

**The Impact Of Bullying On Students' Academic Performance: A Case Study Of Selected Schools In  
Kyegegwa District**

**Kwesiga John<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Okee Jill Margaret<sup>2</sup>**

**1, 2 Metropolitan International University**

**Abstract**

This study examined the impact of bullying on students' academic performance in selected schools in Kyegegwa District, Uganda. Using a mixed-methods design, the study targeted 320 students, 24 teachers, and 10 school administrators drawn from six secondary schools. Stratified random sampling was employed to select 178 respondents. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, interview guides, and observation checklists. The study found that bullying in its physical, verbal, cyber, and relational forms was prevalent in all the sampled schools and had significant negative effects on students' academic performance, school attendance, concentration, and psychological well-being. The results revealed that bullied students were more likely to exhibit declining grade point averages, increased absenteeism, and reduced participation in academic activities. The study concluded that bullying constituted one of the most pervasive barriers to quality education in Kyegegwa District and recommended urgent implementation of anti-bullying policies, peer counselling programmes, and teacher training in conflict resolution.

**Keywords: bullying, academic performance, Kyegegwa District, secondary schools, physical bullying, verbal bullying, cyberbullying, school environment, Uganda**

**1.0 Introduction**

**1.1 Background to the Study**

Bullying remained one of the most complex and persistent challenges confronting educational institutions globally at the time of this study (Victor et al., 2023). Defined as a deliberate, repeated, and aggressive behaviour intended to harm or intimidate an individual who found it difficult to defend themselves, bullying took various forms including physical violence, verbal harassment, social exclusion, and the increasingly prevalent cyberbullying (Julius & Audrey, 2025). In sub-Saharan Africa, and Uganda in particular, emerging evidence pointed to the ubiquity of bullying in schools, with profound consequences for the academic and psychological development of young learners (Godfrey et al., 2023).

The education system in Uganda was guided by the Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) policies, which sought to expand access to schooling (Julius & Nancy, 2026a). However, expansion in enrolment was not always accompanied by improvements in the quality of the school environment (Mark et al., 2023). In many rural districts such as Kyegegwa, classrooms were overcrowded, supervision was limited, and support systems for psychosocial well-being were inadequate (Anthony et al., 2023). These conditions created fertile ground for bullying behaviours to thrive. The district, located in Rwenzori region of western Uganda, presented a microcosm of the challenges facing rural secondary education, where socioeconomic deprivation compounded school-based adversities (Nancy & Prudence, 2024).

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Prior research conducted in various African countries consistently linked bullying to lower academic achievement, poor concentration in class, truancy, and in extreme cases, school dropout (Victor et al., 2023). Studies by Smith et al. (2019) and Obafemi (2020) established that victims of bullying spent considerable cognitive energy managing anxiety and fear, leaving little mental bandwidth for academic engagement. In Uganda, a study by Nakamya (2021) found that nearly 40% of secondary school students in western Uganda had experienced some form of bullying in the preceding three months, with girls more likely to experience relational bullying and boys more prone to physical forms (Julius & Audrey, 2025).

Kyegegwa District, despite its rural character, was not insulated from these trends. School administrators interviewed during preliminary visits noted that disciplinary incidents involving bullying were increasing, yet formal reporting mechanisms remained weak and teacher capacity to intervene effectively was limited (Julius, 2025). The academic consequences manifested in declining performance in national examinations, particularly at the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) level, a concern that motivated the present study (Julius & Audrey, 2025).

