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United we stand: Conquering school bullying to foster team spirit

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Abstract

Sports are vital for the physical, social, and emotional growth of children and adolescents, providing opportunities for teamwork, skill development, and healthy competition. However, playgrounds and collaborative activities like physical education often become hotspots for bullying, with about 28% of students globally reporting such experiences. This significantly impacts their participation and undermines essential skills like communication, conflict resolution, and leadership key components of team spirit. The current paper investigates school bullying in Indian schools through qualitative case studies conducted in Mysore City, highlighting the nuanced experiences of victims and bystanders. Findings reveal that victims suffer from diminished self-efficacy and heightened anxiety, which severely limit their ability to contribute effectively to group activities. Additionally, bullying fosters a toxic environment that fractures peer relationships and erodes trust. Addressing bullying is critical to nurturing team spirit in schools. The paper discusses a few cases of school bullying and advocates for inclusive strategies that empower Outsiders, who represent the largest group among bystanders but often remain passive through education and training programs. These initiatives aim to address their fears and equip them with effective intervention techniques. It also emphasizes the role of Defenders who can support victims while facing challenges themselves. Strengthening teacher-student relationships is essential to fostering a positive school climate where all students feel safe to act against bullying. By mobilizing Outsiders and Defenders alike, schools can create an environment conducive to collaboration, respect, and unity, ultimately fostering a culture where every student can thrive both individually and as part of a team.

Keywords: School bullying, bystanders, team spirit, self-efficacy, physical education

Introduction

Bullying is a significant concern in Indian schools, affecting a substantial number of students and impacting their social, emotional, and academic development. School bullying is a pervasive challenge that negatively impacts the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students. It is a deliberate, repeated, and harmful behavior directed at an individual or group, often taking advantage of a power imbalance (Olweus *et al.*, 1996) ^[14]. The power imbalance may stem from differences in physical strength, social standing, or access to sensitive information that can be used to harm or control others (Thornberg *et al.*, 2018) ^[39]. These behaviors often create a climate of fear and exclusion, undermining the sense of safety essential for a productive learning environment. This paper examines bullying in Indian schools, integrates data from an Exploratory Research study in Mysore City with qualitative case studies highlighting the nuanced experiences of victims and bystanders. It attempts to focus on the impact of School Bullying on victims, playground dynamics, and team achievements, while proposing strategies to empower both victims and bystanders to mitigate these challenges.

Participant Roles in School Bullying

Understanding the dynamics of school bullying involves recognizing the various roles that individuals play in these distressing situations. The primary participants include the bully, the victim, and a critical group of “witnesses” known as “Bystanders”.

Bullies, Victims and Beyond

- **The Bully:** This is the individual or group that initiates harmful actions against others. Their motivations can vary, including a desire for dominance, attention, or retaliation for perceived wrongs.
- **The Victim:** The target of bullying often suffers from physical, emotional, and psychological harm. Victims may display signs such as withdrawal, anxiety, or a decline in academic performance. (Olweus *et al.*, 1996) ^[14].

In addition to the bully and victim, bystanders play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of bullying situations. According to Salmivalli *et al.* (1996) ^[40], bystanders can be categorized into

different types based on their responses:

1. **The Assistant:** A bystander who actively supports the bully by helping to carry out harmful actions.
2. **The Reinforcer:** Someone who indirectly encourages bullying behavior, often by laughing at or approving of the bully's actions.
3. **The Defender:** A bystander who intervenes or supports the victim, either directly or by reporting the bullying to an authority figure.
4. **The Outsider:** A passive bystander who remains uninvolved and chooses not to take sides, often perpetuating the cycle through silence (Salmivalli *et al.*, 2008) ^[23].

