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Original Article

Understanding Pupils' Sense-Making of Bullying Through the Lens of the Hidden Curriculum: A Qualitative Study in Basic Schools in the Effutu Municipality, Ghana

Alex TETTEH[1]

[1] Department of Educational Foundations, University of Education, Winneba (UEW), Winneba, Ghana, atetteh@uew.edu.gh, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8935-7247

* Correspondence: atetteh@uew.edu.gh

Abstract

Bullying remains a persistent concern in basic schools, yet less attention has been given to how pupils interpret bullying within the implicit norms and everyday practices of school life. This study explored how pupils in two basic schools in the Effutu Municipality of Ghana make sense of bullying through the lens of the hidden curriculum. Guided by Symbolic Interactionism and Sense-Making Theory, the study adopted an interpretivist qualitative design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Primary IPA data were collected from pupils through semi-structured individual interviews, while complementary focus group discussions (FGD) with pupils were used to collect data to illuminate shared peer norms and collective meanings. The findings indicate that pupils understood bullying as a normalised part of school life and interpreted inconsistent teacher intervention, peer expectations, and the stigma attached to reporting as important signals about acceptable responses to bullying. Pupils consequently negotiated competing institutional and peer expectations and adopted silence, retaliation, avoidance, and alliance-building as context-sensitive strategies for managing risk and maintaining social belonging. The findings suggest that addressing bullying requires attention not only to formal policies but also to the implicit norms and practices through which pupils learn how to interpret and respond to bullying.

KEYWORDS: bullying, hidden curriculum, sense-making, symbolic interactionism, dual moral framework

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

A persistent and complex challenge within school environments across the world is bullying. It affects pupils' academic engagement, emotional well-being, and social development. Research consistently shows that bullying is not merely an individual behavioural issue, but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by the norms, values, and power relations embedded within school contexts (Izadi & Hart, 2024; Olweus, 1993; Smith, 2016; Thornberg, 2011). In basic schools particularly, where pupils are in formative stages of identity development, experiences of bullying can have long-lasting psychological and educational consequences.

Traditionally, studies on bullying have focused on observable behaviours such as physical aggression, verbal harassment, social exclusion and cyberbullying (Bezie et al., 2025; OECD, 2026; Taya & Cameron, 2023; Wong & Smarrelli, 2025). Though recent scholarship has shifted attention towards the broader socio-cultural environment in which bullying occurs, there is still inadequate knowledge on the role of the hidden curriculum in fostering bullying in school. For instance, a systematic literature review by Restad (2020) found that curriculum is often ignored in bullying research and argued that bullying cannot be fully addressed without considering implicit norms, school culture, and everyday practices within the school; especially, when studies (Craig & Pepler, 1995; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001) have demonstrated that bullying often unfolds in the presence of peers or adults with limited intervention. Implicit messages from scenes like this might be actively providing lessons to pupils to make wrong sense of bullying that perpetrate the phenomenon. Unlike the formal curriculum, which is explicitly stated, the hidden curriculum operates subtly and often shapes the understanding of pupils about acceptable and unacceptable behaviours without direct instruction (Addai-Mununkum et al., 2026). What it means is that within the context of bullying, the hidden curriculum may communicate unintended but powerful messages. Therefore, understanding bullying through the lens of the hidden curriculum shifts the focus from simply identifying incidents to examining how pupils make sense of their experiences within a broader system of implicit meanings. In the Ghanaian basic school context, where communal values, respect for authority, and peer solidarity are strongly emphasized, the hidden curriculum may play a particularly significant role in shaping pupils' responses to bullying.

Despite the foregoing issues and the prevalence of bullying in basic schools, existing interventions often focus on formal rules, disciplinary measures, and awareness campaigns (Gaffney et al., 2021; Nguyen, et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2019), yet these approaches have yielded mixed results. One critical limitation is that such interventions tend to overlook the underlying social and cultural dynamics that influence the behaviour of pupils, especially, the role of the hidden curriculum. In many schools therefore, there is a noticeable gap between official anti-bullying policies and pupils' actual experiences. While schools may formally discourage bullying, implicit practices may send contradictory messages.

Moreover, most of the existing studies on bullying have been conducted using quantitative approaches that emphasise prevalence, causes, and effects (Bezie et al., 2025; OECD, 2026; Taya & Cameron, 2023; Wong & Smarrelli, 2025). While valuable, these studies often fail to capture how pupils themselves interpret bullying situations and the meanings they attach to different responses. Without understanding sense-making processes of pupils, interventions risk being

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misaligned with the realities of lived experiences of pupils. In the Ghanaian context, this gap is even more pronounced, as there is limited qualitative research that explores bullying through pupils' perspectives, particularly within the framework of the hidden curriculum. Consequently, there is insufficient insight into how implicit norms and values within schools shape the decision of pupils to report, remain silent, or respond in other ways. Therefore, within the context of the hidden curriculum, this study addresses this gap by adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore how pupils experience bullying, perceive implicit messages within their school environment, and interpret these messages in shaping their responses. The study was, thus, guided by the following research questions:

1. How do pupils experience bullying within everyday school environment?
2. What implicit norms, values, and expectations about bullying do pupils perceive from teachers, peers, and school practices?
3. How do pupils make sense of these implicit messages and competing expectations about bullying?
4. How do pupils' interpretations of bullying shape the strategies they adopt in responding to bullying situations?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Theoretically grounded and conceptually integrated approach is required to understand pupils' sense-making of bullying within school environments. Therefore, this study draws on symbolic interactionism and sense-making theories as complementary frameworks and makes the hidden curriculum a conceptual lens to interrogate bullying as a socially constructed school-based menace. The review proceeds by linking these frameworks to contemporary conceptualisations and empirical findings on bullying. The review ends with identified gaps that justify the present study.

