Practitioners' Corner

Confronting early bullying: The transformative role of Foundation Phase teachers in fostering inclusive and conducive classrooms[1]

Noluvo Rangana, ORCID: 0000-0002-9217-1178, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

Ezekiel Majola, ORCID: 0000-0002-5887-7134, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

Deidre Geduld, ORCID: 0000-0001-6175-0508, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Bullying behaviours often emerge during early childhood yet are frequently minimised or normalised in Foundation Phase classrooms, limiting opportunities for early intervention. Foundation Phase teachers are therefore strategically positioned to identify, address, and prevent bullying during its formative stages. This qualitative study explores the preparedness of Foundation Phase pre-service teachers to respond to bullying during school-based learning in South African primary schools. Guided by a humanising theoretical framework, the study involved 60 third-year pre-service teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Education programme at a South African university. Data were generated through reflective narrative essays and analysed using critical thematic analysis. The findings indicate that bullying manifests in verbal, physical, and relational forms and is shaped by broader socio-economic inequalities, overcrowding, and limited institutional support. The findings inform practical recommendations for classroom practice, teacher education and policy aimed at fostering inclusive and emotionally safe learning environments.

Keywords: bullying, Foundation Phase, humanising pedagogy, reflective narratives

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The prevalence of bullying in South African schools is a significant concern, with rates ranging from 16.5% to 56.6% (Sebata-Govanayi, 2023). Bullying is not just an individual behaviour; it reflects deeper societal inequalities and power dynamics that permeate the educational system. De Wet and Jacobs (2014) postulate that there is a need for research on the topic of bullying within the South African context. In addition, different scholars have noted an increase in the occurrence of bullying in South African schools (Isdale et al., 2017; Zuze et al., 2018) and research shows that bullying prevalence and patterns are strongly associated with socio-economic and contextual factors beyond individual behaviour (Juan et al., 2025). Recent global data indicate that bullying affects a substantial proportion of young people worldwide, with UNESCO reporting that roughly one in three students has experienced bullying in and around school settings (UNESCO, 2024). Furthermore, the 2019 International Student Assessment conducted by Hikmat et al. (2024) found that bullying is most prevalent in Africa, at 47%, reflecting a broader socio-political and economic inequities. In South Africa, the education system mirrors systemic issues, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and marginalisation that manifest early in children's lives through bullying behaviours (Juan et al., 2025).

At the heart of bullying lies a brutal imbalance of power, where cultural norms and social hierarchies shape children's interactions in the classroom. Bullying is not limited to physical altercations but extends to emotional and psychological domination, reinforcing hierarchies that stigmatise the victim and entrench their marginalisation (Andrews et al., 2023). As education scholar Jonathan Jansen has observed in recent commentary on school violence in South Africa, violent and bullying behaviours among learners often reflect broader societal conditions and cannot be resolved by simplistic policy responses alone (Jansen, 2025). Jordaan and Naude (2018) discuss bullying as a form of social pathology, while Freire argues that it is an inherent outcome of a system that normalises violence and suppresses critical consciousness.

The Foundation Phase, where the foundations for social and cognitive development are laid, is particularly critical in either reinforcing or challenging these oppressive structures. Despite the body of research, bullying remains pervasive and requires further research (Juan et al., 2025). The challenge, therefore, extends beyond merely preventing bullying; it requires a critical examination and understanding of its underlying root causes such as power the power imbalances, the societal norms, and the hegemonic forces that shape children's lives. In this context, Foundation Phase teachers must interrogate the very nature of the classroom as a space of learning and reproduction of social relations. The question is no longer whether teachers can prevent bullying, but how they can foster the radical transformation of educational spaces through a critical pedagogy that empowers both students and teachers.

Based on this, through this study we sought to gain a deeper understanding by answering the below research questions:

> How can teachers actively promote a school environment that prevents bullying and transforms the structures that enable it to persist?
>
> How can teachers cultivate classrooms that challenge the normalization of violence while fostering inclusion, social justice, and a culture where respect for diversity and equality is the standard?

