

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF BULLYING EXPERIENCES, ATTITUDES TOWARD BULLYING, AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ON PEER INTERACTIONS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AFIJIO LOCAL GOVERNMENT, OYO STATE

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Abstract

Peer relationships are the intricate web of interpersonal connections that students form and maintain within the school environment, standing at the heart of the educational experience. Secondary school students face varying experiences with bullying, shaped by school policies, peer dynamics, and broader social influences. This study explores bullying experiences, attitudes toward bullying, and the school Environment on Peer Interactions among secondary school students in Afijo Local Government. The study adopted a correlation survey design. The target population comprises all secondary school students in public secondary schools in Afijo Local Government. A total sample of 200 students from JSS1 to JSS3 was selected using a multistage sampling technique. A significant negative correlation was found between bullying experiences and peer interactions ($r = -.436, p < .001$), indicating that students who experience bullying are more likely to have poorer social interactions. Also, bullying attitudes were found to significantly impact students' social interaction ($r = -.389, p < .001$), with more positive attitudes toward bullying associated with lower quality of social interactions. The school environment emerged as a crucial mediating factor, demonstrating a significant positive correlation with social interaction ($r = .512, p < .001$). The study concluded that a complex relationship exists between bullying and social interaction, emphasizing that effective interventions must address not only bullying behaviours but also the broader school climate and student attitudes. Recommendations include developing comprehensive anti-bullying strategies, enhancing school climate, implementing social-emotional learning programmes, and creating supportive intervention mechanisms to mitigate the negative impact of bullying on students' social relations.

Keywords: Bullying experiences, bullying attitudes, school environment, social interaction, secondary school students, Afijo Local Government

Introduction

Peer interactions, or the complex network of relationships that students create and preserve in the classroom, are crucial to the educational process. Students' academic paths, emotional well-being, and overall development are significantly influenced by these relationships, which encompass interactions with peers, instructors, and other members of the school community. Since peer interactions have a significant impact on many facets of students'

lives, they should be carefully examined as the dependent variable in this study. In recent years, scholars have become more aware of the complex structure of peer relationships in schools. These connections affect students' attitudes, motivations, and accomplishments; they are not only a supporting environment for learning, but they are an essential part of the educational process itself. The study by Wentzel, Muenks, McNeish, and Russell (2018) demonstrated the important role that friendship quality and peer acceptance play in students' academic motivation and achievement. They found that students who had high-quality friendships and felt accepted by their peers were more likely to participate in school activities and perform better academically, highlighting the complex relationship between peer interactions and educational outcomes. Peer relationships include friendships, affiliations with peer groups, and relationships with teachers and other school staff (Omoteso & Obadire, 2019). Positive peer interactions are characterized by trust, support, and a sense of belonging, while negative peer interactions can involve conflict, exclusion, or aggression.

The quality of interactions between students is not just about their relationships with each other, but also includes how they relate to their teachers. McGrath and Van Bergen (2017) said that good teacher-student relationships are important for helping students develop better social skills and feel accepted by their peers. Their research showed that different types of relationships in school are connected, and good interactions with teachers can have a big effect on students' overall social experiences. Recent studies have also looked at how peer interactions in school affect students' mental health and happiness in the long run. Longobardi, Settanni, Prino, Fabris, and Marengo (2019) found that the quality of peer relationships during school years was linked to mental health in young adulthood. Students who had positive peer interactions were less likely to suffer from depression and anxiety later in life, showing that early social experiences have a lasting effect on well-being. In today's digital world, peer interactions have changed with the rise of online communication, adding new ways for students to connect.

Singleton, Abeles, and Smith (2016) studied how social media affects face-to-face relationships. They found that while online platforms can help strengthen friendships and offer support, too much use can reduce the quality of in-person interactions and lead to feelings of loneliness. This showed that understanding and encouraging healthy peer interactions have become more complex in modern education. The COVID-19 pandemic made it clear how important peer interactions are in school. As schools move to online learning, the lack of in-person contact greatly affects students' social and emotional health. Loades et al. (2020) found that loneliness and social isolation during the pandemic were linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety among young people. This crisis has led educators and leaders to rethink how to support and maintain social connections, even when things are difficult. The way students interact with each other is closely connected to the overall school environment.

