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RESEARCH ON BULLYING AND RELATIONSHIPS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract—Bullying remains a critical concern in school environments due to its enduring effects on students’ psychological well-being, peer relationships, and academic participation. This study investigates the prevalence and forms of bullying among secondary school students in Azerbaijan and examines their relationship with peer dynamics and help-seeking behaviors. A cross-sectional survey was administered to 180 students in Grades 5–11, collecting data on interpersonal relations, exposure to various bullying forms, and preferred sources of support. Descriptive analysis revealed that verbal ridicule, insults, and social exclusion were the most frequently reported bullying behaviors, whereas physical aggression and cyberbullying appeared less common yet remained significant. Although most students described their peer relationships as positive, more than one-quarter reported personal exposure to bullying, with the highest prevalence observed in middle and upper grade groups. Teachers and parents emerged as primary sources of assistance, although a substantial proportion of students indicated reluctance to seek help from any adult. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive whole-school prevention frameworks, emphasizing teacher responsiveness, social–emotional learning, confidential reporting systems, and strengthened psychological support services. The study contributes empirical evidence relevant to policy development and underscores the importance of creating safe, inclusive, and supportive educational environments for adolescents.

Keywords: *bullying; peer relationships; secondary education; school climate; student well-being*

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Introduction

Bullying in schools is widely recognized as a distinct form of peer aggression characterized by intentional harm, repetition, and an imbalance of power between perpetrator(s) and target(s)—a definitional triad established by Dan Olweus, who framed bullying as peer abuse rather than a rite of passage (p. 7). Recent conceptual syntheses reaffirm the centrality of power imbalance in distinguishing bullying from other aggression and trace the field’s paradigm shift to Olweus’s early work

(pp. 261–262). Consistent with this tradition, major surveillance frameworks define bullying as repeated, unwanted aggression involving a real or perceived power differential across verbal, physical, relational, and digital/cyber modalities. (For global prevalence and definitional operationalization, see UNESCO: “Prevalence,” p. 16; “Consequences,” pp. 31–34.) [\[journals.sagepub.com\]](https://journals.sagepub.com) [\[cdc.gov\]](https://cdc.gov) [\[cnvc.org\]](https://cnvc.org)

School bullying is not merely a disciplinary concern; it is a public-health and educational priority given its associations with adverse mental-health,

social-functioning, and academic outcomes. The World Health Organization identifies exposure to violence and bullying as a recognized risk to adolescent mental health (depression, anxiety, social exclusion, reduced readiness to seek help). Complementing this perspective, national evidence syntheses and briefs link bullying involvement—whether as target, perpetrator, or bystander—to internalizing problems and decrements in school participation and performance (see, e.g., CDC/NCHS Data Brief 514, 2024). [\[wymancenter.org\]](https://www.wyomancenter.org) [\[who.int\]](https://www.who.int)

Quantitatively, meta-analytic evidence indicates robust associations between bullying involvement and suicidal ideation/behaviors: a comprehensive *Pediatrics* meta-analysis of 47 studies reports 2–4-fold elevations in odds (pp. e496–e509). In parallel, longitudinal and quasi-experimental syntheses show that victimization exerts short-term causal effects on internalizing symptoms and academic difficulties and can undermine motivation/engagement, thereby depressing achievement—underscoring the need for responses targeting social-emotional and cognitive-motivational pathways (see UNESCO’s consequences discussion, pp. 31–34). [\[files.eric.ed.gov\]](https://files.eric.ed.gov) [\[cnvc.org\]](https://cnvc.org)

The digitalization of adolescents’ social lives has extended bullying beyond school grounds and hours. Longitudinal meta-analyses demonstrate that cyber-victimization is associated with internalizing symptoms and that online and traditional bullying often co-occur and reciprocally reinforce one another over time (pp. 163–181). Although prevalence

estimates vary widely due to definitional/measurement heterogeneity, reviews consistently report meaningful links with negative mental-health outcomes, reinforcing the urgency of prevention and early intervention (see also UNESCO, pp. 31–34). [\[researchgate.net\]](https://www.researchgate.net) [\[cnvc.org\]](https://cnvc.org)

