

# Strategic Leadership for Safer Schools: The Role of School Management Teams in Enforcing Discipline Through Anti-Bullying Policies

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teams.

**Abstract.** Bullying remains a persistent and complex issue in public schools worldwide, with serious implications for students' emotional health, academic success, and overall sense of belonging. This study examines how School Management Teams (SMTs) contribute to the enforcement of discipline, by implementing anti-bullying policies in secondary schools. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and policy document reviews across a sample of ten schools representing diverse educational contexts. Participants included 30 members of School Management Teams (SMTs), 50 educators, 100 students, and 20 parents. The findings point to the role SMTs play in shaping how anti-bullying policies are carried out on the ground. Key enablers include proactive leadership, integration of policies into the broader school development strategy, and ongoing staff training. However, common challenges such as limited resources, inconsistent rule enforcement, and community attitudes that normalize bullying often undermine these efforts. The study concludes that SMTs are essential to fostering school cultures that reject bullying and uphold student dignity. For anti-bullying initiatives to succeed, leadership must be sustained, inclusive, and supported by both internal and external stakeholders. Practical implications include the need for targeted leadership development, comprehensive stakeholder engagement, and stronger institutional support systems to embed anti-bullying efforts within everyday school life.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying in schools continues to pose major concerns to learner safety, academic participation, and the overall school climate. Despite increased global attention and the construction of anti-bullying frameworks in educational systems, there is still a gap between policy formulation and consistent implementation (Hall, 2017). School Management Teams (SMTs), which oversee both strategic direction and operational monitoring, are ideally positioned to shape how such policies are implemented in schools (Peacock, 2025). Their leadership has a substantial impact on not just enforcement techniques, but also cultural norms related to learner protection, inclusion, and discipline (Peczkowski, 2024). The changing nature of school-based violence and peer aggression necessitates adaptive leadership capable of navigating complicated relationship dynamics and institutional restrictions (Ajani, 2024). However, many SMTs have institutional and resource constraints that hinder their ability to effectively implement anti-bullying measures (Njelesani et al., 2024). Furthermore, fragmented communication and a lack of role definition among employees frequently undermine the intended impact of such regulations (Jørgensen & Ma, 2025). This article investigates the strategic function of SMTs in implementing discipline in the context of anti-bullying policy implementation. The study aims to analyse how SMTs interpret, adapt, and apply policies within their own school contexts by examining leadership styles used in secondary schools.

It also seeks to identify institutional, cultural, and systemic hurdles that prevent consistent enforcement and impact. The findings shed light on how SMTs might be better supported in creating resilient, safe, and respectful educational environments. Furthermore, the ability of SMTs to foster collaborative and proactive school environments has a significant impact on the effectiveness of anti-bullying policy implementation. According to research, when SMTs model positive conduct and encourage open communication among stakeholders, bullying occurrences are more likely to be reported and addressed (Notana & Boboyi, 2025). Professional development and continuing assistance for school leaders improves their ability to handle complicated disciplinary dynamics while integrating policy with practice (Arendse et al., 2024). However, uneven training and limited autonomy can impair their ability to respond to growing bullying behaviours (Trom, 2023). This emphasizes the need of policy frameworks that provide SMTs with strategic tools and the flexibility to tailor interventions to specific contexts (Andrews et al., 2023). Partnerships with parents, students, and community actors are also neglected, despite their proven effectiveness in fostering safer school climates (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024). As a result, strengthening SMT strategic leadership must be considered as an integrated component of whole school change rather than simply administrative enforcement (Mahler, 2025). Addressing this component is crucial for reducing the gap between policy purpose and implementation. Schools can build better long-term strategies for dealing with bullying by strengthening institutional commitment and leadership capacity.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### 2.1. Bullying as a Systemic Challenge in Africa

Bullying in African contexts goes beyond individual behavior and reflects deeply ingrained structural dysfunctions within educational and societal frameworks. Bullying in schools is linked to bigger concerns such as institutional violence, socioeconomic inequality, and a lack of effective dispute resolution procedures (Mawila et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2019). In South Africa, for example, school-based violence, including bullying, has had lethal repercussions, emphasizing the gravity of the problem. Economic differences accentuate these processes, since children from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely to be targeted (Mncube