Critical pedagogy for bullying prevention: a Freirean framework for transformation

This study is anchored in a humanising theoretical framework informed by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which offers a lens for understanding bullying as a socially produced phenomenon rather than an isolated behavioural problem. Freire's work positions education as a political and ethical practice, one that either reproduces or challenges relations of domination (Freire, 1970). Within this framework, bullying is understood as an expression of unequal power relations that are shaped by broader social, economic, and historical conditions. This perspective enables the study to move beyond individualised explanations of bullying and to interrogate the systemic forces that normalise exclusion, silencing, and harm within early childhood classrooms.

The framework strengthens this study by shaping how teacher preparedness is conceptualised. Rather than viewing Foundation Phase teachers as implementers of behaviour management techniques, critical pedagogy positions them as reflective practitioners and moral agents capable of recognising and disrupting oppressive classroom dynamics. Freire's notion of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) is particularly relevant, as it emphasises the capacity of educators to critically analyse lived realities and to act against injustice (Freire, 1970; Freire & Horton, 1990). In this study, critical consciousness provides a conceptual tool for analysing how pre-service teachers interpret bullying, how they make sense of its causes, and how they imagine their role in responding to it. The framework therefore directly informs the interpretation of the reflective narratives generated by the participants.

Dialogue occupies a central place within this framework and has direct implications for bullying prevention in the Foundation Phase. Freire conceptualises dialogue as a humanising practice through which knowledge is co-constructed and power hierarchies are challenged. Applied to bullying, dialogical engagement allows teachers to move away from punitive responses and instead create spaces where learners reflect on their actions, understand the consequences of harm, and rebuild relationships. In this study, dialogical pedagogy provides an analytical lens for examining how participants propose responses to bullying and whether these responses reinforce control or promote relational accountability and inclusion.

Importantly, the framework also foregrounds the limitations of teacher agency in contexts marked by deep structural inequality. The South African education system continues to reflect historical and socio-economic disparities that shape learners' experiences of violence, marginalisation, and exclusion (Sebata-Govanayi, 2023). By situating bullying within these conditions, the framework enables a more nuanced reading of the data, recognising that teachers' capacities to enact critical pedagogical principles are constrained by overcrowded classrooms, limited psychosocial support, and uneven resource distribution in under-resourced schools (ISS Africa, 2025). This critical positioning prevents the framework from becoming idealistic and instead grounds it within the realities of Foundation Phase schooling.

Finally, the Freirean framework adds value to this study by explicitly linking classroom-level bullying to wider social injustices. Research indicates that children's experiences of bullying are often intertwined with exposure to domestic violence, community violence, and socio-economic

precarity (Shiba & Mokwena, 2023). Viewed through a humanising lens, bullying is understood not only as a pedagogical concern but also as a social justice issue. This positioning enables the study to contribute to the field by illustrating how teacher education, when grounded in critical pedagogy, can support the development of inclusive, equitable, and caring early learning environments. By foregrounding dialogue, reflection, and relational accountability, this framework provides a theoretically coherent basis for examining teacher preparedness to address bullying in developmentally appropriate, contextually responsive, and socially just ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF BULLYING IN FOUNDATION PHASE CLASSROOMS

Bullying is a pervasive issue that often emerges early in children's educational experiences, with incidents reported in primary and early childhood settings (Mawila et al., 2023). The role of teachers in either mitigating or exacerbating these behaviours is critical, yet in South Africa, much of the literature focuses on bullying as criminal conduct (Laas & Boezaart, 2014; Mayeza et al., 2021; Mguye, 2024), neglecting its broader implications for social justice and inclusivity in classrooms. This limited perspective leaves gaps in understanding how Foundation Phase teachers can proactively and comprehensively address bullying.

Juan et al. (2018) define bullying as repeated acts of aggression characterised by power imbalances and deliberate harm; however, such conventional definitions often fail to account for the socio-cultural and systemic conditions that influence bullying behaviours in early childhood classrooms. Shiba and Mokwena (2023) highlight the role of power dynamics in bullying, but these concepts require contextual adaptation to South African classrooms, where children's exposure to domestic and community violence is also mirrored in Foundation Phase classrooms, with learners modelling these aggressive behaviours in their interactions (Mawila et al., 2023). Thus, while bullying is shaped by broader societal conditions such as domestic and community violence, research also emphasises the role of school-level factors such as overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher support, and resource constraints in influencing the frequency and severity of bullying behaviours (Mawila et al., 2023). The prohibition of corporal punishment, without effective alternative disciplinary strategies, further compounds the persistence of bullying (Du Plessis, 2020), reflecting broader systemic issues in South African education. Together, these studies underscore that bullying in early education is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by both external and environmental factors.