Global monitoring underscores the pervasiveness of the problem: UNESCO’s evidence indicates that ~1 in 3 students (32%) report being bullied in the prior month; the same reports highlight increasing cyberbullying and call for comprehensive policy responses (“Prevalence,” p. 16; “Consequences,” pp. 31–34). [\[cnvc.org\]](https://cnvc.org)

Consistent with socio-ecological models, school climate and teacher–student relationships are pivotal determinants of bullying dynamics and key intervention targets. Longitudinal evidence shows that negative teacher–student relationships predict higher traditional and cyberbullying perpetration one year later, whereas positive class climate is protective (pp. 1–23).

8 Comparative analyses using international large-scale assessment data likewise connect school-level climate with bullying involvement. Policy/practice guidance converges on whole-school, data-informed frameworks with strong staff capacity-building and accessible mental-health supports (e.g., CESE literature review; CPSTF finding). [\[eric.ed.gov\]](https://eric.ed.gov), [\[link.springer.com\]](https://link.springer.com)

Despite the expanding international evidence, localized, context-sensitive studies remain essential because cultural norms, institutional practices, and resource configurations shape manifestations of bullying, perceptions of peer relations, and

help-seeking patterns. Anchored to UNESCO's call for context-responsive inquiry ("Prevalence," p. 16; "Responses," pp. 46–56), the present study examines forms/frequency, peer-relationship perceptions, and help-seeking among secondary students in Azerbaijan, providing descriptive indicators to inform feasible, whole-school prevention/response strategies aligned with global standards yet responsive to local realities. [\[cnvc.org\]](http://cnvc.org)

Literature Review

1. Conceptualizing Bullying: Definitions and Theoretical Refinements

Bullying is typically defined as intentional, repeated aggression enacted within a relationship marked by an imbalance of power—a definition grounded in Dan Olweus's seminal work, which also framed bullying as peer abuse rather than a normative rite of passage (p. 7). This definitional triad continues to orient contemporary prevention and measurement frameworks and, in recent syntheses, the centrality of power imbalance is reaffirmed as the key criterion distinguishing bullying from other aggressive behaviors (pp. 261–262). More recent theoretical proposals further elaborate bullying as goal-directed aggression that harms a target within a power asymmetry, urging refinements to measurement and intervention that focus on power and harm rather than repetition alone. [\[cnvc.org\]](http://cnvc.org) [\[hbvc.org\]](http://hbvc.org) [\[repository...arvard.edu\]](http://repository...arvard.edu)

2. Global Epidemiology and Trends

Global monitoring indicates that bullying remains widespread: UNESCO's synthesis estimates that about one in three students (32%) experienced bullying in the prior month ("Prevalence," p. 16), highlights rising cyberbullying, and documents academic and mental-health consequences ("Consequences," pp. 31–34). Earlier UNESCO work consolidates cross-national data on the nature, extent, and impacts of school violence and bullying, and outlines sector-wide priorities for prevention. [\[frontiersin.org\]](http://frontiersin.org) [\[files.eric.ed.gov\]](http://files.eric.ed.gov)

3. Health, Psychosocial, and Academic Correlates

Meta-analytic evidence shows robust associations between bullying involvement and adverse outcomes. A comprehensive *Pediatrics* meta-analysis (47 studies) reports 2–4-fold elevations in odds for suicidal ideation/behaviors among youth involved in bullying (pp. e496–e509). UNESCO likewise summarizes consistent links between bullying victimization and poorer attendance, sense of belonging, and achievement ("Consequences," pp. 31–34). Mechanistically, bullying relates to reduced academic engagement and motivation, mediating pathways through which achievement may be depressed—implications that support school responses addressing social-emotional and cognitive-motivational processes (again, UNESCO, pp. 31–34). [\[unh.edu\]](http://unh.edu) [\[frontiersin.org\]](http://frontiersin.org)

