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Hunger and Hierarchy: Socio-Economic Drivers of Peer Violence in the Vhembe District

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Research Article

Keywords: structural violence, school bullying, socio-economic deprivation, peer hierarchy, food insecurity

Posted Date: May 29th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-9808013/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This qualitative interpretivist case study explores how socio-economic deprivation drives peer violence among primary school learners across four schools in the Vhembe District. Moving beyond conventional behavioural frameworks, the study examines bullying as a micro-enactment of structural violence. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 32 participants comprising learners, teachers, and school nutrition coordinators, the findings reveal a pervasive "Lunchbox Economy." In this environment, food extortion, the policing of material status markers (such as uniforms), and compensatory violence are used to negotiate poverty and establish peer hierarchies. Consequently, hunger and scarcity actively undermine learner safety, dignity, and educational participation. The study argues that punitive discipline is insufficient for addressing economically motivated aggression. To foster safer environments, we recommend destigmatising the National School Nutrition Programme, revising uniform policies to minimise visible disparities, and capacitating educators to recognise economic coercion. Ultimately, anti-bullying governance must address the material inequalities that make school sites structurally vulnerable.

1. Introduction

Bullying in rural South African schools is often framed as a problem of individual temperament, family dysfunction, or weak school discipline. That framing is not wrong, but it is incomplete. A more convincing reading recognises that peer violence is also shaped by poverty, hunger, inequality, and the visible performance of status among learners. Research on South African schools shows that bullying is tied to power imbalances, victim vulnerability, and wider forms of violence, while studies of rural schooling in South Africa repeatedly situate learner aggression within precarious social and institutional environments (Liang et al., 2007; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024; Hlophe et al., 2017; Tugli, 2015). In other words, bullying is not only something that happens between children; it is also one of the ways in which structural disadvantage becomes socially enacted in the schoolyard (Garandeau et al., 2013; Harber, 2001).

This matters especially in the Vhembe District, where schooling takes place within a landscape marked by rural poverty, household insecurity, and uneven access to basic necessities. In such contexts, the National School Nutrition Programme is not simply a supplementary intervention but part of the material conditions through which learning is sustained. When some learners arrive with food, well-kept uniforms, and other visible signs of household stability while others arrive hungry or materially deprived, the school becomes a space where inequality is continuously displayed, interpreted, and contested. Studies from South African school contexts show that learners' social identities, including economic status, stature, age, and complexion, can shape bully–victim relations, and that status hierarchy in classrooms is associated with higher levels of bullying (Hlophe et al., 2017; Garandeau et al., 2013). The central question, then, is not only why bullying occurs, but how deprivation is translated into peer domination.

Against this background, the present manuscript argues that peer violence in rural schools should be read as a socio-economic as well as a psychological phenomenon. Hunger, scarcity, and unequal access to resources do not merely intensify vulnerability; they can also shape the social grammar through which learners assert power over one another. Food, uniforms, stationery, and bodily presentation may all become markers of rank, making bullying over resources part of the everyday performance of hierarchy. School violence in South Africa has been widely shown to damage learner safety, wellbeing, and educational participation, yet much of this literature still treats violence primarily as a school management or behavioural concern rather than as a symptom of structural inequality (Tshatshu, 2023; Singh & Steyn, 2014; Mncube & Harber, 2022). This study therefore situates peer violence within a broader social ecology of deprivation.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 School violence, bullying, and power

The literature consistently defines bullying as repetitive aggression grounded in an imbalance of power. South African studies show that bullying may take physical, verbal, relational, sexual, or cyber forms, and that younger or more vulnerable learners are often at greater risk of victimisation (Liang et al., 2007; Tustin et al., 2014; Hlophe et al., 2017). Research in rural South African schools also links learner aggression to unsafe environments, vandalism, faction fights, and other forms of school violence, suggesting that bullying is embedded in broader patterns of insecurity rather than occurring in isolation (Tugli, 2015; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024). This is important because it positions bullying not as random misbehaviour but as a patterned social relation organised through dominance.

