opportunities for peer leadership and social-emotional learning (Emynorane, 2024). Activities like peer mediation programs, kindness campaigns, or classroom-based role plays help students build empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). When students see that their actions can make a difference, they are more likely to stand up for others and contribute positively to the school culture. In the context of this study, building student empowerment not only strengthens prevention efforts but also fosters resilience and community responsibility among young learners key components of a long-term, sustainable approach to reducing bullying.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings from this study highlight several critical policy implications for school leadership and education authorities. Current anti-bullying policies, while present in documentation, often lack clarity, consistency, and practical guidance. Policies must go beyond definitions and disciplinary procedures; they should include clearly outlined roles for staff, structured prevention programs, and regular training requirements (Winnaar et al., 2018). Schools need district-level support to implement evidence-based policies that promote early identification, student engagement, and restorative practices, rather than relying solely on punitive measures (Zhao et al., 2023). Establishing mandatory reporting systems and tracking mechanisms will also help ensure incidents are properly addressed and monitored over time.

From a practical standpoint, schools must prioritize consistent implementation of anti-bullying measures across all grade levels and staff roles. The inconsistency observed in how teachers and staff responded to bullying incidents reflects a gap between policy and daily practice. To bridge this gap, schools should provide ongoing professional development, create clear response protocols, and involve the entire school community including students and parents in prevention efforts. Practical strategies like classroom

check-ins, school-wide campaigns, peer mentoring, and inclusion programs can make policies more actionable and visible within the school environment (Wang et al., 2009).

Finally, a shift toward a proactive and community-based approach to bullying prevention is essential. Schools should move beyond reactive, isolated responses to a more integrated, preventative framework that aligns policies with day-to-day practices (Montero-Carretero et al., 2021). Encouraging student voice, fostering a positive school climate, and embedding social-emotional learning into the curriculum are all practical ways to support this shift (Emynorane et al., 2024). When policies are understood, supported, and practiced consistently by all stakeholders, they become a living part of school culture helping to not only reduce bullying but to cultivate a safe, inclusive environment where all students can thrive.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical need for a more consistent and coordinated approach to bullying prevention in elementary schools in Sakaraha, Madagascar. While bullying remains a significant issue, especially in the form of verbal and social exclusion, the findings suggest that current prevention strategies are often insufficient, inconsistent, and poorly communicated. Teachers and principals generally recognize the problem, but the variability in their responses indicates a lack of uniformity in how bullying is addressed across schools. School policies on bullying exist but are not always practical or detailed enough to guide effective intervention. The study highlights the importance of implementing comprehensive, school-wide anti-bullying programs that involve all stakeholders, including students, teachers, and parents. Furthermore, it calls for greater emphasis on student empowerment, fostering a culture of respect, and providing teachers with ongoing training to handle bullying in its various forms. By strengthening these areas, schools can create a safer, more supportive environment where bullying is not only reduced but actively prevented.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the government strengthen national policies on school bullying by providing clear guidelines, funding for prevention programs, and mandatory training for educators. Schools should adopt a unified, school-wide approach to bullying prevention that includes regular monitoring, clear reporting procedures, and integration of social-emotional learning into the curriculum. Teachers need continuous professional development on recognizing and addressing all forms of bullying, as well as support from school leadership in enforcing consistent disciplinary measures. Parents should be actively involved through awareness campaigns and parent-school partnerships that encourage open communication and early intervention. For future researchers, it is recommended to expand the study to include students' perspectives and to use mixed-method approaches that incorporate quantitative data for a more comprehensive understanding of bullying dynamics in various educational contexts across Madagascar.

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