

Prevalence and Academic Impact of Bullying in Senior High Schools: Evidence from the Sefwi Juaboso District in the Western North Region of Ghana

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Abstract: *This study investigates the prevalence, forms, and academic consequences of bullying at Sefwi Juaboso Senior High School in Ghana. Using a mixed-methods approach involving 120 students and six teachers, the study reveals that 51.7% of students experienced or witnessed bullying, with verbal and physical-verbal bullying being most common. Bullying occurred frequently—often daily—and affected students' emotional well-being and academic performance, particularly through absenteeism, classroom disengagement, and subject-specific failure. First-year and male students were especially vulnerable. Theoretical frameworks such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model provided insight into the psychosocial and institutional dimensions of bullying. The study emphasizes the absence of cyberbullying due to digital exclusion in rural areas and calls for systemic interventions including teacher training, counselling services, and anti-bullying policy frameworks. These findings contribute to the understanding of school bullying in rural African contexts and support context-sensitive strategies for school improvement.*

Keywords: School bullying, Academic performance, Rural education, Ghana, Psychosocial safety, Anti-bullying strategies

INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a persistent challenge in educational institutions worldwide, and its psychological and academic consequences are well-documented. Defined as repetitive aggressive behavior characterized by a power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim, bullying manifests in physical, verbal, social, or psychological forms, creating a hostile school environment that hinders learning and personal development. Although global research has explored this phenomenon extensively, localized and context-sensitive investigations in rural African settings remain limited (Adu et al., 2024).

Understanding the mechanisms through which bullying influences academic performance requires a nuanced appreciation of multiple theoretical frameworks that span psychology, sociology, and educational science. These theories provide a structured way of interpreting student behavior, the school environment, and the outcomes of peer interactions, especially in settings where bullying is prevalent.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the perpetuation of bullying behaviors in educational settings. According to this theory, individuals learn through observation, imitation, and modeling. In school environments where bullying is unchecked or inadvertently reinforced through peer acceptance or staff inaction, students are more likely to imitate aggressive behavior (Zhang & Davidova, 2024). This modeling effect contributes to a cyclical culture of aggression in which both perpetrators and bystanders learn to normalize hostile conduct. In such contexts, bullying is not merely a deviant act but a learned and socially reinforced behavior. The empirical evidence from Ghana supports this view. In many rural schools, including those in the Western North Region, the lack of systematic disciplinary enforcement creates conditions conducive to behavioral modeling of aggression (Adu et al., 2024). Students witnessing bullying often internalize these behaviors as legitimate methods for asserting dominance or managing social tensions, thereby perpetuating cycles of victimization and retaliation.

Maslow's motivational theory, especially its emphasis on the foundational need for safety, also provides a critical lens through which the academic consequences of bullying can be understood. The theory posits that cognitive engagement in learning becomes possible only after physiological and psychological needs—such as safety, belonging, and esteem—are satisfied. In schools where bullying is rampant, students' sense of safety is compromised, diverting cognitive resources away from academic tasks and toward self-preservation (Carney, Jacob, & Hazler, 2011). Multiple studies show that bullied students frequently report anxiety, hypervigilance, and social withdrawal—all of which are symptoms of unmet safety and belonging needs (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). In such environments, educational engagement deteriorates as students avoid school, disengage from class participation, or experience concentration deficits due to stress-induced emotional dysregulation.

Erikson's framework, particularly the "Identity vs. Role Confusion" stage relevant to adolescence, provides an additional layer of interpretation. During this developmental period, peer acceptance and social validation are central to identity formation. Bullying, which often targets students for their appearance, socio-economic status, or perceived differences, can disrupt this critical developmental task (Mensah et al., 2021). Victimized students may develop feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth, or identity confusion that persist into adulthood. Research also shows that such identity-related disruptions can impact academic orientation. Students who internalize negative peer messages may disengage from scholastic pursuits, viewing themselves as unworthy or incapable of academic success. Erikson's model thus elucidates how bullying is not merely a behavioral issue but a psychosocial crisis with long-term implications for self-concept and motivation.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes the interplay of multiple environmental systems—ranging from the family and school to broader socio-cultural contexts—that shape individual behavior. This framework is particularly useful in explaining why bullying behaviors vary in intensity and impact across different schools and communities. For instance, in rural Ghana, structural limitations such as high student-to-teacher ratios, lack of trained counselors, and limited community involvement contribute to weak protective microsystems and inadequate mesosystem coordination (Boswell, 2016). In such scenarios, students may face bullying both in school and in other

community settings without access to supportive interventions, thereby reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and compounding the academic consequences of victimization.

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) offers a micro-sociological perspective on bullying by focusing on how meanings and social roles are negotiated through interpersonal interactions. According to SI, bullying becomes embedded in the social fabric of a school when students collectively assign value to dominance and devalue vulnerability (Auguste et al., 2014). Through repeated interactions, roles such as “bully,” “victim,” and “bystander” become internalized, and the school environment adapts to reinforce these roles through norms, language, and group dynamics. This perspective is crucial in understanding why interventions that focus solely on punitive measures often fail. Unless the underlying social meanings attached to bullying are disrupted—through peer education, empathy-building, and leadership modeling—behavioral patterns may persist despite formal sanctions.

The empirical literature on bullying in Ghanaian Senior High Schools (SHSs) reveals widespread prevalence and substantial academic and psychological consequences. Recent studies have gone beyond documenting the existence of bullying to quantify its impact and identify mitigating factors, such as gender, school leadership, and teacher involvement.

Bullying is alarmingly common in Ghanaian schools. A national study conducted by Adu et al. (2024) documented verbal, physical, and psychological bullying across various regions, with especially high incidences in rural districts like Sefwi Juaboso. The study emphasized that verbal bullying, including name-calling, mockery, and threats, was the most frequent form reported, followed by physical aggression. Similarly, Kibriya et al. (2017) found that 40% of students in sampled Ghanaian SHSs reported experiencing bullying on a regular basis. The data also highlighted that students in lower academic years were more likely to be targeted, supporting the notion that social hierarchy within schools influences victimization patterns.