Addressing bullying requires more than just focusing on classroom dynamics; it demands systemic change. Overcrowded classrooms, socio-economic disparities, and a lack of teacher training limit the capacity to effectively manage bullying (Sebata-Govanayi, 2023). The focus must be on addressing these structural inequities that underlie bullying behaviours. Sustainable interventions should include systemic reforms such as improved teacher support, resource allocation, and policy alignment.

Theoretical perspectives on bullying offer valuable insights but often fail to critically examine the systemic inequalities that perpetuate bullying, particularly in South African classrooms. While ecological (Klun et al., 2023), sociocultural (Hong et al., 2024), and psychological (Zhao et al., 2024) theories provide useful frameworks for understanding bullying, they often lack the critical lens necessary to interrogate socio-political inequities. Freire's critical pedagogy, however,

offers a transformative approach to bullying, reinterpreting it as a symptom of broader socio-political imbalances. Through Freire's framework, educators can challenge oppressive structures and promote social justice (McLaren & Leonard, 1993), addressing the root causes of bullying.

However, the implementation of Freire's pedagogy requires significant shifts in teacher training. Traditional, compliance-driven pedagogies must be replaced by those that prioritise critical consciousness and teacher agency. Additionally, while international anti-bullying programmes such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) (Konishi et al., 2024) and restorative practices offer useful models, their effectiveness in the South African context remains underexplored. These programmes often assume a level of teacher preparedness and school infrastructure that is lacking in many under-resourced settings.

A key issue exacerbating bullying is the inadequacy of current teacher training programmes. Teachers, particularly those trained during Apartheid, often rely on teacher-centric, compliance-driven methods, which hinder the creation of inclusive, learner-centred classrooms (Joubert & Harrison, 2022). Overcoming these outdated practices is essential for fostering environments where critical dialogue and social justice can flourish, enabling teachers to address bullying effectively.

Integrating Freirean humanising pedagogy with practical, context-sensitive strategies provides a more sustainable approach to bullying prevention. Such an approach requires attention to structural inequalities within schooling contexts including overcrowded classrooms and resource disparities (Spaull, 2013). By framing bullying prevention within a broader commitment to social justice, educators can transform classrooms into spaces where all learners can thrive, and bullying is actively challenged rather than normalised.

METHODOLOGY: CRITICAL DIALOGUES AND TEACHER PREPAREDNESS IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE

This study adopted a qualitative research approach informed by principles of critical pedagogy to explore the preparedness of Foundation Phase pre-service teachers to address behavioural challenges, with particular attention to bullying, during school-based learning. A participatory and dialogical framework guided the study, enabling pre-service teachers to reflect critically on their lived classroom experiences and to interrogate the social and structural conditions shaping learner behaviour. This approach aligns with critical traditions that position participants as active meaning-makers rather than passive subjects of research (Freire & Shor, 1987).

The study involved 60 third-year Foundation Phase pre-service teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Education programme at a South African university. Participants were placed in various primary schools across Nelson Mandela Bay and Uitenhage, including advantaged and disadvantaged communities. This diversity enabled the study to capture variation in classroom contexts and to examine how broader systemic inequalities intersect with behavioural challenges in Foundation Phase classrooms. Data were generated during participants' school-based learning placements, where they engaged directly with everyday classroom practices.

Participants were required to produce reflective narrative essays based on their school-based learning experiences. Each participant identified five behavioural challenges encountered in their classroom contexts, defined these challenges, and proposed possible responses involving relevant school stakeholders, including teachers and school management. This reflective task was designed to encourage critical engagement with practice, enabling participants to move beyond descriptive accounts towards deeper consideration of the relational, institutional, and structural dimensions of classroom behaviour. Reflective narrative writing was selected as a data generation method because it supports dialogical reflection and allows participants to situate their experiences within broader socio-cultural contexts (Freire & Shor, 1987).

