Bullying in a multicultural secondary school in Chatsworth: *An explorative-descriptive study of learners' perceptions and experiences.*

By

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Declaration of Originality

I, Bonolo Pitswane, declare that:

I hereby declare that the thesis presented here, unless stated otherwise, is my original work. This thesis has never been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university. This dissertation does not contain other persons' writing unless specifically acknowledged as sourced from other researchers. Unless acknowledged, the data, information, sources, and pictures included in this study are solely my own and do not incorporate the work of any other individuals.

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Date : 01 October 2025

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I would like to extend my sincere appreciation and acknowledge the following individuals for their significant contributions to the successful completion of this study.

I want to start by sincerely thanking God Almighty, whose grace and divine intervention have been crucial in enabling me to successfully complete this challenging and stressful journey of writing this thesis.

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I would also like to show my appreciation to my research participants for their willingness to be part of the study and for sharing their experiences with me.

Dedication

In loving memory of my late mother, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to her. During our last conversation, at home after she arrived home just before her passing, I told her I was accepted for my master's program. She was happy for me and said she knew I would make it. I firmly believe that her faith in me and the constant support she gave me throughout my life have been a motivator for my current achievements. Ke a leboga Tholo!

Abstract

This dissertation explores bullying among teenage learners in a multicultural secondary school in Chatsworth, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Against the backdrop of ongoing challenges in the education sector, including school violence, cultural divisions, and the psychosocial vulnerabilities of learners, understanding how young people perceive and experience bullying is vital for informing effective interventions. This qualitative study was framed within an interpretivist paradigm, allowing for an in-depth exploration of learners' subjective realities and meanings. It further drew on the person-in-environment perspective and relational well-being theory to situate learners' experiences within their broader ecological and relational lenses. The data were collected through two focus group discussions with 13 Grade 11 learners, aged between 15 and 18 years, providing insights into how they understand, perceive, and have experienced bullying. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, enabling a nuanced exploration of the meanings associated with bullying. The findings revealed that learners perceive bullying as a multifaceted phenomenon, extending beyond physical aggression to encompass verbal abuse, psychological harm, social exclusion, stereotyping, and cyberbullying. Their accounts highlighted that bullying is not only an individual act of aggression but also a socially embedded behaviour influenced by peer dynamics, institutional practices, and historical legacies of inequality. The participants identified teachers being part of the bullying problem by partaking in it, inconsistent enforcement of rules, lack of discipline and possible behaviours learnt from home. These accounts underscore the urgent need for effective interventions that address both the emotional and educational consequences of bullying. The study has policy implications. The study showed the causes and effects of school bullying, which policymakers should aim to address to reduce the prevalence and address the issue of school bullying in South Africa. Participants recommended preventative, restorative, and participatory approaches rather than punitive discipline. Recommended strategies included whole-school anti-bullying education, restorative justice practices, peer-support systems, accessible reporting mechanisms, culturally responsive and trauma-informed teacher training, and inclusive extracurricular activities to build cohesion. Learners also emphasised the importance of stronger communication among parents, staff, and learners, as well as addressing broader community-level prejudices that impact school interactions. This study contributes practically and theoretically by generating context-specific evidence for educators, [school] social workers, and policymakers while demonstrating the value of centring learner perspectives in intervention design.

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List of Abbreviations

KZN DOE: KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Fund

PIE: Person-in-Environment

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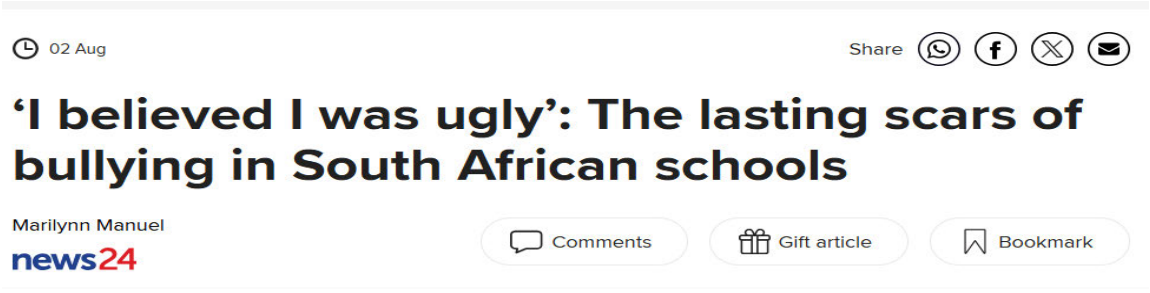
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

"*Deputy Minister in the Presidency for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, Mmapaseka Steve Letsike, has condemned the viral video depicting a schoolgirl being assaulted.*" **(South African Government News Agency, 2025)**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'I believed I was ugly': The lasting scars of bullying in South African schools

Marilynn Manuel

news24

Comments Gift article Bookmark

(Manuel, 2025)

1.1. Background and Rationale

1.1.1. Context

This research begins with the above excerpts of news articles, which contextualise the persistence, urgency and impact of the challenge of school bullying in South Africa. The overwhelming impact of school bullying on learners (children) is a matter of both public concern and political action, a reality underscored by recent events, in a statement reflecting the seriousness with which this issue is viewed at the highest levels of government [by Deputy Minister], as issued by the South African News Agency on the 5th of August 2025. The condemnation, by the political principals, highlights the immediate and visible nature of the problem. It is also noteworthy that the actual depth of the issue extends far beyond 'the known' individual incidents, leaving unnoticed emotional and psychological wounds that endure long after the bullying event has ended. The News24 article (as shown above) also attempts to capture this enduring trauma towards learners' self-esteem.

A foundational definition, provided by Olweus (2013), attributes bullying to ongoing, deliberate hostility amongst pupils in positions of unequal physical, social, or psychological dominance. It is a matter of power. Historically, schools have been a common site for such peer harassment since the early 1990s (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011). Zibane (2017, p.258) found that in the school context, social relationships were constructed as hierarchical, with the power dynamics present legitimising the hierarchy between girls and boys and between social groups. Bullying has immediate and long-lasting effects on both the victim and the instigator

(Aleem, 2016), leading to sustained academic setbacks and profound physical and emotional trauma, which is at times lifelong if left unattended (Adewoye & du Plessis, 2021).

School bullying, as a topic worth exploring, is a complex form of school-based violence that negatively affects the entire educational ecosystem (Banks, 1997; Akiba, LeTendre, Baker, & Goesling, 2002; Adlem, 2021; Tanga & Hendricks, 2023). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reports that across the globe, approximately 246 million children are subjected to school violence and bullying every year (UNESCO, 2017). This then implies that the pervasive challenge of school bullying in South Africa is a matter of profound academic concern, including from the field of social work (*see* Adlem, 2021; Masilo & Matlakala, 2023, among others).

Media coverage has increased, paralleling the rise in academic studies aimed at better understanding the phenomenon (Tanga & Hendricks, 2023). The prevalence of bullying in South Africa is particularly alarming, with statistics indicating that nearly 80% of South African children experience bullying (Mahabeer, 2020), with only 23% reporting that they feel safe at school (Mathebula & Runhare, 2021). This is in stark contrast to countries like Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, where approximately 70% of learners feel safe (Juan, Zuze, Hannan, Govender, & Reddy, 2018). These figures underline a national crisis that compromises children's fundamental rights to learning and safety (Sikhakhane, Muthukrishna & Martin, 2018). The issue has become increasingly visible through viral media clips, prompting widespread public concern.

In response to this crisis, various legislative and policy frameworks have been established in South Africa, including but not limited to the Children's Act (2005), the Child Justice Act (2008), and the South African Schools Act of 1996. Adding to this is the Protection from Harassment Act (2011), which also offers legal recourse for victims of bullying and harassment, within and beyond the school setting. Schools Act, in particular, mandates that school governing bodies create a Code of Conduct and establish a legal framework for disciplinary policies (Mathebula & Runhare, 2021). Despite these provisions (as detailed in Chapter 2), a significant gap remains between policy and implementation, often due to a lack of departmental support, inadequate staffing, the unavailability of social workers in most schools, and insufficient staff training (Eberlein & Moen, 2016). This inconsistency in enforcement underscores the importance of understanding how these policies are perceived and experienced at the school level. The Department of Basic Education's National Safe Schools Framework (2015) and comprehensive school policies are also recognised as essential tools in this effort, providing a structured approach to address bullying (Hall & Dawes, 2019).

This study, therefore, is driven by a need to explore the ongoing and rife nature of bullying, as experienced and perceived by learners in a multicultural school system. While research on bullying has been conducted in other parts of the country and KwaZulu-Natal, such as Mweli's (2013) study in a primary school in Inanda, there remains a notable research gap concerning the lived experiences of learners in a multicultural secondary school in Chatsworth, an area that is dominated by numerous diversities, including multiracialism and multiculturalism.

1.1.2. Rationale

The rationale for this study is multifaceted, with its origins in a personal and professional nexus. A personal encounter with a close friend, a school teacher in one of the multicultural schools within Chatsworth, galvanised the researcher's interest in this topic. The teacher, who attends the same temple as the researcher (a specific Hare Krishna temple), informally shared accounts of bullying incidents they had witnessed. A particular incident involved an altercation between a Black child and an Indian child that was beginning to acquire racial undertones. This experience not only highlighted the pervasive nature of bullying but also underscored the complex social cohesion dynamics present within this specific multicultural setting. This interaction served as the primary motivation for the researcher to conduct a study that would specifically explore learners' perceptions of bullying, its contributory factors, and potential resolutions within a school with diverse backgrounds.

Beyond the above encounter with the teacher, the study was also inspired by the few studies that have been conducted on bullying, such as Mweli (2023), Mathaba (2014), Qwabe et al. (2022), and Hlophe, Morojele and Motsa (2017), who have highlighted the dynamics of bullying in schools and its consequences, emphasising the need for effective interventions (Zhang, Mulhall, Flowers & Lee, 2019).

Based on the context above, this research explores the perceptions and experiences of secondary school learners regarding bullying in a specific multicultural school in Chatsworth, KwaZulu-Natal. The focus on a multicultural context is particularly crucial, as multiculturalism can significantly influence bullying dynamics (Woo & Lee, 2022). As Scheepers, Boshoff and Oostenbrink (2017) posit, South African schools, as a reflection of the "rainbow nation," are uniquely positioned to face challenges rooted in ethnic diversity. A study by Wickes, Zahnow, White, and Mazerolle (2014) suggests that increased diversity can sometimes lead to reduced social interactions and solidarity, potentially exacerbating issues such as bullying. Adopting a social work lens, as emphasised by Ma, Zhou, et al. (2023), this study aims to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of bullying within a multicultural secondary school, thereby informing the development of effective, culturally sensitive intervention strategies. Through a qualitative

approach using focus groups, this study aims to give voice to learners, shedding light on their perceptions, contributory factors, and potential solutions to this persistent issue.

1.2. Problem Statement

The severe and widespread challenge of school bullying in South Africa is a matter of urgent public and political concern (Adlem, 2021; Masilo & Matlakala, 2023). This complex form of school-based violence is a global issue (Banks, 1997; Akiba, LeTendre, Baker, & Goesling, 2002; Adlem, 2021; Tanga & Hendricks, 2023), with UNESCO (2017) noting that it occurs frequently, up to weekly. In South Africa, the problem is particularly alarming; one survey found that approximately 68% of learners faced threats or physical attacks at school, giving the country the highest prevalence of school bullying among 49 surveyed nations (Loynes, 2013).

This high level of school violence disrupts positive learning processes and peer relationships (Nyawo, 2016; Maphumulo, 2018; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2015), with learners remaining involved as both victims and perpetrators (Corcoran, Cheung, Kim, & Xie, 2018). Furthermore, the long-term psychological harm is significant. Victims face an increased risk of psychiatric outcomes (Silberg et al., 2016), with trauma persisting into adulthood and leading to adverse mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Evans-Lacko et al., 2016; Dantchev, Hickman, Heron, Zammit, & Wolke, 2019). Childhood bullying and instigation also have adverse adulthood outcomes, including violence (Sweeting et al, 2023).

While social work research and practice are crucial for addressing this problem (Huang & Cornell, 2019; Rambaree, Nässén, Holmberg, & Fransson, 2023), studies from a social work perspective remain limited. Specifically, there are key gaps concerning bullying in multiracial schools that necessitate culturally sensitive interventions (Choi, Kruis, & Lee, 2021; Xu, Macrynikola, Waseem, & Miranda, 2020). There is a limited exploration of how multicultural dynamics influence bullying, especially within South Africa's unique post-apartheid context, as diversity can sometimes exacerbate the problem (Connell, Sayed, González, & Schell-Busey, 2015). Research often overlooks the intersectionality of culture and bullying (Shelley, Pickett, Mancini, McDougle, Rissler, & Cleary, 2017).

This study addresses these identified gaps by focusing on a multicultural secondary school, which contrasts with much of the existing research that has concentrated on primary or university students (Mweli, 2013; Shelley et al., 2017; Stanković et al., 2022). Furthermore, it contributes to the literature by applying the relational well-being theory and the person-in-environment theory. This theoretical lens allows the research to move beyond a focus on merely the behaviours associated with bullying, instead exploring how these acts are

influenced by underlying contextual and multicultural factors (Mampane, 2023). Thus, this approach aims to provide valuable, practical insights to inform social work practitioners and enable them to develop tailored interventions.

1.3. The Research Site & Its Context

The study was conducted at the selected Secondary School, located at Golden Poppy Crescent, Chatsworth, 4092. Chatsworth is a historic Indian township located approximately 14 kilometres from the Durban City Centre (Vahed, 2013). The school operates under the Umlazi District of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. It enrols students from Grade 8 to Grade 12, with learners ranging in age from approximately 13 to 18 years old. The majority of the student population is drawn from working-class and impoverished Indian and African communities within Chatsworth and its surroundings (Vahed, 2013).

The selection of this specific research site was driven by its convenient location, which facilitated easy access to participants and streamlined the process of obtaining permissions from school educators and the Department of Education. Furthermore, the school's multicultural environment provided a rich context for the study.

- The Research Site's Historical and Cultural Landscape of Chatsworth

Chatsworth's unique cultural and historical identity is deeply intertwined with South Africa's history, particularly that of Indian South Africans. The presence of South Africans of Indian descent in the area dates back to the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers in Durban in 1860 (Singh, 2022). Initially designed by the apartheid government as a means to suppress the educational, social, financial, spiritual, and physical development of its residents, Chatsworth has since evolved into a diverse community (Ellapen & Paul, 2021).

The Group Areas Act, which enforced residential racial segregation, significantly impacted the spatial distribution and cultural practices of the Indian community in Chatsworth. Despite these challenges, residents have largely maintained aspects of their cultural heritage (Archary, 2022). The memories of forced relocation and transnational narratives continue to shape the cultural transformation of Indian South Africans in the region (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2016).

Post-apartheid, Chatsworth's population has grown to include various racial and cultural groups, such as Muslims, Hindus, Zulus, Xhosas, and Christians (Ellapen & Paul, 2021). This multiculturalism is set against the backdrop of South Africa's complex history of racial segregation, which continues to influence social cohesion, perceptions, and interactions among different racial groups (Pirtle, 2022). The area is home to numerous landmarks that

reflect this diversity, including Gandhi Centenary Park, the Bangladesh Market, Sri Sri Radha Radhanath Temple, the Lord Hanuman Statue, Shri Vishnu Temple, and Al Meen Masjid, alongside Christian sites such as the Christian Revival Centre & Magazine Barracks. The community also features secular venues for sporting events at Chatsworth Stadium and shopping at Chatsworth Centre.

- Research Site, Language and Academic Environment

Despite KwaZulu-Natal being predominantly a Zulu-speaking province, English is the dominant language in Chatsworth. As such, all curriculum and teaching at the selected Secondary School are conducted in English. Consequently, the research, including focus group discussions and data presentation, was conducted exclusively in English.

- Visual Representation of the Research Site

Visual representations of the school's facilities and its immediate environment are provided below by the researcher to offer a comprehensive understanding of the study setting.

Image A: Landscapes and area leading to the selected Secondary School.

Image A, depicting the school from a distance, illustrates its suburban setting and reveals seemingly well-developed facilities, characterised by structured buildings and maintained grounds.

Image B: The primary school that is opposite the research site.

Complementing this, Image B captures the surrounding residential areas and the access routes to the research site, notably showcasing crowded, tarred roads. This contrasts sharply with the often unpaved and less densely populated thoroughfares prevalent around many rural schools across the broader South African expanse, thereby highlighting the distinct infrastructural and demographic context of the selected Secondary School within its suburban environment.

- **School Layout**

Image C: School Layout

Image D: School's Outside

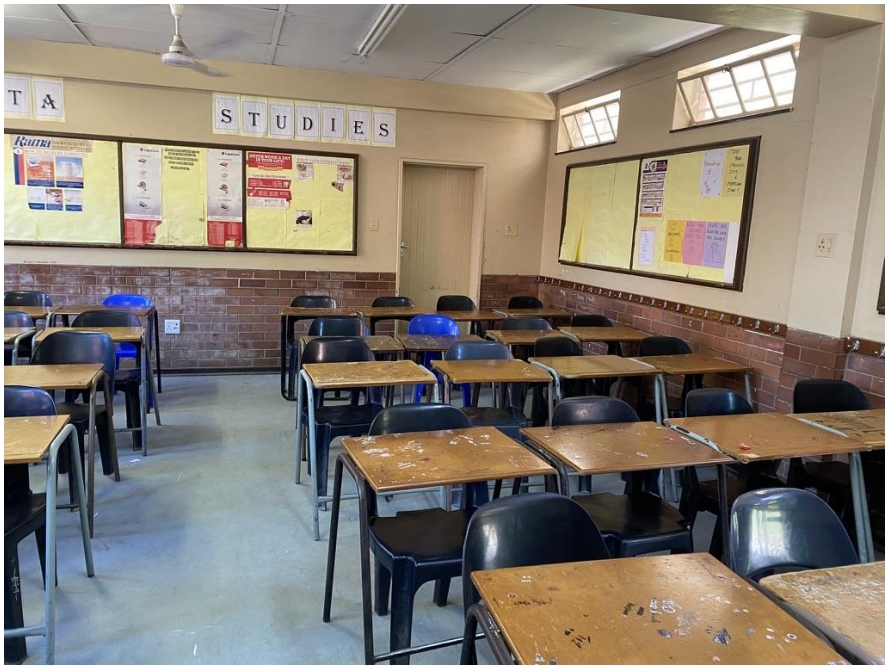

Image E: Classroom

According to the person-in-environment theory, an individual's development is shaped by the interaction between them and their environment (Harvey-Fishenden, Macdonald & Bowen, 2019). This theoretical lens proved invaluable in understanding the selected Secondary School, highlighting the critical influence of its physical, social, and cultural environment on students' experiences. While Images A, B, C, and D convey the school's suburban location and well-maintained exterior, Image E, showing the interior of a classroom, introduces a contrasting reality. Despite the external appearance of a well-resourced "former Model C school," the classroom interior reveals mismatched, worn, and graffiti-covered desks and chairs. Educational posters and student work on display indicate an effort to maintain an engaging and educational space despite evident resource constraints. This internal reality starkly contrasts with the presumed privilege of such schools, as observed by Zibane (2017), who noted the stark lack of facilities and resources in many township schools and their surroundings. The visual evidence from the selected Secondary School thus highlights the complexities within South African educational settings, where historical advantages intersect with contemporary challenges in creating an equitable learning environment.

1.4. Aims and Objectives

1.4.1. Aim

The research study aims to explore and describe secondary school learners' perceptions and experiences of bullying in a selected multicultural school.

1.4.1.1. Objectives

- To explore learners' understanding of bullying in a multicultural school in Chatsworth.
- To determine learners' perceptions of the contributing factors to bullying in a multicultural school in Chatsworth.
- To explore learners' experiences and the effects of bullying on learners within the selected multicultural school in Chatsworth
- To determine the learners' recommendations for addressing bullying in a selected multicultural school in Chatsworth.

1.4.1.2. Research Questions

- What are secondary school learners' understanding of bullying in a multicultural school?
- What do learners in the selected multicultural school in Chatsworth regard as the contributory factors of secondary school bullying?
- What are the experiences and effects of bullying on learners within the selected multicultural school?
- What are secondary school learners' recommendations for ways of addressing bullying in the multicultural secondary school?

1.5. Theoretical Framework

The person-in-environment and relational well-being theories served as the theoretical lens for examining learners' perceptions of bullying, enabling a comprehensive understanding of various factors at different levels contributing to such behaviours in a school setting.

1.5.1. Person in Environment

This study adopts the Person-In-Environment (PIE) framework, a foundational system in social work, which operates on the core principle that individuals' well-being and optimal functioning are achieved when their personal characteristics align with their environment (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2022). By applying this lens, the research analyses the transactional relationship between the learner and the multicultural school setting in Chatsworth, investigating how the 'fit' between individual traits and systemic stressors, such as school culture and imbalances in

ethnic representation, shapes responses to bullying (Trevithick, 2012; Webb, 2022). This facilitates an explicit evaluation of how environmental factors, including the presence or absence of inclusive school frameworks, influence the dynamics of bullying and victimisation within this specific multicultural setting (Lynch, 2021; Stepney, 2022). This analytical grounding ensures a multidimensional exploration of the phenomenon, examining how the incongruence between a learner's psychological needs and the prevailing school atmosphere contributes to bullying behaviours (Gitterman & Knight, 2021; Harker & Green, 2023). This study applies the PIE theory to provide a holistic understanding of bullying dynamics by considering the interplay between learners' characteristics and their school environment (Estévez et al., 2019). This framework allows for analysing how environmental factors, such as school culture, policies, and peer interactions, influence learners' perceptions and responses to bullying (Rai & Agarwal, 2019).

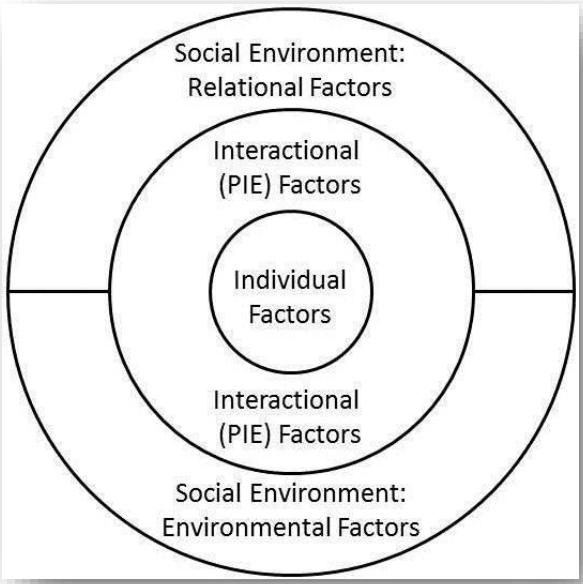

Figure 1: Person-in-environment Source: (van Breda, 2017, p. 250).

The above figure shows the multi-layered life of a person within an environment. According to Rai and Agarwal (2019), the Person-in-Environment theory can be applied to analyse how the characteristics of the school environment, such as the school culture, policies, and peer interactions, interact with the individual characteristics of the learners, including their personality traits, coping mechanisms, and social skills (ibid).

1.5.2. Relational well-being theory

Relational Well-being Theory underscores the significance of social connections in promoting emotional resilience, self-esteem, and overall life satisfaction (White, 2015; Umukoro, Egwakhe, & Falana, 2021). Grounded in the interpretivist tradition, this theory approaches well-being from a subjective perspective, focusing on the quality of relationships, support systems, and interpersonal dynamics as fundamental to psychological health (White, 2015). It is particularly relevant to the study of school bullying, as it emphasises the role of supportive relationships, empathy, and positive social interactions in fostering well-being (Umukoro, 2021). The theory, established by authors of the global South [*Sarah White* & *Shriya Jha*], is well-suited for a South African context, as it highlights how individuals are shaped by their social contexts and is ideal for examining how learners perceive inclusion, exclusion, and marginalisation in a multicultural environment (Theron & Van Rensburg, 2020). This perspective aligns with the philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness and shared humanity. The theory promotes a holistic understanding of well-being, positing that a learner's welfare is deeply connected to the well-being of their peers, teachers, and the broader school community (Clark & Kidd, 2022). The following diagram was conceptualised by White (2015) to show the three points (what she refers to as *dynamics*) of relational well-being.