The academic effects of bullying are well documented. Kibriya et al. (2017) employed propensity score matching and found that students who reported being bullied performed 0.22 standard deviations lower on standardized math tests compared to their non-bullied peers. This quantitative impact demonstrates the seriousness of bullying as a barrier to academic achievement. Moreover, Riffle et al. (2021) demonstrated a negative correlation between various forms of bullying involvement—victimization, perpetration, and defending—and academic performance. Girls, in particular, showed stronger declines in grade point averages when subjected to emotional and social bullying, suggesting a gendered sensitivity to certain types of peer aggression.

Gender plays a crucial role in the form and impact of bullying. In Ghana, male students are often subjected to physical aggression and ridicule but are less likely to report these experiences due to cultural expectations of masculinity (Mensah et al., 2021). Female students, on the other hand, are more frequently victims of relational and emotional bullying, which correlates strongly with school avoidance and academic withdrawal (Riffle et al., 2021). The role of teachers—especially female teachers—has also been highlighted as a potential mitigating factor. Kibriya et al. (2017) noted that classrooms with female teachers showed significantly lower academic penalties associated with bullying. The authors attributed this to female teachers’ higher relational sensitivity and inclusive management styles, which may foster safer classroom environments.

The culture of bullying does not end at the secondary level. Mensah et al. (2021) documented high incidences of verbal harassment and psychological intimidation at a Ghanaian technical university. This continuity of aggression from SHS to tertiary institutions suggests that the failure to address

bullying early can embed it into the broader culture of educational institutions. The implications are profound: without targeted interventions, bullying may evolve into workplace harassment, peer discrimination, and institutionalized inequality. Therefore, the school becomes not just a site of learning but also a breeding ground for long-term behavioral patterns with societal ramifications.

Empirical evidence points to distinct challenges in rural schools. Adu et al. (2024) reported that under-resourced rural schools often lack basic psychosocial support systems, making it difficult for victims to seek help or for administrators to enforce disciplinary actions. Teacher-student ratios are high, counselors are absent, and community awareness is low. These contextual factors compound the negative effects of bullying, making rural students doubly disadvantaged—by both aggression and institutional neglect.

The integration of psychological and sociological theories with empirical evidence reveals that bullying in Ghanaian high schools is not only prevalent but deeply embedded in educational and social systems. The theoretical frameworks of Bandura, Maslow, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner, and others provide comprehensive tools for analyzing how individual, social, and institutional dynamics interact to perpetuate bullying and its academic consequences. Empirical research confirms that the effects of bullying are profound, gendered, and exacerbated by rural underdevelopment. These findings underscore the need for a multidimensional intervention approach that includes teacher training, peer education, community involvement, and systemic policy reforms. Only by addressing the theoretical underpinnings and empirical realities of bullying can Ghanaian schools foster safe, inclusive, and academically supportive environments.

Despite the growing awareness and media attention surrounding bullying in Ghanaian schools, most research has focused on urban or national-level data, with little emphasis on rural districts. Notably, there is limited empirical documentation on the academic impact of bullying in under-resourced rural schools like those in the Sefwi Juaboso District. This gap in localized data restricts the capacity of school administrators and education policymakers to design interventions that are both contextually appropriate and evidence-based (Adu et al., 2024).

Bullying is a pervasive yet under-researched issue in Ghana's rural secondary schools. Although anecdotal accounts suggest its widespread presence, empirical studies confirm that systemic data on its prevalence and academic impact, particularly in districts like Sefwi Juaboso, remain scarce (Mataboge, 2024). This persistent gap in localized research obstructs the formulation of effective and sustainable intervention strategies tailored to the unique socio-cultural dynamics of rural Ghana (Mensah, Nunyomeh, Wireko-Gyebi, & Sabbah, 2021). Students in these underserved communities frequently endure verbal and physical abuse in silence—conditions that significantly erode their academic confidence and classroom participation, compounding broader educational disparities (Kibriya, Xu, & Zhang, 2017).

The study was guided by two main research questions aimed at addressing the existing knowledge gap. First, it investigated the forms of bullying and unhealthy behaviors that were most commonly experienced by Senior High School students in the Sefwi Juaboso District. Second, it examined how bullying and psychologically unsafe school environments had affected the academic performance of these students within the educational setting.

METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, which involved conducting quantitative research first to establish the prevalence and forms of bullying, followed by qualitative inquiry to contextualize and explain the patterns observed. This design allowed for a thorough exploration of the research problem, particularly in a rural Ghanaian Senior High School setting where numerical data alone may fail to capture emotional and psychosocial complexities.

Mixed-methods approaches have proven particularly effective in capturing both the scale and depth of educational issues in African contexts, such as student well-being and teacher interventions (Dampson, 2021). By beginning with structured surveys and following up with narrative interviews, this sequential design ensured that statistical findings were grounded in the lived experiences of students and teachers. As Kandiero (2022) notes, explanatory sequential mixed methods are especially useful in unpacking multifaceted issues because they allow for an integrated interpretation of both datasets.

Moreover, mixed-methods designs are increasingly adopted in Ghanaian education research because they reflect the complex realities of schools and offer pragmatic insights for intervention (Arthur, Boampong, & Dare, 2022). This methodological strategy was therefore essential to understanding not just what forms of bullying existed, but how they affected students' academic and emotional well-being in the Sefwi Juaboso District.