A second insight from the literature is that bullying is shaped by the social identities learners carry into school. Economic status, gender, age, stature, complexion, and sexuality all appear as dimensions through which some learners become visible targets while others gain power or protection (Hlophe et al., 2017; Mguye & Omodan, 2023). These findings matter for the present study because they show that bullying is not merely interpersonal; it is relational and socially coded. Learners do not enter school as equal subjects. They arrive already positioned within inequalities that may be reproduced, sharpened, or reworked through peer interaction.

2.2 Poverty, status, and peer hierarchies

Work on classroom hierarchy provides especially useful support for the argument that inequality shapes bullying. One large study found that higher classroom status hierarchy was associated with higher levels of bullying, while a more balanced distribution of power was linked to lower bullying (Garandeau et al., 2013). This is analytically significant because it shows that bullying is not just a matter of individual aggression; it is also related to the structure of peer relations. In contexts of scarcity, status may become more salient, and learners may compete over the limited symbols of respectability available to them.

South African studies also show that learner violence is tied to precarious social conditions, including extremes of wealth and poverty, family instability, weak school leadership, and poor school climate (Harber, 2001; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024). In rural settings, these conditions may be intensified by limited material resources and by the need to secure food, clothing, and social recognition. The result is a school culture in which hunger and deprivation are not merely private hardships but social differences that can be seen, compared, and exploited. Bullying over uniforms, lunch, or other possessions, therefore, becomes one way in which material inequality is converted into peer rank.

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Structural Violence

To make sense of how deprivation translates into peer domination, this study employs Johan Galtung's concept of Structural Violence. Unlike direct physical violence, structural violence refers to the systemic ways in which social structures and economic inequalities harm individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. In the context of rural schooling, poverty, hunger, and rigid class hierarchies are not merely background conditions; they are active forms of structural violence. When learners extort food or mock a peer's torn uniform, they micro-enact broader societal inequalities on the playground. Utilising this framework allows the study to move beyond viewing bullying as a mere behavioural deficit, positioning it instead as a predictable social symptom of material deprivation and systemic powerlessness.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist case study design, consistent with scholarship that treats school violence as a socially embedded and contextually produced phenomenon rather than a merely behavioural deficit to be measured at a distance (Barnes et al., 2012; Mncube & Harber, 2022). An interpretivist stance was appropriate because the inquiry sought to understand how hunger, poverty, hierarchy, and peer violence were experienced, narrated, and negotiated by those situated within the everyday lives of four primary schools in the Vhembe District (Mncube & Harber, 2022). In line with qualitative case study logic, the design enabled close engagement with the particularities of each school context while also supporting a comparative reading across cases (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024; Mncube & Harber, 2022). The case study approach is especially suited to research that aims to capture the interplay between social, economic and institutional conditions within bounded settings (Harber, 2001; Mncube & Harber, 2022).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 32 participants across the four schools, comprising learners, teachers and school nutrition coordinators. This sampling strategy was suitable because it enabled the selection of participants with direct knowledge of learner relations, school food provision, victimisation and the daily lived realities of schooling in conditions of inequality (Mabasa & Muluvhu, 2019; Hlophe et al., 2017). The intention was not statistical representation but depth, texture and interpretive richness, allowing those most closely positioned to the phenomenon to speak from experience (Hlophe et al., 2017; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024). Participants were selected for the relevance of their perspectives to

the research questions and for their proximity to the social dynamics under investigation (Mabasa & Muluvhu, 2019; Hlophe et al., 2017).