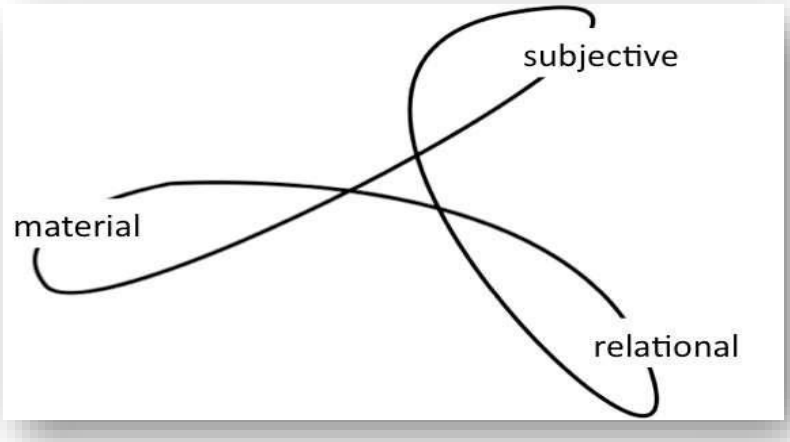

Figure 2.: The dimensions of relational well-being (taken from White, 2015).

According to White (2015), the diagram (Figure 2) represents and retains the sense of inter-relationship and a sense of movement. She further breaks down the above theoretical dimensions in another publication, White (2010, p. 161), positing that:

> "… *the material comprises assets, welfare, and standards of living. The relation has two spheres: the social sphere, which focuses on social relationships and access to*

public goods, and the human sphere, which focuses on the capabilities, attitudes to life and personal relationships. The subjective also has two spheres, with one sphere focusing on people's perceptions of their (material, social and human) positions and the other sphere focusing on cultural values, ideologies, and beliefs" (White, 2010, p.161)

According to Messena and Everri (2022), the relational well-being diagram (Figure 2) often illustrates how these dimensions are interconnected and influence each other. According to White (2015), this perspective highlights the need to consider a broad range of factors when assessing and promoting well-being. By incorporating dimensions such as personal growth, positive relations with others, and environmental mastery, the relational well-being theory acknowledges the interconnectedness of different aspects of individuals' lives and the importance of addressing these dimensions collectively to enhance overall well-being (ibid).

1.5.3 Combining the two theories

Integrating the Person-in-environment (PIE) Theory and the Relational Well-being Theory provided this study with a powerful, holistic framework. While the PIE theory emphasises how an individual's well-being is influenced by their interactions with their surroundings (Namini et al., 2010), the Relational Well-being Theory underscores that well-being is also profoundly shaped by the quality of one's relationships with family, peers, friends, and the wider community (Yong, Haines & Joseph, 2023). By combining these two perspectives, this study attempted to move beyond a single-cause analysis to explore how environmental factors (such as school policies and social structures) and relational dynamics (such as peer interactions and support systems) jointly influence bullying behaviours. This integrated approach is particularly crucial in a multicultural school environment, as it enables a nuanced understanding of how personal characteristics, diverse cultural backgrounds, and the specific school context interact to create or mitigate bullying. Therefore, this framework enables a more comprehensive understanding of well-being and helps develop tailored interventions that promote conflict resolution and relational harmony, taking into account the cultural backgrounds of all learners involved (Estévez, Estévez, Segura, & Suárez, 2019).

1.6. Summary of the Research Methodology

While a more detailed account of the methodology is provided in Chapter 3, this section offers a brief overview of the research methodology employed in this study.

1.6 .1. Research Approach and Paradigm

This study employs a qualitative approach and is situated within an interpretivist paradigm. This philosophical approach was selected because it allows the researcher to understand and interpret the learners' multiple realities and subjective experiences. By focusing on participants' perspectives, this paradigm ensures the study captures the richness and complexity of their lived experiences with bullying, which cannot be adequately captured by quantitative measures alone.

1.6.2. Research Design

The research design is a three-tier contextual, exploratory-descriptive design. This structure was chosen to provide a deep and comprehensive understanding of the research topic. The exploratory aspect enables the researcher to investigate a phenomenon about which little is known. At the same time, the descriptive component ensures that the study provides a detailed account of the learners' perceptions and experiences. The contextual element grounds the study in the specific school environment, ensuring the findings are relevant to Chatsworth's unique historical, cultural, and social dynamics.

1.6.3. Data Collection

Data was collected through focus groups with purposively selected learners from the secondary school. Focus groups were chosen as the primary data collection method because they facilitate group interaction, allowing participants to share their experiences and perceptions in a supportive environment. This method also encourages a dynamic conversation that can reveal shared beliefs and collective meanings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the topic than individual interviews might.

1.6.4. Data Analysis

The data gathered from these focus groups will be analysed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and systematic approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Thematic analysis will allow the researcher to go beyond surface-level descriptions to uncover underlying meanings and insights from the learners' discussions about bullying.

1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This current chapter serves as the foundation for the entire research study. It begins by introducing the topic, followed by the background and rationale, which contextualise the problem of school bullying in South Africa and highlight the researcher's motivation. This leads to the problem statement, which outlines the key issues and gaps in the existing literature that the study aims to address. The study's location is also detailed, providing a comprehensive description of the research site's historical and cultural context. The chapter further outlines the study's aims and objectives, as well as the theoretical frameworks that guided the research. It concludes with a brief overview of the methodology, the significance of the study, its assumptions, and a definition of key concepts to ensure clarity and consistency throughout the dissertation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 provides a thorough review of existing literature relevant to the study's focus. It explores secondary school learners' perceptions of bullying in schools, drawing on both local and international studies. It also explores the predominant forms of bullying most prevalent in school settings. The chapter concludes by examining existing recommendations from learners on how to address bullying best, providing a crucial foundation of empirical and theoretical knowledge upon which the current research is built.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 provides a detailed and comprehensive outline of the research methodology. The chapter begins by establishing the research approach and design of the study, justifying the use of a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm. The chapter then discusses the sampling strategies employed, the data collection methods (focus groups), and the process of data analysis (thematic analysis) in a step-by-step manner. Finally, this chapter addresses critical aspects of research rigour, including how reliability and validity were ensured and the measures taken to uphold trustworthiness and ethical issues. It concludes by identifying the study's limitations.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Presentation of Data

In this chapter, the research findings are brought to life. It begins with the formal presentation of data from the focus groups conducted with the secondary school learners. Following this, the chapter provides a detailed analysis and interpretation of the findings, directly engaging with the themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' discussions. The study's key insights and discoveries are featured in this section, providing a direct answer to the research questions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

The dissertation's final chapter serves as a synthesis of the entire research project. It provides a summary of the key findings from the study, followed by a set of conclusions drawn from the evidence presented in Chapter 4. Most importantly, this chapter outlines a series of practical recommendations for social work practitioners, school staff, and policymakers, all of which are directly informed by the study's key findings and designed to help address the problem of bullying in multicultural secondary schools.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a review of the scholarly literature relevant to this study. The primary purpose was to establish a robust theoretical foundation and contextualise the research within existing knowledge on school bullying, with a specific focus on the unique social and cultural landscape of South Africa.

Bullying, a pervasive social phenomenon with far-reaching consequences, has been a subject of extensive inquiry globally (Adlem, 2021; Masilo & Matlakala, 2023; Tanga & Hendricks, 2023). As a diverse and multicultural nation with a history of apartheid, South Africa is not immune to this complex issue (Adlem, 2021). While the manifestations and prevalence of bullying may vary across different contexts (Banks, 1997; Akiba, LeTendre, Baker, & Goesling, 2002), its detrimental impact on individual well-being, academic achievement, and the overall school climate remains a constant area of exploration, especially in an era where school social work is radically advocated.

The chapter begins by examining the prevalence and dynamics of bullying from a global perspective before narrowing the discussion to the South African context and the specific regional landscape of KwaZulu-Natal. It then delves into a more detailed conceptualisation of bullying, exploring its various forms and its detrimental psychological, social, and academic effects on learners. The discussion further explores the contributory factors that underpin such behaviours, including the potential role of ineffective multicultural education. Finally, the chapter reviews existing social policies, legislation, and frameworks addressing bullying in South Africa. Throughout this review, the principles of the person-in-environment and the relational well-being theories have been used to frame the discussion, Thus establishing a clear research gap and building the theoretical groundwork for the current study.

Figure 3: Overview of Chapter 2

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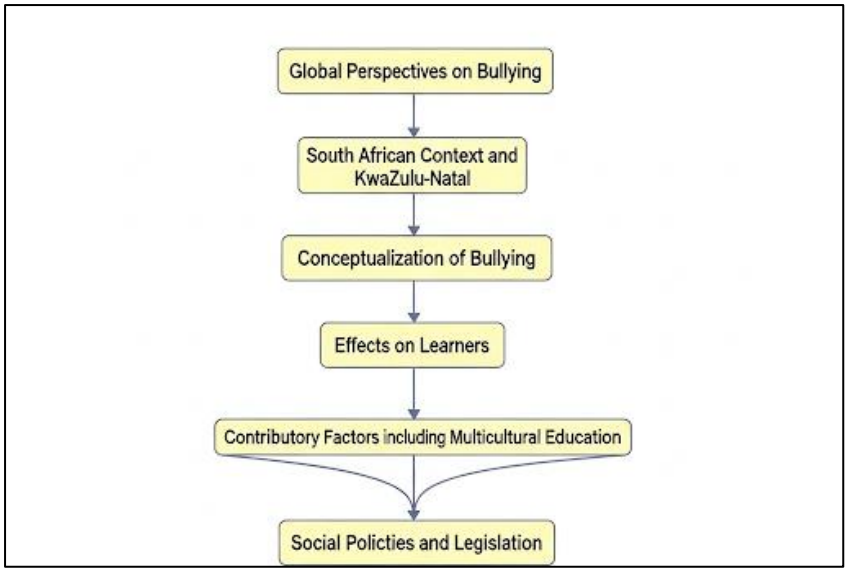


Figure 3: Overview of Chapter 2

2.2. Global Perspectives, Context and Consequences of Bullying

Bullying is a global phenomenon, and its prevalence is a significant concern in many countries. A qualitative study in the Philippines, for example, found that bullying remains a pervasive issue, taking various forms both inside and outside of school premises (Kilag et al., 2023). The findings from this and other international studies highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to prevention and reaction (Bachi et al., 2021; Hamidsyukrie et al., 2022). The implications for victims are profound; research shows that bullying victimisation has detrimental effects on students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and overall school experience (Hesapcioglu & Tural, 2018; Ndetei et al., 2024). Exposure to bullying can lead to emotional and behavioural problems such as loneliness, fear, depression, and anxiety (Han & Demirtaş, 2020).

The impact of bullying on victims extends beyond the school environment and can have lasting effects on their self-esteem, social relations, and mental health (Bachi et al., 2021; Hamidsyukrie et al., 2022). Research demonstrates that victims and aggressors may experience long-term adverse outcomes affecting their self-esteem, social interactions, and overall life paths (Parveen, Tehreem, & Shams, 2023; Shiba & Mokwena, 2024). Multiple studies also show variances in bullying rates between boarding and day schools, and countries like Sierra Leone have been identified as having particularly prevalent bullying victimisation among adolescents (Bachi et al., 2021; Hamidsyukrie et al., 2022; Osborne, 2023).

Also, a growing body of international research has explored how learners interpret bullying, revealing various contributing factors (Stives et al., 2021; Sánchez et al., 2019; Wati et al., 2023). These include perceived differences in victims (Cheng et al., 2011), a bully's desire for social status and popularity (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Frisén et al., 2008), peer pressure (Thornberg, 2010), or even boredom (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008). In light of this widespread issue, addressing bullying requires effective interventions to create a safe and conducive learning environment (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021; Mabasa, 2014). Scholars have highlighted the importance of a participatory approach, where learners are involved in the intervention process (Stives et al., 2021; Sánchez et al., 2019; Wati et al., 2023). Recommendations include implementing peer mentoring programs (Boyes, Bowes, Cluver, & Ward, 2014), involving students in the development of anti-bullying policies (Steyn & Singh, 2018), and providing guidance and counselling on how to respond to bullying (Chisala et al., 2023).

2.3. Bullying in the South African Context

The severity of bullying is particularly high in South Africa, which was identified as having the highest incidence of bullying globally in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Loynes, 2013). Loynes (2013) found that an alarming 68% of learners feared physical assault or being threatened with a weapon while at school. Around the same era, these national trends were echoed at a provincial level, with a surge in theft and assault cases reported in KwaZulu-Natal (Anthony, 2013). In 2017, principals in the uThungulu district, KwaZulu-Natal, expressed distress over the high incidence of bullying perpetration in their schools, highlighting the urgency of addressing this issue (Steyn & Singh, 2018).

In South Africa, research indicates that a considerable percentage of learners have experienced bullying (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021). For instance, Adewoye and Plessis (2021) reviewed literature that shows that 34.4% of sampled learners in Gauteng reported being victims of bullying, with 67.7% observing an increase in incidents over the preceding two years. These trends are further substantiated by research from the Sedibeng District, which noted high levels of aggression among Grade 10 learners (Myburgh, Poggenpoel & Nhlapo, 2015). This increase in bullying incidents over the years highlights the critical need for context-specific studies like the present one, which aim to provide actionable insights for developing practical interventions (Pillay, 2021).

The prevalence of bullying in South African schools is often linked to the broader societal context of violence and crime (Greeff & Grobler, 2008; Abdirahman, Fleming & Jacobsen, 2013; Ndwandwe, 2024). This connection is particularly relevant to this study's focus on Chatsworth (Greeff & Grobler, 2008). Factors such as socio-economic inequalities, home

environments, and external forces have been identified as contributors to school violence and bullying (Abdirahman, Fleming & Jacobsen, 2013). This observation is supported by the person-in-environment theory, which frames bullying as not merely an individual behaviour but a reflection of the broader social context (Ndwandwe, 2024). Community factors, such as the presence of gangs, have been shown to impact school attendance, increase bullying, and disrupt family life (Schenck, Magidi, & Erasmus, 2016). This mirroring of societal issues in school settings affects both learners and educators (Ndwandwe, 2024), highlighting the systemic nature of the problem — a concept that aligns with the relational well-being theory. The consequences of bullying extend beyond immediate effects, with long-term implications for victims, bullies, and bystanders (Mahabeer, 2020), which further emphasises the need for this study to contribute to a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

A unique dynamic observed in African contexts is a higher rate of secondary school learners who are both victims and perpetrators of bullying. This finding influences the overall school environment and social interactions (Hlophe et al., 2017). Mncube & Chinmaya (2021) found that some learners are targeted due to their foreign nationality, suggesting the presence of xenophobia that is particularly relevant to a multicultural setting. While gender may not play a significant role in the frequency of bullying, the type of school (private vs. public) may influence the levels experienced (Matsani, 2022).

The issue is particularly significant in the South African context, with research highlighting the prevalence of bullying at different educational levels (Mawila, Munongi, & Mabaso, 2023). Moreover, studies have found that imbalances in ethnic representation within a school can be linked to increased levels of bullying (Vitoroulis, Brittain, & Vaillancourt, 2016). Additionally, the influence of community factors, such as the presence of gangs, has been linked to increased bullying incidents within schools (Schenk et al., 2016)

The evolution of bullying from a general disciplinary concern to a severe human rights issue is evidenced by a progression of significant incidents that serve as analytical markers for the escalating crisis. As early as 2006, a South African Human Rights Commission report already confirmed that school violence was a widespread national phenomenon, even with the limited quantitative data available at the time (SAHRC, 2006). This historical baseline soon manifested in extreme physical brutality; for instance, in 2013, a learner at Marklands Secondary School in Shallcross suffered multiple vertebral fractures after being attacked by a peer (Naran, 2013). By 2015, the focus expanded to the profound psychological consequences of such violence, highlighted by the tragic case of a 17-year-old Cape Town schoolgirl who took her own life after being bullied by a gang (Baadjies, 2015). These cases sparked widespread community indignation, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, where

stakeholders expressed deep concern over the high frequency of violence in the province's schools (Chikoko, Naicker & Mthiyane, 2015). More recently, the visibility of these incidents has been amplified by digital media, such as a 2017 video from KwaZulu-Natal depicting a male learner violently assaulting a female learner, which brought elements of gender-based violence into the national bullying discourse (Mngandi & Tandwa, 2017). Current research continues to link these incidents to physical altercations and weapon possession among both genders (Liang et al, 2019). National surveys now show that in some provinces, over 30% of primary learners report being hit or called unkind names (Manuel et al., 2021), while qualitative studies identify a complex "victim-perpetrator overlap" that complicates traditional disciplinary responses (Shiba & Mokwena, 2024). By 2023, learners in township schools continued to report high levels of insecurity, with many fearing physical assault during their daily commute (Kutywayo, Mabetha, Naidoo, Mahuma, Njobe, Hlongwane, & Mullick, 2024).

Ultimately, the severity of bullying in South Africa is highlighted by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2021), which involved 49 countries and identified South Africa as having the highest incidence of bullying globally. The study revealed that an alarming 68% of learners feared physical assault or being threatened with a weapon while at school (Loynes, 2013).

This national trend is acutely reflected in KwaZulu-Natal, where a surge in theft and assault cases has been reported since 2008, with around ninety per cent committed by fellow learners (Anthony, 2013). This prevalence has prompted principals in the Uthungulu district to express ongoing distress over the high incidence of bullying perpetration in their schools (Steyn & Singh, 2018). Furthermore, the 2021 PIRLS data revealed that an alarming 64% of learners experienced bullying at least monthly, reinforcing that the "culture of fear" identified in earlier reports remains a pervasive reality in South African schools (Van Staden, 2023).This pervasive issue is not isolated to South Africa. More studies, in the African continent, show variances in bullying rates between boarding and day schools, and countries like Sierra Leone have also been identified as having particularly prevalent bullying victimisation among adolescents (Osborne, 2023; Shiba & Mokwena, 2024). A unique dynamic observed in African contexts is a higher rate of secondary school learners who are both victims and perpetrators of bullying. This finding influences the overall school environment and social interactions (Hlophe et al., 2017).

Bullying is often a precursor to violence in schools (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2014, p. 166) and constitutes a significant challenge to school safety (Nthate, 2017, p. 14). The South African-based literature reflects that the violence in schools is often a reflection of the high levels of violence experienced by children in their communities (Bhana,

2015; Mayeza, 2015; Reygan, 2016; Zuze et al., 2016). Specific incidents underscore this severity: a learner at Marklands Secondary School in Shallcross, a suburban area close to the site of this current study, suffered multiple vertebral fractures after being attacked by a fellow learner (Naran, 2013). In another incident in a KwaZulu-Natal school, a video depicted a male learner violently assaulting a female learner, highlighting elements of gender-based violence (Mngandi & Tandwa, 2017). Bullying is also linked to physical altercations and weapon possession by both genders (Liang et al., 2019). De Wet (2005, cited in Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018) recounts a harrowing incident where a ten-year-old learner from Pretoria was left fighting for his life after being hanged in a school toilet, demonstrating how children can resort to dangerous methods of punishment.

The community of KwaZulu-Natal has expressed indignation over the high frequency of violence in the province's schools (Chikoko, Naicker & Mthiyane, 2015). Although a 2006 South African Human Rights Commission report noted a lack of quantitative data on school violence, it confirmed that the existing evidence pointed to its widespread nature in numerous schools across the country. By focusing on a specific site in KwaZulu-Natal, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of these dynamics and provide evidence-based insights for interventions.

2.4. Conceptualising Bullying in the School

Bullying is a multifaceted social phenomenon that has been studied from various angles and across numerous geographical contexts. It is crucial to begin this discussion with an attempt to conceptualise the term to lay a solid foundation for this research, while acknowledging that the concept is not without its complexities and debates. While this phenomenon was at some point characterised as "violence shown by a group" (Loynes, 2013), the definition has been refined to "repeated negative behaviours by one or more students towards another student" (Aydin, 2023, p. 10). This definition is critical because it distinguishes bullying from other forms of aggression by highlighting the repetitive nature and the inherent power imbalance in such actions (Radliff, Hall, & Ökten, 2017). Bullying is a deliberate, sustained action, and its detrimental effects extend not only to the victim but also to bystanders and the broader school environment (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021).

Findings from a South African school revealed that learners defined bullying as physical and verbal acts, including "kicking, beating, name-calling, bad treatment by others, hurting other people, forcing others to do what they do not want, forcibly taking other people’s belongings and screaming at others" (Ndebele & Msiza, 2014, p. 117). This indicates that bullying is often an abuse of power, used for self-amusement and egoistic purposes to belittle others (Hlophe,

Morojele & Motsa, 2017). Attitudes towards bullying also evolve with age, with high school students generally holding more negative attitudes toward bullying followers and bystanders than their middle school counterparts (Man, Liu, & Xue, 2022).

In a multicultural school environment, the complexities of bullying are often exacerbated by factors such as language barriers, acculturation challenges, and socio-economic disparities (Babane, 2020). Faudi (2024, p. 63) posits that "research has indicated that the absence of effective teaching of multicultural education in schools can result in heightened levels of bullying, prejudice, assault, victimisation, and discrimination". This suggests that a failure to create frameworks that promote inclusivity and diversity may foster a climate where bullying thrives. Bullying can manifest in various forms within these settings, including physical, verbal, psychological, social, and cyberbullying (Shaath et al., 2021). This literature review thus attempts to demonstrate the dynamic and multifaceted nature of bullying, laying the groundwork for a detailed exploration of its unique manifestations within a multicultural secondary school in Chatsworth.

2.5. Types of Bullying and Emerging Trends in South Africa: Implications for Social Workers and School Practitioners

This section examines the diverse types of bullying, ranging from traditional to emerging forms, and discusses their distinct impacts on students. It highlights the factors that must be considered when developing interventions, with a specific focus on the implications for social workers and school practitioners in the South African context.

2.5.1. Traditional and Digital Forms of Bullying

In South Africa, bullying in schools encompasses a variety of forms, including physical, emotional, psychological, and cyberbullying (Hlophe et al., 2017). Traditional bullying, which involves overt physical contact like pushing, hitting, or kicking, is often considered the most common and easiest to identify (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Carbone, 2010). However, this can lead to the misconception that it is the *only* form of bullying (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Research from KwaZulu-Natal has revealed that even these traditional forms pose significant concerns and negatively affect children's well-being (Sikhakhane, Muthukrishna, & Martin, 2018).

In contrast, emotional or psychological bullying is often harder to detect as it involves subtle behaviours such as verbal attacks, social exclusion, spreading rumours, and aggressive stares (Coroloso, 2010; Li, 2023). This form of bullying can be compelling during adolescence

when teenagers are navigating their social identity (Melecki et al., 2015). In the South African context, emotional bullying, characterised by rumour spreading and exclusion, is prevalent, particularly among girls, though boys also engage in it (Mbambo, 2016; Laas, 2014). This type of bullying can have a significant impact on victims' emotional and academic well-being, leading to negative emotional responses and academic setbacks (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021; Farhangpour, Maluleke, & Mutshaeni, 2019). The limited understanding of emotional bullying, as noted in a Zimbabwean study (Gudyanga et al., 2014), highlights the need for studies like the present one to provide insights into these complex dynamics, particularly within multicultural school environments.

An increasingly urgent concern is cyberbullying, a form of harassment facilitated by digital technology (Govender, 2013). Cyberbullying is defined as the use of digital communication to send or post material intended to cause harm (Li, 2006). Unlike traditional bullying, which is often restricted to the school grounds, cyberbullying can occur anytime and anywhere, presenting a significant challenge to traditional anti-bullying interventions. Research confirms the rising prevalence of cyberbullying among South African students, with a national survey finding a significant proportion of secondary school learners experiencing it alongside other forms of aggression (Cilliers & Chinyamurindi, 2020; Khuzwayo, Taylor, & Connolly, 2018). The potential for cyberbullying to cause severe emotional, behavioural, and academic problems highlights the need for targeted, context-specific interventions (Apostolides, 2017).