The study was conducted at Sefwi Juaboso Senior High School (SHS), located in the Juaboso District of the Western North Region of Ghana. This district is predominantly rural and faces significant infrastructural and educational constraints. Many rural schools in Ghana experience shortages of trained teachers, insufficient instructional resources, and inadequate psychosocial support systems, factors which impact both teaching quality and student welfare (Azewara et al., 2021). The school had an enrollment of approximately 1,610 students and 98 teachers during the period of data collection, reflecting a relatively high student-to-teacher ratio that is common in rural educational settings across the country (Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020). The selection of this site was deliberate, given the need to understand bullying in less-urbanised, underserved environments where institutional responses may be limited or absent. In these settings, teacher shortages and limited student support structures often increase students' vulnerability to peer aggression and social isolation (Opoku et al., 2020).

The study employed a stratified random sampling technique to select student participants across three academic levels: SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3. A total of 120 students were sampled, with 40 students selected from each level. This method ensured a balanced representation and enhanced the comparability of responses across the academic cohorts, as it allowed subgroup-specific insights while maintaining randomness in selection (Kodua-Ntim & Fombad, 2020). Gender distribution was also considered to ensure inclusivity in examining the differentiated experiences of bullying among male and female students. Such gender-sensitive stratification is essential in addressing the often unequal impacts of school violence and social marginalisation (Owusu-Cole, 2021). In addition, six teachers were purposively selected based on their specific roles in student counselling, academic mentoring, and disciplinary enforcement, as their insights were expected to yield in-depth qualitative data on students' academic and behavioural changes following bullying experiences (Otoo et al., 2018).

Two primary data collection instruments were utilized: a structured student questionnaire and a semi-structured teacher interview guide. The student questionnaire was composed of 24 items, systematically distributed across four sections: demographic characteristics, types and frequency of bullying, student response and reporting behavior, and perceived academic consequences. This

structure was developed based on established instruments but adapted to the cultural and educational context of Ghanaian senior high schools (Arthur, Boampong, & Dare, 2022). The design emphasized local relevance, with questions framed to reflect specific behavioral patterns and school interactions typical within rural Ghanaian educational institutions (Owusu-Mensah, Dampson, & Apau, 2020).

The teacher interview guide consisted of 15 open-ended questions and follow-up probes targeting detailed narratives about behavioral and academic shifts observed in students who had experienced bullying. Key thematic areas included absenteeism, academic performance, classroom participation, emotional withdrawal, and student-teacher relationships. Semi-structured formats were chosen to allow flexibility in probing complex emotional and contextual issues (Takyi-Bondzie, Asiedu-Addo, & Saah, 2022). Pretesting of both instruments was conducted with a sample outside the study population to refine clarity, sensitivity, and contextual appropriateness, ensuring that all questions resonated with the realities of the target group (Dampson & Apau, 2019).

The collected data from the student questionnaires were quantitatively analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 25). This software enabled the organization and transformation of raw survey data into interpretable statistical outputs. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were employed to establish the prevalence and types of bullying, thereby directly addressing the study's first research question. This form of analysis provided insight into how common bullying was across academic levels and gender groupings (Buondau, Danquah, & Dadzie, 2024).

To complement this, qualitative data from semi-structured teacher interviews were subjected to thematic content analysis. This analytical method entailed carefully transcribing the interviews, reading the transcripts multiple times, coding responses into categories, and identifying recurring themes related to students' emotional responses, learning engagement, and classroom behavior. The use of thematic analysis allowed the researchers to interpret complex, subjective teacher narratives into coherent patterns of meaning (Papalexandropoulou & Watt, 2022). Through this approach, the study could capture the nuanced psychological and academic effects of bullying, which may not be easily quantifiable.

In both phases of analysis, gender and year-group variables were considered to identify patterns and differential impacts. For instance, the quantitative analysis explored whether female students reported more verbal or emotional bullying compared to physical bullying experienced by males. Similarly, thematic patterns in the qualitative data revealed how students' emotional distress often led to classroom disengagement and academic withdrawal.

Moreover, integrating both analytical approaches facilitated data triangulation, enhancing the study's credibility and robustness. Quantitative findings on bullying prevalence were supported by qualitative insights into its behavioral consequences, reinforcing the conclusions drawn. This dual strategy reflects best practices in mixed-methods research within Ghanaian education studies (Moussa & Bans-Akutey, 2023).

The study conformed to internationally accepted ethical standards for educational research involving minors. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of their involvement in the study. The informed consent process ensured that student respondents participated voluntarily, with the added approval of school authorities and, where necessary, guardians (Owusu et al., 2021). Confidentiality and anonymity were prioritized through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage on password-protected devices, aligning with recommendations for

safeguarding sensitive data in educational research involving adolescents (Onumah, Simpson, & Kwarteng, 2021).

Special attention was paid to minimizing psychological distress, particularly during interviews where bullying experiences were disclosed. Students exhibiting signs of emotional trauma were referred to the school's guidance and counselling unit for appropriate follow-up. This approach reflects best practices in conducting sensitive fieldwork in culturally specific contexts like Ghana (Asamoah, 2023). Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, reinforcing the principles of respect for autonomy and non-maleficence that underpin ethical research.

Results

Prevalence and Forms of Bullying

The study established that bullying is a prevalent phenomenon in Sefwi Juaboso Senior High School. Findings from the student questionnaire showed that 62 out of 120 students, accounting for 51.7%, had either experienced or witnessed bullying during the academic year. This aligns with research in Ghana indicating that bullying is widespread in rural senior high schools and often goes unreported (Adu et al., 2024). Bullying was reported to occur mostly in dormitories and classrooms, suggesting that less supervised spaces provide an enabling environment for such behaviors to flourish (Mensah et al., 2024).

The different types of bullying captured in the survey included verbal, physical, and social bullying. Verbal bullying emerged as the most common, with 32 students (26.7%) reporting experiences of insults, name-calling, threats, or mocking. A combined form—where both verbal and physical abuse were present—was reported by 40 students (33.3%). This often involved slapping or pushing coupled with verbal threats or humiliation, reflecting patterns identified in similar Ghanaian studies (Arhin et al., 2019). Social bullying, including exclusion from peer groups or gossip, was experienced by 13 students (10.8%). Notably, no students reported experiencing cyberbullying, possibly due to limited digital access in the rural setting (Mensah et al., 2024).