1.1.1 Symbolic Interactionism and Sense-Making

Two theories that underpin this study are Symbolic Interactionism (SI) and the Sense-Making Theory (S-MT). SI suggests that individuals construct meanings through social interaction and interpretative processes (Blumer, 1969; O'Neill, 2023; Sichach, 2023). Within school contexts, pupils do not merely respond to bullying as objective events. Rather, they interpret actions, intentions, and social cues through shared symbols and meanings developed in interaction with peers and authority figures. Bullying, therefore, is not only a behavioural act but also a negotiated social reality shaped by how pupils define situations, assign roles (e.g., victim, aggressor, bystander), and anticipate reactions.

S-MT on the other hand emphasises how individuals interpret ambiguous or complex situations to guide action (Knauf & Eschenbeck, 2025; Turner et al., 2023; Weick, 1995). Sense-making is retrospective, social, and grounded in identity construction. In the context of bullying, pupils engage in continuous interpretation of events and weigh competing expectations from teachers and peers and evaluate potential consequences of different responses. This interpretative process is particularly salient in environments where formal rules conflict with informal norms that require

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pupils to navigate uncertainty and social risk. Together, these two frameworks position pupils as active meaning-makers, whose responses to bullying are shaped not only by the behaviour itself but by the meanings they construct within their social environments. This aligns with interpretivist approaches and provides a strong theoretical basis for examining bullying through lived experiences and interpretative processes.

1.1.2 The Hidden Curriculum as a Conceptual Lens

The concept of hidden curriculum provides a critical lens for understanding how implicit norms and values within schools shape the interpretations and behaviours of pupils. It was originally conceptualised as the unintended lessons conveyed through school routines and interactions (Jackson, 1968), but later, the hidden curriculum encompassed the informal rules, expectations, and power relations embedded within educational settings (Addai-Mununkum, 2020; Giroux & Penna, 1979). These include norms related to authority, conformity, competition, and social hierarchy. The concept has been expanded to draw attention to its role in reproducing social inequalities and ideological structures (Park et al., 2023). From this perspective, schools are not neutral environments but places where implicit messages about power, status, and acceptable behaviour are continuously communicated and learned (Restad, 2020). These messages are often conveyed through teacher practices, disciplinary approaches, peer interactions, and institutional priorities.

In relation to bullying, the hidden curriculum might operate by shaping what pupils perceive as acceptable, tolerable, or risky. The hidden messages in inconsistent enforcement of rules, teacher inaction, and prioritisation of academic outcomes over social well-being may signal that certain forms of bullying are permissible. For instance, a study by Hawkins, Pepler and Craig (2001) revealed that in 88% of bullying incidents, peers were present, but they intervened in 19% only. This demonstrates that bullying typically unfolds in social settings where others, including nearby adults or authority structures, do not actively intervene. This may teach implicit lessons about bullying and encourage patterns of bullying behaviour to persist and be reinforced socially. Thus, peer norms that stigmatise reporting or praise toughness might constitute powerful informal rules that guide behaviour. The hidden curriculum therefore could provide the context within which pupils interpret bullying and decide how to respond. Importantly, the gap between structural conditions and individual interpretations could be bridged by the hidden curriculum. This makes it useful particularly for examining how broader school dynamics influence pupils' sense-making processes.

1.2 Bullying as a School-Based Social Phenomenon

Bullying is widely defined as intentional, repetitive aggressive behaviour involving a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Andrews et al., 2023). It manifests in various ways such as physical, verbal, relational, and cyber dimensions. Though early research conceptualized bullying primarily as an individual behavioural problem (Olweus, 1978; Perry et al., 1988; Woods & White, 2005), contemporary perspectives emphasize its social and contextual (i.e., social-ecological) nature (Bochaver, 2022; Mishna, et al., 2022; Zhu, 2023). The social-ecological framework stresses the interaction of individual, relational, and institutional factors in

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shaping bullying behaviour. Peer group norms, teacher attitudes, and school climate are recognized as notable influences within this framework. Even though the social-ecological perspective accounts for multiple levels of influences, it has been criticised for insufficiently addressing the interpretative processes through which individuals make sense of the influences (Horton, 2024; Mishna et al., 2022).

Recent studies have therefore reconceptualised bullying as a socially constructed everyday school life (Bochaver, 2022; Mishna, et al., 2022; Thornberg, 2015; Zhu, 2023). This standpoint holds that bullying is sustained through shared meanings, informal rules, and social interactions rather than isolated incidents. They therefore visualise pupils as individuals who learn, negotiate, and reproduce these meanings through participation in peer cultures and engagement with institutional practices. Thus, bullying must be understood not merely as deviant behaviour but as a relational and interpretative process, shaped by both explicit policies and implicit norms within the school milieu.

Thus, in this study, in positioning the theoretical and conceptual perspectives, the Symbolic Interactionism serves as the primary theoretical perspective. It provides the ontological and interpretative basis for understanding bullying as a socially constructed phenomenon with the meanings emerging through interaction. Sense-Making Theory functions as the interpretative framework for examining how pupils retrospectively interpret experiences, negotiate ambiguity, anticipate consequences, and construct meanings that guide subsequent action. The hidden curriculum is used as a conceptual lens through which the implicit norms, expectations, routines, and power relations rooted in school life are examined.

1.3 Empirical Literature on Bullying

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that bullying remains a globally pervasive issue with significant implications for pupils' academic, social, and psychological well-being (UNESCO, 2019). Studies show that victims of bullying are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and disengagement from school (Gaffney et al., 2021). Despite extensive intervention efforts, the persistence of bullying suggests limitations in current approaches to curbing the menace.

A significant body of research has also examined pupils' responses to bullying and identified coping strategies such as reporting, seeking support, retaliation, avoidance, and silence (Bukina et al., 2024; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Hunter et al., 2004; Snodgrass et al., 2024). Non-reporting notably remains one of the most constant findings. The studies reveal that pupils often feel reluctant to seek help due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust in authority, and social stigma. "Snitching" as a notion has also been identified as a powerful deterrent that reflect peer norms that prioritise loyalty over institutional compliance. Other studies further reveal that actions of pupils are guided by informal rules that govern social behaviour. For example, Thornberg (2010) and Thornberg (2011) identified norms such as non-interference, group loyalty, and risk avoidance as central to pupils' decision-making about bullying incidence. These findings point to the role of implicit social expectations in shaping responses to bullying.