2.5.2. Multifaceted and Lasting Effects of Bullying

The consequences of bullying extend far beyond the immediate incident, affecting not only the victim but also perpetrators, bystanders, and the broader school community (Mahabeer, 2020). Research has shown that bullying victimisation has detrimental effects on students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and overall school experience (Hesapcioglu & Tural, 2018; Ndetei et al., 2024). Exposure to bullying can lead to emotional and behavioural problems such as loneliness, fear, depression, and anxiety (Han & Demirtaş, 2020). These psychological effects are not merely immediate but can be long-lasting. Studies have consistently demonstrated that even when controlling for pre-existing conditions, bullying is strongly linked to adverse outcomes later in life, such as depression and non-suicidal self-injury (Moore et al., 2017). This suggests that the trauma of bullying can persist into adulthood, hindering an individual's ability to reach their full potential (Majied, 2016).

This study, guided by the relational well-being theory, recognises the profound impact of bullying on social and emotional relationships. Victims often develop a negative perception of themselves, experience decreased self-esteem, anxiety, and social isolation (Bachi et al.,

2021; Hamidsyukrie et al., 2022). In a multicultural setting like Secondary School in Chatsworth, this impact can be even more pronounced, as bullying can exacerbate existing social tensions and segregation (Lumadi, 2020). The devastating effects are tragically illustrated by incidents such as a Cape Town schoolgirl taking her own life after being targeted by a gang (Baadjies, 2015), and learners feeling compelled to join gangs to avoid being bullied (Magidi, Schenk & Erasmus, 2016).

2.5.3. Predominant Forms of Bullying in South African Schools

The prevalence of bullying in South African secondary schools is a significant and widespread issue, with prevalence rates ranging from 12% to as high as 61% in some studies (Owusu et al., 2011; Townsend et al., 2008). These findings highlight the urgent need for context-specific interventions that address the behavioural and emotional needs of students. The present study is particularly relevant as it focuses on the selected Secondary School. On this site, bullying has been identified as a significant concern, impacting the well-being and academic performance of learners (Rising Sun, 2024). A report by the *Rising Sun Newspaper* (2024) highlighted a severe incident where a learner was targeted by a gang, who extended their threats to the learner's family, indicating the frequency and severity of bullying and how it can extend beyond the school environment.

This literature review has, so far, shown how bullying is a multifaceted issue influenced by peer dynamics, gender, and broader societal factors. It has also revealed a research gap, highlighting the limited literature that links bullying to systemic societal issues and focuses on the unique perceptions and experiences of learners in multicultural school environments. The attitudes of high school students towards bystanders and defenders of bullying, which shift with age (Man, Liu, & Xue, 2022), further underscore the complexity of this issue. By adopting a participatory approach and seeking input from learners, as suggested by scholars (Chisala et al., 2023; Steyn & Singh, 2018), this study aims to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive school environment where well-being and conflict resolution can be promoted with an awareness of the diverse cultural backgrounds involved.

2.6. The Multifaceted Impact of Bullying on Learners: *Focusing on Schools*

Bullying has been found to be a prevalent issue in high schools with far-reaching implications for its victims. Research has consistently shown that bullying victimisation can have detrimental effects on students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and overall school experience (Hesapcioglu & Tural, 2018; Ndetei et al., 2024).

2.6.1. Psychological and Emotional Consequences

Exposure to bullying is a critical risk factor for adverse psychological health outcomes among adolescents (Owusu et al., 2011). Scholars have highlighted that bullying can lead to severe emotional and behavioural problems such as loneliness, fear, helplessness, stress, depression, anxiety, and anger (Han & Demirtaş, 2020). The impact is not only immediate but can also lead to long-term mental health challenges. For instance, a systematic review by Moore et al. (2017) found that even when pre-existing mental health conditions are controlled for, bullying victimisation remains strongly linked to adverse outcomes such as depression and non-suicidal self-injury later in life.

The enduring effects of bullying can persist into students' futures. Iwanaga et al. (2018) posit that experiencing bullying during school years may make individuals more vulnerable to psychological difficulties in their adult lives, highlighting the long-lasting nature of this trauma. Majied (2016) further reports that being a victim of bullying can fundamentally shape one's character, leading to feelings of worthlessness and social isolation. Consequently, those who have experienced this abuse may be hindered from reaching their full potential as adults due to ongoing trauma. In a particularly tragic example from South Africa, a 17-year-old schoolgirl in Cape Town hanged herself after being bullied by a gang of girls at her school (Baadjies, 2015). This underscores how bullying, when left unchecked, can escalate to fatal consequences.

2.6.2. Academic Performance and School Disengagement

Bullying has a significant negative impact on a student's academic life. It is associated with a decrease in academic involvement and achievement, creating a toxic environment that adversely affects academic progress and overall morale (Hesapcioglu & Tural, 2018; Kutsyuruba, Klinger, & Hussain, 2015). The emotional toll of bullying, which includes fear of victimisation and social alienation, can manifest as increased absenteeism, a factor directly correlated with lower academic performance ("Bullying Prevention in Schools", 2015).

The academic consequences are not uniform, as they can vary based on the type of bullying and the individual characteristics of the victim. Rusteholz et al. (2021) revealed that bullying negatively impacts various competencies evaluated in academic settings, affecting both high and low achievers differently. Furthermore, studies in South Africa have shown that psychological distress from bullying translates into difficulties with concentration, lower

motivation, and increased absenteeism, all of which hinder academic outcomes (Boyes et al., 2014).

A participant in a study by Hendricks and Tanga (2019) reported that bullying negatively impacted their academic performance, leading them to disengage from school and isolate themselves. This disengagement is often a result of a negative school climate. When students perceive their school environment as unsafe or unresponsive to bullying, their academic engagement and performance are likely to decline (Shields, Nadasen, & Hanneke, 2014).

2.7. Bullying and the Importance of Multicultural Education

The absence of effective multicultural education in the school curriculum has been identified as a significant factor contributing to bullying. According to Tsuno et al. (2015), multicultural education promotes harmony, inclusion, and mutual coexistence, helping learners appreciate the uniqueness of social diversity and exhibit mutual respect. Research by Fuadi (2024) supports this, stating that a lack of practical multicultural education can lead to increased levels of bullying, prejudice, and discrimination within academic institutions. This is often because a failure to address multicultural values can result in conflicts stemming from differences in ethnicity, religion, and culture (Atika & Yanuarti, 2023).

Incorporating multicultural education programs in schools is proposed as a means to increase understanding and acceptance of individual differences, ultimately reducing instances of bullying and teasing among students (Huang & Cornell, 2019). Furthermore, studies have indicated that bullying in ethnically diverse schools can vary based on the school's ethnic composition and degree of diversity (Vitoroulis et al., 2016). This highlights the importance of promoting inclusivity and respect through education as a preventative measure.

2.8. Contributory Factors to Bullying: Learners' Perspectives and Broader Contexts

To effectively address bullying, it is essential to understand the various factors that contribute to it through different lenses, including social dynamics, environmental influences, and individual characteristics.

2.8.1. Learner Perceptions and Behaviour

Learners' perceptions of bullying are crucial to understanding its prevalence. Research by Blake and Louw (2010) found that many students perceive bullying as an unavoidable and

normalised aspect of their school experience. This troubling acceptance can perpetuate a cycle of victimisation and aggression, stemming from inadequate school policies and a lack of effective intervention strategies (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021). The prevalence of bullying across various South African schools further indicates that systemic issues within educational institutions contribute to the problem (Timm & Eskell-Blokland, 2011).

2.8.2. Broader Societal and Environmental Influences

The relational well-being theory and the person-in-environment theory provide a framework for understanding how individuals are influenced by their environments. Research suggests that exposure to violence in communities can lead to the internalisation of aggressive behaviours among adolescents, which they then replicate in school settings (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021). This is echoed by Radebe & Kyobe (2021), who link the rise of cyberbullying in South African schools to broader societal issues such as violence and crime. When looking at the effect it has on academic performance, research has suggested that the school climate significantly impacts academic achievement, where a hostile bullying environment correlates with lower academic performance (Hesapcioglu & Tural, 2018).

2.9. Predominant Forms

Bullying in South African schools is a pervasive issue, with a wide range of prevalence rates. Owusu et al. (2011) and Townsend et al. (2008) have shown varying prevalence rates of bullying among secondary school learners, with percentages ranging from 12% to as high as 61%. This highlights the urgent need for context-specific interventions that address the behavioural and emotional needs of students.

At the selected Secondary School in Chatsworth, South Africa, bullying has been a significant concern that impacts the well-being and academic performance of learners (Rising Sun, 2024). An article by the Rising Sun Newspaper reported a severe incident where a learner was targeted by a gang, who extended their threats to the learner's family. This example highlights the frequency and severity of bullying incidents and how they can extend beyond the school environment. These incidents call for an urgent need for effective intervention strategies to combat bullying, especially in communities where it is known to be rife.

2.10. Overview of Some Interventions for Bullying

In light of this widespread issue, addressing bullying requires effective interventions to create a safe and conducive learning environment (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021; Mabasa, 2014). Scholars have highlighted the importance of a participatory approach, where learners are involved in the intervention process (Stives et al., 2021; Sánchez et al., 2019; Wati et al., 2023). Recommendations include implementing peer mentoring programs (Boyes et al., 2014), involving students in developing anti-bullying policies (Steyn & Singh, 2018), and providing guidance and counselling on how to respond to bullying (Chisala et al., 2023). Masilo and Matlakala (2023, p.1132) asserted that many learners lack awareness of emotional bullying and often overlook the psychological effects that come with it, thereby underscoring the need for educational programs and work to increase understanding. Staff must be well-equipped to manage bullying, as teachers often lack the necessary skills to address it (Chisala et al., 2023) effectively. Education policy reformists are urged to prioritise learners' understanding and experiences of bullying to foster social inclusiveness, tolerance, and safe schooling environments (Hlophe et al., 2017). Furthermore, learners have emphasised the significance of educational initiatives that enhance their understanding of bullying behaviours (Saibon, Leong & Razak, 2017), suggesting that anti-bullying programs should not only educate on how to stop bullying but also help learners differentiate between different types of bullying (ibid). The participatory approach of including learners in the intervention process aligns with the relational well-being theory, as it aims to foster a sense of oneness and belonging (Stives et al., 2021; Wati et al., 2023), thereby empowering victims and creating a supportive and safe school environment for everyone. Masilo and Matlakala (2023, p.1135) believe that a targeted group-based intervention led by social workers could be a possible solution to address harmful group dynamics and reduce bullying tendencies.

2.11. Social Policies and Legislation, Frameworks on Addressing Bullying

Clear legislative frameworks and supportive school policies fundamentally underpin the development of effective strategies to combat bullying. A study by Nurhayati et al. (2020) emphasises that school policies are crucial for bullying prevention. Legislative components that clearly define prohibited behaviours and mandate the development of local anti-bullying policies have been associated with reduced incidents of both cyberbullying and traditional bullying (Simmons et al., 2020).

In South Africa, the National Safe Schools program aims to assist schools in understanding and addressing security threats, including bullying (Cilliers & Chinyamurindi, 2020). However, the issue remains pressing, with incidents of teacher-targeted bullying also rising (Sambo, 2023). This highlights the need for rigorous implementation and evaluation of anti-bullying

programs, which could significantly enhance the mental health of South African children and adolescents (Boyes et al., 2014). For social work practitioners, a comprehensive understanding of the legal frameworks is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies (Kampoli et al., 2017).

2.12. Key South African Legislation for Anti-Bullying

Several pieces of South African legislation aim to protect children from bullying and provide a legal basis for intervention (Laas & Boezaart, 2014). These acts establish a legal platform for addressing issues of bullying and promoting the welfare of children by ensuring their safety.

2.12.1. The Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005)

The Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005) is a primary piece of legislation that emphasises children's well-being and best interests. It highlights the importance of safeguarding children from mistreatment and harm, including bullying, and mandates that schools create a safe environment for learners. This act also outlines the responsibilities of caregivers and educators in protecting children from any form of harm (Kapile et al., 2023). This Act can be instrumental in fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity in multicultural settings, as it ensures that all forms of bullying, including those based on cultural differences, are recognised and addressed. The Act further encourages the involvement of parents and communities, which is crucial in a diverse community like Chatsworth, where cultural sensitivities must be navigated carefully.

2.12.2. The Child Justice Act (No. 75 of 2008)

The Child Justice Act (No. 75 of 2008) complements the Children's Act by providing a framework for dealing with child offenders that emphasises rehabilitation over punishment (Fisher et al., 2012). The Act is relevant in multicultural environments, where bullying behaviour may stem from underlying factors like trauma or socio-economic challenges, providing an approach that focuses on restorative justice rather than solely punitive measures (Lombard & Twikirize, 2014). This legislative framework is essential for social workers and school practitioners who aim to rehabilitate learners who bully others.

2.12.3. The South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996)

The South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) holds schools responsible for maintaining discipline and ensuring a safe learning environment. The Act requires schools to develop clear codes of conduct that address bullying behaviours. Evidence suggests that schools with clear policies and protocols for managing bullying are more effective in reducing its prevalence (Shiba & Mokwena, 2024). Additionally, this Act supports the training of educators to recognise and intervene in bullying situations, which is particularly crucial in multicultural settings where teachers may need to navigate complex cultural dynamics (Steyn & Singh, 2018).

2.12.4. The Protection from Harassment Act (No. 17 of 2011)

The Protection from Harassment Act (No. 17 of 2011) provides legal recourse for victims of bullying, especially when the behaviour escalates to harassment or violence. This Act is particularly significant in multicultural settings where bullying may manifest in various forms, including verbal, physical, and cyberbullying (Syah, 2020). The Act empowers victims to report incidents without fear of retaliation, increasing the likelihood of intervention (Mahabeer, 2020). This legal framework is a critical deterrent against bullying behaviours and fosters a safer school environment (Syah, 2020).

2.12.5. The National School Safety Framework

The National School Safety Framework (2016) defines school-based violence as acts of violence that happen within the school grounds or acts that occur when learners are on their way to and from school, or anything that relates to the school. The framework provides an important instrument through which minimum standards for safety at schools can be established, implemented and monitored, and for which schools, districts and provinces can be held accountable. This framework provides legal recourse for schools to report and manage bullying incidents. This framework is also critical in managing and intervening bullying problems in schools, in that it helps incorporate anti-bullying measures into a broader school safety strategy. This framework is significant in multicultural settings because it promotes social cohesion (ibid).

2.13. The Role of Social Workers and School Practitioners

Social workers and school practitioners are ideally positioned to utilise these legislative frameworks to create safer and more inclusive school environments. They can assist schools in implementing effective anti-bullying policies and practices that foster a safe environment for

all learners (Chisala, 2023). This includes establishing robust reporting mechanisms and involving parents and the community to foster a collaborative approach (Xweso et al., 2023).

The assertion by Masilo (2018, p. 2) that “social workers need to render victim empowerment services” and that bullying “cannot be addressed or dealt with in isolation” highlights the nexus of social work, the school environment, and anti-bullying programs. This emphasises that a comprehensive approach involving collaboration among social workers, educators, parents, and external stakeholders is necessary to address and prevent bullying effectively. Social workers can use the Child Justice Act to apply restorative practices, facilitating dialogues between victims and perpetrators to foster understanding and promote healing (Lombard & Twikirize, 2014). Furthermore, they can assist in formulating culturally sensitive and inclusive codes of conduct under the South African Schools Act and use the Protection from Harassment Act to educate learners and parents about their legal rights and avenues for recourse (Bernstein & Trimm, 2016).

2.15. Chapter Conclusion and Summary

This chapter has provided a comprehensive literature review on bullying, specifically focusing on the dynamics within a multicultural secondary school environment. The review began by conceptualising bullying, highlighting its multifaceted nature and the importance of a nuanced understanding that goes beyond a simple definition.

The discussion then moved to the global and local perspectives on bullying, emphasising its widespread prevalence and the serious consequences it has for learners' academic and psychological well-being. It was established that bullying in the South African context is a significant concern, often linked to broader societal issues such as violence and crime, which frame the problem as a reflection of the social environment rather than merely an individual behaviour.

Furthermore, the chapter explored the various forms of bullying, from traditional to cyberbullying, and examined their multifaceted and lasting effects on learners. The importance of legislative frameworks was discussed, with a detailed analysis of key South African acts - including the Children’s Act, the Child Justice Act, the South African Schools Act, and the Protection from Harassment Act—that provide a legal basis for intervention. The critical role of social workers and school practitioners in applying these frameworks was also highlighted, emphasising the need for a collaborative and comprehensive approach.

Despite the wealth of existing literature, a significant gap was identified. While the theoretical basis for addressing bullying is strong, there is a limited understanding of how these legislative

frameworks are practically applied within a multicultural school environment. Specifically, there is a need for research that explores the perceptions and understanding of bullying among high school learners in diverse communities to provide actionable, culturally sensitive, and effective intervention strategies.

The current study aims to fill this gap by exploring the perceptions and understanding of bullying among high school learners in the multicultural community of Chatsworth. The findings will provide actionable insights into how these legislative frameworks can be implemented in a manner that is both culturally sensitive and effective, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of bullying dynamics and the development of targeted, community-based interventions. The next chapter will detail the methodological approach used to achieve these objectives.

Chapter Three: The Research Journey: *Methodological Implementation and Reflections*.

3.1 Introduction

The researcher conducted this study with the belief that pursuing reliable scientific knowledge requires a clear and coherent research methodology. This chapter presents the academic framework that underpins this research, detailing the methods employed and providing a rationale for their selection. It attempts to unpack the strategic decisions and systematic processes that shaped this study, reflecting a careful consideration of established scientific methods. Zibane (2017), who also conducted an ethnography study in a school setting, notes that while research is not solely about the researcher, the subjective self can become central to fieldwork experience and the nature of the data collected. Selecting and applying a suitable methodology is more than a technical exercise; it represents a process of thoughtful engagement with the scientific landscape, meticulously crafted to address the research questions with rigour and integrity (Dowd, 2018). This journey, which has allowed for the engagement with methodological considerations, has shown the importance of producing credible and reliable sources.

Conducting this study, as a new researcher [master's candidate], involved recognising and navigating various scientific components, including the research approach, paradigm, design, sampling strategies, data collection tools and techniques, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. These components are foundational to the scholarly acquisition and contribution of knowledge (Tabuena, Hilario, & Buenaflor, 2021). It is acknowledged that the clarity and depth of this study's understanding depend on the careful application of these tools, ensuring the insights are not only novel but also demonstrably sound and defensible (*ibid*). Additionally, as Fathali and Emadi (2022) point out, defining the study's purpose, outlining the methodology, and presenting research findings are integral parts of a thorough research process.

3.2. The Application of the Research Paradigm

As briefly introduced in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, this research study aimed to explore and describe secondary school learners' perceptions and experiences of bullying in a multicultural school setting. To achieve the anchoring aim of the study, the researcher had to select an

appropriate research paradigm. In this study, the researcher employed the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm underscores the importance of understanding the subjective realities of individuals and the significance of their interactions within specific contexts (Puebla, 2023). The interpretivist approach was relevant to this research study because it allowed the researcher to explore how secondary school learners perceive and understand bullying in a multicultural school. This lens proved instrumental in the study due to its congruence with qualitative research. Given the inherently subjective or personal nature of qualitative inquiry, which strives to comprehend participants' lived experiences and their broader systemic contexts, this approach directly resonated with tenets of the theoretical framework of this study, relational well-being, and person-in-environment theories. Emphasis was given to understanding individuals' perceptions of their surroundings.

The interpretivist paradigm, central to this study, aligns with the study's theoretical perspectives of relational well-being and person-in-environment (PIE), emphasizing the importance of understanding individuals' subjective realities and the significance of their interactions within specific contexts (Puebla, 2023). This study aimed to depict how participants are influenced by their environments and subsequently adapt and thrive within them, which was crucial for exploring and comprehending their lived experiences, recognising that individuals cannot be fully understood outside the environments that shape them (Zastrow et al., 2022).Lindorfer (2021) posited that adopting an adequate, holistic perspective is essential when examining human behavior, which further reinforces the decision to ground this study in an interpretivist framework. Pham (2018) lists a number of benefits of applying the interpretivist paradigm over alternative paradigms. First of all, the interpretivist paradigm offers a range of perspectives for characterising people, things, or events and understanding them in relation to society (*ibid*). Second, the researcher can obtain insider knowledge by employing the interpretivist paradigm, which is conducted in a natural setting (Riyami, 2015; Pham, 2018). Also, the interpretivist paradigm enables the researcher to explore and engage things that are not visible to us, including one's thoughts, viewpoints, opinions, biases, values, perceptions, and emotions (Pham, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm seemed most appropriate for this study due to the nature of the research questions, the paradigm, and its benefits.

Focus groups enabled the researcher to explore and engage things that are not visible, including the participants' thoughts, viewpoints, opinions, biases, values, perceptions, and emotions. The interpretivist framework provided the necessary rationale for using focus groups to co-construct meaning with the participants. This qualitative approach was instrumental in facilitating the collection of rich data, providing a platform for learners to express their unique experiences and how their environments shaped these. Karrit and Coetzee (2024) posited

that adopting an interpretivist paradigm requires researchers to be reflexive and to consider how their personal experiences and viewpoints shape their interpretation of evidence.

- Reflexivity and reflection of the application of the interpretivist paradigm

In this study, the researcher practised reflexivity by being mindful of their background (including race- *black*, gender-*female* and religion-*Gaudiya Vaishnavism*) and assumptions when crafting interview questions and analysing participant responses, ensuring that the participants' voices remained central. When looking at reflexivity at a scholarly level, the researcher ensure that everything followed all the ethical standards and that everything was approved before they could do anything, for instance the researcher before they could collect the data applied for clearance which ensured that everything was done correctly and that the methods the researcher chose to use were safe to use and clear, given that this study focused on children and in this way the study was not in any way compromised by the researchers preferences. Beyond this procedural awareness, the researcher considered the inherent power imbalance that arises when conducting research with children; this clearance was a reflexive commitment to ensuring that the research methods did not impose the researcher's own preferences on the participants, rather than just a formal step.

Another way in which the researcher used reflexivity in the study was when they were conducting the focus group session with the learners, the researcher was very understanding that the learners at some point tended to deviate and talk about other things which did not form part of the research scope, the researcher was very understanding but also guided the focus group guide to focus on the scope of the study.

In the focus group session, the researcher had asked what bullying is and how the learners understood it. The participants shared what they think it is and even shared their experiences. This open-ended inquiry aimed to uncover their subjective realities rather than imposing a pre-conceived definition. The depth of their responses, particularly one learner's emotional description- "*It just hurts in every single way, the way you look at yourself, the way you feel about yourself, and people lose much confidence from the way other people see them, and that's about it*"- encapsulates the application of interpretivism. This quote is not just data; it is a direct window into the emotional and psychological impact of bullying from the learner's unique perspective. It highlights how the interpretivist methodology allowed for a rich, nuanced understanding of their lived experience, moving beyond surface-level definitions to capture the profound personal dimensions of bullying. This aligns with the philosophy of the interpretivist paradigm, allowing the learners to share their experiences about bullying fully.

3.3 Research Approach

The study utilised the qualitative approach to best serve the purpose of this research, which is to elicit rich data about the perceptions and experiences of bullying in a multicultural school among learners. Dowd (2018, p. 1) posits that the "... qualitative approach maximises the opportunities to provide subtle details that dissect the problem better". The qualitative approach is valuable because it aims to delve into and represent the intricate nuances of individuals' encounters and responses to bullying (Cour, Bonde, & Rosenbaum, 2022). According to Gilgun (2015), the goal of qualitative research is to allow for a deeper delve into the meaning and experiences of individuals, moving beyond mere descriptions to provide interpretations and theories. Aspers and Corte (2021) note that qualitative research enables interaction and questioning of concepts, data, and evidence, thereby contributing to an iterative process that aims to better understand the phenomenon under study.