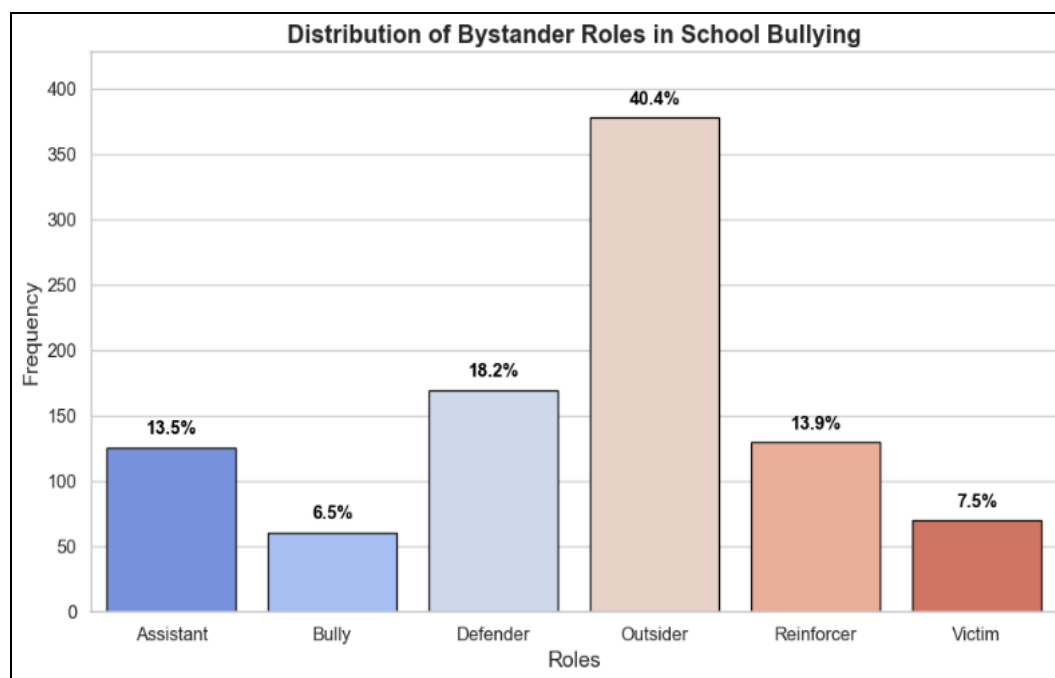


Fig.1: Distribution of Participant Roles in School Bullying

In the current study, the distribution of these participant roles is indicated from Fig 1. As illustrated, the data reveals that Outsiders make up a substantial portion of bystanders. In this context, their inaction directly or indirectly perpetuates a culture of bullying rather than mitigate it as found in our previous studies (Bala *et al.*, 2022; Bala *et al.*, 2023) ^[1, 2]. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon:

1. **Fear of Retaliation:** Many Outsiders may feel threatened by the potential consequences of intervening, especially if they perceive the bully as powerful or aggressive.
2. **Lack of Confidence:** Some individuals may doubt their ability to handle the situation effectively, leading them to remain passive observers rather than active participants in resolving conflicts.
3. **Social Dynamics:** Peer pressure and the desire to fit in can also discourage Outsiders from taking a stand against bullying, as they may fear being ostracized or targeted themselves (Vveinhardt & Fominienè, 2020) ^[34].

Therefore, it is crucial to focus on transforming the outlook of Outsiders and to empower them through education and training programs that address their fears and equip them with effective strategies for intervention. Which would aid in a positive school climate that prioritizes collaboration, support, and respect for all individuals involved.

- **Case 1:** The Importance of Defenders in Preventing Bullying

A compelling case study illustrates the significant impact defenders can have in bullying situations. Priya (name changed), a seventh-grade student and member of her middle school basketball team, witnessed her fellow student Vikram (name changed) being bullied repeatedly in the corridors and on the playground by a group of classmates. During one incident on the playground, the bullies deliberately targeted Vikram, leading Priya to take action. Priya's courageous act of standing up against the bullies not only inspired some of her peers but also demonstrated how defender intervention can effectively disrupt bullying behavior. By intervening, she created a moment of solidarity that challenged the bullies' actions and provided support to Vikram. This highlights the critical role defenders play in shifting the dynamics of bullying situations.

Despite her bravery, Priya faced backlash and retaliation from the bullies following her intervention. Initially hesitant to inform an adult about the situation, she felt isolated and unsupported. This case exemplifies that while defenders can inspire positive change and foster an environment of support, they often encounter substantial personal challenges when institutional support is lacking.

The experiences of defenders like Priya underscore the importance of creating supportive structures within schools. Effective anti-bullying programs should not only empower students to act as defenders but also provide them with the

necessary resources and support systems. Research indicates that school-wide prevention strategies, such as those outlined in programs like Olweus and KiVa, can significantly reduce bullying behaviors by fostering a culture of inclusion and respect (Olweus *et al.*, 1991; Kärnä *et al.*, 2011) ^[12, 11]. Such efforts will not only reduce instances of bullying but also ensure that victims receive the support they need to flourish academically and socially.