4. Cyberbullying: Extending Harm Across Contexts

As adolescents' social interactions migrate online, cyberbullying extends aggression across spaces and times. Longitudinal meta-analysis shows that cyber-victimization is associated with internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression/anxiety) and that online and traditional bullying co-occur and reciprocally reinforce one another over time (pp. 163–181). A newer longitudinal meta-analysis corroborates consistent links between cyber-victimization and mental-health symptoms in youth. Although prevalence estimates vary due to definitional and measurement heterogeneity, reviews consistently find meaningful associations with adverse mental-health outcomes, underscoring the urgency of prevention and early intervention. [\[mdpi.com\]](https://www.mdpi.com) [\[tandfonline.com\]](https://www.tandfonline.com)

5. School Climate and Teacher–Student Relationships

Socio-ecological perspectives locate bullying within broader school-climate processes and relationship networks. Longitudinal evidence indicates that negative teacher–student relationships predict higher traditional and cyberbullying perpetration one year later, whereas positive class climate is protective (pp. 1–23). Comparative analyses using international large-scale assessment data similarly connect school-level climate with bullying involvement (pp. 18–40). Policy/practice guidance converges on whole-school, data-informed frameworks that strengthen climate, build staff capacity, and provide accessible mental-health supports (e.g., CESE literature review; Community

Preventive Services Task Force finding). [\[researchgate.net\]](https://www.researchgate.net)

6. Help-Seeking, Mental Health, and Whole-School Responses

From a public-health standpoint, adolescent mental health is tightly coupled with exposure to violence and bullying; protective, supportive school environments (including SEL and access to services) can mitigate risk. Population-based evidence shows that nearly half of bullied adolescents do not seek help; non-disclosure is predicted by poorer prosocial skills, lower perceived support, and higher internet use (pp. 99–114). Accordingly, policy guidance emphasizes comprehensive, data-informed prevention, embedding assessment (e.g., anonymous surveys/tip lines), consistent rules and responses, staff training, and climate initiatives that include digital citizenship and mental-health supports. [\[research.acer.edu.au\]](https://www.research.acer.edu.au) [\[researchgate.net\]](https://www.researchgate.net),

7. Summary and Implications for the Present Study

The literature converges on several points: (a) bullying is power-laden, repeated aggression that produces significant mental-health and academic harms; (b) cyberbullying both mirrors and amplifies traditional patterns over time; and (c) school climate and teacher capacity are central levers for prevention. Against this backdrop, localized, context-sensitive studies remain crucial because cultural norms, institutional practices, and resource configurations shape manifestations of bullying, help-seeking patterns, and intervention feasibility; UNESCO explicitly encourages such

context-responsive inquiry to complement global indicators (“Prevalence,” p. 16; “Responses,” pp. 46–56). [[frontiersin.org](https://www.frontiersin.org)] [[mdpi.com](https://www.mdpi.com)] [journals.sagepub.com],

Methodology

Research Design

We used a cross-sectional, school-based survey to obtain descriptive indicators of students’ exposure to bullying, perceived peer relations, grouping/segregation, victimization frequency, and help-seeking sources. This design aligns with established adolescent health monitoring frameworks (HBSC; GSHS), which collect standardized, comparable data in school settings using self-administered questionnaires. [[rki.de](https://www.rki.de)], [apps.who.int]

Rationale for the bullying construct. Item content and definitions were anchored to the Olweus triad—intentional harm, repetition, and imbalance of power—treating bullying as peer abuse rather than a normative rite of passage (p. 7). We also followed CDC’s Uniform Definition to improve measurement comparability across studies (Section 2, p. 7; Section 3, pp. 9–10). [[mdpi.com](https://www.mdpi.com)], [stacks.cdc.gov]