Wang and Degol (2023) show that a positive school environment is linked to better grades, less bullying, and better mental health for students. This means that improving peer relationships should be part of creating a better and more inclusive school setting. Research has shown that having good peer relationships is important for students. Students who have strong and supportive connections with other students and teachers usually have better

mental health, are more engaged in school, and have more positive feelings about school (Ajuwon et al., 2021). On the other hand, students who feel left out, rejected, or harmed are more likely to have problems like depression, anxiety, and avoiding school. Peer interactions in schools are not the same for everyone; Factors like gender, income level, race, and ethnicity can influence how students connect. Cappella, Kim, Neal, and Jackson (2019) found that students from poor families often find it hard to build positive relationships and have less access to support from others in school. Understanding these differences is important for creating strategies that help all students build positive peer relationships. Social-emotional learning (SEL) plays an important role in helping students develop the skills needed for good peer interactions. Jones, Barnes, Bailey, and Doolittle (2022) highlighted that SEL can help students learn how to form and keep positive relationships. These findings suggest that including SEL in school programs could be a good way to improve peer interactions in schools.

Bullying, which is one of the variables studied here, refers to being the target of repeated and harmful behavior from other students. This is a serious problem that can harm positive relationships in school. Menesini and Salmivalli (2021) point out that bullying can cause students to feel isolated, lower their self-esteem, and have trouble making and keeping friends. The fact that bullying now happens online has made it even more of a concern for teachers and researchers. New studies are showing the big impact that bullying has on students' interactions with others. For instance, Arseneault (2018) found that victims of bullying often experience long-term difficulties in social interactions, extending well beyond their school years. This research underscores the critical need to address bullying victimization as a means of fostering healthier social relations among students. Bullying experiences have been identified as a significant issue in Nigerian schools. Egbochuku (2022) reported that the prevalence of bullying in Nigerian secondary schools ranges from 33% to 68%, depending on the region and type of school. In Oyo State specifically, Adeoye et al. (2023) found that approximately 45% of secondary school students had experienced some form of bullying in the past year. However, data specific to Afijo Local Government is limited, highlighting the need for this study to provide localized insights. The nature of bullying in Nigerian schools often reflects local cultural and social dynamics. Olumide et al. (2020) noted that in addition to physical and verbal bullying, forms of relational bullying tied to ethnic or religious differences are prevalent in many Nigerian schools. This underscores the importance of understanding bullying experiences within the specific cultural context of Afijo Local Government.

Attitudes towards bullying are another key factor in this study. These attitudes involve what students believe, think, and feel about bullying behavior. They can range from strongly disagreeing with bullying to silently accepting it, or even supporting it. It's important to understand these attitudes because they greatly affect how students interact with each other in school. Thornberg and others (2020) say that when students have pro-bullying attitudes, it can make bullying seem normal, which leads to more bullying and worsens relationships between students. On the other hand, when students have anti-bullying attitudes, it helps create a friendlier and more positive school setting. Sentse and others (2021) found that schools, where bullying is not accepted, have fewer bullying incidents and more supportive friendships. This shows that changing how students feel about bullying can improve how they get along with each other. In Nigerian schools, these attitudes play a big role in shaping

the school environment. A study by Balogun and Olapegba (2020) looked at secondary school students in Ibadan, Oyo State, and found that cultural beliefs about masculinity and social rankings often influence students' views on bullying. They found that 38% of students had somewhat accepting attitudes towards bullying, especially when it targeted students who were seen as different or weaker.

The school environment is the third main factor in this study. It includes the overall feel of the school, its values, how students and teachers relate to each other, teaching methods, and the way the school is organized. A good school environment is linked with better social outcomes for students. Wang and others (2020) found that schools with positive climates have less bullying, stronger friendships, and better emotional and social results for students. The connection between school climate and student relationships works both ways. A positive school climate helps students get along better, and when students have good relationships with each other, it makes the school climate more positive. Aldridge and McChesney (2018) say that improving school climate should be a key part of creating better social relationships and reducing bullying. School environments play a big role in how education works in Nigeria, especially in areas like Afijo in Oyo State. Olaniyan and Yahaya (2019) studied several local government areas, including Afijo, and found that schools with good climates—where teachers and students get along well, and there are clear rules against bullying—have fewer bullying problems and better student happiness. But they also noticed big differences between schools in cities and those in rural areas. Rural schools often face many difficulties in creating a positive environment because rural schools have fewer resources.