The frequency of bullying was also noteworthy. More than half of the students (54.2%) indicated that they experienced bullying on a daily basis, while 17.5% reported weekly occurrences. Only 8.3% experienced bullying rarely or as isolated incidents. These statistics reveal a deeply embedded culture of bullying within the school, especially among male students, 58.3% of whom reported being victims compared to 45% of females—a gender-based disparity reported in several studies (Adu et al., 2024).

Teachers interviewed during the qualitative phase confirmed these patterns. A male teacher shared, “Some boys are constantly teased about their family background and even physical appearance. They often react violently, which only makes things worse.” This supports research showing how bullying can become cyclical, with victims retaliating in ways that perpetuate aggression (Arhin et al., 2019).

Students who were considered socially isolated or “different” were especially vulnerable. Those with language barriers, lower socioeconomic status, or distinctive physical features were more frequently targeted. These findings are consistent with literature that notes how students who deviate from perceived social norms are more likely to face bullying (Mensah et al., 2024).

Table 1

Prevalence and Forms of Bullying among SHS Students (N = 120)

Type of Bullying	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Verbal Bullying	32	26.7
Physical + Verbal Bullying	40	33.3
Social Bullying	13	10.8
Cyberbullying	0	0.0
No bullying reported	35	29.2

Note: Respondents could indicate more than one form experienced.

Academic Impact of Bullying

The results demonstrated a strong link between bullying and academic decline. Out of the 62 students who acknowledged being bullied, 47 (75.8%) reported that it negatively affected their academic performance. This supports findings by Kibriya et al. (2020), who noted that bullying disrupts learning concentration and diminishes academic outcomes.

Detailed analysis revealed three main academic effects:

- 28 students (46.7%) associated low performance in specific subjects with the presence of a bully in class.
- 15 students (25%) reported general academic decline, citing emotional withdrawal, poor sleep, and avoidance behaviors.
- 4 students (6.7%) indicated they sometimes avoided school due to anticipated confrontations.

Teacher narratives echoed these concerns. One female teacher noted: “I had a girl who used to perform well, but ever since she started getting mocked in the dormitory, she barely talks or contributes in class.” This aligns with research emphasizing the psychological toll of bullying on classroom engagement and motivation (Mensah et al., 2024).

The impact was particularly severe among first-year students (SHS 1), who were newer to the school and more socially vulnerable. These students often avoided group activities, isolated themselves, and showed poor performance. This mirrors previous findings that younger or newly enrolled students are more susceptible to bullying-related stress (Adu et al., 2024).

Table 2

Academic Impact of Bullying on Victims (N = 62)

Academic Impact Reported	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poor performance in subjects	28	46.7
Overall academic decline	15	25.0
School avoidance	4	6.7
No reported impact	15	21.6

Note: Some respondents reported multiple academic effects.

Thematic analysis from teacher interviews consistently identified six academic consequences of bullying:

1. Reduced class participation

2. Increased absenteeism
3. Lower test scores
4. Fear of group activities
5. Emotional withdrawal
6. Poor time management

Each theme appeared in at least four out of six teacher interviews. These findings reinforce Maslow's theory that psychological safety is foundational for academic success (Owusu, A., Hart, Oliver & Kang, 2011). Without emotional security, students are unable to effectively engage with learning tasks.

The results indicate that bullying not only undermines emotional well-being but also leads to serious academic impairment. The alignment of both quantitative and qualitative data affirms that bullying should not be treated solely as a behavioral issue, but as a significant academic barrier in need of structured institutional responses.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that bullying is a deeply rooted issue at Sefwi Juaboso Senior High School, with more than half of the surveyed students (51.7%) reporting either personal experience or witnessing incidents of bullying. This high prevalence rate is consistent with broader patterns observed in rural Ghanaian schools, where bullying tends to thrive under conditions of weak supervision and limited institutional safeguards (Adu et al., 2024; Mensah et al., 2024). These results reveal not only the extent of the problem but also its normalization within everyday school life, which poses serious challenges for both student welfare and institutional accountability.

Among the different forms of bullying, verbal abuse emerged as the most common, affecting 26.7% of respondents. These forms included mocking, name-calling, threats, and humiliation. Additionally, a substantial proportion of students (33.3%) reported experiencing a combination of verbal and physical bullying, suggesting that aggression in this school often manifests in layered and recurrent ways. These patterns underscore the complexity of peer violence, which is not limited to single acts but often involves a sustained mix of intimidation, ridicule, and physical harm (Arhin et al., 2019).

The frequency of bullying was also alarming. A majority of victims (54.2%) indicated that they were bullied daily, with only a small fraction describing such incidents as rare. This regularity points to an environment in which bullying is not only frequent but also deeply embedded in the school culture. The qualitative interviews with teachers reinforced this interpretation. One teacher described how bullying behaviors, particularly among boys, became cyclical, with victims often retaliating violently, thereby perpetuating further aggression. This finding is in line with earlier research suggesting that continuous exposure to peer hostility may provoke maladaptive coping behaviors, emotional withdrawal, or even counter-aggression (Mensah et al., 2024).

Gender disparities were also evident in the data. Male students reported higher levels of victimization (58.3%) than their female peers (45%). This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that boys in Ghanaian schools often face intense peer pressure and are more frequently targeted through physical or verbally aggressive means (Adu et al., 2024). Such findings challenge assumptions that boys are inherently more resilient to bullying and suggest that their silence may be driven by cultural norms discouraging emotional expression or help-seeking.