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, methods widely used in South African qualitative studies on bullying and violence because they enable participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while remaining guided by a focused protocol (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024; Hlophe et al., 2017, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were especially valuable for eliciting individual accounts of hunger, shame, aggression, exclusion and the feared or hidden dimensions of victimisation (Hlophe et al., 2017; Tustin et al., 2014). Focus groups, by contrast, made it possible to observe how meanings were collectively produced, contested and refined through interaction, and have been used effectively in work with learners and teachers exploring bullying and violence (Bhana et al., 2021). In this study, discussions of hunger, poverty and peer violence required immense sensitivity, careful pacing and an attentive ethical posture, given that such topics can evoke distress, silence or fear of exposure. The interview process, therefore, needed to be trauma-aware and responsive, allowing participants to withdraw, pause or decline to answer any question without consequence.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis, an interpretive approach well suited to identifying patterned meanings across qualitative accounts while preserving contextual nuance (Mguye & Omodan, 2023; Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021). The analytic process involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, generating initial codes, grouping codes into broader analytic categories, and then developing themes that captured the social meanings attached to hunger, hierarchy and violence (Mguye & Omodan, 2023; Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021). This approach aligned with the study's interpretivist orientation because it treated participants' accounts not as neutral facts to be extracted, but as situated narratives through which school life and power relations became intelligible (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024; Mncube & Harber, 2022). Thematic analysis also enabled the researchers to attend to convergences and tensions across learner, teacher and coordinator accounts, thereby supporting a more textured understanding of how socioeconomic deprivation may shape peer violence in school settings.

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Given the sensitivity of talking about food insecurity, humiliation, victimisation and possible retaliation, the study required clear protocols to minimise harm and to protect participants' dignity. Consistent with qualitative school violence research, anonymity and confidentiality were treated as essential safeguards, with identifying details removed or masked in transcripts and reporting (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024). Non-maleficence guided the conduct of interviews and focus groups, particularly where learners might disclose experiences of hunger, bullying, assault or social exclusion that could render them vulnerable if revealed (Singh & Steyn, 2014; Tustin et al., 2014). Participation was voluntary, and participants retained the right to decline to answer questions or to discontinue involvement.

Considering that the study addressed victimisation among vulnerable learners, psychosocial support was considered an important ethical obligation rather than an optional courtesy (Flannery et al., 2023;

Singh & Steyn, 2014). Where discussion elicited emotional discomfort or signs of distress, referral pathways and support arrangements needed to be available through appropriate school-based or professional services. This is consistent with research showing that bullying and related violence can have serious psychological consequences for victims, including anxiety, depression, stress and reduced well-being (Singh & Steyn, 2014; Tustin et al., 2014). The ethical stance of the study, therefore, extended beyond procedural consent to a more relational commitment to care, dignity and restraint, especially when engaging children and adolescents who may already live with food insecurity, powerlessness or fear (Flannery et al., 2023; Singh & Steyn, 2014).

Overall, the methodology was designed to honour the interpretive complexity of school violence in context: to listen carefully, to disturb neither participants' safety nor their dignity, and to produce an analysis grounded in lived experience rather than deficit assumptions (Hlophe et al., 2017; Mncube & Harber, 2022).

4. Findings

4.1 The Socio-Economic Architecture of Peer Violence

The empirical data reveal a stark reality: bullying in rural South African schools defies the conventional framing of a mere interpersonal conflict or psychological deficit. Instead, it is inextricably entangled with the daily mechanics of survival. Across all interviews and focus group discussions, participants repeatedly mapped peer victimisation onto learners' social and economic positions, illustrating how structural deprivation not only intensifies vulnerability but actively motivates aggression.

The data generated three prominent themes that explain how poverty is enacted through peer relations: the "Lunchbox Economy" and food extortion, the policing of material status markers, and the use of violence as compensatory power.

4.2 The "Lunchbox Economy" and Food Extortion

A striking, recurrent finding was the extent to which food functioned simultaneously as a vital resource and a weapon within the school's bullying ecology. Learners and educators described how lunchboxes, pocket money, and snacks were routinely demanded, forcibly taken, or used to humiliate others. In schools where a significant portion of the student body arrives without adequate nutrition, the possession of food becomes highly visible and socially charged. Bullying, in this context, transcends opportunistic theft; it is a mechanism for controlling access to a basic human necessity, effectively converting hunger into a tool of domination (Bhana et al., 2021; Hlophe et al., 2017).