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More recent studies have begun to explicitly link bullying to the physical environment. For example, Izadi and Hart (2024) investigated the relationship between the spatial environment of schools and the prevalence of bullying using an ecological psychology framework. They found multiple ways by which spatial planning and design of the physical environment of a school are related to the occurrence of bullying. The existence of varieties of relationship between school physical structures and bullying is an indication that everyday school practices and interactions too could reinforce certain bullying behaviours and silent others. For example, teacher inaction or selective discipline may communicate tacit approval, while peer cultures may normalise aggression or discourage reporting. It is not surprising, therefore, that studies have found most bullying interventions focusing solely on formal rules fail to address the underlying social dynamics that sustain bullying.

1.4 Gaps in the Literature

Though there are significant advances in bullying research, several critical gaps still remain. For instance, there is limited focus on pupils' sense-making processes, particularly how they interpret bullying within complex social environments. While existing studies acknowledge the role of peer norms and school climate, they often do not sufficiently explore how pupils actively construct meaning and navigate competing expectations. Also, although the hidden curriculum is well-established in educational theory, its application to bullying research remains under-investigated, that is, extremely few studies have systematically examined how implicit norms and institutional practices shape pupils' interpretations and responses to bullying. Additionally, there is a notable contextual gap in the literature, with limited research conducted in non-Western settings, particularly in African contexts such as Ghana. Cultural values related to authority, communalism, and peer solidarity may significantly influence how pupils perceive and respond to bullying, yet these dynamics remain underexplored.

Finally, there has been a methodological gap as much of the existing research relies on quantitative designs that focus on prevalence, predictors, and outcomes and do not capture the depth and complexity of lived experiences and interpretative processes. These studies are largely situated in Western contexts and that raises questions about their applicability to different cultural settings. There is a need for qualitative, interpretative approaches that capture pupils' voices and provide complex insights into their meaning-making processes in the Ghanaian context. This study addressed these gaps by employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore how pupils in Ghanaian basic schools make sense of bullying through the lens of the hidden curriculum. By integrating theoretical, conceptual, and empirical perspectives, this study offers a contextually grounded and interpretative understanding of bullying that extends beyond surface-level explanations.

2.0 METHODS

2.1 Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research approach rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them.

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The interpretivist stance assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is co-created through interaction and interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The methodological framework employed within this paradigm was the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is concerned with exploring how individuals make sense of significant experiences in their lives and is particularly appropriate for examining complex, emotionally laden phenomena such as bullying (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2021). Thus, in this study, the IPA played the role of a methodological approach through which the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of pupils were systematically analysed.

IPA is underpinned by three key philosophical foundations: phenomenology, which focuses on lived experiences, hermeneutics, which emphasises interpretation, and idiography that prioritises in-depth analysis of individual cases (Smith et al., 2021). A central feature of IPA that was utilised in this study was the double hermeneutic process (DHP). DHP is where participants attempt to make sense of their experiences and the researcher in turn interprets these sense-making processes. This approach aligns closely with the aim of the study, which is to understand how pupils interpret bullying within the context of the hidden curriculum and how these interpretations shape their responses.

The study was conducted in the Effutu Municipality in the Central Region of Ghana. Effutu is a diverse municipality with a mix of urban and peri-urban communities and a variety of basic schools, including both public and private institutions. Most basic schools in the municipality have both the Primary and Junior High School (JHS) located on the same compound. The study population comprised basic school pupils in the municipality and the target population was made of pupils in Upper Primary and Junior High Schools.

Two basic schools (having both Primary and JHS on the same compound) in the municipality were purposively selected for the study. This was made of one public basic school and a private basic school (names withheld for the purpose of anonymity). This was done to provide contextual variation in school organisation and institutional practices. The inclusion of the two school types was not intended to produce a systematic public-private comparison, but to enable the analysis to consider whether similar or contrasting meanings emerged across different institutional contexts.

The study involved 20 pupils purposively selected from the two schools. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) enrolment in one of the two selected schools; (2) experience of bullying (as victim, witness, or both); and (3) willingness to participate and share experiences. The sample comprised both male and female participants aged between 11 and 16 years. The participants represented different stages of basic education, ranging from Primary 5 to JHS 3, which provided perspectives across upper primary and JHS levels. Most participants reported direct experience of bullying either as victims or as witnesses. One participant was identified specifically as a witness. The 20 pupils were distributed across two data-collection methods: the primary IPA sample comprised 12 pupils who participated in individual semi-structured interviews (six drawn from each school). The sample 12 was considered appropriate

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because IPA studies typically involve small, homogeneous samples to allow for detailed, idiographic analysis (Smith et al., 2021). The remaining eight pupils who were not involved in the interviews took part in two complementary focus group discussions (FGDs) comprising four pupils each. Thus, there was no overlap between participants in the individual interviews and those in the FGDs. This separation was deliberate because the interviews were intended to elicit detailed individual accounts of lived experiences, whereas the FGDs were intended to elicit collective discussions of peer norms, shared expectations and socially negotiated meanings surrounding bullying. Keeping the two groups separate also reduced the possibility of prior individual interview participation shaping subsequent contributions of the pupils to the group discussions.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guide and focus group discussions. The study employed semi-structured interviews as primary data collection method. This allowed participants to provide rich, detailed, and personal accounts of their experiences, which is an essential requirement for IPA. The interview guide was organized into six sections: Background information, Experiences of bullying, Perceptions of hidden curriculum (implicit messages), Interpretation (sense-making), Behavioural responses, and Reflection.

The interview questions were deliberately framed in everyday language rather than in theoretical terminology. Participants were not initially asked directly about the "hidden curriculum" or "implicit rules." Instead, they were invited to describe what happens when bullying occurs, how teachers and peers respond, what pupils are expected to do when bullied, what happens when someone reports bullying, and what pupils believed would happen if they responded in particular ways. Questions about implicit messages and unwritten expectations were introduced only through follow-up probes when the accounts of participants indicated the relevance of such meanings. This approach was intended to minimise the imposition of the theoretical concepts of the study on the accounts of participants and to allow meanings to emerge from their lived experiences. The flexible nature of the semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to follow and probe deeper into responses of participants and emerging themes to capture complex meanings and emotions. The interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable environment within each school to ensure confidentiality and encourage openness. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed verbatim.