Together, these key findings highlight a troubling climate at Sefwi Juaboso SHS, where bullying is frequent, multi-faceted, and often left unaddressed. The gendered patterns and high daily occurrence rates raise serious concerns about the emotional well-being and developmental outcomes of affected students. These insights provide the foundation for further examining the academic and psychosocial consequences of bullying, as well as their theoretical interpretations.

Academic Consequences

The evidence from both the student surveys and teacher interviews points to a clear and troubling relationship between bullying and academic decline among students at Sefwi Juaboso SHS. Students who experienced bullying were significantly more likely to report declines in academic performance, classroom engagement, and school attendance. Out of the 62 students who acknowledged being bullied, over three-quarters (75.8%) indicated that the experience had a negative effect on their studies. These outcomes are not merely statistical observations; they reflect deep-seated disruptions in students' learning environments and psychological readiness to participate fully in school life (Kibriya et al., 2020).

The academic effects reported by students included subject-specific underperformance, particularly in classes where bullies were present, as well as general declines linked to emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and fear of attending school. Nearly half (46.7%) of bullied students stated that their academic difficulties were directly linked to interactions with aggressive peers, suggesting a context in which bullying undermines not only emotional security but also cognitive focus. These findings are mirrored in qualitative data, where teachers repeatedly observed patterns of withdrawal, loss of confidence, and reduced participation among victimized students. One teacher recalled a previously high-achieving girl who began to disengage entirely from class activities after being persistently mocked in the dormitory. The teacher elaborated further, stating: *"One of the students who used to perform well suddenly dropped in all her subjects. She was always quiet and withdrawn. When we probed further, we realized she had been bullied in the dormitory."* This layered observation underscores the persistent and cumulative toll bullying takes on students' emotional and academic resilience (Mensah et al., 2024).

Absenteeism, though reported less frequently in numeric terms, carries significant interpretive weight. Some students (6.7%) admitted to missing school entirely to avoid confrontations with bullies. While the proportion may seem small, the implication is severe: even occasional avoidance of school can disrupt academic continuity and exacerbate feelings of isolation. As one teacher noted, *"Some students give excuses just to avoid class. Later, you find out it's because they are being threatened or mocked by their mates."* This testimony reinforces the hidden emotional burden behind absenteeism and its connection to peer hostility. Moreover, absenteeism often co-occurs with other symptoms, such as poor time management and diminished classroom performance, forming a feedback loop that reinforces disengagement from learning (Mensah et al., 2024).

The effect of bullying was particularly evident among first-year students (SHS 1), who appeared more socially vulnerable and less capable of resisting peer aggression. Teachers noted that these students tended to isolate themselves and were more likely to show academic decline. As relatively new entrants to the school's social structure, they lacked the peer networks and confidence that older students might use to buffer against bullying. This heightened vulnerability among SHS 1 students reinforces findings from earlier studies indicating that junior students in hierarchical school systems are disproportionately targeted and often suffer greater academic harm as a result (Adu et al., 2024).

Further reinforcing these concerns, one teacher remarked, *“You can tell they’ve lost interest. Some students used to top the class but are now at the bottom. Their attitude changed completely after being bullied.”* This observation highlights how sustained exposure to bullying does not merely trigger short-term academic lapses, but can fundamentally alter students’ engagement, motivation, and long-term educational trajectories.

Together, the quantitative and qualitative strands of data converge on a single conclusion: bullying significantly disrupts academic life. It affects not only grades and test scores but also learning behaviors, emotional well-being, and social integration—all of which are essential for academic achievement. The school environment, therefore, cannot be treated merely as a site of instruction but must also be viewed as a social space where safety and respect are prerequisites for learning. The academic consequences of bullying in this rural context affirm the urgent need for targeted interventions that go beyond punitive measures to include counselling support, emotional literacy, and structured peer engagement.

Interpretation Using Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding the effects of bullying at Sefwi Juaboso SHS requires more than just statistical description—it demands interpretation through theoretical lenses that illuminate the psychological and social dynamics underlying student experiences. Several well-established frameworks help explain how bullying disrupts learning, distorts identity development, and becomes embedded in school culture.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs provides a useful starting point. According to Maslow, safety is a foundational requirement for personal growth and academic engagement. When students feel threatened—physically, emotionally, or socially—their ability to focus on learning is significantly diminished (Georgescu, 2024). This is evident in the present study, where bullied students reported fear, emotional withdrawal, and lack of concentration. Without a sense of security, cognitive energy is redirected from educational tasks to self-preservation. This condition was visible in the classroom behavior described by teachers, where formerly active students became disengaged and quiet after prolonged exposure to peer aggression. As one teacher explained, *“We see the signs – students who used to be confident now avoid answering questions or even coming to school.”* This highlights how psychological insecurity compromises academic readiness and suppresses student participation, confirming the centrality of emotional safety in school performance.

Bandura’s Social Learning Theory offers another perspective. This theory emphasizes that individuals learn by observing and imitating behaviors modeled by others, particularly in environments where such behaviors are rewarded or go unpunished. In the case of Sefwi Juaboso SHS, the frequent occurrence of bullying and the lack of visible deterrents may have created a culture in which aggressive behavior is normalized. Students observing bullies act with impunity may come to view hostility as a legitimate way to assert dominance or gain peer approval (Zhang & Davidova, 2024). The study’s findings support this: the cyclical nature of bullying, where victims sometimes retaliate and become aggressors themselves, reflects the modeling process that Bandura describes. In such settings, institutional silence or delayed disciplinary responses can inadvertently reinforce the behaviors they seek to eliminate.

Erikson’s Psychosocial Development Theory, particularly the stage of “identity vs. role confusion,” is also relevant. Adolescents seek social validation and self-definition through peer relationships. Bullying undermines this process by eroding self-esteem and reinforcing negative self-perceptions. In

this study, students who were mocked or excluded struggled with confidence and motivation—hallmarks of disrupted identity development. Teacher interviews revealed that such students often internalized the judgments of their peers, leading to diminished self-worth and withdrawal from group activities. Erikson’s framework helps explain why the academic impact of bullying extends beyond grades—it interferes with the very formation of a student’s self-concept and future aspirations (Mensah et al., 2021).