A qualitative approach was best suited to the topic of this study, as it is concerned with the experiences of learners from their own point of view, rather than with quantity. Furthermore, a qualitative approach was ideal for this study due to its advantages. These are essential for thoroughly investigating phenomena and effectively understanding participants' perspectives. In this context, the central phenomenon being explored was bullying in schools. The researcher chose this approach because it enabled the researcher to make unexpected discoveries about the experiences that participants had either directly or indirectly (Dowd, 2018, p. 1; Moss, 2017, p. 1). Furthermore, this approach was selected due to its adaptability in building and reconstructing data, which allows for an in-depth study and simplifies the understanding of complex issues (Maxwell 2012, Flick 2011).

3.4 Research Design

A research design outlines the conditions under which data were obtained and analysed. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006, p. 105), research design is about "… the procedures for conducting the study, including when and under what conditions the data will be obtained". This study thus employed a mixed methods research design, combining exploratory, descriptive, and contextual elements to comprehensively investigate secondary school learners' perceptions and experiences of bullying.

3.4.1 Reflection on the Choice of Research Design

The choice of this multi-tiered design was an iterative and reflexive process. Initially, the study was conceptualised with a two-tiered exploratory-descriptive design, which was reflected in the initial ethics protocol focusing on the aim to ‘explore and describe’ the phenomenon. However, as the research unfolded and supervision consultations proceeded, the researcher realised the importance of capturing the specific context of the multicultural school more consciously. Schoon (2023)) provided a pivotal insight: qualitative research designs should be flexible and adaptable, as they unfold over time in unpredictable ways. This liberated the study from a rigid, pre-determined path and allowed for the integration of a contextual design as a third, necessary component, aligning with the principles of fluid research designs (Wolgemuth et al., 2014).

The foundational exploratory component was essential to investigate how bullying variables manifest specifically within the secondary school context of Chatsworth. While there is an established body of literature concerning bullying within multicultural schools globally and nationally, an exploratory design remains appropriate here to uncover initial insights into the localised socio-cultural factors shaping these specific learners' perspectives (Akhtar, 2016). This was particularly pertinent, as the school’s demographic—a predominantly Indian community with a significant African population, presented a unique intersection of variables that called for an open-ended inquiry.

The descriptive component then built upon this foundation by providing a detailed portrayal of the phenomenon as it existed (Akhtar, 2016). This design element was used to gather rich information on the characteristics of the bullying issue from the learners' perspective (Hair et al., 2011). As Dhludhlu (2021) asserts, the combined exploratory-descriptive design provided an open, flexible, and inductive approach to a relatively unknown research area.

The contextual component was integrated to situate the findings within the participants’ lived experiences and the broader environmental settings that influenced them (Ratcliffe et al., 2023). For example, Informal discussions with the school principal and other teachers profoundly enriched this element. During one such conversation, the principal revealed that many bullying instances extended beyond the school gates, often stemming from learners' backgrounds and the normalisation of such behaviours in their home environments. This insight underscored how individuals are profoundly shaped by their surroundings, aligning with Alpaslan's (2022) view that contextual research helps identify how presenting problems manifest. This component was crucial in providing a more robust understanding of the participants' narratives and allowed for a deeper appreciation of how the school environment might facilitate bullying.

As a novice researcher, the researcher hesitated about deviating from this structured plan. However, a crucial supervision meeting and subsequent consultation with literature (see Schoon, 2023). This guidance was instrumental in liberating the research from a rigid, pre-determined path and allowing it to adapt to emergent insights. This led to the integration of a contextual design as a third, necessary component. This evolved, multi-tiered design allowed the researcher to be receptive to discoveries that arose during fieldwork, aligning with the principles of fluid research designs (Wolgemuth et al., 2014).

As the study progressed, it became evident that the exploratory-descriptive component alone was insufficient to capture the full scope of the problem. Integrating a contextual component was crucial to situate the findings within the participants' lived experiences and the broader settings that influenced them (Ratcliffe et al., 2023). Thus, the intentional integration of these three design components —exploratory, descriptive, and contextual —created a symbiotic lens. This lens refers to the interdependent and reciprocal relationship between the three tiers. The tiers informed one another and, at the same time, ensured the findings were not surface-level but were deeply embedded in the systemic and environmental factors of the community. This symbiotic approach multifaceted, in-depth understanding of the topic, capturing the rich contextual nuances essential for a comprehensive grasp of learners' experiences. This deeper understanding holds significant implications for school social work, highlighting the need for interventions that address complex environmental and systemic factors beyond individual behaviour (Masilo, 2019).

3.5. Population of the Study and Sampling Protocols

3.5.1. Population Overview

In research methodology, "population" refers to the entire group of individuals or items the researcher is interested in examining (Willie, 2024). The population of this study included secondary school learners. These learners comprised Grade 11 learners at the selected Secondary School in Chatsworth, Durban. The selection of Grade 11 learners was deliberate, as they were deemed mature enough and had adequate experience in the school and had adequate experience to articulate and reflect on their experiences and perceptions of bullying meaningfully. This group’s age and psychosocial developmental stage allowed for a nuanced understanding of the topic within the school environment.

The final sample size for the study consisted of 13 female participants, who served as the sources of empirical data in this study. This consolidation into one group [which was implemented on two occasions], with the first focus group encounter more casual and based

on rapport building. The decision to conduct only two focus groups was made due to logistical limitations and challenges encountered during the recruitment phase, despite initial plans for three separate focus groups. The researcher was fortunate to have diversity within her sample, with a final composition of nine Black and three Indian participants, reflecting the multicultural context of the school.

3.5.2 Sampling Strategy: *a double sampling approach*

This research study employed a non-probability sampling approach, primarily utilising purposive sampling and supplementing it with snowball sampling. Non-probability sampling techniques, as highlighted by Showkat and Parveen (2017), involve non-randomised methods for sample selection, often relying on the researcher's judgment based on participant accessibility or specific characteristics. Patton (2002, p. 231) emphasises the strategic nature of this approach, advocating for the selection of "information-rich" participants who are "unusual or special in some way, such as outstanding successes or notable failures". The careful selection of participants was crucial to ensure the study's outcomes were both representative and insightful (Hlophe et al., 2017).

The researcher adopted this double sampling approach, combining purposive and snowball sampling, to ensure a robust and well-rounded sample. Purposive sampling served as the primary strategy, strategically selecting participants based on their direct experience with bullying and their ability to provide rich data (Gupta & Pathak, 2018). However, when initial purposive recruitment yielded fewer participants than anticipated [during the first focus group], primarily due to school scheduling constraints (timetables of different classes within grade 11) and limited direct contact time with learners, snowball sampling was utilised as a contingency, which resulted in the final number discussed below. This involved asking initial participants to refer other learners who met the study's criteria (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). While snowballing was employed, parental consent, along with child-friendly recruitment posters and communication, remained a priority. Conducting research with children within a school setting, where the primary focus is teaching and learning, proved to be challenging. At least Zibane (2017), who conducted her study in a school, navigated an ethnography with prolonged engagement, and therefore, she was part of the learning school processes, which was not the case in this study.

The researcher’s sampling framework was dual, therefore somewhat complex, but it was intended to be ethically compliant, a notion supported by scholars such as Pathak and Gupta (2018) and Matabologa and Flotman (2024). It mitigates potential biases inherent in relying on a single sampling technique (Soebagyo et al., 2021). While purposive sampling can

sometimes limit diversity (Yildiz, 2023; Denieffe, 2020), its limitations were addressed by leveraging initial participants' social networks through snowball sampling, which increased access to a variety of viewpoints while maintaining focus on participant attributes relevant to the study's aim (Yacoub et al., 2022; Herman, 2023). Having referred participants also strengthened the cohesion and comfort among those who were involved, as they felt safe. This strategic combination ensured data saturation and yielded a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.5.3 Participant Selection Criteria and Diversity

For both purposive and snowballing sampling, the researcher had a specific inclusion criterion. Participants were required to be Grade 11 learners from the selected Secondary School who had either directly experienced or observed bullying. To ensure the study captures diverse perspectives reflective of the school's multicultural environment, the selection was open to participants from various racial backgrounds, religions, cultures, sexual orientations, and genders (Appendix L). This was intentional to explore the 'multiculturalism' in context. This inclusive approach helped to capture the dynamics of social cohesion within the school and its potential impact on perceptions of bullying. All participants were under the age of 18, as defined by the Children's Act 38 of 2005, which considers a child to be anyone under 18 years of age.

3.5.4 Participant Recruitment Process

The recruitment process commenced with securing gatekeeper permission from the school principal. A formal meeting was held, during which the researcher presented a detailed letter outlining the study's objectives, data collection procedures, and ethical considerations, including parental consent and learner assent, participant safety, and confidentiality (Mukumbang et al., 2020). Upon receiving the principal's initial approval and the Head of Department in the Department of Education in KwaZulu-Natal, the researcher applied for ethical clearance, a process that encountered unforeseen delays, extending over three months and pushing the start of data collection into the subsequent academic year.

Once ethical clearance was obtained, a follow-up meeting with the principal was scheduled to reconfirm agreements and ensure continuity. While the principal affirmed his recollection of the study, a communication lapse meant the Life Orientation (LO) teacher, designated as the school's contact person, was not initially informed. Despite this minor setback, the researcher

collaborated effectively with the LO teacher to devise a recruitment plan that adhered to ethical guidelines and minimised coercion or disruption to students' academic schedules.

Recruitment was initiated through the LO teacher, who introduced the researcher to Grade 11 classes. The researcher conducted informal, age-appropriate presentations, which allowed for the translation of complex research concepts to an accessible language, utilising interactive elements and visual aids such as posters (Appendix H) to explain the study in an engaging and accessible manner (Gunn & Wyatt-Smith, 2021; Fletcher et al., 2020). This approach aimed to ensure that learners fully comprehended their potential involvement, its importance, and the study's potential contribution to school-based interventions.

Following these presentations, learners willing to participate were directed to the LO teacher to receive parent/guardian consent forms (designed by the researcher and part of the exhibits in the ethical clearance application protocol). Only after parental consent was obtained were learners asked to co-sign a consent form, formally confirming their voluntary participation, which had also been agreed to in writing by their parents. Learners aged 18 years or above were permitted to provide their own consent. Prior to and during the focus group sessions, icebreaker activities were facilitated to alleviate anxiety and foster a comfortable environment for open sharing (Swart et al., 2022).

3.5.5 **Participants' Profile**

The information presented in Table 1 below provides brief profiles of participants from whom data were generated, and they have been assigned pseudonyms.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Participants

Pseudonym	Race	Age	Grade	Religion	Home language	Culture	Gender
Jayden	Indian	17	11	Christian	English	-	female
Ravi	Black	16	11	N/A	Sesotho	Sotho	female
Dineo	Black	18	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female
Mia	Indian	17	11	Christian	Afrikaans/English	-	female
Lukhanyo	Black	16	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female
Themba	Black	16	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female
Naledi	Black	15	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female
Thando	Black	16	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female
Aisha	Indian	16	11	Hindu	English	-	female
Nandipha	Black	17	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female
Tumelo	Black	16	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female

Sipho	Black	16	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female
Lerato	Black	17	11	Christian	IsiZulu	Zulu	female

The participant group for this study comprised 12 learners from the selected Secondary School, all of whom were female and in Grade 11. Pseudonyms, herein, are used to safeguard the true identities of the participants. While 13 participants were present for data collection [with 10 during the first session], the analysis focuses on all 12 detailed in the table.

As shown in the table above, the selected Grade 11 learners had an age range of 15 to 18 years, with the majority being 16 years old, which is expected at this grade level.

In terms of racial composition, the group reflected the multicultural nature of the school, consisting of nine Black participants and three Indian participants. This diversity was further evident in their home languages and cultures. While two of the Indian participants (with pseudonyms Jayden and Aisha) reported English as their home language, one Indian participant (Mia) spoke both Afrikaans and English at home, reflecting her mixed heritage. Among the nine Black participants, isiZulu was predominantly spoken, with one participant (Ravi) speaking Sesotho as her home language. Correspondingly, the Black participants identified with Zulu culture, while the Indian participants did not specify a cultural affiliation in this table.

Notably, despite the majority of participants being Black, English was the preferred language of communication during the study. This observation raises an important question, as articulated by Makhanya (2020), regarding language justice and the urgent need to revive indigenous languages. Such languages are continually eroded by historical systems that still favour colonial languages, thereby ‘betraying’ the process of decolonisation, particularly through the retention and institutionalisation of colonial languages and culture. This phenomenon suggests that former “Model C schools”, as institutions, may still predominantly use colonial languages, despite the dominant demographic within these schools being African, which aligns with the broader South African demographic profile.

Religiously, the group was predominantly Christian, with ten participants identifying as such. One participant (Aisha) was Hindu, and one (Ravi) did not specify a religious affiliation. This demographic profile provided a rich foundation for exploring diverse perceptions and experiences of bullying within a multicultural school environment, aligning with the study's focus on context-bound phenomena. The diverse backgrounds of these participants enabled the researcher to elicit rich data regarding the issue of bullying at the school.

3.6 Data Collection Tools and Procedures

The primary data collection tool for this study was two focus groups with 13 participants. While the initial plan was to conduct three or even four focus groups, this was not possible due to the timing of the data collection (which coincided with the school examination period) and other accessibility circumstances (i.e. strict teaching schedules). However, the researcher was pleasantly surprised by the depth and richness of the data obtained from the two focus groups, as both sessions lasted for approximately 1.5 hours each, providing ample time for building rapport in the first session and meaningful participation in the second session. To foster a comfortable and engaging environment, the sessions began with age-appropriate icebreaker activities, such as songs.

According to Brink, van de Walt, and Van Rensburg (2012), focus groups are a type of interview/conversation held among a group of individuals. This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to gather comprehensive information from the participants' perspective on their knowledge and comprehension within a joint setting. Since the study also explores issues of cohesion, the focus groups allowed the researcher to observe any nonverbal cues among different participants during the data collection process. At the same time, she also recorded the verbatim accounts of their perceptions and experiences of bullying in schools. Focus groups offered opportunities to explore opinions, experiences, and attitudes (Brink et al., 2012). The discussions during the focus group sessions centred on specific questions related to the study objectives set by the researcher (see the attached schedule of questions). The time limitation, as mandated by the school, also made the focus groups more suitable, as there was no opportunity for individual follow-up discussions.

According to Thompson, Hill, McMeekin, and Shaw (2019), focus groups involve organised discussions with a small group of individuals to explore their views and experiences on a specific topic. For the aim of this study, attention was directed towards exploring the perception and experiences of learners on bullying in a specific multicultural school. The researcher in this study included participants who exhibited shared traits and allowed for different attributes among participants, thereby enriching and adding depth to the group discussions. Specifically, all members participating in both focus groups must belong to their teenage years age group category, while different races, cultures, genders, sexes, sexual orientations, or disabilities may characterise them.

The researcher conducted semi-structured focus groups with the learners. According to Chalermsri, Wees, Ziaei, Ekström, Muangpaisan, and Rahman (2020), the use of a semi-structured focus group schedule allowed the researcher to follow up on interesting points raised by participants, thereby enhancing the depth of the data collected. Strydom (2021)

posits that a balance of structure and flexibility is crucial for obtaining comprehensive insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. The semi-structured nature also facilitates the incorporation of diverse viewpoints, as participants can build on each other's responses, leading to a more holistic understanding of the research question (Puentes-Rodriguez, Salazar, Gutierrez & Ramírez, 2022). The focus groups were conducted in the school's empty classroom (with furniture) to ensure the confidentiality of the learners' identities and to avoid being disturbed by other people.

The researcher chose this data collection to explore the topic from the participants' point of view, and had an interview schedule which was used. The researcher also used open-ended questions with the aim of assisting participants in providing in-depth insights and seeking clarity where necessary.

In all the focus groups, the researcher introduced themselves (through an icebreaker), discussed the research purpose, reinforced confidentiality, and the participant's right to withdraw at any stage or not to respond or share information that they did not want to, and that their participation was voluntary. The researcher was also prepared in case the discussions triggered emotions of sadness for some of the participants; the researcher was prepared to take regular breaks and offer psychological first aid, as necessary. The researcher, by profession, is a qualified social worker competent to offer counselling and/or establish necessary referrals. This means that ethical considerations were integral to all the data collection processes.

It was essential for the researcher to ensure that a clear ethical protocol was followed, in case further counselling was needed after data collection. The researcher planned for the Chatsworth Department of Social Development to provide counselling to any learners who might need it. The researcher established an agreement (attached as an appendix) with the organisation to receive any referrals; this was all established before data collection to ensure a smooth and efficient referral process for those in need of such services, as suggested by Fox & Butler (2020). The researcher devised a predetermined crisis intervention plan in the event that the session might have to be stopped and the researcher was to either conduct the counselling or, if possible, refer the individual to the agency for counselling (Jones & Stanley, 2019). As explained earlier, there was a point at which one learner had to be referred for counselling after data collection.

The researcher had a communication protocol which they followed. For instance, they requested one of the teachers to be on standby [in their staff room, not inside the data collection venue] should there be a need to report when one of the participants needed emergency attention or if parental involvement or intervention, as per the professional wisdom

of the researcher as a social orker was required. The researcher ensured that the information sheets and consent forms clearly disclosed the limits of confidentiality, so that participants and their parents would be aware of the circumstances under which the researcher would identify a danger to the participant's well-being.

The researcher ensured that, should some learners be referred for counselling, they would follow up with the parents and the organisation offering their services. The researcher collected data from participants using audio recordings, after obtaining consent from the focus groups to capture the discussion without requiring participants to focus on writing their responses. The researcher used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities.

3.6.1. Language and Data Collection

The study's multicultural context, encompassing diverse home languages, necessitated careful consideration of language for data collection. While KwaZulu-Natal is predominantly an isiZulu-speaking area, and the participant group included nine isiZulu speakers, all participants thus expressed a preference for English during the focus group sessions. The school's curriculum and teaching methods were also predominantly in English. As a result, the focus groups were conducted entirely in English, and all collected data were presented in English. From the observation of the researcher, the participants seemed comfortable with this.

This preference for English among a predominantly Black African participant group, despite isiZulu being their home language, raised an important question regarding the decolonisation project. Makhanya (2023) critically discusses the erosion of indigenous languages by historical systems that continue to favour colonial languages, thereby undermining the decolonisation process, particularly in terms of language and culture. This observation signifies that former Model C schools, such as the selected secondary school , may still inadvertently perpetuate the agenda of colonial languages, despite the dominant demographic within these institutions aligning with the wider African-speaking profile of South Africa. In her study, Makhanya and Mfishi (2023) further emphasised the importance of language in achieving language justice in educational contexts. Makhanya and Zibane (2020) describe how language is not just a tool for communication, but also a vehicle for cultural and social identity. Given that the study was conducted in a multicultural school, the integration of language justice was vital for all learners from different backgrounds and was intended to foster a sense of belonging. Makhanya and Zibane (2020) posit that when one language, such as English, is made dominant, it can marginalise speakers of indigenous languages, thereby promoting inequality. Siziba (2024)

also posits that the negative attitudes learners might have towards African languages in school settings can stem from historical and systemic biases that favour English.

Schrader and Lemos (2023) define language justice as fostering multilingual spaces that promote safety, belonging, and human dignity, thereby challenging the status quo of English dominance. The researcher was therefore prepared to collect data in both English and isiZulu; however, all participants expressed a preference for the focus group sessions to be conducted in English. Nonetheless, the researcher ensured that all forms, such as the consent forms, were available in both English and isiZulu.

Given that the researcher does not fluently speak isiZulu, a skilled research assistant (who speaks isiZulu) was prepared and available to serve as an alternative data collector, ensuring that any participants who wished to speak in isiZulu were fully accommodated. However, there was no need for the research assistant to intervene or be part of the focus groups as the participants all chose to converse in English, which was conveniently a language the researcher (who was born and raised in Gauteng) was proficient in.

This proactive preparation of the secondary data collector was an ethical 'pre-packaging' that aimed at mitigating the well-established difficulties associated with conducting research in a language not natively spoken by the participants (Nemouchi & Holmes, 2022; Beckett & Kobayashi, 2020; Chowdhury et al., 2023; Burkhard & Park, 2023).

3.6.2 The use of an audio recorder

The use of a voice recorder when conducting the focus group session was an important part of the process. Participants were asked to consent to audio recording prior to the focus group session, and they were given the opportunity to click a box in the ICF to do so. Every participant consented to audio recording, which allowed the researcher to focus on the conversation with minimal note-taking and promote a more organic and fluid interaction. The researcher was able to remain alert during the interview by using a voice recorder, which allowed them to ask relevant follow-up questions and give the learners their full attention. Punch (2014, p. 151) suggests that audio recording, when properly handled, can improve the research. According to studies, audio recordings enhance the accuracy of capturing vocal traits and emotional nuances, which can influence theme interpretations (Ranney, Meisel, Choo, Garro, Sasson, & Guthrie, 2015; Facca, Gladstone, & Teachman, 2020). Additionally, using digital voice recorders facilitates the transcription process, reducing the possibility of transcription errors that may occur from taking notes by hand and enabling quicker analysis (Longden, Branitsky, Jones & Peters, 2023).

3.6.3 Data collection in sensitive topics: *Intervention or a No-Go Area*?

Research, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as bullying in educational settings, plays a crucial role as *an intervention*, especially for young people (Zibane, 2017; Makhanya, 2020). As Sandelowski (2018) argues, research moving beyond mere data collection to actively intervene in problematic situations can drive meaningful change. This perspective resonates with Makhanya's (2020) emphasis on research as a means to understand individuals' experiences and thereby liberating, highlighting the importance of directly engaging with learners to comprehend the various manifestations of bullying, from physical violence to exclusion. Kim et al. (2019) further stress the utility of real-time data in grasping the continuous nature of bullying, which is often missed in studies of isolated incidents.

Allowing young people to voice their lived experiences itself acts as an intervention (Pattman and Bhana, 2009; Swartz, 2011; Zibane, 2017). This research, by providing learners a platform to share their perceptions and experiences of bullying, empowered them to reflect and understand their situations, thereby validating their voices and fostering personal and social change. The profound impact of this approach was starkly illustrated when the Department of Social Development in the Chatsworth Office offered trauma debriefing to participants (see Appendix C). This support underscored the deeply sensitive nature of the topic and the significant needs revealed by the research interaction.

A touching example of this direct intervention occurred during a second focus group session when a learner, Themba (pseudonym), shared his experience of how a bullying incident led to emotional strain, stating, "*a bullying incident that happened to me affected my relationship with my mother because she didn't believe I was the victim but the one who incited the whole thing and that is when I tried committing suicide*". Recognising the immediate need for support and acting as a qualified social worker, the researcher paused the session (without alarm) by introducing an icebreaker, thereby attending to the learner and containing emotions to ascertain their willingness to continue with the focus group discussion. After realising the learner was willing to continue with the discussion, the researcher, however, arranged an appointment for psychosocial support at the Chatsworth Department of Social Development. The learner also requested that the researcher not disclose this referral to their parents or teachers. Therefore, this incident illustrates the ethical dilemmas that arise in the research process and how creating a safe space for disclosure can inadvertently reveal critical needs and directly facilitate necessary interventions. Thus, this study not only contributes to the literature on bullying perceptions in multicultural schools but also serves as a vital mechanism

for intervention, enabling learners to become active participants in promoting positive change. As the researcher writes this dissertation, the intervention involving Themba and his mother is ongoing with the Department of Social Development.