The school-specific FGDs were used to capture shared meanings and collective norms among the participants. Although IPA is principally idiographic and is most commonly associated with detailed analysis of individual accounts, the FGDs were used in this study in accordance with the recommendation of Love et al. (2020) as a complementary source of contextual data rather than as substitutes for individual phenomenological accounts. The FGD guide was based on pupils' common reactions to bullying and unwritten rules among pupils. It also focused on the meaning and implications of "snitching" and the peer expectations and pressures they experience. FGDs allowed participants to interact, challenge, and build on each other's ideas, thereby revealing the

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social construction of norms, which is a key aspect of the hidden curriculum. Each school's FGD was moderated by the researcher and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

The data collection process began with obtaining approval from school authorities in both selected schools. Participants were identified with the assistance of teachers. Teachers assisted only with identifying pupils who appeared to meet the broad inclusion criteria. They were not present during the interviews or focus group discussions. Neither were they informed about the specific accounts provided by pupils and so they did not influence the decisions of pupils regarding participation. The pupils were then briefed on the purpose of the study. Permission was obtained from school authorities while informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participating pupils. Assent was obtained from the pupils themselves. Interviews were conducted first to capture individual experiences and FGDs were conducted subsequently to explore shared perspectives. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis

2.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The semi-structured individual interviews constituted the primary dataset for the IPA, while the FGDs served as a complementary source of contextual data. The interview data were analysed using the systematic procedures of IPA, with particular attention to its phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic commitments. The analysis involved six interconnected stages.

First, familiarisation with the data involved immersion in the interview transcripts through repeated reading. The researcher read and re-read each transcript to develop a holistic understanding of each participant's account before proceeding to detailed analysis. Attention was given to the content of the experiences of participants, the circumstances in which bullying occurred, how participants interpreted these experiences, and the meanings they attached to their responses.

Second, initial noting involved detailed examination of each transcript. Notes were made at three levels: 1) descriptive comments concerning what participants explicitly said; 2) linguistic comments concerning tone, emphasis, metaphors, repetition, and choice of words; and 3) conceptual comments concerning the meanings and possible interpretations underlying the accounts of participants. At this stage, the researcher remained closely rooted in the participants' own descriptions rather than imposing the theoretical concepts of hidden curriculum or sense-making as predetermined coding categories.

Third, the development of emergent themes involved transforming the detailed exploratory notes into concise statements that captured important aspects of the experiences and interpretations of participants. These emergent themes reflected both the experiential content of the accounts and the researcher's interpretative engagement with the meanings that participants constructed around bullying.

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Fourth, connecting emergent themes involved examining relationships, similarities, contrasts, and conceptual connections among the emergent themes within the account of each participant. Related themes were clustered into broader conceptual groupings, resulting in superordinate themes that captured significant dimensions of the experience of individual participants.

Fifth, cross-case analysis was undertaken after the individual cases had been analysed. The researcher examined patterns of convergence and divergence across participants while retaining attention to the particularity of each case. This stage enabled the identification of recurring experiential and interpretative patterns across participants, including the normalisation of bullying, perceptions of teacher intervention, peer expectations concerning reporting, and strategies of pupils for responding to bullying.

Sixth, interpretation and theoretical engagement involved moving beyond the descriptive presentation of the accounts of participants to consider the meanings of the emerging themes in relation to the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. The researcher interpreted the sense-making of participants in relation to Symbolic Interactionism and Sense-Making Theory and examined how implicit norms, expectations, teacher practices, and peer dynamics could be understood through the lens of the hidden curriculum. Theoretical sensitivity was distinguished from theoretical imposition. The theories guided the interpretation of the accounts of participants but were not used as predetermined coding categories. Initial coding remained closely grounded in participants' descriptions before themes were subsequently interpreted in relation to the theoretical and conceptual perspectives. Throughout this stage, attention was maintained to the double hermeneutic of IPA, whereby participants made sense of their experiences while the researcher interpreted the sense-making of participants. The researcher also maintained a balance between the phenomenological accounts of participants and the hermeneutic interpretation of the researcher.

2.4 Integration and Triangulation of Data Sources

The focus group discussions were analysed separately from the individual interview data because their purpose and interactional character differed from those of the individual interviews. Whereas the interviews provided the primary basis for idiographic IPA analysis of the lived experiences of the participants, the FGDs were used to explore shared meanings, peer norms, collective expectations and socially negotiated understandings of bullying. Particular attention was given to participants' discussions of reporting, snitching, retaliation, peer loyalty, teacher intervention, and expectations concerning how pupils should respond to bullying. Attention was also given to how participants affirmed, challenged, extended, or modified one another's accounts during the discussions.

Triangulation was undertaken after the initial idiographic and cross-case analysis of the interview data and the separate analysis of the FGD data. The two datasets were compared to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and complementarity. The purpose of triangulation was not to verify

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one dataset against the other but to deepen the interpretation of sense-making of pupils within their social and institutional contexts. Where the interview and FGD accounts converged, the FGD data provided contextual insight into the shared peer meanings and norms surrounding individual experiences. Where the accounts diverged, the differences were examined as potentially meaningful variations in pupils' experiences, social positions, or interpretations rather than treated as inconsistencies to be eliminated. For example, where individual interview participants described reluctance to report bullying because of fear of being labelled *korkonsa*, corresponding FGD discussions concerning peer attitudes towards reporting were examined to understand the broader social meanings surrounding such reluctance. Similarly, accounts of perceived teacher inaction in the interviews were considered alongside FGD discussions about how pupils collectively interpreted teacher responses to bullying. In this way, the complementary data helped illuminate the social and normative context within which individual experiences were interpreted.