Types of Bullying

Bullying manifests in various forms, each with distinct implications for victims. Verbal bullying, which includes name-calling, teasing, and derogatory remarks, is the most common type reported among students in Indian literature (Thapa *et al.*, 2024; Ranjith *et al.*, 2019) ^[29, 21] and in the current study. This form of bullying can severely impact a victim's self-esteem and confidence, making them less likely to engage in team sports or collaborative activities. For instance, in Case 2, Shruthi (Name changed) a 6th class student of a small private school faced constant name-calling from her classmates calling her “Eli” (Kannada) translating to “little mouse” in English. They usually either excluded her from games altogether when the PT teacher wasn't around or was selected last for the group in any game.

Physical bullying, which involves direct harm such as hitting, pushing, or damaging personal belongings, is the second most common form of bullying. It is the most visible type and often leaves tangible evidence on the victims. This form of bullying can cause both short-term pain and long-term psychological consequences, leading to a decline in the victim's emotional and social well-being.

In addition to verbal and physical bullying, social bullying, characterized by exclusion, spreading rumors, and body shaming, is also alarmingly prevalent. Such behaviors not only harm the victim's emotional well-being but also disrupt the social dynamics within teams, leading to a toxic environment that stifles collaboration and mutual support (Evans *et al.*, 2016) ^[9]. For instance, in Case 1, the student who was ostracized by peers further withdrew from team activities, further isolating themselves and diminishing the overall team spirit.

Another emerging form of bullying is cyberbullying, which occurs through digital platforms (Thomas *et al.*, 2015) ^[30]. This includes sending hurtful messages, sharing private information, or creating fake profiles to harass or embarrass the victim. The 24/7 nature of cyberbullying makes it especially harmful, as victims often find no respite from the harassment (Bala *et al.*, 2022; 2023) ^[1, 2].

Bullying, a pervasive issue in schools, and sports fields, that extends beyond the classroom profoundly affecting students' academic and athletic achievements. Victims of bullying often face diminished self-confidence, heightened anxiety, and social withdrawal, which inhibit their participation in team sports and collaborative activities. In team sports, where collaboration and trust are crucial, these challenges significantly undermine performance and discourage students from pursuing sports further.

Equally critical is the role of bystanders—students who witness bullying—who can either perpetuate the problem through passive observation or intervene to foster a more inclusive environment. The dual impact of bullying on victims and the potential influence of bystanders highlights the need for comprehensive strategies to address playground bullying (Stanley *et al.*, 2013) ^[23].

Prevalence of Bullying

Studies on school bullying in Indian context indicate that approximately 25.6% of students in Indian school's report experiencing bullying, with this figure highlighting the widespread nature of the problem (Rana *et al.*, 2020; Ramya and Kulkarni, 2011) ^[18, 17]. This statistic is alarming, as it suggests that nearly one in four students faces some form of bullying, which can lead to long-term psychological effects and hinder their overall development. The prevalence of bullying is particularly concerning in the context of team sports, where collaboration and trust are essential for success (Van *et al.*, 2003) ^[33]. When students are subjected to bullying, their willingness to participate in physical activities diminishes, leading to a decline in both individual and team performance (Rani *et al.*, 2021) ^[19].

Consequences of School Bullying on Victims and Bystanders

School bullying has profound and lasting consequences for both victims and bystanders, significantly affecting their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.

Effects on Victims

Victims often endure physical harm, ranging from minor injuries to severe consequences resulting from direct aggression. These experiences create a constant state of fear and hypervigilance, impairing their ability to engage in physical activities and disrupting their overall health. Common outcomes include sleep disturbances and chronic stress, which weaken immune systems and lead to further health complications. Victims frequently perceive themselves as powerless, diminishing their confidence in handling social situations. This sense of helplessness makes them more vulnerable to ongoing bullying. Verbal bullying is the most prevalent form, followed by relational and physical bullying (Wang *et al.*, 2009; Santos *et al.*, 2014) ^[41, 24]. Additionally, cyberbullying has emerged as a distinct form of harassment (Wang *et al.*, 2009) ^[41]. Research indicates that boys are more likely to be involved in physical and verbal bullying, while girls tend to experience relational bullying (Wang *et al.*, 2009; Santos *et al.*, 2014) ^[41, 24]. The prevalence of bullying varies globally, with reports indicating that 15-20% to 70% of students experience bullying at least once during a school term. Age and grade level also influence bullying patterns, with younger students generally being more vulnerable (Olweus, 1994) ^[13].