3.7 Data Analysis Process

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data in this research study as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to Neuman (2013), in qualitative research methodology, analysis is initiated during data collection; however, it remains unconfirmed and unfinished until further investigation is conducted systematically to organise, integrate and scrutinise the information for patterns and correlations among specific details. Thematic analysis is considered the most appropriate method for data analysis in this study. Thematic analysis is defined as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hseih & Shannon, 2005: 278). Braun & Clarke (2019) recognise Thematic Content analysis as a valuable tool for qualitative research. Additionally, Connor and Corcoran (2021) find thematic analysis to be applicable to a wide range of text data, offering researchers a flexible approach that can be tailored to suit the specific requirements of various studies. According to Kim and Park (2020, p.43), “thematic analysis contributes to the richness of qualitative research through its focus on participant voices, ensuring that data representation remains authentic”. In terms of the 6 phases of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis of data unfolded as follows:

3.7.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation and immersion

To ensure a thorough understanding of the data, familiarisation with both transcripts and recorded interviews is recommended according to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), whereby multiple reads are necessary for effective organisation and comprehension of findings as outlined by Terre Blanche et al. (2006). According to Giloi (2015, p.139), transcribing is a complicated process that involves choices about anything from whether to:

> "*Transcribe a recording. How much of it to transcribe. How to represent the recorded talk. Whether non-verbal elements and gestures should be included. Whether pauses and silences should be included and, if so, whether they should be timed. How to label speakers and lay out the transcripts? And, where to begin and end extracts for use in research reports*" (Giloi, 2015, p. 139).

Therefore, upon completing the focus group interviews, the researcher immersed herself in the collected data, transcribing while listening to the recordings and thoroughly reviewing the

data, in order to gain a deep understanding of the learners' experiences and viewpoints regarding bullying in their school environment. Xu and Zammit (2020) have posited that data familiarisation extends beyond verbal data transcription into written form and includes classroom observation.

3.7.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Utilising thematic analysis, codes were assigned in order to facilitate efficient and comprehensive analysis (Maguire, and Delahunt, 2017). The researcher adopted an open coding during the research process, as this allows for code development along the way. The researcher used this step by categorising data into different forms, for example, the different types of bullying, to allow for further analysis and to unravel the underlying patterns surrounding bullying. The viewpoints of participants and the qualitative diversity of the phenomena are adequately captured by a strong theme code (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Data reduction, exploration, analysis, and theory development are the fundamental aims of coding (Khokhar, Pathan, Raheem, & Abbasi, 2020). The researcher after having immersed herself in the data, went through it again and tried to identify information that could be used and was relevant to the research questions and had a code for each of them.

3.7.3 Phase 3: Searching for themes

According to Kiger and Vapino (2020), the researcher considered all potential significant themes, regardless of their direct relevance to the study question. Further, the researcher considered them regardless of the amount or volume of data that came under these themes. To accomplish this goal, the researcher collaborated with encoded transcripts and themes to restructure information and categorise it into more comprehensive topics (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In this study, the researcher went over the themes that were present to ensure that they would a substantial amount of information that would help answer the research questions.

3.7.4 Phase 4: Reviewing themes

The researcher interpreted the data and addressed any weaknesses. Thus, this was achieved by interpreting the data in relation to one another, reviewing the literature, and identifying the study's objectives, context, theoretical framework, and underlying assumptions. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) also advise that the checking stage should involve reviewing the final interpreted data and developed themes to confirm whether they make sense.

3.7.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

During this phase, the researcher documented their findings, which included the recurring themes identified from the collected data. This involved refining the themes and giving them clear, concise names that captured the essence of the participants' viewpoints. The implications of the themes were also considered in order to understand and address bullying in schools, providing a clear narrative for the final report.

3.7.6. Phase 6: Producing the report

The final phase involved writing the research report. The researcher prepared the report based on the defined and named themes, using the coded data to support the findings and provide a comprehensive analysis. This final output presented the results of the thematic analysis in a clear, compelling narrative that addressed the research questions and contributed to the existing body of knowledge on bullying.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This research study adhered to the ethics for social research as outlined by Babbie (2005), prioritising the protection of participants' welfare and rights. This means the researcher's pursuit of information did not compromise the participants' rights. The following subsections detail the ethical procedures and principles applied throughout the study.

3.8.1 Permission to Conduct the Study

Formal permission to conduct the study was a crucial first step. Following the acquisition of a gatekeeper letter from the school and the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZN DOE), the researcher submitted a detailed application for ethical clearance to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC). This step, as noted by Ndaba (2020), is essential for ensuring the well-being of participants and the integrity of the research.

The HSSREC carefully reviewed all ethical protocols to ensure the study would not be harmful to the potential participants, particularly because they were minors. This process was extensive but vital, serving as a constant reminder of the researcher's obligation, as a qualified social worker, to uphold the best interests of the children (Audrey et al., 2016). The researcher received ethical clearance (protocol ref: HSSREC/00008148/2025). Although the process

experienced unexpected prolonged delays, which posed pressure to complete data collection before learners' exams speedily, the researcher viewed this as a valuable opportunity for ethical reflection, reinforcing the commitment to prioritising the safety and well-being of the learners.

3.8.2 Informed Consent and Assent

Informed consent is the process of ensuring participants are adequately informed about the research so they can make a voluntary decision to participate (Strydom, 2011). Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained informed consent from the parents or guardians of all participants. Parents were informed about the study's purpose, potential risks, and benefits.

Parental consent was a critical layer of protection for the participants, who were all under 18 years old (Hokke et al., 2018). The researcher provided parental consent forms in both English and isiZulu, reflecting the multicultural context of the school. Learner assent forms were then distributed to the minors, ensuring they understood the study in a manner that was child-friendly and voluntarily agreed to participate. Learners aged 18 and above provided their own informed consent, but parents were still informed.

3.8.3 Non-Maleficence: Minimising Harm

The principle of non-maleficence dictated that the researcher took every precaution to prevent direct or indirect harm to participants (Wassenaar, 2006). This included minimising the risk of emotional trauma, stigma, or victimisation. As bullying is a sensitive topic, the risk level was managed to be no greater than what is ordinarily encountered in daily life.

To mitigate potential harm, the researcher used pseudonyms to protect identities and implemented a pre-determined crisis intervention plan in case of emotional distress. This plan involved offering psychological first aid and making referrals to Child Welfare Chatsworth, with whom a referral agreement was established beforehand (Fox & Butler, 2020). This proactive approach was fundamental, as evidenced by the participant's emotional breakdown during the process. The researcher, as a trained social worker, immediately paused the session, provided support, and arranged for an appointment with a psychosocial support professional, demonstrating how the research process itself can act as an intervention.

3.8.4 Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. All subjects were free to choose to participate without any pressure or coercion and could withdraw at any time without negative consequences (Padgett, 2008). This was clearly communicated to both participants and their parents. The researcher ensured that the data collection process did not favour personal research goals over the well-being of the participants, actively protecting them from potential victimisation.

3.8.5. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymity and confidentiality were central to protecting the participants' identities. Anonymity ensures that personal identities cannot be linked to responses, while confidentiality is the commitment to safeguard data from public access (Neuman, 2013).

To uphold these principles, participants were assigned pseudonyms, which they used to identify themselves during the focus group sessions. The sessions were conducted in a private classroom with the door closed to avoid disturbances and maintain privacy. The researcher also reinforced the importance of confidentiality among the participants to prevent discussions about the group's contents with others, thereby minimising the risk of identification and potential judgment. The limits of confidentiality, including the duty to report harm, were explicitly disclosed in the ethical letter and consent forms.

The use of an empty classroom, rather than the initial plan of using the school hall, further ensured a secure and confidential environment for the focus group. This adjustment allowed for a focused and private discussion, away from potential distractions and prying eyes.

3.9 Trustworthiness of the Study

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is crucial for ensuring the rigour and truthfulness of the findings (Peters, 2023). This study employed several strategies to address the four key criteria of trustworthiness: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

3.9.1 Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the research findings over time and under varying conditions (Morse, 2015). To enhance dependability, this study adhered to a

clear and consistent methodology, which included a detailed description of the sampling strategies and data collection procedures (Cope, 2013). A methodical approach was applied to data coding and analysis to ensure consistency and minimise variability (Moon et al., 2016). The use of audio recordings and subsequent transcription provided a stable and verifiable record of the raw data, allowing for consistent interpretation and analysis.

3.9.2 Credibility

Credibility is the extent to which the research findings are believable and accurately represent the perspectives of the participants (Waalkes, DeCino & Flynn, 2021). According to Chilisa (2012), research is credible when it adequately reflects the multiple realities of the participants, and they are able to recognise the descriptions as accurate. This study achieved credibility through prolonged engagement with the participants during the focus groups, which provided a safe space for them to share their experiences in depth. The use of a single focus groups, lasting 1.5 hours, allowed the researcher to build rapport and gather rich, nuanced data.

3.9.3 Transferability

Transferability concerns the extent to which the study's findings can be applied to other contexts or settings (Mitchell et al., 2017). To enable other researchers to make judgments about the applicability of these findings, this study provides a "thick description" of the research context and methodology. The detailed account of the multicultural school, the Grade 11 learner population, and the specific dynamics of the focus group sessions provides sufficient information for future researchers to understand how to apply this study's insights to their own work. The diverse demographic composition of the sample, with participants from different racial and cultural backgrounds, further enriches the transferability of the findings.

3.9.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the research- that is, the degree to which the findings are rooted in the data and not in the researcher's own biases (Chilisa, 2012). To enhance confirmability, this study relied on audio recordings of the focus groups, which were shared with the researcher's supervisor. This provides a transparent trail for anyone to trace the findings back to the original data, ensuring that the information was not manipulated.

3.9.5 Reflexivity as part of confirmability

Reflexivity is a key strategy for ensuring confirmability by highlighting a researcher's potential biases before they influence the study's outcomes (Smith, Chukwuere, & Sehularo, 2024). The researcher, as a qualified social worker, was aware of her professional obligations and personal experiences, which could have led to emotional reactions to the disturbing stories shared by participants. By consciously practising reflexivity, the researcher ensured that personal feelings did not interfere with the data collection or analysis. The researcher actively encouraged participants to share their experiences freely without influence, allowing their voices to be heard authentically and ensuring the findings were a true reflection of their lived realities (Irawan, 2017).

3.10 Limitations of the Study

All research studies have inherent limitations that may affect the findings and their generalizability (Langa, 2019). The primary limitations of this study are outlined below:

- **Limited Sample Size**

The study's sample consisted of only 13 Grade 11 learners from one specific school. While this aligns with the in-depth nature of qualitative research, it means the findings are specific to this group's experiences and cannot be generalised to all South African high school learners. A larger sample size, while beyond the scope of this study, could have provided a broader viewpoint.

- **Single Perspective**

This research focused exclusively on the perspectives of learners. While this was a deliberate choice to centre their voices, a more comprehensive understanding of bullying would be achieved by also including the perspectives of teachers, parents, and other school staff. This broader view, however, was outside the scope of the current study

- **Focus on only learners' perspectives**

The study only focused on learners' perspectives and did not include teachers, other school personnel, and parents which means that the broader institutional responses and adult perspectives on bullying were not studied, and therefore limits the ability to triangulate learners' accounts with other school personnel/teachers' experiences. This remains a gap for future research.

3.11 Value of the Study

Despite its limitations, this study provides significant value to the body of knowledge on school bullying from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

- **Academic Contribution:** The research provides rich, in-depth data and a deeper understanding of how learners experience and perceive bullying within a specific multicultural educational setting (Zahrani, 2024). This information is valuable for future researchers looking to build upon these findings.
- **Criminology:** From a criminological perspective, the study sheds light on the prevalence and nature of bullying in a multicultural school, as posited by Liew et al. (2023). The findings can be used to inform the development of context-specific interventions to address bullying problems.
- **Social Work:** The study is particularly valuable for social work practitioners. It provides crucial insights into how to best support learners who are dealing with the emotional and psychological effects of bullying, either as victims or witnesses. The findings can help social workers and other professionals collaborate with schools to formulate effective intervention plans and anti-bullying policies (Varela et al., 2019).

3.12. Summary and Chapter Conclusion

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the research methodology and design that underpin this study. The investigation was firmly rooted in a qualitative paradigm, employing an interpretive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of learners' perceptions of bullying. The study's sample consisted of 12-16 Grade 11 learners from the selected Secondary School, who were chosen to provide rich and meaningful insights.

The data collection was systematically carried out through focus group discussions, which were conducted with two distinct groups of participants. These discussions were then transcribed and subjected to a rigorous thematic data analysis, a process that involved multiple phases of coding and theme identification to ensure the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences. Furthermore, the chapter detailed the comprehensive ethical considerations that underpinned every stage of the research, from obtaining formal permission and informed consent to ensuring participant safety, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The discussion also addressed the measures taken to uphold the study's trustworthiness, including its dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

In conclusion, this chapter has established a robust methodological framework for the study, providing a transparent account of the research process. The next chapter will present the findings of the thematic data analysis, drawing on the rich data collected to answer the research questions and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of bullying from the learners' perspectives.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

Building on the research methodology detailed in the previous chapter, this chapter transitions from the theoretical to the empirical by presenting, analysing, and discussing the study's findings. As Slee (2017, p. 9) argues, bullying is "a physically, harmful, psychologically damaging and socially isolating experience for those who experience it." He further posits that for any intervention to succeed, schools must strive towards "well-being, which refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience" (ibid). This perspective underscores the critical need for effective interventions that prioritise learners' well-being, thereby fostering a safe and conducive school environment.

In line with this perspective, this chapter shares how learners have experienced and understood bullying, the effects it has had on them, and their suggestions for resolving the issue to improve the school environment and enhance their mental well-being. The presentation and analysis of the data adhere to the thematic approach and focus group methodology detailed in Chapter 3. The following sections provide an analysis of the results, organised according to the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data collected.

4.2 Data presentation and discussion of findings

The themes that emerged from the researcher's findings following the transcription of participant data are presented in Table 4.2.1 below.

Table 4.2.1: Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Understanding of bullying	1.1 Bullying as a tool of humiliation and psychological harm 1.2 Types and forms of bullying identified by learners
2. Perceived contributing factors to bullying	2.1. Home environments as foundations for aggression and discipline deficits.

	2.2 School environment and teacher intervention 2.3 Echoes of apartheid: Racial and Cultural tensions as underlying triggers of bullying 2.4 Social Media as a weapon: amplifying humiliation and fear beyond the school gates
4 Learners' Experiences and effects of bullying	3.1 Internalisation of bullying and self-worth erosion 3.2. School attendance and engagement 3.3. Observations of bullying incidents 3.4. (Lack of) Responsive Support mechanisms for bullying
4. Recommendations for Addressing Bullying	4.1 Preventative measures suggested by learners 4.2 Role of teachers, parents, and peers 4.3 Suggestions for school policies or disciplinary actions 4.4 Cultural diversity, social inclusion and peer stereotyping

4.3. PRESENTATION OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.3.1. Theme 1: Understanding of Bullying

This theme presents the findings related to the first research objective: to explore learners' understanding of bullying in a multicultural school, the selected Secondary School. The analysis of the focus group transcripts revealed a nuanced and multifaceted conceptualisation of bullying among the participants, which is captured in the sub-themes below.

Sub-theme 1.1: Bullying as a Tool of Humiliation and Psychological Harm

To begin the discussion (in both sessions), participants were asked to define bullying. Their responses revealed a strong emphasis on the psychological and emotional dimensions of the behaviour.

> **Researcher:** "How would you guys define bullying? What is bullying?"
>
> **Mia:** "*Taking advantage over somebody or making fun of their insecurities*."
>
> **Dineo:** "*I personally believe that bullying is like, basically a form of violence against people of the same age group. Or most of the time it occurs in schools. It can be violence of any sort, maybe emotional, physical sometimes*."
>
> **Thando:** "*it's when someone keeps hurting you on purpose, like they do it all the time, not once*."
>
> **Jayden:** "*Bullying is when they make you feel small or like you don't matter, even with words not just hitting*."
>
> **Tumelo:** "*I think it's when someone embarrasses you in front of others, especially on social media, that's bullying too*."
>
> **Ravi:** "*bullying is when someone constantly tries to bring you down, not just physically but emotionally too*."
>
> **Naledi:** "*they use your weakness against you, like you're poor or not good at English, they laugh at you*."

The responses from Mia and Dineo highlight a fundamental understanding of bullying rooted in power dynamics and its diverse manifestations. Mia's assertion that bullying involves "*taking advantage*" and "*making fun of their insecurities*" reflects a keen awareness of the emotional and psychological harm at its core. This finding aligns with Yang et al. (2022), who identify emotional bullying as a common form of aggression in schools, often manifesting through name-calling and verbal abuse. Dineo's definition further broadens the scope of bullying, framing it as a form of "*violence of any sort*" and acknowledging its prevalence in schools and across age groups. This suggests that learners possess a comprehensive understanding that extends beyond traditional physical bullying.

The participants' definitions of bullying—which include making someone "*feel small*" (Jayden), repetitive harmful acts (*"keeps hurting you on purpose"*), and public embarrassment (*"in front of others, especially on social media"*)—reveal that their conceptualisation is comprehensive and directly connected to their daily experiences. The experiences of Jayden and other

learners show that they recognise the temporal persistence of bullying as a defining characteristic. This nuanced understanding is particularly noteworthy given that some studies suggest a lack of awareness of emotional bullying. For instance, Masilo and Matlakala (2023, p. 1132) assert that many learners overlook the psychological effects of bullying when they discuss bullying. In contrast, the findings from this focus group challenge this notion, demonstrating a heightened awareness of non-physical bullying and its psychological impact on well-being. This perspective is supported by Tanga and Hendricks (2019, p. 1), who emphasise the adverse effects of bullying on psychological functioning and academic progress. The participants' ability to articulate these abstract harms indicates that they are not only experiencing bullying but are also actively conceptualising its detrimental effects on a deeper level.

Sub-theme 1.2: Types and Forms of Bullying Identified by Learners

Participants were asked to identify different types of bullying they had experienced or witnessed in the school. Their responses revealed a recognition of various forms, with a particular focus on physical, emotional, and cyberbullying.

> **Researcher:** "What are the different types of bullying you have experienced or witnessed in the school?"
>
> **Dineo:** "*Emotional bullying, if that even exists*."
>
> **Thando:** "*Physical, physical, physical*."
>
> **Lerato:** "*Physical*."
>
> **Naledi:** "*Cyberbullying*."
>
> **Researcher:** "Anyone want to elaborate?"
>
> **Dineo:** "*I never experienced it. Sometimes both kids at this school like body shaming... Sometimes they make fun of your personal background... And that often disturbs... Disturbs your mental health and other things. Especially your self-esteem*."
>
> **Naledi:** "*I don't know when it was. I think it was this year or the year before. But then there was a group or a channel on Facebook. And they used to take pictures or say things about people from our school*."

Thando: "*Or sometimes they find an old picture that you posted long time ago... Just look at you. How your hair looks or how short you are or how you teach something like that*."

Naledi: "*They even do it to teachers. Not all the teachers. They also take some teachers. Yes, they do*."

Dineo's initial hesitation—"*Emotional bullying, if that even exists*"—is a significant finding. It underscores a persistent gap in the discourse around emotional bullying, suggesting that while learners may be aware of its psychological harm (as seen in Sub-theme 1.1), they may still not recognise it as a formal category of bullying. This finding aligns with research by Eriksen and Lyng (2016) and Skibsted et al. (2017), who argue that relational aggression and emotional bullying are often overlooked compared to overt physical aggression. This silence is particularly noted in marginalised school environments, where victims may not report such incidents due to the covert nature of the harassment (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2023, p. 2). The long-term effects of this are profound, as bullying can lead to a higher risk of mental and physical symptoms that negatively influence mental health, quality of life, and school performance (Geng, 2024).

The participants also shed light on the pervasive nature of cyberbullying. Naledi and Thando's comments about Facebook groups and using old pictures to make fun of people demonstrate how social media platforms are actively used to perpetuate bullying beyond the school grounds. As Dineo astutely points out, social media is "*the main cause of cyberbullying. It gives people the opportunity to do things or say things about you without being known anonymously*." This anonymity, coupled with the normalisation of such behaviour, contributes to a culture where bullying is perceived as an unavoidable part of the school experience (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021). The fact that this behaviour extends to teachers, as noted by Naledi, points to a breakdown of institutional respect and highlights the urgent need for comprehensive intervention programs that educate both learners and educators on how to address cyberbullying effectively (Nyoni & Lidzhegu, 2021, p. 56).

The discussion also brought to light instances of physical bullying, including a specific example of gender-based violence (GBV). Dineo's account of a girl physically assaulting a boy over a relationship conflict illustrates how bullying can intersect with gendered dynamics. This type of incident is often minimised by educators and students who may dismiss such harmful actions as "*mere jokes*" (Rawlings, 2019). The data also suggests that these incidents frequently occur in unsupervised areas, leaving learners vulnerable to repeated aggression (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2023, p. 4). Nyoni and Lidzhegu (2021, p. 59) argue for coordinated

responses and counselling strategies that specifically address these gendered dynamics within bullying. The findings from this study show a variation in how learners understand and experience bullying, encompassing physical, emotional, and cyberbullying. The normalisation of these behaviours and the lack of consequences underscore the need for targeted interventions, as proposed by Smit (2023, p. S7), which address not only individual behaviour but also the broader institutional cultures and power dynamics that shape the school environment.

4.3.2. Theme 2: Perceived Contributing Factors to Bullying

This theme explores the learners' perceptions of the factors that contribute to bullying in their school environment. The analysis revealed a multifaceted understanding of bullying's origins, linking it to individual characteristics, family backgrounds, and institutional dynamics. This theme aligns with the broader academic discourse that identifies bullying as an intricate issue influenced by a variety of personal, social, and environmental factors (Abdirahman, Fleming & Jacobsen, 2013).

Sub-theme 2.1: Home Environments as Foundations for Aggression and Discipline Deficits

The researcher initiated the discussion by asking participants to identify the potential contributing factors to bullying, prompting them with an example of socioeconomic background.

> **Researcher:** "What do you think the contributing factors to bullying?" "what do you guys think could be the contributory factors to bullying? Things that contribute to bullying. For instance, maybe. Like you guys say, if... A learner comes from an impoverished background, something like that… people tend to bully those people…"
>
> **Dineo:** "*I think the main reason as to why bullying happens, it can be lack of discipline at home...*"
>
> **Thando:** "*Many learners tend to project their insecurities on other learners...*"
>
> **Researcher:** "Do you think race or culture is a contributing factor to bullying?"

Mia: "*I don't think so. I feel like we're all the same, honestly*."

Thando: "*I like to disagree with her… Some learners... still have that apartheid mentality...*"

Dineo: "*There was one time when... my friend was called a monkey by an Indian boy...*"

The participants' initial responses suggest a link between a learner's home life and their propensity to bully. Dineo's assertion that the "*main reason as to why bullying happens, it can be lack of discipline at home*" is a central observation. She elaborates, explaining that children often replicate behaviours they witness in their family environment, whether it be a lack of discipline or coming from an abusive home. This observation is strongly supported by academic literature. Adlem (2021, p. 7) and Tanga & Hendricks (2023) highlight that unresolved trauma and a lack of parental supervision often lead to externalising behaviours, including school bullying. Adewoye & Plessis (2021) and Smit (2023) similarly contend that children from unsafe family backgrounds are prone to replicating abusive behaviours they have experienced. Furthermore, the mention of a lack of discipline suggests that there could be a complex interaction between the school and home environment. Radebe and Kyobe (2021) confirm that exposure to conflict at home increases the likelihood of a child becoming aggressive at school. The participants' insights thus confirm a crucial link between family dynamics and bullying behaviours observed at the selected Secondary School.

Beyond the home environment, the participants identified the school itself and its cultural context as significant contributing factors. Thando's disagreement with Mia's assertion of racial equality reveals that an "*apartheid mentality*" persists among some learners, leading to racially motivated bullying, such as a friend being called a "*monkey by an Indian boy*. This illustrates the complex social dynamics within the multicultural school and the lasting impact of South Africa's history on learner interactions.

The researcher then further asked whether the school could also be a contributory factor, and most of the learners said yes. They shared the following:

Mia: "*The teachers also are rude to the learners*."

Dineo: "*But it's like talking about someone indirectly in front of them and in front of everyone else, and most of the time they do it in such a way that other people get the joke but then you don't get it because you know what he's being talked about here*."

Lukhanyo: "*Yes, I do think so because... Because I would say I've never seen them like handling the bullying in a good manner and yah are even the teachers bully the kids*."

Naledi: "*yes, there are some teachers that are also bullying the learners. I'm not going to say her name but like Miss Biyela, she always has something to say about other children*."