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory adds a multi-layered understanding of how different environmental systems influence student behavior. The school microsystem, in this rural context, is weakened by overcrowding, understaffing, and a lack of specialized counselling services (Boswell, 2016). These institutional shortcomings reduce the protective structures available to students and limit adult monitoring of peer interactions. Moreover, the mesosystem—comprising relationships between school, family, and community—is often fragmented in rural areas, weakening the network of support students might otherwise rely on. This helps explain why bullying at Sefwi Juaboso SHS is not merely a school problem but a reflection of broader structural and cultural vulnerabilities.

Finally, Symbolic Interactionism (SI) sheds light on how social roles and meanings are constructed through daily interactions. In this framework, labels like “bully,” “victim,” or “bystander” are not just descriptors but roles that students come to inhabit and perform. These roles are reinforced through language, peer group dynamics, and informal school norms (Auguste et al., 2014). For instance, students may come to see silence or laughter during bullying episodes as normal responses, thereby participating in a collective process of meaning-making that legitimizes aggression. The failure to challenge these symbolic roles leads to their institutionalization, making change difficult without targeted efforts to redefine peer expectations and group identities.

Support from Empirical Literature

The findings from the Sefwi Juaboso SHS study are consistent with a growing body of empirical research that documents the widespread nature and academic impact of bullying in Ghanaian educational institutions. Multiple studies corroborate the prevalence of verbal and physical bullying in senior high schools, particularly in rural districts, where institutional oversight and psychosocial support systems are often inadequate. For instance, Adu et al. (2024) reported high rates of bullying across Ghana, identifying rural schools like those in the Western North Region as particularly vulnerable due to weak disciplinary structures and minimal student support services. This national context provides important validation for the patterns observed at Sefwi Juaboso SHS, where verbal aggression and mixed verbal-physical bullying were dominant.

Moreover, the academic consequences identified in this study—ranging from diminished classroom participation to school avoidance—echo the conclusions of earlier empirical work. Kibriya et al. (2017), using quantitative analysis, found that students who had experienced bullying scored significantly lower on standardized mathematics tests compared to non-victimized peers. This supports the current study’s finding that nearly half of the bullied students reported subject-specific performance declines. Similarly, Riffle et al. (2021) established that both male and female students involved in bullying—either as victims or aggressors—demonstrated reduced academic performance over the course of the school year. Such outcomes reinforce the argument that bullying undermines not only emotional well-being but also cognitive functioning and learning retention.

The psychological distress reported in the current study is also well documented in the literature. Victims of bullying often experience anxiety, withdrawal, and poor concentration—factors that

cumulatively erode academic engagement (Mensah et al., 2024). In this context, academic decline should not be interpreted as a mere outcome of distraction or peer conflict but as a deeper manifestation of emotional suffering that impairs motivation and learning capacity. Teacher observations from this study, which highlighted emotional withdrawal and increased absenteeism, are consistent with this literature and affirm that the academic risks linked to bullying extend beyond classroom performance to encompass long-term educational disengagement.

Notably, the study's findings on gender also find strong parallels in existing research. Male students were more frequently targeted through physical forms of bullying, yet cultural norms around masculinity often discouraged them from reporting these experiences (Mensah et al., 2021). This aligns with Riffle et al. (2021), who demonstrated that boys often experience bullying in silence, which may lead to aggressive coping mechanisms or internalized stress. Conversely, girls were more susceptible to relational and emotional bullying, which was more closely linked to academic withdrawal. These gendered experiences reflect broader sociocultural dynamics that shape how bullying is both enacted and internalized in Ghanaian schools.

The continuing pattern of bullying beyond secondary school, as noted by Mensah et al. (2021) in the context of a Ghanaian technical university, further emphasizes the need for early and sustained intervention. The persistence of bullying behaviors into tertiary education highlights how unaddressed aggression in high schools can evolve into more complex forms of peer abuse and institutionalized discrimination. This longitudinal dimension suggests that schools like Sefwi Juaboso SHS are not isolated cases but part of a wider continuum of educational environments where bullying can become entrenched unless actively disrupted.

Taken together, the empirical literature supports and deepens the interpretations of the present study. It affirms that bullying in Ghanaian schools—especially those in rural and underserved areas—is both a widespread and academically damaging phenomenon. The evidence further underscores that gender, institutional resources, and teacher involvement all mediate the intensity and impact of bullying, making targeted and context-specific interventions not only advisable but essential.

Gender-Specific Trends

The study revealed notable gender-based differences in the experiences and reporting of bullying at Sefwi Juaboso SHS. Male students reported a higher prevalence of victimization, with 58.3% indicating they had experienced bullying, compared to 45% of female students. However, this numeric disparity tells only part of the story. The nature of bullying, the social scripts surrounding it, and the coping responses it generates vary significantly between boys and girls, shaped by broader cultural norms and school dynamics.

For male students, bullying often took the form of direct physical or verbal aggression—such as slapping, teasing about appearance, or public humiliation. These acts are frequently normalized within peer groups, especially in settings where toughness and emotional restraint are considered markers of masculinity. As Mensah et al. (2021) observed, cultural expectations of boys to remain stoic under pressure discourage them from acknowledging vulnerability or seeking help. Consequently, male victims are less likely to report their experiences or utilize support systems even when available. This underreporting can lead to unresolved psychological distress and may increase the likelihood of retaliatory behaviors, thereby reinforcing the cycle of aggression (Mensah et al., 2024).

Teachers interviewed in the study confirmed these patterns. Several noted that boys who were regularly teased about their family background or physical features often responded with violence or withdrawal.