The integration of the two sources therefore occurred at the interpretative stage rather than through mechanical merging of the datasets. The individual interviews remained the primary basis for the IPA findings, while the FGD data enriched the interpretation of shared peer norms and collective meanings relevant to the hidden curriculum.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, verbatim transcription of the interviews and FGDs. Dependability was supported through clear documentation of the research procedures and consistent application of the IPA stages to the individual interview data. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling and grounding interpretations in the accounts of participants. Methodological decisions, personal assumptions, emotional responses to participants' accounts, and emerging interpretations were documented throughout data collection and analysis. The researcher revisited these records during analysis to identify instances in which prior assumptions about bullying, authority, reporting, or school discipline could influence interpretation. Transferability was supported through thick description of the study context and participants.

Given that this study involved school pupils and a sensitive phenomenon, ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Permission was obtained from school authorities and informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participating pupils. Participants were fully informed about the study, and assent was obtained from those who voluntarily agreed to participate. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants, and also, no identifying information was included in the report. Care was taken to avoid emotional harm, especially given the sensitive nature of bullying. Participants therefore had the opportunity to withdraw at any stage without any penalty.

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3.0 RESULTS

The results are presented in two broad sections, Section A and B. The Section A focuses on thematic presentation of pupils' experiences and perceived hidden curriculum (i.e., results on the first two research questions), and the Section B covers a thematic presentation of pupils' sense-making and behavioural responses to bullying (i.e., results on the 3rd and 4th research questions).

3.1 Section A: Pupils' Experiences and Perceived Hidden Curriculum

The analysis under this section yielded four major superordinate themes, namely:

1. Bullying as a normalized everyday experience
2. Selective authority and the silence of teachers
3. Peer codes and the moral economy of "snitching"
4. Unwritten rules: endurance, toughness, and social survival

These themes reflect both lived experiences of pupils and the implicit messages (hidden curriculum) that shape their understanding of bullying, moving from individual experiences to shared meanings. While themes were presented across cases, attention was given to preserving the depth and individuality of the accounts of participants. For the sake of anonymity pseudonyms were used.

Theme 1: Bullying as a Normalized Everyday Experience

Participants from both schools described bullying as a routine and an expected part of school life and not as an isolated or exceptional occurrence. The participants' responses showed that bullying exists in their schools in various forms, including teasing, name-calling, physical intimidation, extortion of food or money, and social exclusion. A participant from the public school remarked, "It happen almost every day. Sometimes it is joking joking, but it can become serious. If you are quiet or small, they will always worry you… it is like part of school." (Participant_F). Similarly, Participant_R from the private school said, "Even in class, some people will insult you aa and you'll see everybody laughing just like that. Even if the teacher is there, they won't mind unless it becomes too much." These accounts give the indication that pupils do not necessarily distinguish sharply between "play" and bullying. They rather show a blurred boundary where harmful behaviours are often trivialised or normalised. Pupils collectively reinforced this normalisation during the FGD. For instance, Participant_Q shared, "If someone is not bullied, it means maybe he or she is strong or popular friend of the teachers. Everyone goes through it." This normalization reflects a hidden curriculum that subtly communicates a conclusive opinion that bullying is an inevitable part of schooling, particularly for those perceived as vulnerable.

Theme 2: Selective Authority and the Silence of Teachers

The perception that teachers respond to bullying in inconsistent and selective ways was a recurring theme across the accounts of participants. This sends ambiguous messages to pupils about what constitutes bullying and the seriousness that warrants a behaviour as bullying. Many pupils indicated that teachers often intervene only when incidents escalate into visible physical conflict while ignoring verbal or relational bullying. Participant_I explained, "If they see you fighting, they will punish you. But if someone is just worrying you with words or taking your things small-small, that one, they will say we should settle it ourselves, it is very painful...." This selective intervention creates a hierarchy of what counts as "real" bullying, implicitly minimizing and normalizing non-physical forms of bullying. Some pupils also perceived teacher-bias in handling bullying cases: "If it is a big boy or someone they like, even if you report, nothing will happen, or just small punishment. But if it is someone they don't like, they will punish fast and hard." (Participant_C). It was observed from the responses of the participants from the private school that discipline appeared stricter in their school but pupils still noted some gaps: "...they say bullying is not allowed, but sometimes when you report, they just warn the person and it continues later and you don't know what to do." (Participant_H).

Pupils interpreted these experiences as conveying an implicit message that reporting might not lead to meaningful action and authority figures may not be fully reliable. It also suggests that some pupils are "untouchable". Consequently, pupils learn to assess the effectiveness and risks of seeking adults' intervention, though it often leaves them in scepticism.

Theme 3: Peer Codes and the Moral Economy of "Snitching"

One of the most powerful and consistent findings across both schools was the existence of strong peer norms discouraging reporting (known in the literature as "snitching") but commonly framed as "korkonsa" in the local language. Pupils described reporting bullying as a violation of peer loyalty which often attracts social sanctions. Participant_O explained, "If you report, they will say you are a korkonsa" [*participant could not use the term "a snitch"*] and nobody will want to be your friend again. Even those who are helping you will stop." This sentiment was strongly echoed in FGDs: "Reporting [*referring to snitching*] is worse than the bullying itself, because when you report [*snitch*], everyone sees you as someone who cannot be trusted." (Participant_T). The consequences of reporting extended beyond social exclusion to increased victimisation as expressed by Participant_P, "If you report, the person will come for you later… maybe not in class, but somewhere, maybe after school.". This creates a powerful deterrent that reinforces silence even in severe bullying incidents.

Interestingly, pupils demonstrated an awareness of the contradiction between school rules and peer expectations. For example, Participant_T noted, "Oh we all know that the teachers say we should report, but our friends and students too say we shouldn't report. So, hmm…always you have to choose and not anger your friends.". This tension brings to light the hidden curriculum at work, where peer-enforced norms override formal institutional expectations.

Theme 4: Unwritten Rules: Endurance, Toughness, and Social Survival

Apart from pupils recounting being discouraged from reporting, they also described a set of unwritten rules that defined the "acceptable" ways of responding to bullying. Central among these were endurance, toughness, and self-reliance. Many participants indicated that enduring bullying without complaint was seen as a sign of strength. Participant_N commented, "…if you can keep quiet and be with it, fine, that one, people will respect you; but if you always complain complain, then they see you as weak.".