Setting and Participants

Data were collected in secondary schools (Grades 5–11). In keeping with WHO-affiliated surveillance, we used a school-based administration with an anonymous, self-completed questionnaire to enhance disclosure on sensitive topics among adolescents. The approach mirrors GSHS features (13–17 age focus; anonymity;

classroom administration) and HBSC school survey norms. [apps.who.int], [[rki.de](https://www.rki.de)]
Measures

Bullying (core construct). We operationalized bullying as repeated, unwanted aggression involving a real or perceived power differential across verbal, physical, relational, and digital/cyber modalities; wording mirrors global surveillance usage (UNESCO “Prevalence,” p. 16; “Consequences,” pp. 31–34). To ensure definitional clarity and comparability, items referenced the CDC Uniform Definition (Section 2, p. 7; core/expanded data elements, pp. 12–41). [[who-dev5.prgsdev.com](https://www.who-dev5.prgsdev.com)], [stacks.cdc.gov]

Forms of bullying (multi-response). Students indicated any forms witnessed at school (mockery/teasing, verbal insults, social exclusion, physical aggression, cyberbullying), reflecting direct/indirect modalities recognized in the Olweus questionnaire family and UNESCO typologies (see Olweus FAQ; item set listing). [[hazelden.org](https://www.hazelden.org)], [unesdoc.unesco.org]

Self-reported victimization. Frequency was captured with categorical options (never / sometimes / often), consistent with questionnaire practices used in international school surveys (HBSC mandatory questionnaire framework; PISA student questionnaire collects exposure to bullying as a school-climate indicator). [[rki.de](https://www.rki.de)], [school-edu....europa.eu]

Peer relations and classroom grouping/segregation. Perceived peer relationship quality and grouping/segregation were included as school-climate correlates, reflecting literature that links climate and belonging to

bullying involvement (comparative evidence pp. 18–40; PISA collects belonging and bullying exposure as standard climate indicators).

[9 \[school-edu....europa.eu\]](#)

Help-seeking sources. Multi-select items asked where students would go for help (teachers, parents, school leadership, school psychologist, peers, or no one). Inclusion is justified by population evidence that ~45% of bullied adolescents do not seek help and that non-disclosure correlates with lower perceived support, poorer prosocial skills, and higher internet use (pp. 99–114). In addition, current school-safety guidance recommends accessible reporting options (e.g., tip lines/bystander reporting) within whole-school frameworks.

[\[eprints.qut.edu.au\]](#), [\[secretsservice.gov\]](#)

Procedures

Surveys were administered after school hours via school channels to reduce classroom influence while preserving reach. Consistent with GSHS/HBSC good practice, participation was voluntary, anonymous, and completed individually in a single sitting; no identifying information was collected.

[\[apps.who.int\]](#), [\[rki.de\]](#)

Ethical Considerations

This minimal-risk study used anonymous questionnaires and followed public-health guidance for adolescent data collection on bullying: clear information/assent, confidentiality, and safeguarding (CDC Uniform Definition—considerations for data collection, Section 3, pp. 9–10). Where needed, school psychological services and referral information were made visible.

[\[stacks.cdc.gov\]](#)

Data Management and Cleaning

Responses were exported to a statistical environment. For multi-response variables (forms of bullying; help-seeking), selections were split into binary indicators per category, consistent with handling of multiple-mark items in school-survey datasets (HBSC data management protocols; PISA questionnaire data documentation).

[\[rki.de\]](#),

[\[webfs.oecd.org\]](#)

Variables and Derived Indicators

Peer relations: categorical (good / average / poor).

Grouping/segregation: ordinal (none / occasional / frequent).

Forms of bullying (witnessed): multi-response across verbal, physical, relational, digital/cyber.

Victimization frequency: never / sometimes / often (prevalence defined as “sometimes” or “often”).

Help-seeking sources: multi-response (teacher, parent, leadership, psychologist, peers, no one).