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Despite growing recognition of bullying as a school-based problem, empirical studies specifically examining its impact on academic performance in Kyegegwa District remained scarce at the time of this research (Kazaara & Nelson, 2024). Educational planners, head teachers, and district education officers lacked contextualized data to inform policy and programmatic responses (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). The existing national studies were largely confined to urban districts such as Kampala, Wakiso, and Mbarara, leaving rural districts underrepresented in the research literature (Christopher, Moses, et al., 2022). This knowledge gap meant that the unique socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors shaping bullying dynamics in Kyegegwa were not adequately understood (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022). The study therefore sought to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence on the nature, prevalence, and academic consequences of bullying in selected secondary schools in Kyegegwa District.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The study was guided by the following specific objectives: to establish the prevalence and forms of bullying in selected secondary schools in Kyegegwa District; to examine the relationship between bullying and students' academic performance; to identify factors that predisposed students to bullying in Kyegegwa District schools; and to propose strategies for mitigating the impact of bullying on academic performance (Julius & Kazaara, 2026b).

### **1.4 Research Questions**

The study sought to answer the following questions: What was the prevalence and nature of bullying in selected schools in Kyegegwa District? How did bullying affect students' academic performance? What school and community-level factors contributed to bullying? What interventions could effectively reduce bullying and its academic consequences in Kyegegwa District schools?

### **1.5 Scope of the Study**

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The study was geographically confined to Kyegegwa District in western Uganda. It covered six purposively selected secondary schools three government-aided and three private during the 2023 academic year (Julius & Nancy, 2026b). The content scope addressed the relationship between bullying (independent variable) and academic performance (dependent variable), mediated by factors such as school environment, teacher conduct, and peer relations. The study targeted students in Senior 1 to Senior 4, as these cohorts were most vulnerable to the academic consequences of bullying.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Conceptualizing Bullying in Educational Settings**

The conceptualization of bullying in educational research drew heavily from Olweus's (1993) foundational framework, which characterised bullying as involving three core elements: intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance. This definition was subsequently refined by scholars such as Espelage and Swearer (2003), who emphasised the social-ecological context within which bullying occurred. In the African context, Ojwang (2018) argued that cultural norms around discipline, gender roles, and authority mediated both the expression and perception of bullying, necessitating context-sensitive frameworks.

Physical bullying the most visible form involved direct bodily harm including hitting, kicking, and property destruction (Kazaara & Nelson, 2024). Verbal bullying encompassed name-calling, teasing, and threatening language. Relational or social bullying, more commonly directed at girls, involved manipulation of peer relationships through exclusion, rumour-spreading, and social sabotage (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022). Cyberbullying, enabled by the proliferation of mobile phone access even among students in rural Uganda, involved the use of digital platforms to intimidate, embarrass, or harass victims. Research by Kowalski and Limber (2013) found that cyberbullying was particularly damaging because it transcended the boundaries of the school and invaded victims' home environments.

### **2.2 Bullying and Academic Performance: Theoretical Perspectives**

Several theoretical frameworks informed the understanding of how bullying affected academic performance (Anthony et al., 2023). The General Strain Theory, originally advanced by Agnew (1992) in the context of deviance, was adapted by educational researchers to explain how negative school experiences generated emotional strain that disrupted learning (Audrey & Nancy, 2025). Bullied students experienced strain as a result of goal blockage (inability to achieve academic success) and loss of positive stimuli (friendship, safety, belonging), which in turn produced negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression (Kaazara & Audrey, 2025).

Bandura's Social Learning Theory provided a complementary lens by explaining how bystanders and peers normalised bullying through observational learning, creating school cultures that were permissive of aggression. The Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) underscored the importance of microsystemic (family, peer group) and macrosystemic (policy, culture) influences on bullying behaviour and its academic consequences.

### **2.3 Empirical Evidence on Bullying and Academic Outcomes**

A substantial body of empirical research established a negative relationship between bullying victimisation and academic performance (Julius & Audrey, 2026). Schwartz et al. (2005) found that victims of bullying had significantly lower grades and standardised test scores compared to their non-bullied peers. A meta-analysis by Nakamoto and Schwartz (2010) covering 33 studies confirmed that bullying victimisation was associated with reduced academic achievement across a range of school levels and cultural contexts. In sub-Saharan Africa, Maphosa and Shumba (2010) documented that South African students who experienced bullying were more likely to skip school and perform below their potential.