Others emphasized the importance of retaliation as a form of self-protection, saying, "Sometimes you have to fight back small, so they know that you are not someone that they can just bully." (Participant_Q). This suggests that pupils are socialised into a system where survival depends on demonstrating resilience or resistance rather than seeking help. In some cases, pupils adopted strategic coping mechanisms. One participant narrated, "…you just avoid them or try to join people who are strong so nobody will worry you." (Participant_L). These responses reflect a pragmatic adaptation to the school environment where pupils navigate risks and opportunities within existing power structures. These unwritten rules collectively form a hidden curriculum that teach pupils to tolerate certain forms of harm and prioritise peer acceptance over institutional rules. It also teaches pupils to manage problems independently.

Though participants from both schools exhibited similar patterns, some differences emerged. Within the two schools included in this study, participants from the public school more frequently described overt forms of bullying and perceived teacher intervention as less consistent, whereas participants from the private school described somewhat stricter regulation but continued to report various forms of bullying. The underlying dynamics of normalisation, peer pressure, and implicit expectations were, however, strikingly similar in both schools. These observations are presented as contextual differences and similarities between the two participating schools rather than as evidence of systematic comparison between public and private basic schools. These findings set the stage for a deeper exploration of how pupils interpret these messages and how such interpretations influence their actual responses to bullying.

3.2 Section B: Pupils' Sense-Making and Behavioural Responses to Bullying

Building on the experiential and contextual themes presented in Section A, this section focuses on pupils' interpretative processes, that is, how they make sense of bullying within the framework of the hidden curriculum, and how these interpretations shape their actual responses. In line with IPA, the analysis here engages in a double hermeneutic, that is, pupils interpret their experiences and the researcher in turn interprets these interpretations. The following three more superordinate themes emerged from the pupils' sense-making and behavioural responses to bullying: (a) Negotiating Contradictory Worlds: Institutional Rules versus Peer Reality; (b) Risk, Reputation, and the Cost of Speaking Up; and (c) Strategic Agency: Choosing Silence, Retaliation, or Adaptation

Theme 5: Negotiating Contradictory Worlds – Institutional Rules versus Peer Reality

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A dominant pattern across participants' accounts was the recognition of a fundamental contradiction between what schools officially promote and what pupils experience in practice. Pupils demonstrated a clear awareness of formal expectations. Participant_J recounted, "They [*teachers*] always tell us that when someone bully you, you should report. That is what they say is the right thing to do.". However, this was immediately contrasted with peer expectations: "But really really, if you report, you will suffer more. So what they [*school authorities*] say is the right thing is not always the right thing." (Participant_F). This tension creates what this study conceptualises as a *Dual Moral Framework* (DMF). This term is used in this context to refer to the situation in the school where pupils must navigate between institutional morality (reporting, obedience, rule-following) and peer morality (loyalty, silence, self-reliance). Rather than passively accepting one over the other, pupils actively interpret and negotiate these competing expectations. One participant articulated this dilemma vividly: "When you are bullied or observe bullying, you have to think like two people. One is what the school wants, and the other is what your friends expect you to do. If you follow the school, your friends will turn against you." (Participant_O). She further gave her interpretation of the reality of effective rules on bullying in her school: "...so for me, I see the school rules that sometimes work are those that may be applied when you are caught or reported. The real rules that always work are those that you must learn by yourself and be guided by them because of what you know or have experienced that the teachers don't know." This reveals that pupils construct meanings about bullying from lived experience rather than relying solely on institutional directives. From an interpretative standpoint, this reflects a hidden curriculum that teaches pupils that formal rules are not always aligned with lived realities, and that successful navigation of school life requires understanding this disconnect. Thus, pupils' sense-making is shaped not by rules alone, but by their perceived consequences within social contexts.

Theme 6: Risk, Reputation, and the Cost of Speaking Up

A critical dimension of pupils' interpretation of bullying situations is their evaluation of risk, particularly in relation to social reputation and personal safety. Reporting bullying was consistently framed as a high-risk action, not because pupils doubted its moral correctness, but because they anticipated negative social consequences. Participant_P disclosed, "It is not that reporting is bad oo, but it bring problems. People will see you as bad… like you are not part of them." Similarly, Participant_E noted: "...when you report, even those who are not involved will start leaving you. It is like you have spoiled your name." This largely explains the importance of reputation as a social capital within the school environment. Pupils are acutely aware that their actions are constantly being evaluated by peers and maintaining a positive social identity often takes precedence over seeking justice.

Apart from reputation, pupils also considered physical and emotional risks when bullied or observe bullying. Participant_G recounted, "If you report the person, the bully, the person can attack you later, maybe when nobody is there. So you have to be careful.". This anticipatory thinking reflects a sophisticated level of social awareness. Pupils are not merely reacting to bullying, rather, they are projecting possible outcomes and making calculated decisions. In IPA terms, this reveals a process of interpretative forecasting, where pupils assess the situation, anticipate consequences

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and choose responses based on perceived risk. The pupils experience the hidden curriculum, which in this situation, reiterates that safety is not guaranteed by authority, and that social belonging requires conformity to peer norms and speaking up may carry greater risks than silence.

Theme 7: Strategic Agency (Choosing Silence, Retaliation, or Adaptation)

Contrary to portrayals of pupils as passive victims by some studies, the findings of this study reveal that pupils exercise a variety of strategic agency in responding to bullying. Their actions (whether silence, retaliation, or coping) were intentional and context-dependent. For instance, pupils preferred to use silence as a protective strategy. Though it was the most common response, it was not a sign of helplessness. It was rather a deliberate strategy to minimize risk. Participant_N explained, "…and sometimes you just have to keep quiet, not because you are weak, but because you don't want more trouble." Another participant added, "If you ignore them, sometimes they get tired. But if you mind them too much, then they will continue." (Participant_H). Silence, therefore, is interpreted by pupils as a form of control which allows them to manage situations without escalating conflict in the face of the consequences.