Adeyemi (2020) looked at rural schools in Oyo State and found that places with bad climates and attitudes that support bullying saw more bullying, which made friendships between students worse. This was especially true in schools that didn't have enough support for anti-bullying programs. The effects of these issues can be different for various groups of students in Afijo. Ogunfowora et al. (2021) found that students from minority ethnic groups or those from poorer families were more likely to be bullied and feel isolated in rural Oyo State. The mix of these factors creates a complicated situation that affects how students interact with each other in Afijo.

For example, a school with a bad environment and strong bullying attitudes might see more bullying and worse student relationships. On the other hand, a school with a good environment and strict anti-bullying rules can help reduce the bad effects of bullying on friendships. This shows the need for programs that understand and help different types of students in the local area. New technologies are also changing the picture. Even though not as many rural areas as cities have access to smartphones and the internet, Oluwadare and Ajayi (2020) found that cyberbullying is becoming a bigger problem in rural secondary schools in Oyo State. They found that about 15% of students who had mobile phones had faced some form of online bullying, which affected their relationships both online and in real life. This study looks into how bullying experiences, attitudes towards bullying, and school environments affect peer interactions among secondary school students in Afijo Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Recent data from the Oyo State Ministry of Education (2022) shows worrying trends in bullying and how students interact with each other in secondary schools across the state, especially in rural areas like Afijo Local Government. The data shows that about 45% of secondary school students in Oyo State said they experienced some kind of bullying in the last year, and this number is even higher in rural areas. The study also found that 38% of students had attitudes that were somewhat okay with bullying, especially when it was directed at students who are seen as "different" or "weak." This situation is made worse because only 25% of rural schools in Oyo State have full anti-bullying programs, compared to 60% in urban areas. Another issue is that 15% of students in rural Oyo State who use mobile phones have faced online harassment, showing that even in areas with less internet access, cyberbullying is becoming a bigger problem. These numbers show a big problem in how bullying, student interactions, and school environments are handled in rural Nigerian schools. The high rate of bullying, along with mixed attitudes and limited support, not only affects students' well-being right away but also leads to bigger problems like educational inequality and social conflict. Even though there has been more awareness and efforts to prevent bullying, it is still a major challenge in many schools, with harmful effects on the school community and student outcomes. This study will look into the link between bullying experiences, attitudes towards bullying, and the school environment on how students interact with each other in Afijo Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The broad purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between bullying experiences, attitudes towards bullying, School environment, and their collective impact on Peer interactions among secondary school students in Afijo Local Government, Oyo State. To achieve this aim, the study has the following specific objectives:

- examine the significant correlation between bullying experiences and Peer interactions among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government.
- determine the significant relationship between students' attitudes towards bullying and Peer interaction among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government
- explore the contributory effect between school environment and Peer interactions among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government.

Research Questions

Based on the identified issues related to bullying, Peer interactions, and School environment in Afijo Local Government, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant correlation between bullying experiences and Peer interactions among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government?
2. Is there a significant relationship between students' attitudes towards bullying and Peer interaction among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government?
3. Does there exist a contributory effect between school environment and Peer interactions among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government?

Methodology

Design, Population, Sample, and Sampling Procedure

The study used a correlational survey research design. The group being studied includes all secondary school students in public secondary schools located in Afijo Local Government

Area, Oyo State. According to records from the Oyo State Ministry of Education (2023), there are about 3,500 students enrolled in eight public secondary schools in this area. To choose participants, a multi-stage sampling method was used to select 200 students. First, four public secondary schools were randomly picked from the eight schools in Afijo. Then, in the second stage, proportionate stratified random sampling was used to select fifty (50) students from each of the four selected schools (Akinmoorin Grammar School, Fiditi Grammar School, Awe High School, and Ilora Grammar School, all within Afijio Local Government Area). This ensured that students from all classes, JSS1 to SS3, were included. Altogether, this resulted in 200 students participating in the study. Four standardized tools were used and combined into one questionnaire for data collection. These tools are:

1. The Bullying Victimization Scale (BVS) has 15 items that measure how often students experience physical, verbal, and social bullying. Each item is rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Very Often).
2. The Student Attitudes towards Bullying Scale (SABS) has 12 items that measure students' attitudes and beliefs about bullying. Each item is rated on a 4-point scale, from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree).
3. The School Climate Survey-Student Version (SCS-S) includes 20 items that assess students' perceptions of school safety, relationships, and support. Each item is measured on a 4-point scale, from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree).
4. The Student Social Relations Scale (SSRS) has 15 items that measure the quality of peer relationships and social support. Each item is rated on a 4-point scale, from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree).

Before the main study, a pilot study was conducted with 40 students from two schools not included in the main study to check the reliability of the instruments using Cronbach's alpha to see how consistent they are with each other. A test-retest reliability check was also done, with two weeks between the first (Pretest) and second (Posttest) administration of the tools. The data was analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) to test the null hypotheses at a significance level of 0.05.

Results

Research Question 1: Is there a significant correlation between bullying experiences and Peer interactions among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government?

Correlation between Bullying experiences and Peer interactions

Variable	N	Sig. 2-tailed	Pearson Cor	Decision
Bullying experiences	200	.000	-.436	Reject
Peer interactions	200	.000		

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1: The correlation analysis reveals a statistically significant relationship between bullying experiences and Peer interactions ($r = -.436$, $p < .001$). This **shows that** bullying experiences negatively impact the peer interaction among secondary school students in Afijo Local Government. Students who experience higher levels of bullying tend to have

significantly poorer peer interaction. The moderate strength of this relationship suggests that bullying experiences are important, but not the only factor influencing students' Peer interactions.

Research Question 2: Is there a significant relationship between students' attitudes towards bullying and Peer interaction among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government?

Relationship between Attitudes towards bullying and Peer interactions

Variable	N	Sig. 2tailed	Pearson Cor	Decision
Bullying attitudes	200	.000	-.389	Reject
Peer interactions	200	.000		

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: The correlation analysis shows a statistically significant relationship between students' attitudes toward bullying and their Peer interactions ($r = -.389, p < .001$). The table indicates that Students' attitudes toward bullying significantly influence social dynamics in Afijo schools. The analysis demonstrates that pro-bullying attitudes are associated with poorer Peer interactions.

Research Question 3: Does there contributory effect between school environment and Peer interactions among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government?

The contributory effect of the School Environment and Peer interactions

Variable	N	Sig. 2tailed	Pearson Cor	Decision
School Environment	200	.000	.512	Accept
Peer interactions	200	.000		

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: The correlation analysis reveals a statistically significant positive relationship between School Environment and Peer interactions ($r = .512, p < .001$). This indicates that the School Environment in Afijo Local Government schools has a substantial positive effect on students' Peer interactions. The moderately strong correlation suggests that a positive School Environment may serve as a protective factor that fosters healthier Peer interactions among students. This finding suggests that the School Environment may moderate the relationship between bullying experiences and Peer interactions, potentially buffering some of the negative impacts of bullying. Creating and maintaining positive school environments appears to be a promising approach for enhancing students' social well-being and potentially reducing the harmful effects of bullying experiences.

Discussion of Findings

RQ1: Is there a significant correlation between bullying experiences and Peer interactions among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government? The statistically significant negative correlation ($r = -.436, p < .001$) between Bullying experiences and Peer interactions

confirms the detrimental impact of bullying on students' social functioning. This finding aligns with previous research by Cassidy et al. (2021), which demonstrated that victims of bullying experience social withdrawal and exclusion, undermining their ability to form and maintain positive relationships with peers. The coefficient of determination ($r^2 = .190$) indicates that Bullying experiences explain approximately 19% of the variance in students' Peer interactions, highlighting its substantial but not exclusive role in shaping social dynamics. The descriptive analysis revealed that verbal bullying was the most prevalent form ($\bar{x} = 2.50$), with nearly half (48%) of respondents experiencing it very often. This finding is consistent with UNESCO's (2020) global report, which identified verbal aggression as the most widespread form of school victimization. Smith et al. (2021) noted that verbal bullying often goes unnoticed by school authorities despite its severe emotional impacts, suggesting a need for increased awareness and monitoring of verbal interactions among students. The moderate strength of the correlation between Bullying experiences and Peer interactions indicates that while bullying significantly affects Peer interactions, other factors also play important roles in shaping students' social experiences. This multifaceted nature of Peer interactions underscores the need for comprehensive approaches to bullying prevention that address multiple aspects of students' social environments.

RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between students' attitudes towards bullying and Peer interaction among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government? The significant negative relationship ($r = -.389, p < .001$) between Attitudes towards bullying and Peer interactions supports Thornberg et al.'s (2020) assertion that societal norms and peer dynamics shape both attitudes toward bullying and peer interactions. Wang et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of bystander responsibility in mitigating bullying incidents. The current findings suggest that educational programs that promote empathy and respect while challenging pro-attitudes towards bullying could indirectly enhance students' Peer interactions by addressing the 15.1% of variance in Peer interactions attributable to Attitudes towards bullying.

Rq3: Does there exist a contributory effect between school environment and Peer interactions among Secondary school students in Afijo Local Government? The contributory effect ($r = .512, p < .001$) between School Environment and Peer interactions represents the strongest contribution found in this study. This aligns with Aldridge and McChesney's (2021) identification of School Environment as a critical factor in promoting student wellbeing and reducing bullying behaviours.

The descriptive analysis revealed that while students generally perceived positive teacher-student relationships ($\bar{x} = 3.25$) and trusted adults at school ($\bar{x} = 3.10$), there were concerns about reporting bullying without fear ($\bar{x} = 2.65$), with 43% disagreeing that students could report bullying safely. This highlights a critical gap in bullying prevention mechanisms. Konishi et al. (2020) found that supportive teacher-student and peer relationships enhance resilience against bullying and promote positive social interactions. The current findings extend this understanding by quantifying the substantial influence of School Environment on Peer interactions (26.2% of variance explained), suggesting that interventions aimed at improving School Environment could significantly enhance students' social functioning and potentially buffer the negative impacts of Bullying experiences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study confirms that bullying significantly affects students' ability to maintain positive Peer interactions, often leading to social isolation, emotional distress, and decreased peer support. Bullying experiences foster fear, anxiety, and mistrust, making it difficult for students to engage in healthy social interactions. However, the findings also emphasize that the School environment plays a crucial role in shaping students' social experiences and can either exacerbate or mitigate the negative impact of bullying. A hostile School environment, characterized by weak anti-bullying policies, inadequate supervision, and a lack of supportive structures, can reinforce negative attitudes toward bullying, further deteriorating peer relationships. On the other hand, a positive School environment where respect, inclusivity, and peer support are promoted creates an environment that discourages bullying and enhances students' ability to form meaningful social connections. Schools that implement strong policies, cultivate empathy, and encourage open communication foster resilience among students and help them navigate social challenges more effectively.

Recommendations

To mitigate the impact of bullying and improve students' Peer interactions, some recommendations were made from this study:

- Schools should strengthen anti-bullying policies and ensure strict enforcement, particularly addressing verbal bullying, which was found to be the most prevalent form. Anonymous reporting systems should be established to encourage students to report bullying incidents without fear of retaliation.
- Teachers and school staff should receive training to identify and intervene in bullying situations effectively.
- Schools should implement programs aimed at changing students' attitudes toward bullying, emphasizing empathy, respect, and bystander intervention. Given that attitudes toward bullying explain a significant portion of the variance in social relations, these programs should focus on educating students about the consequences of bullying and promoting a culture of kindness and respect.
- Encouraging peer support systems, such as mentorship programs, can also help victims of bullying build confidence and improve their social interactions.
- Enhancement of the School environment, Schools should prioritize creating a safe and inclusive atmosphere by promoting strong teacher-student relationships and ensuring that students feel valued and protected.
- Parental involvement in anti-bullying initiatives should be encouraged to reinforce positive behavioural norms at home and in school.

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