These reactions suggest that the social stigma surrounding male victimhood in school environments not only silences boys but also isolates them emotionally, with long-term effects on academic participation and peer relationships.

In contrast, female students were more likely to experience social and emotional forms of bullying. While fewer in number, these cases were characterized by subtle but persistent acts of exclusion, gossip, and verbal mockery. Such forms of relational aggression, though less visible, were equally damaging. They often led to diminished classroom participation, avoidance of group activities, and emotional withdrawal. As highlighted by Riffle et al. (2021), girls tend to be more affected by peer-based emotional attacks, with observable declines in academic performance and self-confidence. This aligns with teacher accounts from the study, which described formerly active female students becoming quiet and withdrawn following episodes of dormitory teasing or isolation. One teacher shared, *“She was a happy student. But ever since the name-calling started, she no longer speaks in class or even plays with friends.”* This vivid example highlights how emotional bullying can break a student’s confidence and reshape her social engagement.

Another teacher added, *“They don’t want to join group work anymore. When we ask, they say the other students tease them or leave them out.”* This observation supports the finding that female students experiencing relational bullying often respond by disengaging from collaborative activities, thereby deepening their isolation and academic vulnerability.

What emerges from these findings is a nuanced portrait of gendered victimization. Boys are often subjected to overt, physically charged bullying that is underreported due to social norms, while girls experience more covert, relational bullying that is equally harmful but harder to detect. Both experiences result in academic and psychological harm, but they demand different forms of intervention. Male students may benefit from safe spaces that allow them to express vulnerability without shame, while female students require mechanisms for early detection of relational bullying and access to peer support networks.

In both cases, the role of teachers—particularly female teachers—remains crucial. Prior research cited in the manuscript shows that female teachers tend to create more inclusive and emotionally responsive classroom environments, which can serve as protective spaces against bullying (Kibriya et al., 2017). This underscores the importance of gender-sensitive teacher training and classroom management practices that address the specific vulnerabilities and needs of both male and female students.

Cyberbullying Absence

One of the notable findings from the study at Sefwi Juaboso Senior High School is the complete absence of reported cyberbullying among the student respondents. Unlike urban educational settings where digital bullying has become increasingly prevalent through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, none of the 120 students surveyed in this rural school indicated having experienced any form of cyberbullying. This finding is both significant and revealing, especially when contextualized within the broader infrastructural limitations that characterize rural Ghanaian schools.

The absence of cyberbullying may be best understood in terms of digital exclusion. As noted in the study results, the school and its surrounding community face infrastructural deficits that include limited access to the internet, unreliable electricity supply, and low ownership of digital devices such as smartphones or tablets. These barriers not only hinder the adoption of digital communication tools but also insulate students from the digital spaces where cyberbullying typically occurs. The literature further supports this interpretation, highlighting that many rural districts in Ghana lack the

technological infrastructure needed for meaningful student engagement in online environments (Mensah et al., 2024; Adu et al., 2024).

This finding holds dual implications. On one hand, the absence of cyberbullying can be viewed as a protective factor within the school's current context. Students are largely shielded from the psychological harms associated with online harassment, such as persistent digital intimidation, body-shaming, and social media exclusion—all of which have been shown to significantly impact adolescent mental health and academic concentration in urban studies. On the other hand, the absence also underscores a digital divide that potentially disadvantages rural students in other critical aspects of education, such as access to online learning resources, digital literacy development, and remote engagement opportunities. This digital gap, while insulating students from one form of bullying, may also contribute to broader educational marginalization.

Furthermore, the absence of cyberbullying does not suggest a safer environment in general. Rather, it reflects a shift in the modes through which aggression is transmitted. In the absence of digital means, peer hostility and social exclusion manifest more intensely through verbal and physical bullying—forms that were dominantly reported in the study. Therefore, the lack of cyberbullying should not be misinterpreted as an indicator of low overall bullying prevalence. Instead, it points to the socio-technological context in which traditional forms of bullying persist unchecked, while digital forms remain latent due to technological barriers (Mensah et al., 2024).

Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

The findings of this study carry far-reaching implications across theoretical, policy, and practical domains. The persistent presence of bullying—particularly verbal and physical-verbal forms—at Sefwi Juaboso Senior High School (SHS), and its demonstrated academic impact, underscore the urgent need for multidimensional interventions. These implications align with broader empirical and theoretical conclusions documented in the literature, and are especially relevant in resource-constrained educational contexts such as rural Ghana.

The study affirms the explanatory power of integrated psychosocial and ecological theories in understanding the dynamics of bullying and its consequences. The use of Bandura's Social Learning Theory demonstrated how peer modeling and institutional inaction create a permissive environment for bullying (Zhang & Davidova, 2024). Simultaneously, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs highlighted that unmet safety needs disrupt learning by inducing emotional withdrawal and anxiety among students (Georgescu, 2024). Moreover, Erikson's theory illustrated the psychosocial disruptions bullying causes during critical periods of identity formation, while Bronfenbrenner's framework explained how weak microsystem protections—such as the absence of school counsellors and high student-teacher ratios—compound the problem (Boswell, 2016; Mensah et al., 2021). The study's alignment with Symbolic Interactionism also emphasizes the need to address bullying as a social meaning-making process, not merely a behavioral issue (Auguste et al., 2014). Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how bullying becomes institutionalized and how it derails educational progress. These theoretical perspectives provide a solid base for designing context-sensitive interventions that recognize the interplay between personal, interpersonal, and structural factors in sustaining school-based aggression.

On a policy level, the findings reinforce the need for school-wide and district-level anti-bullying frameworks in rural Ghana. The high daily frequency of bullying—particularly among first-year and male students—suggests that reactive or informal strategies are inadequate. Current practices in Sefwi

Juaboso SHS appear to rely heavily on student self-regulation and informal teacher mediation, neither of which are sustainable nor evidence-based. As suggested by Adu et al. (2024), formal policy frameworks that institutionalize clear disciplinary actions, reporting systems, and support structures are critical. District-level tracking mechanisms would also allow for better oversight, data aggregation, and intervention targeting. Such policies should be sensitive to gender and age differences, considering the higher vulnerability of newly admitted SHS 1 students and the culturally reinforced silence among male victims.

