



Culturally Responsive Schools as a Preventive Framework for Bullying in Primary Education

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Abstract

Bullying remains a serious challenge in primary education, significantly impacting students' academic achievement, social development, and psychological well-being. Although awareness of this issue is increasing, many school interventions remain reactive and punishment-focused, failing to address the cultural and relational roots of the problem. This article examines culturally responsive schools as a preventive framework for bullying in primary education. Employing a conceptual qualitative approach, it reviews international scientific literature on inclusive education, school culture, and bullying prevention. Data analysis utilized thematic analysis to identify patterns linking culturally responsive practices to inclusive school environments. The findings demonstrate that culturally responsive schools significantly prevent bullying by fostering inclusive cultures, enhancing teacher-student relationships, and strengthening students' sense of belonging and psychosocial safety. This article provides a conceptual framework to guide educators, school leaders, and policymakers in developing sustainable, inclusive approaches to school safety.

Keywords: culturally friendly schools; bullying prevention; basic education; school culture; inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a complex problem that remains a serious challenge in education, especially at the primary level. Various studies show that bullying negatively affects students' academic engagement, emotional well-being, and social development. Students who experience bullying often exhibit anxiety, decreased confidence, and low learning engagement (Boulton & Macaulay, 2023; Chou et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2018; Pörhölä et al., 2019; Siddique et al., 2023).

During the primary education period, students are in a critical phase of self-identity formation. Differences in cultural backgrounds, languages, and socioeconomic conditions influence social interactions among students and can lead to exclusion if not managed properly (Banks, 2016). Therefore, bullying cannot be understood solely as individual behavior but rather as a social phenomenon rooted in school culture.

Although awareness of bullying is increasing, many prevention efforts still emphasize reactive disciplinary approaches. These often fail to address the relational and cultural dimensions at the root of the problem (Rigby, 2017). In this context, school culture plays a strategic role in shaping student behavior. An inclusive school environment correlates with lower bullying rates and improved student well-being (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015, 2018; Varela et al., 2019, 2021; Xu & Fang, 2021).

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Culturally responsive education offers a relevant framework by recognizing learners' cultural identities as assets in the learning process (Gay, 2018). This approach fosters equity, rewards, and active participation. Thus, culturally responsive schools contribute to creating safe and inclusive environments.

School culture plays a pivotal role in shaping students' social behavior. A positive school culture promotes mutual respect, empathy, and belonging, while a negative one exacerbates conflict and deviant behavior (Bear, 2020; Chakraborty et al., 2025; Kuzhiyengal Mambra & Kotian, 2024).

Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasized that culturally relevant pedagogy supports academic success while building students' critical awareness and positive identity. This approach effectively reduces prejudice and promotes healthy social interactions (Gay, 2018). Schools implementing culturally responsive practices create environments that value diversity and encourage inclusivity, supporting students' social-emotional development and reducing bullying risks (Assefa & Zenebe, 2024; Boske, 2015; Guberina, 2023; La Salle-Finley et al., 2024; Perez, 2024).

Several studies have identified links between culturally responsive approaches and reduced bullying. For example, Aldridge, McChesney, and Afari (2018) found that schools using culturally responsive pedagogy experienced significant decreases in aggressive behavior and improvements in inclusive climates. Similarly, Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) showed that practices recognizing cultural diversity reduce disciplinary disparities and enhance psychosocial safety. However, these studies primarily focused on middle or high school levels, leaving a gap in applying a culturally responsive schools as a preventive framework for bullying in primary education specifically in primary settings, where socio-emotional foundations form.

This study fills that gap by exploring how culturally responsive schools as a preventive framework for bullying in primary education can serve as a sustainable bullying prevention framework in primary education contexts. It offers theoretical contributions by enriching literature on educational inclusion and bullying prevention from a cultural perspective, as well as practical benefits through a framework adoptable by educators, school leaders, and policymakers to design safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive environments.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a conceptual design. Data were obtained from reputable journal articles, academic books, and international policy reports that discuss bullying, school culture, and culturally responsive education. Data analysis is carried out through a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring conceptual patterns. The data were encoded and grouped into key themes to build a conceptual framework regarding the role of culturally friendly schools in bullying prevention. To maintain the validity of the data, source triangulation and critical reflection are carried out to minimize interpretive bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive School Culture as a Foundation for Bullying Prevention

The main findings of this study show that an inclusive school culture is the most fundamental foundation in efforts to prevent bullying in primary education. School culture is not simply understood as a set of formal rules or normative slogans, but as a system of values, beliefs, and social practices that live in the daily interactions of all school residents. In this context, culturally friendly schools function as a social ecosystem that actively shapes behaviors, attitudes, and relationships between students.

Various literature confirms that bullying does not appear suddenly or solely caused by the individual character of the perpetrator, but rather develops in a permissive social climate towards power inequality and social exclusion (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2017). Schools that fail to manage diversity fairly tend to create social spaces that allow for the normalization of ridicule, stereotypes, and discrimination. Therefore, inclusive culture acts as a preventive mechanism that closes the space for bullying to grow from the early stages.

Inclusive school culture is characterized by respect for differences in cultural backgrounds, languages, religions, abilities, and socioeconomic conditions of students. Banks (2016) emphasized that the recognition of diversity is not just a moral issue, but a structural prerequisite for educational justice. In culturally friendly schools, differences are not treated as a threat, but as a source of social learning that enriches students' learning experiences.