These comments show a critical breakdown of trust in the school environment. The participants' statements, from Mia's observation of rude teachers to Lukhanyo's claim that they "*never seen them like handling the bullying in a good manner*," point to a lack of effective policies and a perceived institutional failure to address bullying. Naledi's specific mention of a teacher, Miss Biyela, engaging in verbal bullying further underscores this issue. When authority figures participate in bullying behaviours, it normalises such actions and creates a space where learners feel unable to report incidents for fear of inaction or retribution. This is supported by Timm & Eskell-Blokland (2011), who found that systemic issues within educational institutions contribute to bullying, and Adewoye & Plessis (2021), who noted that when teachers are part of the problem, bullying is often overlooked. This normalisation perpetuates the cycle of bullying and leaves victims to suffer in silence, with no clear avenue for recourse.

The discussion also touched on the role of social media in cyberbullying:

Researcher: "What role do you think social media plays in bullying?"

Dineo: "*It's the main cause of cyberbullying. It gives people the opportunity to do things or say things about you without being known anonymously*."

Dineo's assertion highlights a direct link between social media and cyberbullying, emphasising the element of anonymity that social media provides. This is consistent with existing research, such as that by Nyoni & Lidzhegu (2021, p. 56), which reports that schools and teachers are often unaware of cyberbullying instances because victims may not report them.

Finally, the discussion of physical bullying brought forth an important gendered dynamic:

Dineo: "*...when the girl was actually beating the guy... he had his face smashed against the wall.*"**…**"*I wasn't experiencing that specific type of bullying. What I referred to was more along the lines of GBV in the school*."

This incident, which Dineo correctly identifies as an example of gender-based violence (GBV), illustrates how physical aggression within the school can be rooted in relationship conflicts. Rawlings (2019) highlights that educators and students often dismiss such harmful actions as mere jokes, thereby diminishing the severity of gendered violence at a school level. The data further suggests that such incidents often occur in unsupervised areas, and Nyoni & Lidzhegu (2021, p. 59) argue for coordinated responses that specifically address these gendered dynamics. The findings from this study show a variation in how learners understand and experience bullying, encompassing physical, emotional, and cyberbullying. The normalisation of these behaviours and the lack of consequences underscore the need for targeted interventions, as proposed by Smit (2023, p. 7), which address not only individual behaviour but also the broader institutional cultures and power dynamics that shape the school environment.

Sub-theme 2.2: School Environment and Teacher Intervention

As shown in the responses herein, most of the participants were united in their belief that the school environment itself is a significant contributor to bullying. Their responses revealed a profound sense of institutional failure, encompassing a lack of effective discipline, poor policy enforcement, and, most critically, teachers' active participation in bullying behaviours.

> **Researcher:** "Do you think the school also is a contributing factor to bullying?"
>
> **All Learners:** "*Yes, yes.*"
>
> **Mia:** "*The teachers also are rude to the learners*. The school has no discipline… no rules or proper consequences."
>
> **Dineo:** "*It's like talking about someone indirectly in front of them and in front of everyone else…*"
>
> **Lukhanyo:** "*Yes, I do think so because... even the teachers bully the kids*."
>
> **Naledi:** "*Yes, there are some teachers that are also bullying the learners...* like Miss Biyela, she always has something to say about other children."
>
> **Dineo:** "*If you were to ask most students... they would probably say 'Mam XXX [name concealed]'...*"

These comments provide a critical glimpse into a school culture where the boundaries between authority figures and learners are blurred, leading to a breakdown of institutional trust. Lukhanyo's and Naledi's assertions that teachers "*bully the kids*" and Mia's observation of a lack of proper discipline point to a permissive environment where bullying is normalised. This is further substantiated by Dineo's description of teachers engaging in subtle, indirect ridicule, which may seem trivial but can have a crippling effect on a learner's self-esteem and sense of safety. These findings align with Timm & Eskell-Blokland (2011), who found that systemic issues within educational institutions contribute to the problem, and Adewoye & Plessis (2021), who noted that when teachers are part of the problem, bullying is often overlooked. The statements by Dineo, Naledi, and Lukhanyo directly support the literature from Adlem (2021), which reported that teachers often model or enable bullying behaviours, and Ngidi and Moletsane (2023), who noted that a lack of accountability from teachers has created environments where bullying is normalised.

The consequences of this toxic environment extend beyond individual incidents and affect the entire school community.

> **Researcher:** "How do you think bullying affects the school environment? And the mood? Here at school?"
>
> **Mia:** "*Some people get very excited to see how people are getting bullied... but I think it makes the environment very... It makes some learners very timid to show their real... personalities because of bullying*."
>
> **Aisha:** "*I feel like sometimes you can make the environment feel very toxic, where you have to do things or act a certain way... So they just keep quiet, they hide who they are...*"
>
> **Dineo:** "*It might also make some kids hate being in school. For example, it's mostly the main reason as to why most kids prefer to just be at home then go to school*."
>
> **Themba:** "*Some people outside the school see the school as a bad school and that has bad people because of the way they behave and the bullying cases. So they don't recommend other people coming to the school because of the cases that have been reported*."
>
> **Researcher:** "How has bullying affected your academic performance actually?"

Tumelo: "*It affects how we think in the classroom… people talk about bullying incidents after break instead of focusing.*"

These comments demonstrate the profound impact of bullying on the school's social and academic climate. Mia and Aisha highlight the creation of a toxic environment where self-expression is suppressed, leading some learners to become "*timid*" and "*hide who they are*." This fear and anxiety are a significant emotional and mental distraction that inhibit meaningful classroom participation, as described by Tumelo. Dineo's observation that some learners "*hate being in school*" confirms findings by Geng (2024), which show that bullying significantly affects learners' mental health and quality of life. The Relational Well-being and Person-in-environment (PIE) theories further provide a framework for understanding this, positing that a hostile school environment affects the well-being of all individuals within the system, not just the direct victims. This is reiterated by Adlem (2021, p. 7), who noted that "*psychological distress from bullying severely impairs learners' capacity to focus and engage in schoolwork*" [italics by researcher for emphasis]. Themba's statement that the school has a negative reputation due to "*bullying cases*" shows that the issue has a systemic impact on the institution's public perception.

When asked about potential solutions, the learners' responses reflected their disillusionment with the current system.

Researcher: "What role do you think teachers and staff in general can play in addressing bullying?"

Dineo: "*Personally, I don't think there's much they can do if they are also part of the problem*."

Aisha: "*They should stop making fun of learners in class... they should talk to them privately*."

Researcher: "Has it affected your relationship with teachers in any way?"

Dineo: "*I've never liked most teachers… especially because of how they handle bullying*."

The comments from Dineo and Aisha reveal a deep-seated mistrust in teachers' ability to intervene. Dineo's statement shows a complete loss of faith in teacher-led solutions. At the same time, Aisha's suggestion for private, one-on-one conversations offers a concrete, learner-centred alternative to the public humiliation they have witnessed. This is a critical

finding, as it points to a gap between the school's perceived efforts and the learners' lived experiences. This lack of accountability and the perception that nothing will be done are key reasons why bullying becomes embedded in the school culture, as argued by Nyoni & Lidzhegu (2021) and Timm & Eskell-Blokland (2011). Thus, the data from this sub-theme reinforces the need for a targeted whole-school approach that goes beyond punitive measures to actively foster inclusive and affirming spaces, as recommended by Adlem (2021, p.13) and Masilo and Matlakala (2022).

Sub-theme 2.3: Echoes of Apartheid: Racial and Cultural Tensions as Underlying Triggers of Bullying

Given that the selected secondary is a multicultural school, the researcher aimed to find out whether the racial diversity in the school could also be a contributory factor to the bullying issue. The following exchange highlights the different perspectives among the learners.

> **Researcher:** "Do you think race or culture is a contributing factor to bullying?"
>
> **Mia:** "*I don't think so. I feel like we're all the same, honestly*."
>
> **Thando:** "*I like to disagree with her… Some learners... still have that apartheid mentality...*"
>
> **Researcher:** "can you share with us why you are disagreeing with her?"
>
> **Dineo:** "*It's like some people here still think we're in apartheid. They act superior to us like they're better*."
>
> **Researcher:** "Have any of you been bullied because of your race?"
>
> **Thando:** "*Yes because Someone once called me a monkey. I think they said that because I'm black*."
>
> **Researcher:** "What do you think could be the reason as to why other learners are being bullied?"
>
> **Mia:** "*But to be honest, I don't think it's about race. Most of us get along regardless of our background. It's more about personal issues or how you look*."

Thando's experience of being called a "*monkey*" and Dineo's assertion that some learners "*still think we're in apartheid*" and "*act superior to us*" show a clear link to racial bullying and reflect racial prejudice among learners. The use of such dehumanising terms and slurs confirms the findings of Shumba et al. (2022, p. 6), who posited that "*Racial epithets and cultural slurs are still weaponised against black learners in integrated schools*." Similarly, Canham (2019) in his study found that in post-apartheid integrated schools, Black learners frequently encounter racial microaggressions and are affected both consciously and subconsciously, and patterns of exclusion that they navigate as forms of hostile treatment or bullying as shared from the experiences of the participants of that study. These findings are further supported by Ngidi and Moletsane (2023), who argue that a lack of inclusive cultural practices can result in bullying.

Mia's perspective, however, offers a contrasting view. Her statement, "*I don't think it's about race. Most of us get along regardless of our background. It's more about personal issues or how you look*," suggests a blindness to the structural inequalities that shape social dynamics in racially mixed schools. This viewpoint is a significant finding in itself, as it points to the subtle and often unacknowledged nature of racial aggression. Adlem (2021, p. 12) have recognised this as a "*blindness to structural inequalities which still shape social dynamics in racially mixed schools*." This divergence in perception highlights the complex challenge of addressing racial bullying, as some learners may not recognise it as a form of bullying, thereby perpetuating the problem.

Subtheme 2.4.: Social Media as a Weapon: Amplifying Humiliation and Fear Beyond the School Gates

Participants also spoke about the pervasive influence of social media on bullying behaviours, extending the bullying environment beyond the school premises. Their experiences and observations regarding cyberbullying were as follows:

> **Researcher:** "What role do you think social media plays in bullying?"
>
> **Dineo:** "*They usually take a picture of you when you're not ready… then they turn it into a sticker and make fun of you*."

Thando: "*…sometimes they find an old picture that you posted a long time ago and they just look at you… how your hair looks or how short you are or how you teach something like that*."

Naledi: "*Even teachers get bullied… people take pictures of them and post them*."

Jayden: "*It's the main cause of cyberbullying. It gives people the opportunity to do things or say things about you without being known, uhm anonymously*."

Themba: "*The school has a bad reputation because of bullying… it's on the tabloids*."

Researcher: "That's actually why I chose this school, when I was looking for schools for this study, I didn't even know this school but when I saw the bullying instances on the internet, I then came here and didn't even consider the distance at all…."

Themba: "*It's always on tabloids, Sho!*"

The statements from the participants paint a clear and consistent picture of how social media has become a weapon for humiliation, with serious implications for the school environment and its reputation. Their statements are supported by literature, which shows that cyberbullying is a growing problem in South African schools. Consistent with what Jayden said about people acting anonymously, Govender (2013) argues that cyberbullying is distinct from traditional bullying because it happens outside the school environment, and the bully can be anonymous. This is a significant finding, as it highlights the challenge of holding perpetrators accountable and the difficulty for schools to intervene in behaviours that occur outside the school yard.

The participants' comments, such as Dineo's description of photos being turned into WhatsApp stickers and Thando's experience with old pictures, illustrate how cyberbullying leverages anonymity to amplify emotional and psychological harm. This is further compounded by the fact that teachers are not exempt from this behaviour, as noted by Naledi. The visibility of these incidents, as Themba points out, has resulted in the school having a "*bad reputation*" and even being featured in "*tabloids*." The researcher's own reason for choosing the school for the study further underscores the public nature of the problem, highlighting how cyberbullying can damage an institution's image and make it difficult to attract new students. Cilliers and Chinyamurindi (2020) and Khuzwayo, Taylor, and Connolly (2018) affirm that cyberbullying is a complex and serious problem that requires immediate

intervention, as it is often intertwined with other forms of aggression and can lead to emotional, behavioural, and academic challenges for both victims and perpetrators.

4.3.4. Theme 3: Learners' Experiences and Effects of Bullying

This theme delves into the personal and psychological impact of bullying as described by the learners, examining how it affects their sense of self, academic engagement, and relationships with others.

Sub-theme 3.1: Internalisation of Bullying and Self-worth Erosion

Participants were asked about the effects of bullying on their mental health and well-being, including any experiences with suicidal ideation. Their responses revealed a profound erosion of self-worth and a struggle with mental health issues.

> **Researcher:** "…Okay, I know some of you mentioned something about mental health that bullying has affected your mental health. So how do you guys think bullying has affected your mental health?, your mental well-being? Has it affected your mental well-being? Like You're not okay, you feel like, you know what, I don't care and don't want to live anymore or feel like a zombie"…
>
> **Thando:** "*it gives you anxiety. Sometimes you feel depressed and you become more suicidal.*"
>
> **Researcher:** "Who has experienced having suicidal thoughts and feelings?"
>
> **Dineo:** "*Sometimes they make fun of your personal background. All things like that. And that often disturbs… disturbs your mental health and other things. Especially your self-esteem.*"
>
> **Mia:** "*Bullying really destroys your confidence. You start to believe what they say about you.*"
>
> **Thando:** "*It makes you feel unwanted. Like you're not normal. Like you don't deserve to be here.*"
>
> **Mia:** "*My best friend killed himself in 2022. It was due to his mother. She was diagnosed with… psychosis. But yeah, she was very physical, you know, with him. He*

was bullied a lot by the kids in his area. But also here at school. He used to cry a lot and he didn't talk to anyone."

Researcher: "So how did this make you feel?"

Mia: "*Sad, I mean I grew up with him, so I... It made me so depressed.*"

Dineo: "*I wouldn't say I felt these, but I was, it wasn't because I was bullied. But yeah, I was going through a few things at that time, maybe I still am but then, yeah.*"

Researcher: "how did you deal with the situation and what you were going through during that time?"

Dineo: "*I just ignored it and let it pass.*"

Researcher: "How has bullying affected your mental health? Or how have you witnessed someone's mental health decline as a result of bullying?"

Dineo: "*It tends to make you pretend. Like, you try your best to hide that you're not feeling okay, you just pretend to be happy. To the point where sometimes, you even pretend to be with people, and you'll act as if you like this person just because you don't want them to feel the same way you were feeling. Yeah. As a result of how I pretend to be happy, especially when I'm upset, no offense to anyone.*"

Naledi: "*You lose trust in your friends. Even the people who should be there for you can turn on you.*"

Aisha: "*I didn't want to come to school anymore. I started pretending to be sick just to stay home.*"

Themba: "*I used to stay alone a lot. I wouldn't eat during break. I felt like no one liked me.*"

Tumelo: "*Sometimes it just gets too much. You don't even feel like talking to anyone anymore.*"

Themba: "*It affected my relationship with my mom, because she found out that I was trying to kill myself. I think two years back, she saw bruises on my skin, and she found out everything. She found out that I was trying to kill myself with a blade.*"

Dineo: "*It's worse when it's your own friends. That type of bullying makes you feel like you were never really enough for them.*"

Jayden: "*You start keeping everything inside. You don't want anyone to see you break.*"

The participants' assertions profoundly illustrate how bullying systematically erodes a learner's sense of self and mental well-being, often leading to severe isolation and despair. Dineo highlights how "making fun of your personal background" directly "disturbs your mental health and other things. Especially your self-esteem," while Mia painfully reveals, "Bullying really destroys your confidence. You start to believe what they say about you," showcasing the internalisation of negativity. Thando conveys a crushing sense of rejection, articulating, "It makes you feel unwanted. Like you're not normal. Like you don't deserve to be here." The tragic depth of this impact is underscored by Mia's account of her best friend's suicide, exacerbated by bullying both at school and in his area, exemplifying the devastating consequences when environmental stressors accumulate without support.

The betrayal of social bonds is evident in Naledi's assertion, "You lose trust in your friends. Even the people who should be there for you can turn on you," leading to behavioural changes like Aisha's school avoidance, "I didn't want to come to school anymore. I started pretending to be sick just to stay home." Themba's confession, "I used to stay alone a lot. I wouldn't eat during break. I felt like no one liked me," and the shocking revelation that bullying contributed to her attempt to "kill myself with a blade," underscore the severe psychological toll. Lastly, Jayden describes the coping mechanism of internalising pain, stating, "You start keeping everything inside. You don't want anyone to see you break," further emphasising the profound isolation and silent suffering experienced by these learners. These findings are supported by Shumba et al. (2022), who posited that many learners have ended up losing interest in schoolwork and some ended up being depressed or suffering from suicidal ideation. The Relational Well-being theory is affirmed here, as the quality of relationships within the learners' systems, including with friends and family, directly affects their well-being.

Sub-theme 3.2: School Attendance and Engagement

The researcher asked learners about the impact of bullying on their school attendance and academic engagement.

Researcher: “How has bullying affected your academic relationship, your academic performance actually? Like at school, How did it affect your progress in school? Does it affect you in any way?”

Tumelo: “*It mostly affects how we think in the classroom… we don't usually pay attention because… after break people talk about it instead of focusing*.”

Mia: “*It does make you feel demoted. I feel it makes you feel demoted, and it belittles you*.”

Researcher: “I hear you, but how has bullying affected your attendance at school?”

Dineo: “*I've never been bullied, but I think, like I said before, that it wouldn't make you want to go to school anymore*.”

The participants' assertions illustrate how bullying affects learners’ school attendance and engagement. Tumelo highlighted how bullying affects their focus in the classroom, leading to a disruption of their learning. Similarly, Mia’s comment that bullying makes her "feel demoted and belittled" underscores the psychological toll that disrupts their capacity to participate in class. These assertions are supported by Hendricks and Tanga (2019), who posited that learners who are bullied fear for their lives, and by Mabasa and Muluvhu (2019), who are of the view that victims of bullying resort to absenteeism and dropping out. The Minister of Education, Mrs. Angie Motshega, also stated that bullying disrupts the quality of learning and teaching in schools and therefore requires immediate attention (Department of Basic Education, 2017). Reyneke (2018) also noted that victims of bullying often experience poor social and emotional well-being, which leads to poor academic performance.

Sub-theme 3.3: Observations of Bullying Incidents

The researcher asked the learners questions that prompted them to talk about their observations of bullying and their perceptions of the problem's severity.

Researcher: “do you guys think bullying is a serious problem in the school?”

ALL: “*It is*.”

Researcher: “Why do you guys think is a serious problem?”

Mia: "*…Because the school has no discipline. If you see every girl, mostly the girls, there's no unity between the girls. There's no girl code, they don't have love for each other. There's no unity and there's no discipline in this school. We don't have proper rules or proper consequences for bullying or the action of hurting somebody else. There is no consequence*."

Dineo: "*So the point during this school is as far as, most of the time you see even the teachers being bullied, mostly the principal.*"

Researcher: "the teachers get bullied?"

Dineo: "*Yeah, it's something like that, besides cyberbullying, like, okay, I'll just make an example, right? There's this one time when our principal, even today, not the principal, but the other guy who was here, I think it was the woman, no, those who came in the morning when we had that assembly. They, um, yeah. Most kids take what she says as a joke, you know. And I think that can affect your mental health, I think. because you'd ask yourself, why are they laughing at you? And you'd just try and make excuses as to why do we do that, and there's a lot of excuses as to why they would say that. For example, there's this time when the principal said, when you're being 'bulled", even today*."

Mia: "*again as I said that would have happened in the school if there was discipline and consequences for all the actions, if the teachers actually put their foot down and actually control the learners and, you know, give them punishments for the actions that they have done, in classroom, out of classroom, even outside the school too. That wouldn't have happened. They would be respected.*"

The above statements by Dineo and Mia show how the persistence and normalisation of bullying in the school environment are directly linked to a lack of authority and discipline. Dineo's observation that "*even the teachers get bullied, mostly the principal*" is a critical finding, as it suggests that bullying is not just a peer-to-peer issue but a systemic problem that affects even the highest authority figures. If the principal can be openly ridiculed, learners may feel empowered to bully others without fear of consequence, which is what Mia also pointed out. This is consistent with Adewoye and Plessis (2021), who noted that learners are now viewing bullying as a normal part of their schooling experiences, and this has allowed the cycle of victimisation and aggression to persist. The statements are also consistent with Blake and Louwe (2010), who found that learners see bullying as an unavoidable part of their school experience. Timm and Eskell-Blokland (2011) also report that bullying is common in South

African schools, pointing to systemic issues that do not protect learners and staff. The participants' observations highlight the urgent need for a stronger, more consistent approach to discipline and accountability, as also suggested by Chisala, Ndhlovu, and Mandyata (2023).

Sub-theme 3.4: (Lack of) Responsive Support Mechanisms for Bullying

The researcher asked learners about the support they have received from their friends, families, and teachers. Their responses revealed a significant gap in effective support systems, both at home and at school.

> **Ravi:** "*Personally, because I'm not close to my parents, I would like to support my friends because I rely on them to make me feel better. I feel like as a parent, they might also exaggerate everything and come to the school and make it into a big thing*."
>
> **Lukhanyo:** "*You're really not sure about friends because they can be fake… but our parents don't listen to us.*"
>
> **Aisha:** "*I would like someone else from the school, on the school SGB, but not my parents. They would definitely… the first thing that would come to their head [is] that I was the problem.*"
>
> **Jayden:** "*Some teachers do take it seriously, but others just laugh along with the class.*"
>
> **Mia:** "*It's hard to tell teachers because sometimes they do nothing, and sometimes they even make things worse.*"
>
> **Tumelo:** "*I told a teacher once, and she just said I must ignore it. But it didn't stop.*"
>
> **Researcher:** "This is a very important question, what kind of support would you like to receive if you were bullied?"
>
> **Nandipha:** "*Physical and emotional. It depends on the person, I mean what type of support brings you up. I would like emotional or mental support*."
>
> **Dineo:** "*I would probably say any kind of support that comes from a person who I take as a friend. For example, support from a mother would mean a lot for me, because my mother and I we are practically best friends*."

Themba: "*I would want that person to come back to me to apologize.*"

Lukhanyo: "*I would want to be supported if I was bullied, mostly by my mother.*"

Naledi: "*Mam personally, because I'm not close to my parents, I would like to support my friends because I rely on them to make me feel better because I feel like as a parent, they might also exaggerate everything and come to the school and make it into a big thing, but real friends just comfort you*."

Tumelo: "*I'm saying I wouldn't like to be supported.*"

Researcher: "You wouldn't want to be supported, why?"

Tumelo: "*Because I would feel like the person that's supporting me is feeling sorry for, something like that. I don't want any of my friends to sympathize for me…*"

The above responses reveal a significant gap in effective support structures both at school and at home, leaving learners feeling unsupported and unheard. The data shows a complex dynamic with parents; while some learners, like Lukhanyo and Dineo, desire support from their mothers, others like Ravi and Aisha fear that their parents would overreact or blame them, preventing them from seeking help. This highlights a breakdown of trust and communication within the family system.

Similarly, the learners have had negative experiences with teachers, as highlighted by Jayden, Mia, and Tumelo. The dismissal of bullying incidents and the lack of proper follow-through from teachers confirm the findings of Adlem (2021) and Ngidi and Moletsane (2023), who both reported that a lack of accountability from teachers has created environments where bullying is normalised. The participants' assertions account for a very significant gap in effective support structures within the school environment and at home, thereby making them feel as though they are not being supported. Nandipha, Themba, and Dineo's suggestions for emotional, mental, and restorative support (an apology from the bully) point to a need for multifaceted intervention strategies that address not only the behaviour but also the psychological and emotional well-being of the learners.

Theme 4: Recommendations for Addressing Bullying in a Multicultural School

Sub-theme 4.1: Preventative Measures Suggested by Learners

The researcher's inquiry into learner-suggested recommendations for addressing bullying elicited a range of responses, reflecting a desire for practical and impactful measures beyond the school's current disciplinary system.