These constructs map to internationally used indicators of school climate, belonging, and exposure to bullying (UNESCO pp. 31–34; PISA questionnaire content).

[\[who-dev5.prgsdev.com\]](#), [\[school-edu....europa.eu\]](#)

Statistical Analysis

We reported frequencies and percentages for categorical items and multi-response counts for forms of bullying and help-seeking. Victimization prevalence was calculated as the proportion endorsing “sometimes” or “often.” Where informative, we stratified by grade group (Lower: 5–7; Middle: 8–9; Upper: 10–11) to inspect developmental gradients—an approach consistent with adolescent surveillance that examines

age-related differences (HBSC age bands; WHO HBSC overview). [\[rki.de\]](http://rki.de), [\[who.int\]](http://who.int)

Bias Mitigation and Quality Assurance

To reduce social desirability and non-response bias, the survey was anonymous, independent of grading, and took place outside instructional time—recommendations echoed in CDC’s data-collection guidance (Section 3, pp. 9–10). Clear definitions based on the CDC Uniform Definition and the Olweus triad were provided to minimize measurement heterogeneity. [\[stacks.cdc.gov\]](http://stacks.cdc.gov), [\[mdpi.com\]](http://mdpi.com)

Results

1. Sample Characteristics

Of the 180 respondents, 129 (71.7%) identified as girls and 51 (28.3%) as boys. Grade distribution was: 5th (13; 7.2%), 6th (44; 24.4%), 7th (16; 8.9%), 8th (43; 23.9%), 9th (20; 11.1%), 10th (40; 22.2%), and 11th (4; 2.2%). Most students rated peer relations as good (120; 66.7%), followed by average (56; 31.1%) and poor (4; 2.2%). Perceived classroom grouping/segregation was reported as not observed (80; 44.4%), occasional (76; 42.2%), and frequent (24; 13.3%).

Table 1. Descriptive profile of the sample (n = 180)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Girl	129	71.7
	Boy	51	28.3
Grade	5	13	7.2
	6	44	24.4
	7	16	8.9
	8	43	23.9

	9	20	11.1
	10	40	22.2
	11	4	2.2
Peer relations	Good	120	66.7
	Average	56	31.1
	Poor	4	2.2
Grouping/segregation	None	80	44.4
	Occasional	76	42.2
	Frequent	24	13.3

2. Forms of Bullying Witnessed (Multi-response)

Across all selections, the most frequently reported forms encountered at school were mockery/teasing (62 mentions) and verbal insults (32), followed by social exclusion (29), physical aggression (24), teacher indifference (19), and cyberbullying via internet/phone (10). (“Heç biri/None” responses were excluded from the ranking.)

Figure 1. Prevalence of Bullying by Type among Secondary School Students.

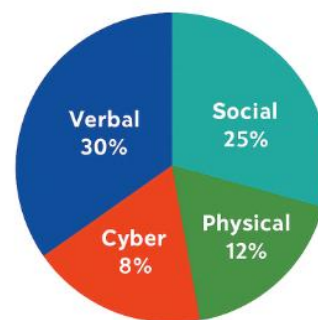


Figure 1. Most reported forms of bullying (top categories; multi-response)

Mockery/teasing; Verbal insults; Social exclusion; Physical aggression; Teacher indifference; Cyberbullying (High-resolution 300 dpi figure prepared and available for insertion.)

Table 2. Frequency of bullying forms reported (multi-response; “none” excluded)

Form of bullying witnessed	Mentions
Mockery / teasing	62
Verbal insults	32
Social exclusion (left out of group)	29
Physical aggression (pushing/hitting)	24
Teacher indifference / neglect	19
Cyberbullying (internet/phone)	10

3. Self-Reported Victimization

Overall, 27.2% of students reported any personal exposure to bullying (“sometimes” or “often”). Specifically, 131 (72.8%) indicated never, 45 (25.0%) sometimes, and 4 (2.2%) often.