In practice, an inclusive culture is reflected through interaction norms that emphasize mutual respect, empathy, and justice. The findings of the study show that schools that consistently inculcate these values have lower bullying rates than schools that rely only on disciplinary approaches. This is in line with the findings of Thapa et al. (2013) which stated that a positive school climate is significantly correlated with low aggressive behavior and improved psychosocial well-being of students.

Thus, an inclusive school culture is not just a complement to anti-bullying policies, but a structural framework that determines the effectiveness of all prevention efforts.

Teacher-Student Relationship as a Psychosocial Protective Factor

The findings further show that the quality of the relationship between teachers and students is a very significant protective factor in bullying prevention. Positive pedagogical relationships create a sense of security, trust, and emotional connectedness that are prerequisites for a healthy learning environment.

Teachers in culturally friendly schools not only play the role of delivering academic materials, but also as moral and social figures who shape the classroom climate. Research shows that students who feel valued and treated fairly by teachers tend to have stronger school attachment and a lower risk of involvement in bullying (Rigby, 2017).

In the context of basic education, teachers have a strategic position because the intensity of interaction with students is relatively high. Teachers who show empathy, cultural sensitivity, and consistency in upholding the value of justice are able to detect potential social conflicts early on.

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On the other hand, relations that are authoritarian or culturally biased have the potential to strengthen power imbalances among students.

Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes that culturally relevant pedagogy requires teachers to understand the social and cultural backgrounds of students as the basis for building meaningful relationships. In culturally friendly schools, teachers do not impose homogeneous standards that ignore the identity of students, but rather adapt pedagogical approaches to the needs and social characteristics of the classroom.

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that bullying prevention cannot be separated from the quality of teachers' pedagogical leadership in the classroom. Culturally responsive teachers contribute directly to the creation of a safe and supportive psychological climate, thereby lowering tolerance for aggressive and exclusive behavior.

Students' Sense of Belonging and Psychosocial Security

A sense of belonging is another key theme that emerged in the study's findings. Students who feel accepted, valued, and part of the school community show a lower tendency to engage in bullying, both as perpetrators and victims.

Sense of belonging functions as a basic psychological need that affects the emotional well-being and social behavior of students. When these needs are not met, learners are prone to seeking recognition through destructive means, including aggressive behavior towards peers (Thapa et al., 2013).

Culturally friendly schools build a sense of belonging through inclusive practices, such as engaging students in simple decision-making, acknowledging cultural identity, and creating safe spaces for self-expression. These practices contribute to the formation of a positive social identity and reduce the tendency to social exclusion.

Banks (2016) emphasizes that a sense of belonging does not arise naturally, but must be built through consistent school policies and practices. In the context of bullying prevention, a sense of belonging serves as a psychosocial fortress that strengthens prosocial behavior, empathy, and solidarity between students.

These findings reinforce the argument that effective bullying prevention should be oriented towards meeting the psychosocial needs of students, not just controlling deviant behavior.

Integration of Culturally Responsive Education in School Policies and Practices

The study also found that the success of culturally responsive schools in preventing bullying is largely determined by the degree to which culturally responsive education is integrated into school policies and practices. This approach is not enough if it is only applied at the grade level, but it should be part of the school's institutional vision.

Gay (2018) emphasizes that culturally responsive education includes the dimensions of curriculum, pedagogy, social relations, and school leadership. In the context of bullying prevention, this integration ensures that the value of inclusivity does not stop at normative declarations, but is embodied in tangible actions.

Schools that adopt culturally friendly policies comprehensively tend to have ongoing bullying prevention mechanisms. The policy includes anti-discrimination rules, restorative conflict handling procedures, and teacher training on cultural and social-emotional sensitivity.

Rigby (2017) criticizes anti-bullying approaches that place too much emphasis on punishment, as they often fail to change the social dynamics behind aggressive behavior. In contrast, culturally friendly schools prioritize preventive and restorative approaches that focus on restoring social relationships and learning values.

Thus, the integration of culturally responsive education is the main prerequisite for the sustainability of bullying prevention efforts in primary education.

Culturally Friendly Schools as a Sustainable Preventive Framework

Overall, the findings of this study show that culturally friendly schools function as a systemic and sustainable preventive framework. This approach not only lowers the incidence of bullying, but also strengthens the quality of social relationships, psychological well-being, and the overall learning climate.

The cultural-based preventive approach has advantages because it targets the root of the bullying problem, namely inequality in social relations, cultural prejudice, and a weak sense of belonging. By reinforcing an inclusive culture, schools create social conditions that naturally suppress aggressive and exclusive behavior.

These findings broaden the discourse on bullying prevention by placing school culture as a key variable. Culturally friendly schools are not just an additional strategy, but a paradigm that integrates educational values, policies, and practices in one whole framework.

Discussion Synthesis

Based on all the findings and discussions, it can be synthesized that the prevention of bullying in primary education requires a holistic and culturally oriented approach. Culturally friendly schools provide a relevant conceptual framework to address these challenges by combining inclusive education, healthy pedagogical relationships, and meeting the psychosocial needs of learners.

This discussion emphasizes that bullying is not just a problem of individual behavior, but a reflection of the social culture formed in the school environment. Therefore, school culture transformation is the main prerequisite for the creation of a safe, fair, and dignified learning environment.

CONCLUSION

Culturally friendly schools are an effective strategic framework in preventing bullying in primary education. Through strengthening inclusive cultures, healthy social relationships, and psychosocial safety, schools can create a safe learning environment and support student development. This research enriches the study of inclusive education by emphasizing the importance of cultural responsiveness in building a safe learning environment. Further research is

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recommended to examine the empirical application of this framework in various educational contexts.

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