Some pupils also used retaliation as self-defence and identity assertion. For them, retaliation was seen as necessary to establish boundaries and deter further bullying. Participant_E narrated, "If you don't show them something small, they will think you are soft or weak.". It was observed from the pupils' comments that retaliation was not always physical, it also involved verbal resistance or aligning with stronger peers. Interestingly, pupils framed retaliation as self-defence rather than aggression. Participant_L maintained, "…it is not that you want to fight oo, just that you too have to protect yourself.". This reflects a hidden curriculum that equates strength with respect, which in turn, reinforces the idea that pupils must assert themselves to avoid victimization.

Responses from the participants showed that adaptation and social navigation were also employed as a strategic agency in responding to bullying. This was a more complex strategy involving avoidance, alliance-building, or behavioural adjustment. Participant_B articulated, "…you try to stay with people who are respected, so nobody will worry you.". Others described changing aspects of themselves to fit in: "Sometimes you just try to behave in a way that they will not see or notice you too much." (Participant_D). These responses reflect a process of social adaptation where pupils modify their behaviour to align with the implicit expectations of their environment.

3.3 Integrative Interpretation: The Hidden Curriculum as a System of Survival

Taken all together, the findings suggest that pupils' sense-making is shaped by a hidden curriculum that functions as a system of social survival. Within this system, pupils learn that formal rules are secondary to peer norms, and that, reputation and belonging are essential resources. They also learn that even though self-reliance is often more effective than institutional support, risk must be carefully managed. As one participant succinctly put it: "In this school, you have to know how to handle things yourself. Not everything you can take to teachers." (Participant_B). From an IPA

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perspective, this reflects a deeply internalised understanding of the school environment where pupils are not only aware of implicit norms but actively use them to guide their actions.

4.0 DISCUSSION

On pupils' experiences of bullying in the school environment, the findings revealed that pupils go through bullying as a normalised and quotidian aspect of school life rather than as isolated incidents. This supports earlier works (Izadi & Hart, 2024; Olweus, 1993; UNESCO, 2019) that conceptualise bullying as repetitive and embedded in school social structures rather than episodic behaviour. However, this study extends this existing knowledge by showing that normalisation is not merely a product of repeated exposure but is actively reinforced through everyday interactions and institutional practices. Pupils' accounts indicate that behaviours such as teasing, intimidation, and exclusion are often trivialised, blurring the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable conduct. This aligns with Smith's (2016) argument that bullying exists along a continuum of peer aggression, but the present study adds that pupils themselves internalise this continuum as part of their lived reality. Thus, bullying becomes embedded within the ordinary fabric of schooling. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, over time, such repeated interactions produce a taken-for-granted understanding of bullying as "normal," thereby shaping how pupils perceive and respond to it. This therefore requires systemic, whole-school interventions (not case-by-case discipline) to disrupt and transform that culture.

A central revelation of this study, in terms of the implicit norms and the role of the hidden curriculum, is its illumination of how the hidden curriculum shapes pupils' understanding of bullying. The findings demonstrate that implicit messages from teachers and peers often contradict formal anti-bullying policies. The concept of hidden curriculum is evident in the ways pupils interpret teacher inaction, selective discipline, and peer expectations. For instance, when teachers intervene only in severe cases, pupils infer that less visible forms of bullying are tolerable. This finding resonates with the works of Addai-Mununkum et al. (2026) and Giroux (1983) who argued that schools reproduce social norms through implicit practices. In this study, such practices contributed to the normalisation of silence, endurance, and self-reliance similar to what happens in the real society.

Notably, peer cultures emerged as a powerful component of the hidden curriculum. This finding aligns with the Symbolic Interactionism's emphasis on the role of social groups in shaping behaviour. The stigmatisation of "snitching" reflects what can be described as a moral economy of loyalty where adherence to peer norms is prioritised over institutional expectations. This is a wrong lesson to be learnt at this stage since responsible citizenship-living in the larger society requires adherence and prioritisation of institutional expectations rather than peer norms. The finding here supports the study findings of Thornberg (2010) who identified informal rules rather guiding pupils' responses to bullying. These findings bring to light that addressing bullying

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requires more than enforcing rules. It demands a critical examination of the implicit messages or the hidden curriculum embedded within school cultures.

When it came to pupils' interpretation (sense-making) of bullying in school, the study found that pupils are not passive recipients of school norms but active interpreters who engage in complex sense-making processes. Pupils demonstrated an acute awareness of the contradictions between formal rules and peer expectations which led to an emergent concept that the researcher describes as a *Dual Moral Framework*. Within this framework, pupils need to navigate between institutional expectations concerning reporting, obedience, and rule-following and peer expectations concerning loyalty, silence, and self-reliance. This finding extends existing literature by drawing attention to the cognitive and moral complexity of pupils' decision-making processes. Pupils do not simply choose between right and wrong; rather, they navigate competing "rightnesses" based on context and consequences. In Ghana, there is evidence of legal pluralism (Mensah, 2021), where formal regulations and implicit societal expectations (customary norms) operate simultaneously and sometimes in tension. This demonstrates that what is legally prescribed does not always align with what is socially expected or practiced in the society, resulting in a dual moral framework. These pupils, at their current stage, are navigating this unfortunate dual moral framework, which emerges from their encounters with competing institutional and peer expectations surrounding bullying. Such experiences may contribute to pupils developing understandings of how formal expectations interact with informal social norms, although this study does not establish whether or how such understandings are carried into later life.

With respect to how pupils' interpretations of bullying shape the strategies they adopt in responding to bullying situations, a key finding was that pupils' responses to bullying, whether silence, retaliation, or adaptation, are perceived as strategic and rational, rather than purely emotional reactions. From a sense-making perspective, these responses can be understood as outcomes of interpretative processes in which pupils retrospectively and prospectively evaluate situations (Knauf & Eschenbeck, 2025; Weick, 1995). Consistent with the social-ecological perspective of Espelage and Swearer (2010), the behaviours of pupils are shaped by multiple contextual factors. This study, however, goes further by demonstrating that these behaviours are mediated through pupils' interpretations of the hidden curriculum. For instance, silence is used as a strategy to avoid social and physical risks; and retaliation is employed to assert identity and deter further victimisation. When they choose adaptation as a response to bullying, it reflects their efforts to navigate social hierarchies and maintain belonging. These findings challenge deficit-oriented views that portray pupils as passive victims or irrational actors. Instead, pupils emerge as strategic agents operating within constrained environments.