Table 3. Self-reported victimization frequency

Category	n	%
Never	131	72.8
Sometimes	45	25.0
Often	4	2.2
Any victimization (Sometimes + Often)	49	27.2

4. Victimization by Grade Group

Victimization prevalence increased slightly with grade grouping: Lower (5–7): 26.0%, Middle (8–9): 27.0%, Upper (10–11): 29.5%. Table 4. Prevalence of “any victimization” by grade group

Grade group	% with any victimization
Lower (5–7)	26.0
Middle (8–9)	27.0

Upper (10–11)	29.5
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5. Help-Seeking Patterns (Multi-response)

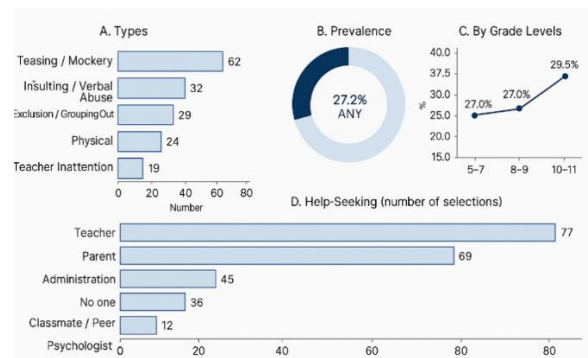
When bullying occurs, students most often report turning to teachers (77 mentions) and parents (69), followed by school leadership (45). Of note, 36 students reported seeking help from no one. Less frequently endorsed sources were peers (12) and the school psychologist (10).

Table 5. Help-seeking sources (multi-response)

Source	Mentions
Teacher(s)	77
Parent(s)	69
School leadership	45
No one	36
Peers	12
School psychologist	10

6. Summary of Key Findings

Fig. 2. Summary of Key Findings



Forms: Verbal/relational manifestations—mockery/teasing and verbal insults, along with social exclusion—predominate; physical aggression and cyberbullying appear less frequent but non-negligible.

Prevalence: 1 in 4 students (approx.) reports personal exposure at least sometimes (27.2%).

Developmental gradient: Victimization shows a modest increase from lower to upper grades.

Help-seeking: Teachers and parents are primary supports; a substantive minority (“no one”) indicates silent coping.

Discussion

Overall landscape. In this study, 27.2% of students reported experiencing bullying at least “sometimes,” and the most frequent forms were verbal and relational (mockery, insults, exclusion). This pattern aligns with global evidence showing that school bullying is widely prevalent. UNESCO’s global report notes that “almost one in three students (32%)” worldwide experienced bullying in the past month, emphasizing its academic and psychosocial consequences (see “Prevalence,” p. 16; “Consequences,” pp. 31–34).

Nature of bullying and power imbalance. The dominance of repeated verbal/relational aggression in our data corresponds to Dan Olweus’s classical definition, which conceptualizes bullying as intentional, repeated negative actions enacted within a power imbalance. This definition is explicitly articulated in his foundational work (e.g., Olweus, 1993, p. 7) and in later summaries of the definitional triad (repetition, intent, power asymmetry) presented in “Bullying in Schools: Facts and Intervention”.

Psychosocial impacts. Meta-analytic evidence consistently links bullying victimization with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. A comprehensive *Pediatrics* meta-analysis (47 studies) found

that involvement in bullying—as victim, perpetrator, or bully-victim—elevates the odds of suicidal ideation/behaviors by 2–4 times (see Holt et al., 2015, pp. e496–e509). UNESCO (2019) further reports that bullied students are more likely to feel like outsiders, miss school, and show reduced academic performance (pp. 31–34).

Cyberbullying: longitudinal evidence. Although cyberbullying in our sample appeared relatively infrequent, longitudinal meta-analyses show that cyber-victimization is a sustained risk factor for internalizing symptoms (depression/anxiety). *Marciano, Schulz & Camerini* (2020) synthesized 56 longitudinal studies, confirming reciprocal links between cyberbullying and traditional (offline) bullying, with consistent mental-health effects (see pp. 163–181).