Participants' responses:

> **Jayden:** *"By assigning proper punishments... Just suspending them is not enough... by punishments, I mean like sweeping the classroom or wiping the board, cleaning the boards, cleaning tables, cleaning the bathrooms… You know, doing something that will make them not do it again."*
>
> **Mia:** *"Yes, I mean it's a serious thing, people kill themselves for this kind of stuff... Okay, you must redeem yourself."*
>
> **Aisha:** "*I feel that maybe, if this person is obviously gets suspended... They come back and still do it. I feel that the school should call the parents in, have a meeting with them and take them out of the school."*
>
> **Lerato:** *"Sometimes that doesn't help because your parents can be called in... you're even more angry that it led to this. If you're being expelled from school or maybe you're given a transfer letter you can just continue in a different school."*
>
> **Aisha:** *"Maybe a class or an issue class or something, for bullying to educate them... Maybe a compulsory class or something."*
>
> **Thando:** *"There should be posters in the school about bullying. Like what to do and who to go to."*
>
> **Themba:** *"Maybe the school should have a bullying awareness week where we talk openly and even write messages to others about being kind."*
>
> **Dineo :** *"I think there should be a group of learners who are trained to help others… like peer supporters or something... Find the root of the problem... a child wont bully another person for nothing, maybe something triggers him, there has to be something that you can teach him or educate him?."*

The responses from participants highlighted a deep-seated frustration with the existing school policy, particularly the perceived ineffectiveness of suspensions. Jayden's suggestion of public, restorative punishments such as cleaning bathrooms and classrooms, supported by

Mia's concern for the severe psychological consequences of bullying, *reveals a preference for consequences that are not only punitive but also have an element of public shame and accountability*. This perspective contrasts with the traditional notion of private disciplinary actions and suggests a desire for bullies to be made to understand the gravity of their actions.

Furthermore, Aisha's call for expulsion is critically challenged by Lerato, who astutely observes that such a measure merely displaces the problem. This finding, *that punitive measures often fail to address the root cause of bullying and can even exacerbate the problem*, is a significant insight from the learners.

The learners' recommendations also demonstrate a strong focus on proactive and preventative measures. Their suggestions for *mandatory anti-bullying classes, awareness campaigns, and peer support initiatives* underscore the need for a comprehensive educational strategy. The comments by Ravi, and supported by Dineo, to "find the root of the problem" and provide "counselling" highlight a sophisticated understanding of bullying as a symptom of deeper psychological issues rather than a simple behavioural problem. This aligns with a restorative justice approach, which seeks to address the needs of all parties involved rather than focusing solely on punishment (Masilo, 2023).

Sub-theme 4.2: Role of Teachers, Parents, and Peers

Participants were highly critical of the role teachers play, or fail to play, in addressing bullying and offered insights into the collective responsibility of all stakeholders.

Participants' responses:

> **Dineo:** "*Personally, I don't think there's much they can do about it if they are also part of the problem."*
>
> **Aisha:** "*They should stop making fun of learners… If there's a problem, talk to them after class… not in front of everyone and embarrass them."*
>
> **Nandipha:** "*I think learners must be taught what bullying is. Some of them don't even know that what they're doing is bullying."*
>
> **Naledi:** *"Respecting each other's feelings."*

A central finding in this sub-theme is the *institutional distrust learners have toward teachers*. Dineo's bold statement that teachers can't help if they are "part of the problem" is a profound reflection of a school culture where the very authority figures meant to protect learners are perceived as complicit. This sentiment is reinforced by Aisha's recommendation for teachers to stop "making fun of learners" and handle disciplinary matters in private. This resonates with Rawlings (2019), who notes that when educators and students "dismiss harmful actions as mere jokes," it diminishes the severity of the violence and normalises such behaviour.

The learners' statements also highlight their own capacity and desire to contribute to a positive school environment. Their focus on mutual respect and positive affirmations, as suggested by Naledi and Dineo, points to the potential effectiveness of peer-led interventions. Furthermore, Nandipha's crucial observation that "some of them don't even know that what they're doing is bullying" highlights a critical *gap in awareness and education that must be addressed at a foundational level* to effectively combat the issue.

4.4. Chapter Summary and Conclusion

The findings of this chapter contribute valuable insights into the multifaceted issue of bullying at the selected Secondary School. The themes underscored by the depth and frequency of participants' responses. Learners shared distressing accounts of being victims or witnesses of bullying, highlighting its profound impact on their psychological well-being.

This chapter has provided a foundational understanding of bullying within a multicultural school setting, revealing that the phenomenon is deeply embedded within the school environment and influenced by a complex interplay of emotional, environmental, and relational factors. The data illustrate how social media, family backgrounds, and the relationships between learners and between learners and teachers all contribute to the dynamics of bullying.

The urgency of this issue is further underscored by the learners' recommendations, which reveal a clear call for holistic, context-sensitive, and sustainable interventions. These recommendations point toward a shift from a purely punitive approach to one that prioritises prevention, education, and healing. The findings have laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by students at selected Secondary School, thereby paving the way for targeted strategies to help eradicate bullying and foster a safer, more respectful school culture.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

5.1. Introduction

Bullying is a reality that permeates school environments across the globe. Yet, to truly understand its impact and develop effective interventions, one must move beyond generic definitions and listen to the lived experiences of those most affected: the learners themselves. This chapter presents a comprehensive summary of the study's findings, concluding the research by attaining its stated objectives. The chapter begins with a recap of the methodological and theoretical framework that guided the research. It then delves into a detailed discussion of the key findings, organised by thematic categories, to provide a nuanced and authentic account of bullying at the selected Secondary School. The study's contributions to the body of knowledge are then discussed, followed by a series of practical and actionable recommendations for social work practice, policy development, government bodies, and future research.

5.2. Summary of the Study Methodology and Theory

This study was situated within a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, a philosophical approach that enabled the researcher to understand and interpret the unique, subjective experiences of learners at the selected Secondary School. This paradigm was crucial for capturing the richness and complexity of the participants' lived realities with bullying, which cannot be quantified through objective, positivistic measures alone. The interpretivist approach allowed the researcher to delve into the multiple realities of bullying, acknowledging that its meaning and impact are constructed differently by each individual based on their context.

A three-tier contextual, exploratory-descriptive design was employed to provide a deep and comprehensive understanding of the topic. The exploratory aspect was essential, as it enabled the researcher to investigate a phenomenon about which little is known, specifically the dynamics of bullying in a multicultural South African school setting. The descriptive component ensured that a detailed and rich account of the learners' perceptions and experiences was captured. Finally, the contextual element grounded the study in the unique historical, cultural, and social dynamics of Chatsworth, ensuring the findings were relevant and specific to the community under study.

Data was collected through focus groups with purposively selected learners. This method was chosen as the primary data collection technique because it facilitates dynamic group interaction and conversation, which can reveal shared beliefs, social norms, and collective meanings that may not emerge in a one-on-one interview setting. The focus group format also created a supportive environment where participants could openly share their experiences with bullying. The data were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis, following the systematic six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method allowed the researcher to move beyond surface-level descriptions to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) and to uncover the underlying meanings and insights from the learners' discussions about bullying.

5.3. Discussion of Findings and Attainment of Objectives

The research findings successfully addressed all four of the study's objectives by generating rich data on learners' understanding, experiences, and perceptions of bullying, as well as their recommendations for intervention.

5.3.1 Learners' Understanding of Bullying

The first objective, to explore learners' understanding of bullying, was successfully met, revealing a nuanced and multifaceted conceptualisation of the behaviour. The study's findings consistently demonstrated that learners define bullying in terms that extend beyond physical aggression to include psychological harm, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. This broader view aligns with scholarship recognizing bullying as a multifaceted phenomenon involving different dimensions (Masilo & Matlakala, 2023).

Participants' own definitions were rich, specifically encompassing verbal humiliation, social exclusion, gossip, stereotyping, and the use of derogatory language based on race, class, and cultural identity. The shared emphasis on the resulting harm, such as being excluded or being called derogatory names, strongly suggests that bullying is inherently relational and deeply tied to identity.

Learners consistently described bullying as a tool for "humiliation and psychological harm" and a behavior that makes a person "feel small." This focus on emotional impact challenges some literature suggesting learners may lack awareness of emotional bullying (Masilo & Matlakala, 2023), aligning instead with research that identifies emotional harm as a common

form of aggression (Yang et al., 2022). However, a persistent gap was noted as some participants hesitated to formally label this behaviour as "emotional bullying."

Furthermore, the data captured recognition of the pervasive nature of cyberbullying, which extends humiliation beyond school grounds (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021). The findings from the discussions suggested that participants not only recognised the various effects and manifestations of bullying but also viewed it as being deeply embedded in the institutional and cultural fabric of the school. Uncovering these rich perspectives helps to enrich the existing discourse and provides the school with the necessary insight to implement comprehensive, targeted interventions.

5.3.2 Perceived Contributing Factors to Bullying

The second objective, to understand the contributing factors to bullying at the selected Secondary School, was successfully achieved, revealing a complex interplay of individual, familial, and institutional dynamics.

The data provided a clear picture of influencing factors, starting with the familial environment. Learners consistently linked bullying to a perceived "lack of discipline at home," explaining that children often replicate aggression witnessed in their family environment (Adlem, 2021; Radebe & Kyobe, 2021; Abdirahman et al., 2013). This point was further supported by the assertion that external forces from the community often manifest in the school environment, and teacher modelling of harsh discipline can also contribute to learned behaviours (Banzon-Librojo, Garabiles, & Alampa, 2017).

Institutional Factors emerged as critical, highlighting a perceived lack of teacher supervision, a culture of institutional distrust, and the absence of constructive school activities. Most concerning was the perceived complicity of teachers in bullying, as expressed by one participant: there is "not much they can do if they are also part of the problem." This institutional failure, combined with a lack of effective disciplinary policies, can normalise bullying (Timm & Eskell-Blokland, 2011; Adewoye & Plessis, 2021; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). This finding suggests a critical need for targeted teacher training to improve competence in managing bullying (Chisala, Ndhlovu, and Mandyata, 2023).

Finally, the multicultural context of the school surfaced as a significant factor. Some participants noted the lingering influence of an "apartheid mentality," resulting in racially motivated bullying and the weaponization of "racial epithets and cultural slurs" (Shumba et al.,

2022). This finding, though not universally recognised by all learners (Adlem, 2021), underscores a subtle form of racial aggression embedded in the school's social fabric.

5.3.3 Learners' Experiences and Effects (Personal and Psychological) of Bullying

The third objective, to explore the personal and psychological effects of bullying, was profoundly met through the raw and honest accounts of the participants. The findings revealed that bullying has a deeply detrimental impact on learners' mental well-being, systematically eroding their sense of self-worth and leading to severe isolation, anxiety, and depression. These emotional and psychological tolls—including feelings of worthlessness, anxiety, academic disengagement, and even thoughts of self-harm—echo existing literature (Adlem, 2021, p. 45). Mia's tragic account of her friend's suicide and Themba's accounts provided powerful illustrations of these devastating consequences when environmental stressors accumulate without adequate support (Geng, 2024).

A key theme was the internalisation of negativity, as learners reported that bullying destroys their confidence and makes them "start to believe what they say about you." The negative effects also extended directly to academic performance, as participants admitted to being distracted and disengaged from school (Perkins & Graham-Berman, 2012). Cyberbullying, although less visible, was reported as equally destructive; despite the absence of physical scars, it causes psychological distress that significantly affects functioning (Jacobs, 2013).

The normalisation of bullying was again evident in this objective, with participants noting that both learners and teachers experienced it, pointing to a broader culture of silence and lack of accountability (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021). This alignment with the Relational Well-being and Person-in-environment (PIE) theories posits that a hostile school environment affects the well-being and functioning of all individuals within the system.

5.3.4 Learner-Suggested Interventions

The fourth objective, to capture learners' recommendations for intervention, was successfully achieved. The participants' suggestions highlighted a clear desire for a fundamental shift away from ineffective, punitive measures (like suspension) towards a more holistic, preventative, and restorative approach.

Their recommendations provided actionable, learner-centred insights, which included public, restorative consequences for bullies, compulsory anti-bullying classes, and the establishment of a peer support program. The desire for a confidential reporting system also underscored the participants' deep-seated mistrust of the current institutional reporting structures.

Furthermore, suggestions from participants like Dineo and Aisha highlighted the importance of positive teacher behaviour and modelling—consistent with findings that argue a relational leadership approach rooted in care can filter down to learners (Smit, 2018). The emphasis on restorative approaches aligns with the argument that they offer a more sustainable solution by encouraging empathy and responsibility rather than perpetuating cycles of punishment (Jabulani & Edward, 2021). The final objective was met by documenting a wide array of learner-suggested recommendations, which demonstrate the learners' capacity to contribute to the creation of a safe school environment and highlight the importance of participatory approaches in intervention development.

5.4. Implications of the Study

This study makes several significant contributions to the body of knowledge on bullying, particularly within the South African context, and provides a crucial link to the field of school social work.

First, by providing an authentic platform for learners' voices, this research offers a unique and essential perspective often overlooked in traditional studies. The resulting findings enrich the existing literature by offering context-specific insights into the complex, multifaceted nature of bullying—one that learners define as extending beyond physical aggression to include psychological harm, social exclusion, verbal abuse, stereotyping, and cyberbullying—as it is experienced in a multicultural secondary school context in Chatsworth. Such insights are critical in developing more inclusive frameworks in post-apartheid South Africa.

Second, the research underscores the need for holistic, context-sensitive, and sustainable interventions that transcend generic, punitive measures. Most importantly, the study's findings are prescriptive for school social work practice. Identifying the breakdown of institutional trust and the negative impact of teacher-led bullying provides a clear mandate for social workers to lead professional development for staff, advocate for policy changes, and apply a Person-in-Environment (PIE) theoretical framework to address the systemic, relational, and environmental factors contributing to bullying.

5.5. Recommendations of the Study

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the issue of bullying at the selected Secondary School and other similar institutions.

5.5.1. Recommendations for Social Work Practice:

Implement a Whole-School Approach

Social workers should move beyond individual counselling to lead school-wide, preventative interventions. This involves collaborating with teachers, learners, and parents to foster a culture of respect and empathy through workshops on topics such as conflict resolution, empathy building, and cultural sensitivity. Social workers can help lead workshops that focus on critical issues such as conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity and empathy, and this is echoed by Fine, Pinandari, Muzir, Agnesia, Novitasari, Bass, & Mmari (2022), who have said that anti-bullying must engage the whole school and target everyone. These kinds of workshops would be beneficial in that they would provide everyone with the necessary skills and knowledge about their responsibility in preventing bullying and creating a safe and conducive environment.

According to Wang, Liu, Wang, Hu, Fang, Yuan, & Su (2016), a collective collaboration between teachers, health care professionals and social workers is important in that they can help with creating a conducive school environment, where learners will be able to focus on their schooling without being afraid. It can also help in opening lines of communication that will promote solidarity among all parties involved.

Establish Peer Support Programs

Social workers should facilitate the creation of a peer support group, training learners to be ambassadors of kindness and support for their peers, as suggested by the participants. This would involve a structured training program and the establishment of a designated, safe space for peer support. The establishment of peer support groups is pivotal for creating spaces where open dialogue that will allow participants to share their challenges and experiences, and they would be crucial for empowering them as well (Lindgreen et al., 2020; Mazambara et al., 2022). In a research study that was conducted by Ratnawati, Setiawan, Sahar, Widyatuti, Nursasi, & Siregar, (2024), it was found that by establishing and nurturing a physically and emotionally safe environment, it results in good student outcomes and an enhanced social cohesion.

Social workers can use previously used models or establish new models for peer support that somewhat follow the ones that have provided positive results in peer support settings. Involving learners in the establishment of peer support programs will make them take charge, which would likely increase their active participation and commitment to the programs. Research has indicated that relationships, as a result of peer support, improve the well-being of the recipients while also boosting the mental health of those giving support by fostering a mutual cycle of mutual benefit (Boensvang, Weibel, Wakefield, Bidstrup, Olsen, Nissen, & Larsen, 2024). In order to improve academic and emotional outcomes in school settings, social workers should take advantage of the mutually beneficial relationships to implement these programs.

Provide Teacher Training

Social Workers are ideally placed to provide training to teachers on how to identify, respond to, and prevent bullying. This training should focus on practical skills such as early identification of bullying behaviour, de-escalation techniques, and handling disciplinary issues discreetly and respectfully. The teacher training programs should heavily focus on recognising the different forms of bullying, even the subtle forms such as emotional and cyberbullying (Eldridge and Jenkins, 2019). In the teacher training programs, participants could be taught practical skills such as identifying early signs of bullying and de-escalation techniques. As suggested by (Onnekikami et al., 2017; Sokol et al., 2016), to make sure that the teachers are knowledgeable about their roles and the procedures in place, there should be discussions on compliance with anti-bullying policies that would be established in schools.

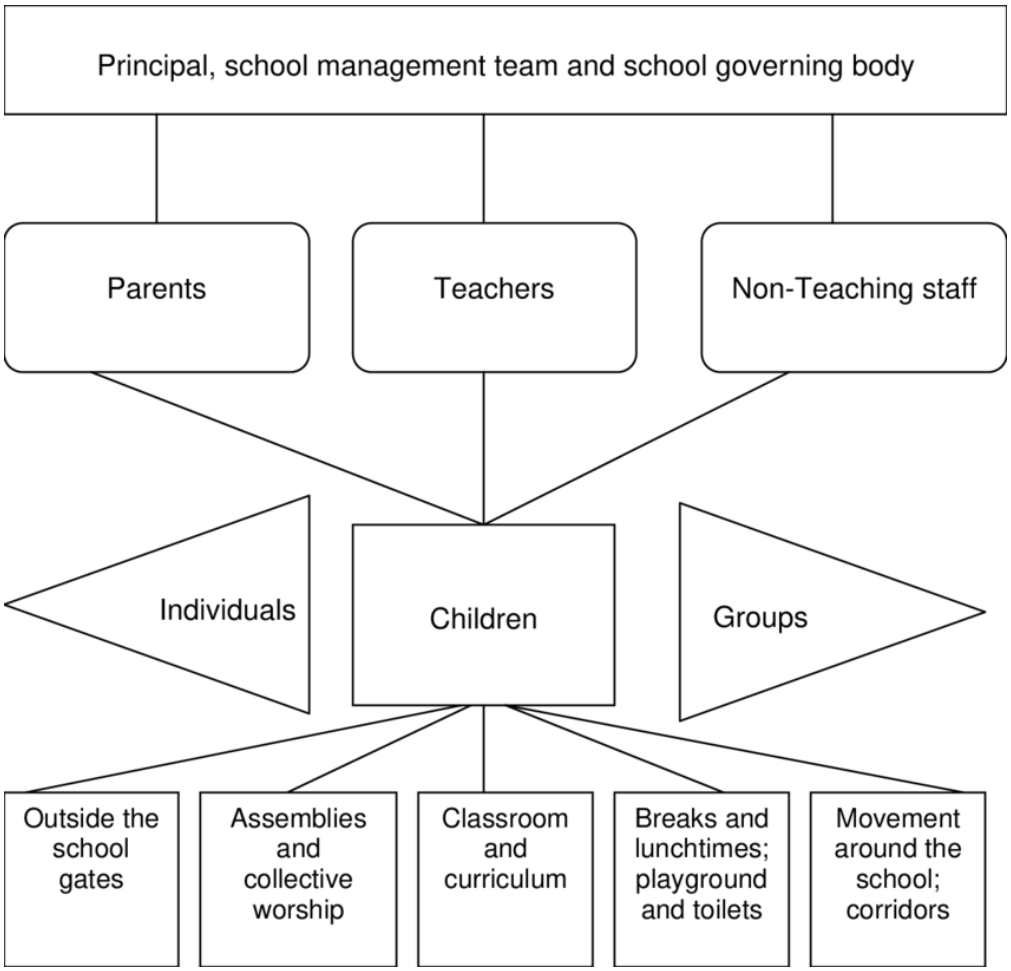
5.5.2. Recommendations for Policy Development:

Revise Disciplinary Policies:

School policies should be revised to shift away from suspensions as a primary response to bullying. Policies should incorporate restorative justice principles and meaningful consequences, such as community service or mediation, to ensure that bullies understand the impact of their actions and take responsibility for them. It would be important if schools develop their own policies and in the development stages it would be very helpful and meaningful if they consult stakeholders such as the learners, staff and parents. According to Sharp and Thompson (1994b:23-24) the policy can be implemented at a number of levels. Schools that are attempting to change attitudes and behaviour in their school must make a concerted effort to address the problem in all parts of the school system. According to Sharp and Thompson

(1994), once the policy has been developed and agreed upon it can be implemented at different levels.

Figure 4: Levels of implementation of a whole-school anti-bullying policy (Adapted from Sharp and Thompson, 1994b:24)



Implement an Anonymous Reporting System:

A confidential reporting system, such as a physical suggestion box placed in a neutral location or a secure online platform, should be implemented to empower learners to report bullying without fear of retaliation. The implementation of an anonymous system would be critical in effectively addressing bullying because learners are often hesitant to report bullies due to fear of retaliation.

Develop a Code of Conduct for Staff:

The school's code of conduct should be expanded to include explicit guidelines for staff behaviour, addressing concerns raised by learners about teachers' complicity in bullying and

emphasising the importance of a respectful, non-discriminatory environment. The school's code of conduct should be robust and should explicitly detail acceptable and unacceptable behaviours with clear examples for the school personnel to follow. According to Rudberg, Olsson, Thunborg, & Salzmann-Erikson (2023), the establishment of a code of conduct can improve staff relationships, which ends up enhancing communication between the school and teacher personnel and the school environment.

Recommendations for Government:

Mandate Anti-Bullying Education

The Department of Education should mandate and provide a standardised, curriculum-aligned anti-bullying education program for all schools. This curriculum should educate learners on the different forms of bullying, its effects, and effective reporting mechanisms. Schools can play a vital role in the mitigation of bullying through the implementation of multi-faceted anti-bullying programs. Alternatively, mental health education can also be integrated into anti-bullying education.

Provide Professional Development for Educators

The Department of Education should fund and require ongoing professional development for teachers to equip them with the necessary skills and tools to address bullying in a proper and timely manner. This should be a mandatory, recurrent training program.

Recommendations for Future Research:

- **Longer or Ethnographic Studies**

Future research could conduct longer or ethnographic studies to track the effectiveness of interventions implemented at the selected Secondary School and measure changes in bullying prevalence and school culture over time. This would provide valuable insights into which strategies are most sustainable. A longer or Ethnographic study would allow for tracing the sustainability and impact of the bullying prevention strategies that would have been implemented in the school over an extended period, and thereby addressing the research gap on how school intervention measures can adapt to changing school environments and the needs of the learners. A future longitudinal study would allow for researchers to have a deeper analysis of the differences in bullying prevalence and school culture over time, thereby corroborating the persistence or decline of effective practices (Mills, McNarry, Mellalieu, & Mackintosh, 2015).

- **Comparative Study**

A comparative study could be conducted to examine the differences in bullying dynamics between multicultural schools and similar-resourced mono-cultural schools in South Africa, providing further insight into the specific role of cultural diversity.

- **Quantitative Study**

A follow-up quantitative study could be conducted to measure the prevalence and types of bullying among the wider student body, providing statistical data to complement the rich qualitative findings of this research.

5.7 Chapter Summary and Conclusion

This Chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the study's conclusions, implications and Recommendations. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of learners regarding bullying in a Multicultural secondary school in Chatsworth.

Learners provided in-depth data, and the study captured their accounts on how they have experienced bullying directly and indirectly, which highlighted the damaging effects of bullying on their mental well-being, academic performance and social relationships. This chapter has shown how bullying in a multicultural school is shaped by a number of factors.

The recommendations that were shared by the learners call for a more holistic way of dealing with bullying, and this study reflected a need for more effective strategies that can help with the reduction of bullying in schools. This chapter has highlighted a strong foundation for more targeted interventions that can help transform the school and make it more conducive for learners and the school personnel.