In Uganda, limited but growing research highlighted the same trends. Kamau and Arutu (2022) found that secondary school students in northern Uganda who reported frequent bullying victimization had lower mean scores in core subjects including Mathematics and English. The mechanisms identified included reduced concentration, avoidance of school, reluctance to participate in class discussions, and higher rates of absenteeism (Godfrey et al., 2023). The emotional sequelae of bullying anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem also impaired cognitive functioning and memory consolidation critical for academic performance.

#### **2.4 Factors Predisposing Students to Bullying**

Research identified a multiplicity of individual, family, peer, and school-level factors that predisposed students to bullying, either as perpetrators or victims (Julius & Kaazara, 2025). At the individual level, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and disability status increased vulnerability to victimization (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). At the family level, authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles, exposure to domestic violence, and socioeconomic hardship were associated with both bullying perpetration and victimization. At the school level, poor supervision, ineffective disciplinary systems, competitive academic environments, and inadequate counselling services were identified as enabling conditions (Christopher, Komunda, et al., 2022).

In the Ugandan context, Namutebi (2020) found that boarding school arrangements, which were common in secondary schools, concentrated students from diverse backgrounds in close quarters with limited adult oversight, creating conditions that were particularly conducive to bullying. The hierarchical culture among students where seniors expected deference from juniors was also identified as a cultural driver of bullying behaviour specific to the Ugandan school system (Julius & Kazaara, 2026a).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study adopted a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design, which involved the simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Olanrewaju et al., 2021). The quantitative component utilised a cross-sectional survey to gather numerical data on bullying prevalence and academic outcomes, while the qualitative component employed in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to explore contextual meanings and experiences.

#### **3.2 Study Population and Sampling**

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The target population comprised all students, teachers, and school administrators in the six selected secondary schools in Kyegegwa District, totalling approximately 3,200 students, 144 teachers, and 18 administrators (A. Nafiu et al., 2012). Stratified random sampling was used to select students, ensuring proportional representation by gender, year of study, and school type. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers and administrators with relevant experience in managing student welfare. A sample of 178 students, 24 teachers, and 10 administrators was realised, giving a total of 212 respondents.

### **3.3 Data Collection Instruments**

Three primary instruments were used: a structured student questionnaire, a semi-structured interview guide for teachers and administrators, and a researcher-administered observation checklist. The student questionnaire comprised three sections covering demographic information, bullying experiences (adapted from the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire), and self-reported academic performance indicators. The interview guide explored perceptions of bullying, institutional responses, and recommendations for intervention. All instruments were pre-tested in one school outside the study sample and refined for clarity and cultural appropriateness.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 25 (Nelson et al., 2022). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarise bullying prevalence and academic performance data. Pearson correlation and simple linear regression analyses were used to test the relationship between bullying and academic performance. Qualitative data from interviews were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, resulting in the identification of recurring themes and sub-themes.

## **4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Prevalence and Forms of Bullying**

The analysis revealed that bullying was highly prevalent in the sampled schools. As indicated in Table 1, 68.5% of students reported having experienced at least one form of bullying in the three months preceding the study, with 31.2% reporting being bullied on a weekly or daily basis. Verbal bullying was the most prevalent form, followed by physical bullying, relational exclusion, and cyberbullying respectively.

**Table 1: Prevalence of Bullying Forms Among Students in Selected Schools, Kyegegwa District (2023)**

| <b>Form of Bullying</b>            | <b>Frequency (n=178)</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Verbal Bullying</b>             | 142                      | 79.8                  |
| <b>Physical Bullying</b>           | 118                      | 66.3                  |
| <b>Relational/Social Exclusion</b> | 97                       | 54.5                  |
| <b>Cyberbullying</b>               | 64                       | 35.9                  |
| <b>Any Form of Bullying</b>        | 122                      | 68.5                  |
| <b>Weekly/Daily Bullying</b>       | 55                       | 31.2                  |