One educator vividly captured how scarcity alters the social dynamics of the playground:

At break time, that is when you really see it. Some children are not even thinking about learning, they are thinking about the lunchbox. If a child brings bread, vetkoek, fruit, or even just a small snack, others are already watching. The ones who have nothing will say they are only asking, but you can see it is not asking.

They will surround that child, threaten him, sometimes even shout in front of everybody until he gives up his food. In this area, hunger changes how children behave. A child who is hungry is not calm. He becomes angry and starts thinking that taking from another learner is the only way to get through the day. **[P1, Educator, School A]**

This account exposes the central contradiction of the lunchbox economy. While food is fundamentally ordinary, under conditions of severe scarcity it becomes a marker of privilege and a magnet for coercion. The school yard becomes a site where household poverty is publicly negotiated through peer violence.

The extortion operates largely through intimidation and the enforcement of silence, as explained by a learner participant:

You find that some of the boys wait until they see the smaller children eating. They will stand there pretending to joke, but they are calculating who has what. If the learner has juice or a sandwich, they say, 'Share with us,' but it is not sharing because if the child refuses, they push, they insult, they take the food by force. Sometimes they even take the whole lunchbox and keep it until after school. The child who was robbed goes back to class embarrassed and hungry. That learner cannot concentrate, and sometimes they do not even tell the teacher because they know tomorrow it will happen again. **[P2, Grade 7 Learner, School B]**

This testimony underscores the profound emotional and educational toll of food extortion. Learners avoid reporting because they anticipate repeated victimisation, calculating that the social costs of disclosure outweigh the likelihood of protection. Consequently, hunger, shame, and the pervasive fear of renewed attacks destroy classroom concentration. This aligns with broader South African research demonstrating that victimisation is inextricably linked to absenteeism, trauma, and diminished academic engagement (Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021; Singh & Steyn, 2014; Tshatshu, 2023).

Crucially, participants did not frame this extortion merely as individual greed. They linked it directly to the community's uneven distribution of resources. The economic meaning of food at school extends far beyond nutrition; it indexes social worth, family stability, and peer power.

4.3 Material Markers of Status

Beyond food, the data highlighted the weaponisation of material possessions as rigid markers of social rank. Participants reported that uniforms, shoes, stationery, backpacks, and even the mode of transport used to reach school frequently triggered harassment. These objects are not neutral; they are scrutinised by peers as visible indicators of family income and personal value. Consequently, bullying becomes the primary mechanism through which socio-economic difference is displayed, amplified, and ruthlessly policed (Garandeau et al., 2013; Hlophe et al., 2017). A teacher elaborated on the inescapable nature of this material scrutiny:

It is not only food. Even your shoes can make you a target. If you wear clean shoes, or if your uniform looks new, the others start talking. They say you are showing off, or they ask who bought it for you, where do you

get money from. But if you come with old shoes or your shirt is torn, then they laugh and call you names. So whichever side you are on, there is always a problem. Children compare everything. They look at your lunch, your stationery, your clothes, even the car that drops you at school. If it looks better than what they have, they turn it into a reason to bully. **[P3, Educator, School C]**

This excerpt illustrates how status is not merely possessed; it is actively read, narrated, and contested by the peer group. In rural schools marked by deep inequality, material goods serve as a social shorthand for who is respected and who is vulnerable. A pair of intact shoes or a full pencil case can mark a learner as either aspirational or arrogant, rendering them deserving of either admiration or attack. A learner participant described how this jealousy and mockery manifest in daily interactions:

Some learners are bullied because they arrive with things that others do not have. A learner who has lunch money every day, or who has a proper bag, or who gets dropped off by a car, is seen differently. The others will say, 'You think you are better than us.' Then the jealousy starts. They may hide the learner's books, tear the exercise book, take the stationery, or spread rumours that the child is rich and must buy for everybody. At the same time, if a learner is poor, they are also mocked. Their clothes are watched closely. The moment they wear something old, the teasing starts. So the material things at school become a way of ranking children. **[P4, Grade 6 Learner, School A]**

What emerges is a school culture where poverty is publicly legible and socially consequential. Learners do not simply experience inequality at home; they are forced to embody it through their appearance at school. Those with fewer resources are subjected to ridicule, while those with slightly more are targeted through envy and perceived excess. In both scenarios, the aggression is fundamentally driven by economic comparison.

4.4 Violence as Compensatory Power

The final theme reveals how physical and emotional violence functions as a form of compensation for systemic powerlessness. Participants repeatedly noted that older boys, physically imposing learners, or socially dominant cliques were the most likely perpetrators of intimidation. For learners who felt emasculated, impoverished, or academically inadequate, violence offered a potent, immediate way to convert vulnerability into authority (Bhana et al., 2021; Hlophe et al., 2017). One educator provided a deeply empathetic interpretation of this dynamic:

There are learners who are always quiet in class, but when it is break time, they become different people. You can see that at home they are struggling. Maybe there is no food, maybe there is violence, maybe they are being laughed at in the community. Then they come to school and they want to feel strong somewhere. So they look for the smaller child, the one who is shy, the one who is not going to fight back. They push him, they insult him, they make him run for them, and in that moment they feel powerful. It is as if they are saying, 'At least here, I am somebody.' **[P5, Educator, School D]**

This is a critical sociological insight. The violence observed is not random; it is highly compensatory. Learners who endure humiliation or severe deprivation outside the school gates seek to reverse that

experience through domination within them. The school yard becomes a stage where fractured identities are temporarily repaired through the subjugation of weaker peers (Harber, 2001; Liang et al., 2007).

A learner participant further articulated how this violence is performed for an audience:

The older boys are the ones who usually do it. They know the younger ones are scared. They know girls are afraid to report. So they call names, they hit, they take money, they send others to fetch things for them. Sometimes it is not even because they need the item. It is because they want to show the others that they are in charge. If somebody challenges them, they threaten that learner after school. The violence is not only about the act itself. It is about making everybody understand who has the power. **[P6, Grade 7 Learner, School C]**

This testimony frames bullying as a theatrical performance sustained by fear and reinforced by institutional silence. The ultimate goal is not necessarily the acquisition of the stolen item, but the assertion of control and the demand for recognition. In socio-economic terms, this is profound: where academic success, family wealth, or social prestige are inaccessible, physical violence becomes a substitute currency for respect.

However, this compensatory power is inherently fragile and deeply destructive. It relies entirely on fear, deepening the very inequalities that birthed it. Victims become withdrawn, while perpetrators contribute to a climate of pervasive insecurity that fractures the educational environment (Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021; Singh & Steyn, 2014).

Taken together, these three themes demonstrate that bullying in rural South African schools cannot be divorced from its socio-economic context. Hunger makes food dangerous, inequality makes possessions visible, and systemic powerlessness makes violence an attractive compensation. Bullying is, therefore, not merely a failure of discipline, but a tragic social symptom of material deprivation and the struggle to survive with dignity in an environment of scarcity.

5. Discussion

5.1 Structural Violence and the Ecology of Peer Aggression

This study set out to dismantle the assumption that primary school bullying is merely an isolated behavioural anomaly. Viewed through the lens of Johan Galtung's concept of Structural Violence, the data reveal that what educators frequently label as "indiscipline" or "bullying" is, in fact, a micro-enactment of broader societal inequalities. Peer violence in the Vhembe District is not random; it is meticulously patterned around age, bodily strength, access to resources, and economic status. Bullying, therefore, is not simply a breach of school order requiring punishment; it is the sedimentation of social hierarchy within everyday school life. This aligns with critical scholarship demonstrating that school violence is inextricably linked to wider social contexts marked by poverty, patriarchy, and systemic inequality (Bhana et al., 2021; Garandeau et al., 2013; Harber, 2001; Hlophe et al., 2017).