Emotional Toll on Victims

The emotional impact of bullying is deeply scarring. Victims often experience feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and social rejection, leading to a decline in self-esteem and an increased susceptibility to anxiety and depression. Over time, these experiences can isolate victims, limiting their opportunities for meaningful social interactions and support. In the current study, victims reported diminished self-efficacy—their belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations—which is a crucial predictor of behavioral initiation (Bandura, 1977) ^[3]. Individuals are less likely to engage in tasks they believe they cannot successfully complete. Academic engagement also suffers as victims struggle to focus, participate in classroom discussions, or collaborate with peers. This reinforces feelings of inadequacy and alienation (Zimmerman *et al.*, 1992; Bandura, 2020) ^[38, 4]. The cycle continues: as victims' self-efficacy declines, their participation in team sports and collaborative activities decreases, further exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and

isolation (Smith and Lee, 2023) ^[26, 27]. Global studies highlight the significant role of self-efficacy in influencing performance outcomes across various domains. For instance, research shows that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perceived support and academic success (Pajares *et al.*, 2020; Smith and Lee, 2023) ^[26, 27]. Additionally, a study found a reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance, indicating that initial performance can shape future self-efficacy beliefs (Wang *et al.*, 2024) ^[35]. In sports contexts, a systematic review demonstrated a moderate correlation between self-efficacy and performance (Johnson *et al.*, 2023) ^[10].

Impact on Bystanders

The psychological consequences of bullying extend beyond victims to include bystanders, whose experiences can also be distressing. Witnessing bullying can evoke intense emotions such as guilt, fear, and helplessness (Thornberg *et al.*, 2018; Smith and Carron, 2023) ^[26, 27, 39], particularly when bystanders feel powerless to intervene. Prolonged exposure to such incidents may lead to desensitization or moral disengagement, diminishing empathy and accountability over time. Conversely, bystanders who actively defend victims may face retaliation from bullies, amplifying their stress and anxiety. This complex interplay of emotions disrupts social cohesion within school environments, affecting teamwork, trust, and mutual respect. Moreover, the psychological toll of bullying can lead to increased anxiety and depression among bystanders as well. These effects can manifest in academic underachievement and reluctance to engage in physical activities. The cumulative impact not only affects individual students but also undermines the overall dynamics of school teams, leading to decreased performance and cohesion.

Overall, the physical, emotional, and psychological repercussions of school bullying compromise not only individual well-being but also the broader dynamics of school communities. Addressing these multifaceted consequences requires a comprehensive approach that fosters resilience, empathy, and proactive intervention among all stakeholders involved. By creating supportive environments that prioritize mental health and encourage positive interactions among students, schools can mitigate the damaging effects of bullying on both victims and bystanders.

The Impact of Bullying on School Sports

Team sports, including cricket, football, and basketball, rely on unity and mutual support among players. Bullying fractures these bonds, leading to poor communication, decreased trust, and reduced overall team effectiveness. Perpetrators often dominate teams in counterproductive ways, such as by monopolizing decision-making (Cillessen *et al.*, 2004) ^[6] ridiculing teammates' mistakes, or excluding less confident players from key plays. For instance, a skilled player who belittles others' abilities may create an atmosphere of fear and resentment, discouraging collaboration and fostering hostility (Vveinhardt & Fominienė, 2020) ^[34]. Such behaviors not only alienate team members but also stifle the growth of potential talent within the group.

During the current study around 38% of students reported experiencing bullying during PE classes. Experiencing school bullying during games can discourage them from engaging in sports altogether (Williamson & Sandford, 2018) ^[36]. Bullying not only affects the immediate experience of physical activity but may also contribute to long-term barriers to maintaining an active lifestyle, as victims may feel alienated or reluctant

to participate in team-oriented settings (Wolke *et al.*, 2013; Cowie, 2011; Schunk *et al.*, 2012) ^[37, 7, 25].

Bullying in schools can create significant barriers to students' participation in sports, particularly team sports. When students experience bullying, their willingness to engage in physical activities diminishes, leading to reduced motivation and a lack of enjoyment in sports. This discouragement not only affects individual performance but also undermines the overall team effort, as cohesion and collaboration are essential components of team sports.