Data were analysed using critical thematic analysis. The analysis process followed a systematic and iterative procedure. First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data through repeated reading of the reflective essays to identify initial patterns and points of significance (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Terry et al., 2017). Open coding was then conducted to capture both explicit and latent meanings within the narratives, with particular attention to how behavioural challenges were framed in relation to power, inequality, and institutional practice. Codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes and subthemes, which were refined through ongoing comparison with the data to ensure coherence and analytical depth. Consistent with a critical analytic lens, themes were developed not only to describe experiences but also to interrogate underlying assumptions, systemic constraints, and possibilities for pedagogical transformation (Alhojailan, 2012; Javadi & Zarea, 2016).

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection, ethics number H22-EDU-PGE-020. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with pseudonyms used during analysis and reporting. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. To enhance trustworthiness, reflexivity was embedded throughout the research process, with the researchers remaining attentive to their positionality and influence on data interpretation (Herr & Anderson, 2016). Member checking was employed by sharing emerging themes with participants for verification, thereby strengthening the credibility and authenticity of the findings.

Through this methodological approach, the study sought to illuminate both the behavioural challenges encountered by Foundation Phase pre-service teachers and the broader systemic conditions shaping these experiences. By foregrounding reflective dialogue and critical analysis, the methodology contributes to understanding the transformative potential of teacher education in addressing bullying and fostering inclusive classroom practices within South African schooling contexts.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Teachers' role in addressing bullying: Strategies, challenges, and capacities

Foundation Phase teachers are at the forefront of handling bullying behaviours in classrooms, a responsibility that demands significant emotional, intellectual, and pedagogical engagement. The participants in this study described their efforts to mitigate bullying through strategies such

as fostering inclusive group activities, encouraging empathy, and setting clear expectations for acceptable behaviour. These proactive measures demonstrate a commitment to nurturing environments of mutual respect and collaboration. For instance, one participant remarked,

> Creating group activities where learners must collaborate has helped reduce exclusion and teasing in my classroom.

Such strategies resonate with the ideals of a humanising pedagogy, seeking to create spaces where learners' dignity is affirmed and protected.

Despite these commendable efforts, teachers frequently encounter systemic and structural challenges that severely constrain their capacity to address bullying effectively. Overcrowded classrooms emerged as a significant obstacle, with one teacher lamenting,

> With over 40 learners in my class, it is impossible to monitor everyone's behaviour, let alone address individual concerns.

This reflection underscores the broader inequities plaguing the education system, where resource constraints disproportionately affect schools in disadvantaged areas. Similarly, the lack of professional development opportunities tailored to addressing bullying further entrenches these challenges, leaving teachers ill-equipped to navigate complex classroom dynamics.

These findings expose the inadequacy of a system that places the onus of managing bullying on teachers without providing the requisite structural support. Addressing these gaps requires not only policy interventions aimed at reducing class sizes and enhancing teacher training but also a critical reimagining of the education system's priorities to centre the well-being and development of all learners.

The influence of structural and socio-economic factors on bullying

Bullying in Foundation Phase classrooms cannot be disentangled from the broader socio-economic and structural inequities that characterise South Africa's educational landscape. Participants consistently highlighted how factors such as poverty, exposure to violence, and inadequate school resources exacerbate bullying behaviours. One pre-service teacher observed,

> Learners often mimic what they see at home or in their communities, bringing aggressive behaviours into the classroom.

While another pre-service teacher stated that

> Home environment and background influences the learners' behaviour, if there is violence at home, they bring that behaviour to school.

Another pre-service teacher reflected on structural inequalities stating:

> I have noticed that learners who struggle academically or come from impoverished households sometimes get teased, and in either playtime or other group activities as a teacher I intervene but sometimes with large classes this is difficult to do.

These reflections highlight the reality that bullying is not merely an individual or isolated phenomenon but rather a symptom of deeper societal issues and structural inequalities. Within the learning context, such inequalities are reproduced through everyday peer interactions, positioning bullying as a relational practice shaped by unequal power relations rather than isolated misbehaviour This poignant statement reflects the reality that bullying is not merely an individual or isolated phenomenon but a symptom of deeper societal issues.

Schools located in marginalised communities face chronic under-resourcing, which perpetuates cycles of frustration and neglect among learners. The lack of basic infrastructure, teaching materials, and psychosocial support services creates an environment where bullying thrives, further disadvantaging already vulnerable children. Moreover, systemic inequities in resource allocation deepen the divide between schools in affluent areas and those in underprivileged communities, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and oppression.