5.2 The Myth of the Equalising School

A central theoretical contribution of this research is its demonstration that the school environment often amplifies, rather than neutralises, socio-economic hierarchies. The conventional, democratic expectation that the school functions as an equalising space is fundamentally challenged by these findings. Instead, learners from impoverished backgrounds are highly vulnerable to ridicule and coercion, while those perceived to possess wealth (manifested in food or better uniforms) become targets of envy-driven extortion.

While the existing literature acknowledges that classroom status hierarchies correlate with higher levels of bullying (Garandeau et al., 2013; Hlophe et al., 2017), this study extends that premise. In the rural primary school context, inequality is not merely symbolic—it is materially enacted through the forcible taking of food and possessions. The school fails to compensate for the inequalities of the surrounding social order; instead, it provides the stage upon which those inequalities are violently reproduced.

5.3 Hunger as an Active Mechanism of Violence

Perhaps the most significant theoretical departure of this study lies in its reconceptualisation of hunger. Much of the existing literature treats hunger as a passive background condition—a deprivation that undermines concentration or acts as an indirect risk factor for anti-social behaviour (Harber, 2001; Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021).

However, this study establishes that hunger is an **active driver of peer domination**. Hunger moves from a structural condition to immediate social action. Food is directly implicated as both the motive and the mechanism of violence, driving coercion, extortion, and the humiliation of weaker peers. By demonstrating that material deprivation translates directly into everyday aggression, this research offers a highly grounded account of how structural violence infiltrates the daily lives of children, forcing them to manage severe need through the domination of others.

5.4 Spatial Vulnerability and the Performance of Power

The findings further illustrate that this economically driven violence relies on specific spatial and social conditions. Bullying consistently clustered in playgrounds, toilets, empty classrooms, and transitional routes, spaces where adult supervision was fractured. However, the significance of these "unowned spaces" extends beyond mere oversight.

These spaces serve as arenas where power is most visibly exercised, particularly by older boys over younger learners and girls. This spatial dynamic resonates with studies identifying gendered domination and violent masculinity as central to school violence (Bhana et al., 2021). School space, therefore, is not neutral. When supervision is weak and socio-economic hierarchies remain unchallenged, physical space becomes the exact setting where structural inequalities are rehearsed and violently enforced among children.

5.5 Depoliticising Deprivation: The Limits of Punitive Discipline

The findings expose a critical flaw in how schools conceptualise intervention. When teachers interpret food extortion or poverty-shaming merely as "ill-discipline," jealousy, or personal misconduct, they risk depoliticising the root causes of the behaviour.

While literature consistently emphasises the importance of code enforcement and school leadership in reducing violence (Barnes et al., 2012; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024; Mncube & Harber, 2022), this study argues that administrative compliance is insufficient if it ignores material deprivation. In Structural Violence terms, punitive discipline treats the symptom while leaving the unequal relations that generate the behaviour entirely intact. The school punishes the visible act of theft or assault yet fails to recognise the social deprivation that makes such acts logical—or even necessary for survival to the learners involved.

5.6 Synthesis and Implications

If bullying is understood as a micro-enactment of structural inequality, intervention must extend far beyond the punitive. A positive school climate is not simply a desirable pedagogic feature; it is a necessary counterweight to the reproduction of poverty-driven hierarchy (Flannery et al., 2023). In contexts where hunger, poverty, and power asymmetries dictate learner interactions, safety cannot be achieved by punishment alone. It requires material support, proactive spatial governance, and a school climate that actively resists the stigmatisation of the poor. Ultimately, this study proves that bullying is not a behavioural deviation, but a tragic social symptom of inequality made visible in the everyday life of the primary school.