- Several key barriers arise from the impact of bullying on sports participation:

1. **Decreased Motivation:** Victims of bullying often feel less inclined to participate in sports due to fear of further victimization or social rejection. This lack of motivation can lead to a withdrawal from social activities (Chhabria *et al.*, 2020) ^[5].
2. **Increased Anxiety:** The stress and anxiety associated with being bullied can make the prospect of participating in team activities overwhelming for affected students. This anxiety can manifest during practices and competitions, further hindering performance.
3. **Diminished Self-Efficacy:** Bullying can severely impact a child's self-esteem, and self-efficacy making them feel inadequate or unworthy of participating in sports (Schunk *et al.*, 2012) ^[25]. This perception can deter them from trying out for teams or engaging in competitive environments.

In team sports, the dynamics among players are crucial for success. If bullying occurs within a team, it can fracture relationships and diminish trust. The resultant fractures in team dynamics hinder both individual and collective performance, diminishing school teams' competitiveness and discouraging students from pursuing sports at higher levels. Victims of bullying especially avoid participation or underperform due to anxiety and low self-esteem, while bystanders, reluctant to challenge perpetrators, can unconsciously contribute to the toxic environment. In Case 3, Atul (name changed), a 10-year-old student in Class 5 at a respected private school is known for his quiet nature and artistic talents. He finds joy in drawing and often spends his free time sketching scenes inspired by nature. However, his introverted personality and unique interests made him a target for bullying. During lunch breaks, a group of older boys begins to mock him for his passion for art, teasing him for not wanting to participate in cricket games. The relentless teasing made Atul feel humiliated and anxious about attending school. The laughter of the boys lingered in his mind, causing him to dread lunch breaks. Gradually, he started to isolate himself, sitting alone during recess and avoiding the playground. Atul eventually opened up to the school administrator, an empathetic staff member who takes immediate action. She spoke with the boys' parents and addressed the situation, offering Atul a sense of relief. Despite this intervention, the bullying persists in a new form when rumours were spread that Atul is creating drama for attention. This emotional setback became too much for him to handle. In consultation with his parents, he decided to transfer to a new school, seeking a fresh start away from the ongoing harassment. His parents were shocked to learn the full extent of what had transpired, but they supported his decision for a healthier school environment.

Cases like these underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to restore cohesion and foster a culture of

respect and support within school sports teams.

Strategies to Mitigate Bullying and Enhance Team Achievements

• Empowering Individuals

1. Empathy Training: Empathy training equips bystanders with the emotional insight needed to support victims, fostering a more cohesive team environment. Evidence shows that empathy training programs significantly reduce bullying by fostering understanding among peers (Reichl *et al.*, 2012) ^[20].
2. Resilience Building: Initiatives focusing on resilience, such as mindfulness and stress management workshops, have been linked to improved peer interactions and reduced victimization (Davis & Hayes, 2011) ^[8].
3. Dialogue Facilitation: Regular discussions between students, teachers, and coaches about bullying incidents can help build a culture of openness and mutual support. Schools implementing peer mediation programs report a 50% reduction in bullying incidents (Smith *et al.*, 2023) ^[26, 27].

• Strengthening Teams

1. Team-Building Exercises: Studies highlight the effectiveness of cooperative activities like "trust games" in fostering unity among players, leading to improved team performance (Smith *et al.*, 2023) ^[26, 27].
2. Inclusivity Policies: Addressing discriminatory practices and encouraging participation across diverse groups have been shown to enhance team morale and cohesion (Pepler *et al.*, 1994) ^[16].

Institutional Policies

1. Strong Anti-Bullying Frameworks: Implementing clear policies with defined roles and consequences has proven effective in reducing playground bullying (Olweus, 1994; Thornberg *et al.*, 2014) ^[13, 31].
2. Educator Training: Training coaches and educators to identify subtle bullying behaviors ensures timely intervention. Research indicates that trained staff are 35% more effective in preventing repeated incidents (Rigby, 2004) ^[22].

Apart from above programs educating parents about the signs and effects of bullying have been associated with better parent-child communication and reduced bullying cases.

Conclusion

Bullying on school playgrounds significantly affects team dynamics and discourages participation in sports, thereby hampering the overall achievements of school teams. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes empowering bystanders, fostering empathy, and implementing effective policies. By creating supportive environments and encouraging active intervention, schools can transform playgrounds into spaces of collaboration and growth, ensuring that students can thrive both academically and athletically. Through collective efforts, the detrimental effects of bullying can be curtailed, transforming Indian school sports into a model of inclusion and collaboration, where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

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