This theme challenges the often-simplistic narratives around bullying that focus solely on individual behaviours, urging instead a systemic analysis that foregrounds the structural drivers of inequality. It calls for radical policy reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of socio-economic disparities that infiltrate the classroom, advocating for a redistribution of resources and opportunities that prioritises the most disadvantaged schools.

Towards transformative anti-bullying practices: The role of Freirean pedagogy

The final theme explores the transformative potential of Freirean critical pedagogy in addressing bullying in Foundation Phase classrooms. Central to Freire's vision is the idea of education as a practice of freedom, where teachers and learners co-create knowledge through dialogue and reflection. Participants in this study echoed these principles, with one teacher sharing,

> I encouraged my learners to talk openly about their feelings and understand how their actions affect others. It made a difference in how they relate to one another.

This approach challenges the traditional authoritarian model of teaching, which often reproduces oppressive power dynamics, and instead positions the classroom as a space for critical engagement and mutual empowerment. By fostering critical consciousness among learners, teachers can help them recognise and challenge the societal forces that perpetuate bullying and other forms of injustice. However, adopting such transformative practices requires a paradigm shift in teacher education and support systems. Teachers must be equipped not only with the technical skills to manage classroom behaviour but also with the critical tools to interrogate and dismantle oppressive structures within and beyond the classroom. This necessitates a radical overhaul of teacher training programmes to integrate Freirean principles and a commitment to sustained professional development that prioritises equity and social justice.

The findings indicate that bullying in Foundation Phase classrooms manifests in multiple forms, including verbal bullying (name-calling, teasing, and verbal intimidation), physical bullying (pushing, hitting, and destruction of belongings), and relational bullying (exclusion, isolation,

and manipulation of peer relationships). While verbal and relational bullying were most frequently reported, participants noted that these forms were often normalised and therefore less likely to be addressed by teachers. Importantly, pre-service-teachers linked the prevalence and intensity of bullying behaviours to broader socio-economic conditions, particularly poverty, overcrowded classrooms, and exposure to community violence. Learners from economically marginalised backgrounds were perceived to display heightened emotional dysregulation, which, in turn, contributed to peer conflict and aggressive behaviour. These findings underscore the need for teachers to understand bullying not merely as individual misconduct but as behaviour shaped by external structural and socio-economic influences that directly affect teaching and learning in Foundation Phase classrooms.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex and deeply embedded nature of bullying in Foundation Phase classrooms, demonstrating how such behaviours are shaped by broader socio-cultural and structural inequalities. Participants' reflections indicate that bullying is frequently managed through reactive or behaviourist strategies that prioritise control and compliance rather than relational understanding or prevention. While these responses are often well intentioned, the findings suggest that they are limited in their capacity to address the underlying causes of bullying, particularly in contexts characterised by overcrowded classrooms, constrained resources, and socio-economic vulnerability.

Consistent with South African scholarship, the findings indicate that bullying cannot be understood as an isolated behavioural issue, but must be situated within wider systems of power, inequality, and socialisation. Pre-service teachers' accounts illustrate how classroom interactions often mirror societal hierarchies, with bullying practices reinforcing patterns of exclusion, marginalisation, and silence. These insights support critical perspectives that view schools as sites where broader social relations are reproduced, rather than neutral spaces detached from learners' lived realities.

The findings further resonate with the Freirean theoretical framework underpinning this study, particularly in illuminating how bullying operates through unequal power relations embedded in both classroom practices and wider social structures. Learner-teachers' reflections suggest the development of an emerging critical consciousness, as bullying is increasingly interpreted as a relational and contextual phenomenon rather than an individual behavioural deficit. This interpretive shift aligns with Freire's emphasis on education as a process of humanisation, where educators are called to recognise and challenge dehumanising practices within everyday pedagogical interactions.

From a critical pedagogical perspective, the findings point to tensions between teachers' ethical commitments to care and inclusion and the structural constraints that shape their responses to bullying. While participants articulated a desire for relational and dialogical approaches, their reflections also reveal the limiting effects of systemic pressures, including time constraints, large class sizes, and limited access to psychosocial support. These tensions underscore the importance of situating teacher preparedness for bullying prevention within broader debates about equity, institutional support, and the conditions under which humanising pedagogy can be meaningfully enacted in the Foundation Phase.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen teacher preparedness and support inclusive anti-bullying practices in Foundation Phase contexts.