These findings suggest that the responses of pupils to bullying should be understood as context-dependent coping strategies developed in response to perceived risks, inadequate protection, and competing social expectations rather than as lessons beneficially acquired through bullying. Their responses are shaped by how they interpret the likely consequences of different courses of action

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within their immediate social environment. When pupils perceive that reporting may expose them to further victimisation, ridicule, or social exclusion, silence becomes a means of managing perceived risk rather than an indication that they accept bullying. Similarly, retaliation may emerge when pupils interpret non-retaliation as leaving them vulnerable to continued victimisation or as signalling weakness within the peer group.

Adaptation, on the other hand, may occur when pupils perceive bullying as persistent and institutional protection as uncertain. This will lead them to modify their behaviour, relationships, or expectations in order to reduce exposure to further harm. These responses therefore reflect constrained agency rather than the acquisition of desirable social competencies from bullying. Pupils actively interpret their circumstances and select responses that they perceive as offering the greatest protection, social security, or control under the conditions available to them. In this sense, the hidden curriculum operates less as a source of beneficial "lessons" and more as a context in which pupils learn which responses appear to be socially safe, institutionally viable, or personally consequential. Where formal expectations encourage reporting but peer norms attach social costs to speaking up, pupils may privilege silence; where protection is perceived as inadequate, they may resort to self-protection through retaliation or behavioural adaptation. The significance of these findings, therefore, lies not in suggesting that bullying prepares pupils for life beyond school, but in showing how harmful school experiences and contradictory social messages can shape pupils' immediate coping decisions and potentially reproduce norms that sustain the conditions in which bullying persists.

4.1 Implications of the Study

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by extending the application of the hidden curriculum to bullying research and demonstrates the value of IPA in uncovering pupils' sense-making processes. Also, it has introduced an emergent concept which the researcher termed as a *Dual Moral Framework* in pupils' decision-making. Practically, this study has implications for schools in the Effutu Municipality and other similar contexts:

1. Teachers need to be sensitised on the implicit messages their actions convey. Consistency in responding to all forms of bullying is essential.
2. Schools should foster environments where reporting is normalised and protected, reducing the stigma associated with "snitching."
3. Bullying interventions should target peer norms by promoting positive bystander behaviours and redefining notions of loyalty and strength.
4. Schools must ensure that formal anti-bullying policies are reflected in everyday practices.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

This study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved a small purposive sample drawn from only two basic schools in one municipality. Although this sampling strategy was consistent with the depth-oriented nature of IPA, the findings

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are not intended to be statistically representative of basic schools in Ghana. Second, the inclusion of one public and one private school provides contextual variation but does not permit systematic conclusions about differences between public and private schools. The observations concerning school type should therefore be interpreted as context-specific rather than generalisable differences.

Third, participants were identified with assistance from teachers, which may have introduced selection bias if teachers' knowledge of pupils influenced who was considered eligible or willing to participate. Fourth, the study relied primarily on pupils' self-reported experiences and perceptions. Accounts of bullying and teacher responses were not independently verified through observation, school records, or interviews with teachers and administrators. Consequently, the findings represent the lived interpretations of pupils rather than independently established accounts of particular incidents.

Fifth, because bullying is a sensitive topic, social desirability and concerns about peer reputation may have influenced what pupils were willing to disclose, particularly during focus group discussions. The use of FGDs may therefore have constrained disclosure of highly personal experiences despite efforts to establish confidentiality and a supportive environment. Finally, the study was conducted within a specific cultural and institutional context, and the transferability of the findings to other Ghanaian basic schools or other educational contexts depends on the extent to which those contexts share similar social norms, institutional practices, and peer dynamics.

4.3 Conclusions

The findings from the two participating basic schools in the Effutu Municipality indicate that pupils experienced bullying as an embedded aspect of everyday school life rather than merely as isolated incidents. Within these settings, pupils' interpretations of bullying were shaped not only by formal school rules but also by implicit peer expectations, perceived teacher responses, and everyday institutional practices. Pupils appeared to negotiate competing institutional and peer expectations when deciding whether and how to respond to bullying. Their reported use of silence, retaliation, avoidance, and alliance-building suggests that responses were shaped by perceived social and physical risks and by the need to maintain social belonging. The findings therefore suggest that, within the participating schools, addressing bullying requires attention to both formal anti-bullying measures and the implicit norms through which pupils learn what is considered safe, acceptable, or socially costly.

4.4 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made.

1. Based on the finding that pupils fear retaliation and being labelled "korkonsa", schools should establish confidential/safe reporting systems, develop protective follow-up mechanisms and explicitly challenge the stigma attached to reporting bullying.

2. It was found that teachers respond inconsistently to bullying cases. In view of this, schools should train teachers to recognise and respond consistently to physical, verbal and relational bullying.
3. In relation to the finding that pupils associate toughness with survival, schools should develop peer programmes that redefine strength, loyalty and courage. Schools should also integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes that build empathy, assertiveness, and conflict resolution skills to empower pupils to respond constructively.
4. Based on the finding that pupils rely heavily on peers when bullied or when avoiding bullying, schools should strengthen positive bystander and peer-support mechanisms.
5. The study found that formal rules on bullying contradict lived experiences of bullying, it is recommended that schools regularly examine whether everyday school practices reinforce the stated anti-bullying policy in the school. Moreover, schools should engage pupils in designing anti-bullying initiatives to ensure that interventions are aligned with their lived realities

DECLARATION

Data Availability: The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to institutional data protection policies. However, de-identified and anonymized data may be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest related to the conception, execution, analysis, or publication of this study. No external commercial, institutional, or personal influences affected the research process.

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Ethics Statement: This research adhered to the ethical standards and complied with global best practices for research involving human participants. All data were stored securely, anonymized during analysis, and used solely for academic purposes.

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