Additionally, policy interventions must address resource disparities in rural schools. The findings demonstrate that bullying thrives in unsupervised and poorly monitored spaces such as dormitories and classrooms—a pattern exacerbated by high student-to-teacher ratios and the absence of psychosocial professionals like guidance counsellors (Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020; Azewara et al., 2021). Therefore, any comprehensive policy must include budget allocations for hiring school counsellors, training staff, and equipping rural schools with the personnel and systems required for timely bullying intervention.

The findings from this study call for deliberate, multi-tiered practical interventions to mitigate bullying and its academic and psychosocial effects in rural senior high schools such as Sefwi Juaboso SHS. First, teacher capacity-building must be prioritized. The qualitative data revealed that while some teachers recognized behavioral and emotional changes in students, they lacked structured training to address bullying. This highlights the need for in-service training workshops focused on recognizing early signs of victimization, conflict mediation, trauma-informed classroom practices, and responding appropriately to disclosures. These training sessions should be supported by the Ghana Education Service (GES) and aligned with national school health and safety policies (Otoo et al., 2018).

Second, the school's counselling infrastructure must be expanded and professionalized. The current study showed that only a small fraction of victims accessed the guidance and counselling unit, primarily due to its under-resourcing. A strengthened counselling framework should include full-time professionally trained counsellors, regular psychosocial assessments, and confidential reporting mechanisms. Schools can also adopt anonymous feedback tools and safe spaces where students feel comfortable discussing their experiences without fear of judgment or reprisal. Additionally, schools should consider collaboration with NGOs and health professionals to support mental health initiatives and provide short-term psychosocial first aid during crises.

Third, the institutionalization of peer-support systems and socio-emotional learning (SEL) programs is critical. Peer-support groups provide safe spaces for sharing experiences and building solidarity among students. Schools can train selected students as peer mentors or anti-bullying ambassadors, equipping them with listening, conflict-resolution, and referral skills. At the same time, integrating SEL into the school curriculum will help build emotional literacy, empathy, and resilience. Programs such as drama-based conflict resolution, debate clubs on social values, and guided discussions on friendship and identity can be woven into extracurricular activities to reinforce positive social norms (Mensah et al., 2024; Riffle et al., 2021).

Importantly, these practical interventions must be embedded within broader school culture reforms. This includes reviewing school rules and disciplinary codes to explicitly address bullying, promoting inclusive leadership that involves students in decision-making, and monitoring the effectiveness of implemented measures through periodic assessments and student feedback mechanisms. Schools

should also develop crisis response teams that include teachers, counsellors, and senior students trained to manage bullying-related incidents promptly and compassionately.

Finally, engagement with families and local communities is indispensable. Parents should be sensitized about bullying and trained to recognize its warning signs at home. Community durbars, school open days, and parent-teacher forums can serve as platforms for collaborative planning and accountability. When schools, families, and communities work together, they can foster a school environment that affirms dignity, inclusion, and academic excellence.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited in several important ways. First, the data were collected from a single rural senior high school, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other regions or school types across Ghana. Second, the reliance on self-reported data from students may have introduced recall bias or underreporting due to fear or stigma. Although triangulated with teacher interviews, the qualitative sample involved only six teachers, limiting the diversity of perspectives captured. Additionally, the study did not include insights from parents, school administrators, or community leaders, whose views could have enriched the understanding of school-wide bullying dynamics. These limitations suggest the need for broader, multi-source studies to strengthen evidence and policy relevance.

Future studies should adopt a multi-site approach across diverse geographic regions, including both urban and rural senior high schools, to enhance the generalizability of findings. Researchers should incorporate objective academic records alongside self-reported data to improve accuracy in assessing the impact of bullying on performance. Additionally, future inquiries should engage broader stakeholder groups—such as parents, school heads, and community leaders—to provide a holistic view of the bullying ecosystem. Schools and district education offices should institutionalize structured anti-bullying interventions, including early-warning systems, counselling programs, and teacher capacity-building. Regular psychosocial assessments and participatory school climate reviews can also ensure student well-being and accountability. These measures will strengthen the educational and psychosocial resilience of Ghana's school environments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the prevalence, forms, and academic implications of bullying among students at Sefwi Juaboso Senior High School, with a specific focus on rural educational settings in Ghana. Drawing on mixed-methods data from students and teachers, the findings confirm that bullying is both widespread and deeply entrenched in the school's social environment. More than half of the student participants reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, with verbal and physical-verbal types being the most common. The daily frequency of bullying—particularly among first-year and male students—raises concerns about the school's psychosocial climate and the adequacy of existing protective mechanisms.

The research revealed a clear link between bullying and academic decline, manifesting in absenteeism, disengagement, and poor academic performance, especially in core subjects. Theoretical frameworks, including Maslow's hierarchy, Bandura's social learning, Erikson's psychosocial stages, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, all helped to explain how bullying undermines both the emotional safety and academic potential of students. Additionally, Symbolic Interactionism illuminated the role of social norms and meanings in sustaining victim-bully dynamics.

Importantly, the absence of reported cyberbullying, though initially surprising, reflects the digital exclusion prevalent in rural schools—a factor that must be considered in designing anti-bullying interventions. The study underscores the urgent need for practical, school-based solutions including teacher training, expanded counselling services, peer-support systems, and district-wide policy responses. Addressing bullying requires a holistic and sustained effort that aligns theory, evidence, and local context. Without this, the educational experience of vulnerable students will remain compromised, perpetuating inequality in access, participation, and achievement.

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