Implications for Foundation Phase Teachers

Foundation Phase teachers should be supported to adopt proactive, relational approaches to addressing bullying rather than relying predominantly on punitive or reactive strategies. Intentional classroom practices should include the establishment of clear, developmentally appropriate norms that promote respect, empathy, and inclusion. Integrating social and emotional learning into daily routines can support emotional regulation and peer empathy, thereby reducing the likelihood of bullying behaviours. Teachers should also actively monitor peer interactions, particularly subtle forms of exclusion and verbal aggression that are frequently overlooked in the early years. When bullying incidents occur, restorative and dialogical practices can be employed to support learner reflection, accountability, and relationship repair. Effective implementation of these practices requires time, consistency, and reflective engagement, highlighting the importance of manageable class sizes and institutional support.

Implications for teacher education programmes

Teacher education programmes should explicitly prepare pre-service teachers to address bullying within Foundation Phase contexts. This preparation should include the integration of critical pedagogy and reflective practice into coursework, enabling learner-teachers to interrogate issues of power, inequality, and inclusion in classroom interactions. Structured opportunities during school-based learning should allow learner-teachers to observe, document, and critically reflect on behavioural challenges, including bullying. In addition, teacher education programmes should provide practical training in the early identification of bullying behaviours and the application of contextually appropriate intervention strategies. Such preparation can strengthen pre-service teachers' confidence and competence in responding to bullying across diverse school environments.

Implications for schools and school leadership

Schools and school leadership play a critical role in shaping coherent and consistent responses to bullying. School leaders should ensure that anti-bullying policies are clearly communicated, consistently implemented, and aligned with inclusive and restorative approaches. Ongoing professional development should be prioritised to support teachers in relational classroom management and learner wellbeing. In addition, collaboration among teachers, support staff, and school-based support teams should be actively facilitated to address bullying in a holistic and coordinated manner. A school-wide approach can reduce inconsistencies in teacher responses and strengthen learners' sense of safety and belonging.

Implications for policy and system-level support

At a systemic level, education authorities should address structural conditions that undermine effective anti-bullying interventions in Foundation Phase classrooms. This includes reducing overcrowding to enable responsive teacher–learner interactions and increasing access to psychosocial support services, such as school counsellors and social workers, particularly in under-resourced communities. Targeted resources and practical guidance should also be provided to support schools in implementing developmentally appropriate anti-bullying strategies. Policy interventions that prioritise equity and learner wellbeing are essential for creating enabling conditions within which inclusive classroom practices can be sustained.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the phenomenon of bullying in Foundation Phase classrooms, situating it within broader socio-economic and systemic inequities. Through a Freirean lens, it has explored the challenges teachers face in addressing bullying, the socio-structural factors exacerbating these behaviours, and the transformative potential of critical pedagogy in fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. The findings highlight that bullying is not merely a behavioural issue confined to the classroom but a reflection of the wider structural inequalities and power dynamics in society. Teachers, despite their pivotal role in mitigating bullying, often operate within constrained environments characterised by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate training, and insufficient institutional support. These conditions hinder their ability to create safe, nurturing spaces for learners. At the same time, the socio-economic realities faced by learners, including poverty and exposure to community violence, further exacerbate bullying behaviours. These dynamics emphasise the urgent need for systemic reforms that prioritise equity and resource redistribution to support schools and communities in addressing these challenges.

This study underscores the importance of adopting a radical, equity-centred approach to anti-bullying interventions. By integrating Freirean principles into teacher education and classroom practices, educators can foster critical consciousness, empower learners, and challenge the oppressive structures that perpetuate bullying and inequality. Moreover, fostering partnerships between schools and communities is essential to addressing the socio-economic factors that contribute to bullying and creating a holistic support network for learners.

In conclusion, this study calls for a reimagined education system that centres dignity, agency, and justice. It challenges educators, policymakers, and researchers to move beyond surface-level interventions and address the root causes of bullying through systemic transformation. By doing so, education can serve as a powerful tool for social change, ensuring that every learner can thrive in a safe, inclusive, and equitable environment.

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