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Appendices

Appendix A: HSSREC Ethical Clearance letter

12 May 2025

Bonolo Tuelo Pitswane (219066241)
School of Applied Human Sc
Howard College Campus

Dear BT Pitswane,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008148/2025
Project title: Bullying in a multicultural secondary school in Chatsworth: an explorative-descriptive study of learners' perceptions and experiences.
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Full Committee Reviewed Protocol

This letter serves to notify you that your response received on 06 May 2025 to queries of 06 May 2025 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid for one year until 12 May 2026
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours faithfully

[redacted]

Doctor Shamila Naidoo (Senior Deputy Chair)/nng

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/

Appendix B: Reply for request for Psychosocial Support

KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

6 Bhaktivedanta Swami Circle
Private Bag X003
Chatsworth, 4030
Tel: 031 402 8000 Fax: 031 4030917

CHATSWORTH SERVICE OFFICE

Mr Bongane Mzinyane
School of Applied Human Sciences, Discipline of Social Work
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal
Durban

REQUEST TO PROVIDE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

1. Your letter dated 03.12.2024 is duly noted.
2. Thank you for reaching out to our Department with this request. I trust that the research proposed by Ms Bonolo Pitswane will provide valuable insight into the issues that are facing young people in the community of Chatsworth.
3. The Chatsworth Office would be happy to provide psycho social support as the need arises. Please contact Ms Suleman on 0720333966 when there is a need for our intervention.

Thanking You

[redacted]

Service Office Manager
06/12/2024

Appendix C: Request to conduct research

Appendix D: Letter requesting permission to conduct research

University of KwaZulu-Natal
269 Masizi Kunene Road
Glenwood, Durban
4041

26 October 2023

Dear MS/MR

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I, Bonolo Pitswane, am a registered master's learner at the University of KwaZulu-Natal under the supervision of Mr Mzinyane in the Department of Social Work, in the School of Human Applied Sciences. This application serves to request Secondary school X to participate in a study titled, Secondary school learners' perceptions of bullying in schools: A case study of school learners in a school in KwaZulu-Natal.

The study will entail the purposive selection of 12 to 16 learners from grade 11 to participate in 30-minute-long focus group interviews aimed at soliciting their understandings and constructions of the above topic.

There are no known or anticipated risks to participants in this study. Furthermore, all information gathered from participants will be held in strict confidence and schools, and participants will not be identifiable in print, as code names will be used throughout the study. In this way, the researcher will guarantee the participant's privacy and anonymity. I will make the final report available to all research participants. I may be contacted via email at 219066241@stu.ukzn.ac.za.

I hereby request permission to conduct the research at one secondary school in Chatsworth in KwaZulu-Natal.

Yours sincerely

Bonolo Pitswane

(Researcher)

Appendix D: Permission letter from the school

Ms Bonolo Pitswane

Discipline of Social Work

School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Howard College Campus

Durban

Permission Letter to Conduct Research at Crossmoor Secondary School

Dear Ms Pitswane,

This letter serves to grant permission for you to conduct focus group interviews with Grade 11 learners at Crossmoor Secondary School as part of your Master's research on bullying, provided that written consent is obtained from the parents or legal guardians of the participating learners.

We understand the importance of your research and its potential contribution to addressing the issue of bullying within our school community. We trust that you will adhere strictly to the ethical guidelines governing research and will ensure the confidentiality and well-being of our learners throughout the study.

Please ensure that your research protocol aligns with the ethical standards and procedures outlined in your research proposal.

We wish you success in your research endeavor.

Sincerely,

[Principal's Name]

Principal Crossmoor Secondary School

Date stamp

Crossmoor Secondary School

Appendix E: Reply Slip

REPLY SLIP

DECLARATION AND UNDERSTANDING

I Khayelihle Innocent Myeni ..... The principal of Crossmoor Secondary school hereby confirm that I hereby understand the content of this document and the nature of the research project, and grant permission to Bonolo Pitswane to conduct the research in my school.

.....

.....

Principal's Signature [redacted]

Date 29-11-24.

Appendix F: Permission letter KZN DOE

KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Ref: 2/4/8/372
Enquiries: Ms Phindile Duma Email: phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za Tel: 033 392 1063

Ms Bonolo Tuelo Pitswane
50 Bhaktivedanta Swami Circle
CHATSWORTH
4092

Dear Ms Pitswane

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DOE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"BULLYING IN A MULTICULTURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL IN CHATSWORTH: AN EXPLORATIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 18 November 2024 to 31 October 2027.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

UMLAZI DISTRICT

[redacted]

Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 18 November 2024

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix G: Recruitment Session plan

Session theme: to lay the groundwork for an effective recruitment session

Overall purpose of the session: preparation phase

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">ACTIVITY ONE

Name and brief description of activity: meeting up with the Life Orientations teacher and the principal and to prepare for the venue and materials needed

Duration:20 mins

Materials required: Timer</td></tr>
<tr><td>Purpose of activity:

To have a meeting with the principal together with the Life Orientations teacher and to prepare for the venue and materials needed.</td><td>Brief description of activity:

The researcher will schedule and conduct a meeting with the Life Orientation teacher together with the principal to explain the study, its purpose, and the ethical safeguards.

The purpose of the activity is to also seek assistance in scheduling a meeting with parents and learners and sharing the child-friendly posters for distribution within the school.

Another purpose of the activity is to prepare for the venue and materials needed, that would include Booking the school hall or classroom for the session, printing and organize child-friendly information sheets, consent forms for parents, and assent forms for learners and preparing visual aids for the presentation (e.g., slides, posters).</td></tr>
</table>

Session Plan for Recruitment (Initial stage)

Date of session:

Session theme: Recruitment of Grade 11 Learners for research Study

Overall purpose of the session: To introduce the researcher to the participants and to explain to them how the sessions are going to be done, what is expected from the researcher and what is expected from the participants. To recruit Grade 11 learners as research participants through an ethically sound and child-friendly process.

Objectives to be achieved:

- To recruit Grade 11 learners as research participants through an ethically sound and child-friendly process.
- To engage parents and learners to ensure informed consent and assent are obtained while respecting their rights.
- To explain the purpose, scope, and ethical safeguards of the study to potential participants and their guardians.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">ACTIVITY ONE

Name and brief description of activity: Introduction by the researcher and brief run down on what is going to happen in the session, what is expected of everyone followed by an icebreaker(s),

Duration:5 mins

Materials required: Timer</td></tr>
<tr><td>Purpose of activity:

The purpose of the activity is to introduce researcher to grade 11 learners and their parents and do a little of</td><td>Brief description of activity:

Researcher will introduce themselves as a social worker, emphasizing your ethical obligation to protect participants.

Greet parents, learners, and the LO teacher. provide a brief overview of the session agenda.</td></tr>
</table>

icebreakers so that everyone is comfortable and relaxed.	
ACTIVITY TWO *Name and brief description of activity:* icebreaker *Duration:* 5 min *Materials required:*	
Purpose of activity: To make sure everyone is calm and ready to start the session. To also create quick and quick and light connections so that participants can comfortable talking	*Brief description of activity:* The Researcher is going to quiz parents about bullying with options to choose from but the quiz will be interactive. Icebreakers assume a major part in assisting individuals with associating and joining forces with each other in a group climate (Knox, 2009).
ACTIVITY Three *Name and brief description of activity:* Presentation *Duration:* 15 min *Materials required:* Visual aids	
Purpose of activity: To present using visual aids about the study.	*Brief description of activity:* To present and explain what the study is about and the purpose of the study, the importance of understanding and addressing bullying in schools. How the role study will be used also as an intervention tool explain to parents ethical safeguards, including anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation
ACTIVITY Four *Name and brief description of activity:* Presentation of ethical considerations and the consent forms *Duration:* 20 min	

Materials required: Visual aids	
Purpose of activity: To talk about ethical considerations and how the study aims to ensure safety of participants, the purpose is to also talk about the informed and assent forms to the parents and children and to discuss them in great detail and to answer any questions they might have.	*Brief description of activity:* In this activity there is going to be discussions about the ethical considerations, the researcher is going to emphasize child protection as per the Children's Act (Section 10), which supports their right to participate in decisions concerning them and also explain the non-intrusive nature of the study and the measures in place to prevent harm, victimization, or stigmatization. The researcher is also going to talk about the informed consent for both the learners and parents and discuss them in great detail. The researcher is going to distribute consent forms to parents and assent forms to learners and will narrate the key points of the forms in child-friendly language, ensuring everyone understands: o Participation is voluntary. o Parents must provide consent before learners can participate. o Participants can withdraw at any point without consequences. Answer any questions to clarify doubts.

Appendix H: Isizulu Informed Consent Form

ISICELO SOKUGUNYAZWA NGOKWEZENQUBONHLE

Okocwaningo olusebenza ngabantu

OKUKULEKELELA EKWAKHIWENI KWEFOMU LOKUVUMA

Umbhalo Wemininingwane Nokuvuma Ukubamba Iqhaza Ocwaningweni

Usuku:

Igama lami nginguBonolo Pitswane, ngingumfundi we-Master of Social Science (219066241) eNyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natal, eHoward College campus, eNingizimu Afrika. Ngiyenza lolu cwaningo njengengxenye yephrojekthi yami yocwaningo ngaphansi kwesikole se-Applied Human Sciences.

Uyamenywa ukuthi ubheke ukubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni oluhlola ukuhlukunyezwa kwabafundi ezikoleni zamazwe amaningi. Inhloso yalo cwaningo ukuhlola nokuchaza imibono nolwazi lwabafundi besikole samabanga aphezulu mayelana nokuhlukunyezwa. Lolu cwaningo luzohilela ababambiqhaza abangaba ngu-12 kuya ku-16, kanti iqembu ngalinye lizoqukatha abafundi abangu-6 kuya ku-8.

Ukugqugquzela ababambiqhaza kuzokwenziwa eCrossmoor Secondary School, eGolden Poppy Crescent, Chatsworth, 4092. Ukubamba iqhaza kuzofaka inqubo elandelayo: ingxoxo engahlelekile lapho abafundi bezokwabelana ngokuqonda kwabo futhi baxoxe ngemibuzo eyilungiswe umcwaningi. Uma ukhetha ukubamba iqhaza, isikhathi ozosichitha kulolu cwaningo silinganiselwa kosuku olulodwa noma amabili. Lolu cwaningo alunakho uxhaso lwangaphandle.

Izingozi Nokungakhululeki Asilindele izingozi ezibangelwa ukubamba iqhaza kwengane yakho kulolu cwaningo. Uma kunenkinga evelayo, sizoxoxa nengane futhi siqinisekise ukuthi iyaqonda ukuthi

kwenzekani futhi ikhululekile ukuqhubeka nocwaningo. Imininingwane yengane yakho izogcinwa iyimfihlo, futhi ayizodalulwa kunoma ubani.

Umcwaningi ungumsebenzi wezenhlalakahle onemfundo efanelekayo futhi unamakhono adingekayo okuqaphela izimpawu zokuhlukumezeka noma ukucindezeleka ezinganeni. Lokhu kubalulekile kulolu cwaningo olubandakanya ababambiqhaza abake bahlukunyezwa noma abaye babhekana nezimo ezinzima. Noma yikuphi ukukhombisa ukukhathazeka ngokomzwelo kuzoholela ekutheni kuthathwe izinyathelo zokwesekwa ngokushesha, okuhlanganisa ukudluliselwa ezinsizakalweni ezifanele. Uma ingane ikhombisa izimpawu zokucindezeleka ngesikhathi sokuhlolwa kwabambiqhaza noma eqoqwa idatha, izodluliselwa eHhovisi Lezokuhlaliswa Kwabantu KwaZulu-Natal, eChatsworth Service Office, lapho izothola khona usizo lobungcweti lwezokwelulekwa nokwesekwa.

Lolu cwaningo luhlolwe ngokwezokuziphatha lwaphasiswa yi-UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (inombolo yemvume___ **HSSREC/00008148/2025).**

Uma kunezinkinga noma imibuzo/ukukhathazeka ungaxhumana nomcwaningi lapha (nikeza imininingwane yokuxhumana) noma i- UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, kulemininingwane elandelayo:

EZOKUPHATHWA KWEZENQUBONHLE KWEZOCWANINGO EKOLISHI LEZESINTU ESIKOLENI SEZIFUNDO NGENHLALO YOMPHAKATHI

Ihhovisi LezoCwaningo, iKhempasi i-Westville

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Ucingo: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

I-imeyili: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Ukubamba iqhaza kulolu cwaningo kuyazikhethela ngokuphelele. Ababambiqhaza banelungelo lokuhoxa noma nini ngaphandle kokunikeza isizathu. Ukuhoxa kulolu cwaningo ngeke kube nemiphumela emibi, kufake phakathi ukulahlekelwa yilungelo noma insiza abebeyithola ngaphambili.

Yonke imininingwane etholakala kulolu cwaningo izogcinwa iyimfihlo ngokuphelele futhi izotholakala kuphela kumcwaningi nomqondisi wakhe. Ayikho imininingwane ezokwabelwana ngayo nomunye umuntu. Kuphela uma kwenzeka inkinga ebucayi mayelana nokuphepha kwengane noma yomunye umuntu, lapho esibophezelekile ukutshela umqondisi wesikole. Uma kunenkinga enjalo, sizokwenza umzamo wokuxoxa nawe ngaphambi kokuthatha isinyathelo. Wonke amadokhumenti azogcinwa efayilini elivaliwe emahhovisi ocwaningo eNyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natal.

UKUVUMA

Mina (Igama) ngazisiwe ngocwaningo olunesihloko esithi Bullying in a multicultural secondary school in Chatsworth: an explorative-descriptive study of learners' perceptions and experiences, luka Bonolo Pitswane.

Ngiyakuqonda okuphokophelwe nokuyimigomo zalolu cwaningo (kubhale lokhu futhi uma kunesidingo).

Nginikeziwe ithuba lokuphendula imibuzo mayelana nocwaningo futhi ngithole izimpendulo ezingigculisayo.

Ngiyaqinisekisa ukuthi ukubamba kwami iqhaza kulolu cwaningo akuphoqelekile futhi ngingayeka noma yinini nokuthi lokho ngeke kube nomthelela kwengikuzuzayo engijwayele ukukuthola.

Ngaziswe nganoma yiluphi usizo lwengqondo olungatholakala uma kwenzeka ngilinyazwa ngenxa yezinqubo ezihlobene nocwaningo.

Uma ngineminye imibuzo/ukukhathazeka noma kukhona engidinga kucaciswe mayelana nocwaningo ngiyakuqonda ukuthi ngingathintana nomcwaningi (bhala imininingwane).

Uma nginemibuzo noma ukukhathazeka ngamalungelo ami njengobambe iqhaza, noma ngikhathazekile nganoma yiluphi uhlangothi locwaningo noma abacwaningi ngingathintana nabe:

EZOKUPHATHWA KWEZENQUBONHLE KWEZOCWANINGO EKOLISHI LEZESINTU ESIKOLENI SEZIFUNDO NGENHLALO YOMPHAKATHI

Ihhovisi LezoCwaningo, iKhempasi i-Westville

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Ucingo: 27 31 2604557 - iFeksi: 27 31 2604609

I-imeyili: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Ukuvuma okwengeziwe, lapho kudingeka khona

Ngiyavuma ukuthi kwenziwe lokhu:

Kuqoshwe ingxoxo yami/yeqembu YEBO/CHA

_____ _____

Ukusayina kobambe iqhaza **Usuku**

_____ _____

Ukusayina Kowufakazi **Usuku** **(Uma kunesidingo)**

_____ _____

Ukusayina Kohumushayo **Usuku**

(Uma kunesidingo)

Appendix I: English Consent Form

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Greetings and thank you for taking the time to engage with my research,

My name is Bonolo Pitswane, I am a Master of Social Science (219066241) student studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus, South Africa. I am conducting the interview as part of my research project which is under the school of Applied Human sciences.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on bullying in a multicultural secondary school. The aim and purpose of this research is to explore and describe secondary school learners' perceptions and experiences of bullying.

This study is expected to enroll 12 to 16 participants in total, with 6 to 8 participants in each focus group. Recruitment will take place at Crossmoor Secondary school, Golden Poppy Crescent, Chatsworth, 4092. Participation will involve the following procedures: semi-formal interview whereby learners will be sharing their understanding and discussing questions that will be prepared by the researcher. If you choose to enroll and remain in the study, the duration of your participation is expected to be approximately a day or two. This study is not externally funded.

Risks and Inconveniences

We do not see any risks for your child participating in this study. If any problems do arise, we will speak to the child and make sure he/she understands what is going on and feels comfortable continuing with the study. The identity of the child will not be revealed to anyone, and any information that we get from the study will be kept private.

The researcher is a qualified social worker and is equipped with the necessary skills recognize signs of trauma or distress in children. This is crucial in a study involving participants who may have been bullied or subjected to adverse experiences. Any indication of trauma will prompt immediate intervention and support, including referrals to appropriate services. If any child displays signs of trauma or distress during recruitment or data collection, they will be referred to the KZN Department of Social Development Chatsworth Service Office, where professional counselling and support services are available. This referral process will be explained to participants and their parents, ensuring they feel supported and safe.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number_____).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at (219066241@stu.ukzn.ac.za) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Participants have the right to withdraw at any stage without providing a reason. Withdrawal will not result in any penalties, loss of treatment, or forfeiture of any benefits to which the participant is normally entitled.

There are no rewards for participation, nor will there be any negative consequences for withdrawing from the study. To ensure an orderly withdrawal, participants should inform the researcher, Bonolo Pitswane, of their decision to withdraw. If a participant feels emotionally distressed during or after the interview, they are encouraged to notify the researcher immediately to request appropriate support.

All of the information that we get from the study will be kept strictly confidential and will only be available to the researcher and supervisor. No information will be shared with anyone else. The only exception is if there is a serious problem with the safety of the child or any other person, in which case we are required to inform the school principal. If such a concern arises, we will make every effort to discuss the matter with you before taking any action. Please note that none of the questions in this study are designed to collect information that will require us to contact anyone. All the information we get from the study will be stored in locked files in research offices at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Because confidentiality is important, we would expect that any information you provide is also private and that you will not discuss this information with anyone.

CONSENT

I _____ have been informed about the study by (Bonolo Pitswane).

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available psychosocial treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at (219066241@stu.ukzn.ac.za)

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

_____ _____

Signature of Participant **Date**

Appendix J: Parents/Guardian Consent Form

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

Parent/Guardian INFORMED CONSENT

Information Sheet and Consent to All Your Child To Participate in Research

Date:

Project Title: Bullying in a multicultural secondary school in Chatsworth: an explorative-descriptive study of learners' perceptions and experiences.

Parent/Guardian form

Invitation to participate

Greetings and thank you for taking the time to engage with my research,

My name is Bonolo Pitswane, I am a Master of Social Science (219066241) student studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus, South Africa. I am conducting the interview as part of my research project which is under the school of Applied Human sciences.

Your child is being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Bonolo Pitswane, a Master of Social Science student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This research project is under the School of Applied Human Sciences.

Purpose of the Study:

The aim and purpose of this research is to explore and describe secondary school learners' perceptions and experiences of bullying. This study is expected to enroll 12 to 16 participants in

total, with 6 to 8 participants in each focus group. Recruitment will take place at Crossmoor Secondary school, Golden Poppy Crescent, Chatsworth, 4092. Participation will involve the following procedures: semi-formal interview whereby learners will be sharing their understanding and discussing questions that will be prepared by the researcher. If you choose to allow your child to enroll and remain in the study, the duration of their participation is expected to be approximately a day or two and the session is expected to take an hour. This study is not externally funded.

Risks and Inconveniences

We do not see any risks for your child participating in this study. If any problems do arise, we will speak to the child and make sure he/she understands what is going on and feels comfortable continuing with the study. The identity of the child will not be revealed to anyone, and any information that we get from the study will be kept private.

The researcher is a qualified social worker and is equipped with the necessary skills recognize signs of trauma or distress in children. This is crucial in a study involving participants who may have been bullied or subjected to adverse experiences. Any indication of trauma will prompt immediate intervention and support, including referrals to appropriate services. If any child displays signs of trauma or distress during recruitment or data collection, they will be referred to the KZN Department of Social Development Chatsworth Service Office, where professional counselling and support services are available. This referral process will be explained to participants and their parents, ensuring they feel supported and safe.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number: **HSSREC/00008148/2025)**.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at (219066241@stu.ukzn.ac.za) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Participants have the right to withdraw at any stage without providing a reason. Withdrawal will not result in any penalties, loss of treatment, or forfeiture of any benefits to which the participant is normally entitled.

There are no rewards for participation, nor will there be any negative consequences for withdrawing from the study. To ensure an orderly withdrawal, participants should inform the researcher, Bonolo Pitswane, of their decision to withdraw. If a participant feels emotionally distressed during or after the interview, they are encouraged to notify the researcher immediately to request appropriate support.

All of the information that we get from the study will be kept strictly confidential and will only be available to the researcher and supervisor. No information will be shared with anyone else. The only exception is if there is a serious problem with the safety of the child or any other person, in which case we are required to inform the school principal. If such a concern arises, we will make every effort to discuss the matter with you before taking any action. Please note that none of the questions in this study are designed to collect information that will require us to contact anyone. All the information we get from the study will be stored in locked files in research offices at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Because confidentiality is important, we would expect that any information you provide is also private and that you will not discuss this information with anyone.

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

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Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Consent

_____ _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian **Date**

Appendix K: Focus Group Interview Schedule

Questions

Biographical information

1.1 Name: (Pseudonym/ Code)

1.2 Race:

1.3 Age:

1.4 Grade:

1.5 Religion (you can choose not to disclose if you like):

1.6 Home language:

1.7 Culture:

1.8 Sexual orientation (you can choose not to disclose if you like):

Instructions

- I will ask each of the following questions individually in a round robin? Please feel free to raise your hand should you wish to say something, even if it is not your turn yet

Questions

Objective 1: To explore the understanding of bullying by secondary school learners' in a selected school in Chatsworth.

- How would you define bullying?
- What do others think?
- What different types of bullying have you experienced or witnessed in your school?
- Can you describe a specific bullying incident you have witnessed or experienced?
- How do you think bullying makes someone feel?
- What do you think are the reasons why bullying happens?
- What do others think?
- Do you think bullying is a serious problem in your school? Why or why not?
- How do you think bullying affects the school environment?
- Are there certain groups of students who are more likely to be bullied than others?
- How do you think social media plays a role in bullying?
- Do you think there is a difference between bullying and teasing?

Objective 2: To determine learners' perceptions of the contributing factors to bullying in a selected school in Chatsworth.

- What do you think are the main reasons why students bully others?
- What do others think?
- Do you think family background has an impact on bullying behaviour?
- How do you think peer pressure contributes to bullying?
- Do you think the school environment contributes to bullying? If so, how?
- Do you think social media influences bullying behaviour?
- Do you think the way bullying is handled by teachers and staff affects the problem?
- How do you think differences in cultures or backgrounds contribute to bullying?
- Do you think gender plays a role in bullying?
- Do you think the school curriculum addresses bullying effectively?
- How do you think the media portrays bullying? Does this influence bullying behaviour?

Objective 3: To understand learners experiences and effects of bullying on learners within the selected multicultural school in Chatsworth

- How does bullying make you feel?
- How has bullying affected your academic performance?
- How has bullying affected your relationships with other students?
- How has bullying affected your self-esteem?
- How has bullying affected your attendance at school?
- How has bullying affected your mental health?
- How has bullying affected your physical health?
- How has bullying affected your relationships with teachers and staff?
- How has bullying affected your future aspirations?
- How do you think bullying affects the overall school climate?

Objective 4: To determine the learners' recommendations about ways of addressing bullying in a selected multicultural school in Chatsworth.

- What do you think the school can do to prevent bullying?
- What role can teachers and staff play in addressing bullying?
- What role can students play in preventing and addressing bullying?
- What kind of support would you like to receive if you were being bullied?
- How can the school create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students?
- What kind of anti-bullying programs or initiatives would you like to see implemented in the school?
- How can the school involve parents in addressing bullying?
- What role can the community play in preventing bullying?
- How can we create a positive school culture where bullying is not tolerated?
- What message would you like to send to other students about bullying?

Appendix L: Poster