Source: Primary Data, 2025

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The findings presented in the table highlighted the prevalence of different forms of bullying experienced by respondents. The results showed that bullying was a common occurrence among the study participants, with substantial proportions reporting exposure to various forms of victimization. The data further demonstrated that verbal bullying was the most frequently experienced form, while cyberbullying was reported less often compared to other forms. The results indicated that Verbal Bullying was the most prevalent form of bullying among respondents. Out of the 178 participants, 142 individuals, representing 79.8%, reported experiencing verbal bullying. This suggested that insults, teasing, name-calling, threats, and other forms of verbal harassment were widespread among the respondents. The high prevalence implied that verbal aggression constituted a major challenge within the social environment of the participants. Physical Bullying was also highly reported, with 118 respondents accounting for 66.3% of the sample. This finding indicated that a considerable proportion of participants had experienced physical forms of bullying such as hitting, pushing, kicking, or other acts of physical aggression. Although less common than verbal bullying, the high percentage demonstrated that physical victimization remained a serious issue affecting many respondents.

The findings further revealed that Relational or Social Exclusion bullying affected 97 respondents, representing 54.5% of the sample. This suggested that more than half of the participants had experienced forms of bullying related to social isolation, exclusion from peer groups, spreading rumors, or deliberate damage to social relationships. The results implied that bullying extended beyond direct physical or verbal aggression and also involved psychological and social dimensions that could negatively affect emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships. In relation to Cyberbullying, the results showed that 64 respondents, representing 35.9%, had experienced bullying through digital platforms or electronic communication. This indicated that although cyberbullying was the least reported form among the categories studied, it still affected more than one-third of the respondents. The findings suggested that the increasing use of social media, mobile phones, and online communication platforms may have contributed to the occurrence of bullying in virtual spaces.

The analysis also showed that 122 respondents, representing 68.5% of the sample, had experienced at least one form of bullying. This demonstrated that bullying was highly prevalent overall among the respondents and affected a majority of participants in one way or another. The finding emphasized the widespread nature of bullying experiences within the study population. Finally, the results revealed that 55 respondents, accounting for 31.2%, experienced bullying on a weekly or daily basis. This suggested that nearly one-third of the participants faced repeated or frequent bullying incidents. The finding indicated that for some respondents, bullying was not an isolated occurrence but rather a persistent and recurring problem that could have serious psychological, emotional, and social consequences. These findings corroborated those of Nakamya (2021) and Kamau and Arutu (2022), who similarly documented high prevalence of verbal and physical bullying in Ugandan secondary schools. The high rate of relational bullying was noteworthy, as this form was often overlooked in disciplinary frameworks that focused primarily on physical incidents.

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**4.2 Impact of Bullying on Academic Performance**

Table 2 presents the self-reported academic performance of students cross-tabulated with their bullying victimisation status. Students who reported frequent bullying had significantly lower self-reported grade point averages compared to those who reported no bullying experience. The mean GPA for frequently bullied students was 1.89 compared to 3.21 for non-bullied students, a difference that was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 2: Relationship Between Bullying Frequency and Academic Performance Indicators**

| <b>Bullying Frequency</b> | <b>Mean GPA</b> | <b>Absenteeism Days/Term</b> | <b>% Below Average Grade</b> |
|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Never/Rarely</b>       | 3.21            | 2.3                          | 18.4                         |
| <b>Occasionally</b>       | 2.67            | 4.7                          | 34.2                         |
| <b>Weekly</b>             | 2.14            | 8.1                          | 56.8                         |
| <b>Daily</b>              | 1.89            | 11.4                         | 74.5                         |

**Source: Primary Data, 2025**

The results showed that students who reported experiencing bullying never or rarely had the highest academic performance outcomes. This group recorded a mean GPA of 3.21, an average absenteeism rate of 2.3 days per term, and only 18.4% of students falling below the average grade level. These findings suggested that students with minimal exposure to bullying were more likely to attend school regularly and achieve stronger academic results. The low absenteeism and relatively small proportion of below-average grades indicated a more stable and supportive learning environment for these students. In contrast, students who experienced bullying occasionally demonstrated lower academic outcomes compared to those who were rarely bullied. This group recorded a mean GPA of 2.67 and an average absenteeism rate of 4.7 days per term, while 34.2% of the students performed below average academically. The findings indicated that even occasional bullying was associated with reduced academic achievement and increased school absence. The higher percentage of below-average grades suggested that bullying may have interfered with concentration, motivation, and overall academic engagement.