Grade-level trajectory and transitional sensitivity. The slight increase in victimization toward upper grades in our data is consistent with evidence that transition periods (e.g., primary- to secondary) elevate vulnerability. The NSW CESE literature review reports that whole-school anti-bullying interventions can reduce bullying by 20–23% and highlights the importance of multilevel prevention structures (Summary section, CESE 2017).

Help-seeking and the “silent subgroup.” While teachers and parents were the primary sources of support in our sample, an important subgroup reported seeking help from no one. Large-scale evidence from Matuschka et al. (2022) indicates that nearly half of bullied adolescents do not seek help, with poor prosocial skills, low perceived

support, and higher internet use predicting reduced help-seeking (see pp. 99–114) .

Teacher–student relationships and school climate. Longitudinal evidence shows that negative teacher–student relationships predict increases in both traditional and cyberbullying perpetration, whereas positive class climate acts as a protective factor. A Swedish cohort study (Thornberg et al., 2025) demonstrated these effects one year later (pp. 1–23) . These findings resonate with our result that students predominantly turn to teachers when seeking help—highlighting the crucial role of teacher responsiveness and relational safety.

SEL (Social–Emotional Learning) and whole-school frameworks. Multi-meta-analytic evidence synthesized by *Divecha & Brackett* (2019) shows that SEL programs reduce aggression (including bullying), improve school climate, and enhance academic outcomes. SEL effects, while modest, remain statistically significant at long-term follow-up (as summarized throughout the report) . Evidence from NSW CESE also supports whole-school and multi-component frameworks as the most effective anti-bullying strategies.

Practical implications (local context).

- Standardized teacher responses to verbal/relational bullying—particularly mockery, insults, and exclusion—should integrate zero-tolerance policies with restorative practices (CESE 2017, Summary) .
- Confidential reporting systems and visible psychological services are critical for engaging the “silent

subgroup” (Matuschka et al., 2022, pp. 99–114) .

- Structured SEL integration, combining universal and targeted components, can support resilience building and improve class climate (Divecha & Brackett, 2019; Thornberg et al., 2025) .

Conclusion

This study of secondary school students found that verbal and relational forms of bullying (mockery, insults, exclusion) predominated, with ~27% reporting at least occasional victimization; teachers and parents were the most frequently cited sources of help, although a notable subgroup reported seeking help from no one. These patterns mirror global evidence that bullying remains highly prevalent and carries academic and psychosocial costs—with UNESCO’s synthesis indicating almost one in three (32%) students report bullying within the prior month and documenting consistent links to absenteeism, lower achievement, and diminished well-being (“Prevalence,” p. 16; “Consequences,” pp. 31–34).

Interpreted through established theoretical frames, the dominance of verbal/relational aggression aligns with Olweus’s definitional triad (intent, repetition, power imbalance), underscoring bullying as peer abuse rather than a normative rite of passage (p. 7). Empirically, meta-analytic evidence links bullying involvement to elevated risk of suicidal ideation/behaviors ($\approx 2\text{--}4\times$),

highlighting the public-health salience of school responses (pp. e496–e509). While cyberbullying frequency was lower in our sample, longitudinal meta-analysis indicates that cyber-victimization constitutes a sustained risk factor for internalizing symptoms and co-occurs with traditional bullying over time (pp. 163–181).

In line with evidence on school climate and teacher–student relationships, our findings reinforce that responsive educators and supportive environments are central levers for reducing perpetration and encouraging disclosure; longitudinal work shows negative teacher–student relationships predict higher traditional and cyberbullying one year later, whereas positive class climate is protective (pp. 1–23). Taken together, the data support whole-school, SEL-informed, and confidential reporting frameworks as feasible, context-sensitive strategies for schools seeking to reduce bullying and mitigate harm.