6. Recommendations

To effectively dismantle the socio-economic and spatial drivers of peer violence, school governance structures must move beyond reactive discipline toward systemic, preventative action. The following recommendations outline a comprehensive framework for intervention:

6.1 Destigmatise the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)

School Management Teams (SMTs) and governing bodies must reframe school nutrition as a fundamental right and a core support for learners, rather than a symbol of poverty. Because socio-economic deprivation amplifies vulnerability to victimisation (Harber, 2001; Singh & Steyn, 2014), schools must actively dismantle the stigma surrounding the NSNP. This requires integrating anti-stigma messaging into assemblies and classroom discussions, and ensuring that meal distribution protects learners' dignity, preventing the feeding line from becoming a site of peer humiliation.

6.2 Revise Uniform Policies to Mitigate Visible Socio-Economic Inequality

Uniform regulations should be critically reviewed to address affordability and the ways in which material differences signal social status and trigger bullying. Because rigid classroom hierarchies correlate with higher rates of victimisation (Garandeau et al., 2013; Hlophe et al., 2017), schools must eliminate disciplinary practices that publicly humiliate learners for poverty-related non-compliance. School Governing Bodies (SGBs) should implement flexible, low-cost uniform alternatives and establish discreet support mechanisms for indigent families, thereby neutralising uniforms as a weapon of social exclusion.

6.3 Capacitate Educators to Recognise Economic Coercion and Food Extortion

Staff development initiatives must explicitly define the theft of food, lunch-money extortion, and poverty-shaming as severe forms of bullying. Educators often miss these covert, normalised acts of economic aggression (Liang et al., 2007). Training should equip teachers with the pedagogical tools to identify, document, and consistently intervene in these incidents, fostering a deeper understanding of how systemic socio-economic vulnerability fuels interpersonal violence.

6.4 Implement Proactive Spatial Governance in High-Risk Zones

Schools must strategically increase adult supervision in "unowned" or transitional spaces—such as toilets, corridors, and peripheral yards where bullying thrives outside the immediate gaze of educators (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024). Beyond mere patrolling, SMTs should conduct spatial risk assessments to alter the physical layout where possible, improving sightlines and reducing environmental opportunities for intimidation and assault. Spatial governance must become a permanent fixture of school safety planning, not an ad hoc reaction.

6.5 Establish Secure, Retaliation-Free Reporting Pathways

Schools must institutionalise highly accessible, confidential reporting mechanisms specifically designed to protect victims of extortion and peer coercion. Vulnerable learners are often trapped in a culture of silence (Flannery et al., 2023; Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021). Therefore, reporting protocols must clearly outline designated safeguarding officers, secure documentation processes, guaranteed response timeframes, and post-disclosure psychosocial support, ensuring learners can seek help without fear of reprisal.

6.6 Operationalise Comprehensive Anti-Bullying Frameworks

While many schools have generic codes of conduct, they often fail to implement them consistently (Barnes et al., 2012; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024). Schools must adopt and enforce explicit anti-bullying policies that clearly differentiate between preventative education, early intervention, restorative justice, and punitive disciplinary action. Crucially, these frameworks must explicitly address covert intimidation, repeated aggression, and economically motivated victimisation.

6.7 Drive Prevention through Accountable School Leadership

The eradication of school violence hinges on decisive leadership. SMTs and SGBs must take primary responsibility for cultivating a safe school climate, rigorously enforcing conduct codes, and coordinating systemic responses to bullying (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024; Tugli, 2015). Furthermore, circuit-level management must provide robust oversight, mandate data collection on bullying incidents, and hold school leadership accountable for the safety of their environments.

6.8 Adopt Multi-Tiered, Restorative Interventions

Addressing bullying rooted in systemic deprivation requires a collaborative, ecological approach. Schools must partner with parents, social workers, community leaders, and psychological services to address the root causes of aggression, including home circumstances and gendered conflicts (Bhana et al., 2021; Flannery et al., 2023; Mabasa & Muluvhu, 2019). By shifting from purely punitive measures to shared community responsibility, schools can offer holistic, restorative support to both victims and perpetrators (Harber, 2001).