The analysis further revealed that students who experienced bullying on a weekly basis recorded even poorer educational outcomes. Their mean GPA declined to 2.14, while absenteeism increased significantly to an average of 8.1 days per term. Additionally, 56.8% of students in this category performed below average academically. These findings suggested that frequent bullying had a substantial negative impact on academic performance and school attendance. The results implied that repeated victimization may have contributed to emotional distress, reduced participation in learning activities, and avoidance of school environments.

Students who experienced bullying daily exhibited the poorest academic outcomes among all groups. This category recorded the lowest mean GPA of 1.89 and the highest absenteeism rate of 11.4 days per term. Furthermore, 74.5% of these students performed below average academically. The findings indicated that persistent daily bullying was

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strongly associated with severe academic difficulties and high levels of school absenteeism. The extremely high proportion of below-average grades suggested that continuous bullying may have seriously undermined students' academic confidence, psychological well-being, and ability to perform effectively in school. Qualitative data enriched the quantitative findings. Teachers reported that bullied students were often observed to be distracted, reluctant to volunteer answers, and withdrawn during lessons. One teacher from a government school noted that victims of bullying frequently arrived late, sat at the back of the classroom, and avoided participation in group activities. Administrators highlighted that bullied students were more likely to request transfers or drop out entirely, a finding consistent with Maphosa and Shumba (2010).

#### **4.3 Predisposing Factors**

The study identified several institutional and contextual factors that perpetuated bullying in Kyegegwa schools. These included inadequate supervision during non-instructional periods (e.g., break time, dormitory hours), limited counselling services with an average of one counsellor per 450 students and senior-junior hierarchies that normalized aggressive behaviour. Family-level factors such as poverty, absent parents, and exposure to violence at home were also cited by teachers and counsellors as significant risk factors.

#### **4.4 Proposed Interventions**

Based on the findings, both teachers and administrators recommended a range of interventions including: mandatory anti-bullying policies in all schools, peer counselling programmes facilitated by trained student mentors, regular teacher professional development on identifying and responding to bullying, parental engagement through school-community meetings, and the establishment of anonymous reporting mechanisms such as suggestion boxes or confidential helplines.

#### **5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations**

##### **5.1 Conclusions**

The study concluded that bullying was a widespread and significantly damaging phenomenon in secondary schools in Kyegegwa District. Its impact on academic performance was both statistically significant and practically consequential, with bullied students displaying lower GPAs, higher rates of absenteeism, and reduced academic engagement. The prevalence of verbal and physical bullying was particularly high, driven by inadequate institutional safeguards and cultural norms that normalised hierarchical peer aggression.

##### **5.2 Recommendations**

The study recommended that the Kyegegwa District Education Office should formulate and enforce a district-wide anti-bullying policy applicable to all secondary schools. Schools should establish functional peer counselling programmes with trained student counsellors and designate designated safe spaces for victims to report incidents confidentially. The Ministry of Education and Sports should integrate bullying prevention content into teacher training curricula at all pre-service and in-service levels. Parents and community leaders should be engaged as active partners in creating safe school environments.

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### **5.3 Areas for Further Research**

Future research should explore the long-term academic trajectories of bullying victims beyond secondary school, examine the effectiveness of specific anti-bullying interventions in rural Ugandan schools, and investigate the perspectives of bullying perpetrators to develop more comprehensive prevention programmes.

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