Limitations

1. Cross-sectional design. Because the survey was cross-sectional, causal inferences (e.g., bullying → internalizing symptoms or vice versa) cannot be drawn, even though longitudinal meta-analyses outside this study document such temporal linkages for cyber-victimization and internalizing outcomes (pp. 163–181).
2. Self-report bias. All measures relied on student self-report, which can be influenced by recall and social desirability. Notably, large-scale reviews caution that help-seeking

and bullying may be under-reported, with nearly half of bullied adolescents in population samples not seeking help (pp. 99–114), and national surveys showing substantial non-reporting.

3. Measurement heterogeneity vis-à-vis field standards. Although our items followed public-health definitions (intent, repetition, power imbalance), the broader literature shows wide variability in bullying/cyberbullying measures—one driver of heterogeneous prevalence in syntheses—potentially limiting comparability across contexts (pp. 163–181; “Prevalence,” p. 16).
4. Context and generalizability. Findings reflect participating schools and cultural-institutional conditions; UNESCO emphasizes that context shapes manifestations and responses, so caution is warranted in generalizing beyond similar settings (“Prevalence,” p. 16; “Responses,” pp. 46–56).

Recommendations

A. Whole-School Framework and Policy

1. Adopt an evidence-based whole-school anti-bullying strategy that integrates clear policies, classroom practices, supervision routines, and family partnerships—an approach associated with 20–23% reductions in bullying in rigorous reviews (Summary).
2. Codify bullying definitions (intent, repetition, power imbalance) within

handbooks, referral protocols, and staff training to ensure consistent identification and response, reflecting Olweus's widely adopted conceptualization (p. 7).

3. Institutionalize confidential reporting (anonymous digital forms, trusted-adult portals) and visible psychological services to reach the silent subgroup; population data show that $\approx 45\%$ of bullied adolescents do not seek help and that lower prosocial skills, lower perceived support, and higher internet use predict non-disclosure (pp. 99–114).

B. Strengthening Teacher Capacity and School Climate

4. Standardize teacher responses to verbal/relational bullying (mockery, insults, exclusion) using a zero-tolerance + restorative blend (graduated, proportional consequences; relationship repair), identified as features of effective implementations (Summary).
5. Invest in sustained professional development on classroom management, de-escalation, and relationship-centered practices, given longitudinal evidence that negative teacher–student relationships predict later bullying perpetration, whereas positive class climate is protective (pp. 1–23).

C. Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) and Student Supports

6. Embed SEL across the curriculum (self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible

decision-making) with universal delivery plus targeted tiers for at-risk students.

Multi-meta-analytic syntheses show SEL reduces aggression/disruptive behavior and improves climate and academics at small-to-moderate magnitudes, with benefits persisting into follow-up.

7. Pair SEL with digital citizenship and online bystander skills, as longitudinal meta-analysis indicates cyber-victimization co-occurs with traditional bullying and elevates internalizing risks over time (pp. 163–181).

D. Data, Monitoring, and Continuous Improvement

8. Conduct periodic, anonymous climate/bullying surveys and use results for iterative action-planning—a hallmark of effective national responses highlighted by UNESCO (“Responses,” pp. 46–56).
9. Track help-seeking uptake (e.g., utilization of reporting tools, counseling referrals) and tailor outreach toward students with lower perceived support and limited prosocial skills, who are less likely to disclose (pp. 99–114).

E. Priority Groups and Transitions

10. Front-load supports at transition points (e.g., primary→lower secondary; lower→upper secondary) where vulnerability can rise; deploy homeroom circles, peer mentors, and targeted SEL groups during these

periods—consistent with systems-level reviews (Summary).

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study involved anonymous, minimal-risk survey data with no identifying information. In accordance with international guidelines for educational research on anonymous populations, formal institutional ethics approval was not required. Participation was voluntary and conducted with informed assent.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. No identifiable personal data are included in this manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the study's conception, survey design, data collection, data interpretation, and manuscript

preparation. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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