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify robust strategies to mitigate bullying among primary school learners in the Sambandou Circuit of the Vhembe East District. The empirical evidence and thematic findings clearly demonstrate that peer victimisation cannot be dismissed as an isolated disciplinary infraction or a normative phase of childhood. Rather, it is a complex governance and learner safety crisis, intricately shaped by school climate, peer power dynamics, spatial supervision gaps, and the stark socio-economic realities of the rural context (Barnes et al., 2012; Garandeau et al., 2013; Mncube & Harber, 2022). When these systemic drivers are left unchecked, bullying exacts a severe toll on the educational project. It fractures learners' emotional security, breeds pervasive fear, drives absenteeism, and ultimately compromises the pedagogical mandate of the school by weakening the foundational relationships necessary for learning (Liang et al., 2007; Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021; Singh & Steyn, 2014).

The central contribution of this research lies in exposing the underlying architecture of this violence. In the Vhembe context, bullying is sustained not merely through overt physical aggression, but through the weaponisation of socio-economic inequality and deprivation. Social practices that enable humiliation, such as food extortion, lunch-money coercion, and the stigmatisation of poverty, create an environment where material status differences become potent tools of peer intimidation (Garandeau et al., 2013;

Hlophe et al., 2017). Consequently, effective prevention requires a critical lens that looks beyond individual behavioural deficits to recognise and disrupt these hidden, economically driven forms of violence.

Addressing such deeply entrenched peer hierarchies requires a decisive shift away from purely punitive, reactive discipline. Bullying in this context is fundamentally a governance challenge. Meaningful intervention depends on coordinated, systemic action driven by principals, educators, School Governing Bodies (SGBs), and the broader parent community (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2024; Tugli, 2015). School leadership must be empowered to dismantle the institutional arrangements that inadvertently reproduce exclusion and unequal power dynamics. This involves deliberate policy coherence, consistent enforcement of codes of conduct, and the cultivation of a school climate rooted in equity, inclusion, and learner dignity.

Ultimately, safer schools are built by leaders who actively intervene in the spatial and social conditions that foster vulnerability. By deliberately reducing socio-economic stigma, limiting visible markers of inequality through revised uniform policies, and strengthening both physical supervision and confidential referral systems, schools can transform from sites of anxiety into orderly, supportive learning environments (Bhana et al., 2021; Flannery et al., 2023). To protect the most vulnerable learners in the Sambandou Circuit, anti-bullying strategies must be institutionalised not merely as a disciplinary add-on, but as a core pillar of school governance and social justice (Barnes et al., 2012; Garandeau et al., 2013; Tugli, 2015).

Declarations

8.1 Funding: This research was conducted entirely independently and received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors confirm that no external financial support was provided for the study design, data collection, manuscript preparation, or publication.

8.2 Responsible Use of AI and Technology: Artificial intelligence tools were utilised solely to enhance language clarity, refine manuscript structure, and organise the authors' original qualitative data. The authors assume full and final responsibility for the intellectual content, originality, and academic integrity of this work.

8.3 Ethical Approval: Ethical clearance was obtained from the [College of ***blinded for review***, University ***blinded for review***] Research Ethics Committee (Ref. No: blinded for review).

8.4 Consent to Participate*:* Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants (and their legal guardians, where applicable) included in the study.

Author Contribution

Martin Chukwudi Ekeh and Nndwamato Ndou jointly conceptualised the study and developed the methodology. Martin Chukwudi Ekeh wrote the main manuscript text, while Nndwamato Ndou refined the theoretical framework and discussion sections. Nndwamato Ndou contributed to the qualitative data collection while Martin Chukwudi Ekeh handled the thematic analysis. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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