& Chinyama, 2020). Furthermore, the absence of effective psychological support systems and insufficient teacher involvement contributes to the persistence of hostile environments in schools (WHO, 2020). With the rise of digital technology, cyberbullying has emerged as a substantial threat to adolescent well-being, particularly in countries with low digital literacy and inadequate protective measures (UNICEF, 2022). Gender-specific patterns of victimization are also visible, with boys facing more physical aggression and girls facing relational and emotional abuse (Smith et al., 2022). The psychological consequences, such as sadness, anxiety, and suicide ideation, emphasize the importance of comprehensive mental health care (WHO, 2021).

Efforts to reduce bullying have been made in several African countries, but these initiatives frequently lack sustainability, integration, and official support (O'Brien et al., 2023). Many educational policies in the region fail to recognize bullying as a developmental barrier, resulting in underreporting and insufficient institutional interventions (Mzumara, 2024). Disparities in data collection and policy execution among countries impede continental-scale attempts to address the issue (UNESCO, 2019). Cyberbullying exemplifies the mismatch between increasing technological use and inadequate digital responsibility education (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024). To address bullying as a systemic issue, multi-level changes including schools, families, and government agencies should be implemented to build safer and more inclusive learning environments (Mawila et al., 2023). Effective solutions necessitate not only behavioral treatments, but also structural reforms that address the core causes of violence and inequality within educational systems (Mncube & Chinyama, 2020). International organizations play an important role, but their efforts must be tailored to local circumstances (UNICEF, 2022). Finally, eliminating bullying in Africa necessitates a shift in viewpoint, identifying it as a symptom of wider systemic failings rather than an isolated disciplinary issue.

## 2.2. Policy Responses: From Documentation to Action

Anti-bullying measures have emerged as critical instruments for creating secure and welcoming learning environments. Such rules are built into legislation and institutional structures in many educational systems. However, there is still a persistent gap between formal documentation and effective implementation. According to research, despite clearly specified criteria, many schools struggle with consistent implementation due to inadequate teacher training, limited institutional support, and insufficient follow-up mechanisms (O'Brien et al., 2023). The lack of formal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms exacerbates the inability to quantify policy impact or make necessary changes (Cioppa et al., 2015).

Importantly, legal obligations by themselves do not guarantee significant change. A healthy school atmosphere, strong leadership, and educators who are confident and competent to intervene in bullying occurrences are frequently required for successful implementation (O'Brien et al., 2023). Translating policy into practical, context-sensitive action necessitates a comprehensive approach based on evidence-based solutions. Successful interventions frequently include social-emotional learning, inclusive student participation, and culturally relevant approaches (Zhou & Hassan, 2024). For example, in South Africa, localized adaptations of anti-bullying frameworks that address broader societal concerns like community violence or inequality have increased their relevance and impact (Mncube & Chinyama, 2020). Involving students in the formulation and evaluation of anti-bullying policies encourages ownership and accountability. Furthermore, ongoing engagement among educators, parents, and community stakeholders improves implementation and ensures continuity beyond the school walls (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024). Finally, without proper resources, training, and accountability systems, even the best-intentioned policies risk remaining rhetorical rather than actionable.

## 2.3. Leadership and the Role of SMTs

Strategic leadership is essential for ensuring safe learning environments, with School Management Teams (SMTs) playing important roles in formulating and enforcing anti-bullying policies. Effective SMTs take a proactive approach, incorporating anti-bullying strategies into overall school improvement plans and cultivating a culture of respect and accountability (Leithwood et al., 2020). They are responsible for creating, disseminating, and implementing discipline frameworks that are consistent with national education policy and child safety requirements. Harris and Jones (2020) emphasize the need of distributive leadership, which involves SMTs working with all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and students, to develop preventive activities. SMTs use systematic data to find trends, track occurrences, and tailor therapies to context-specific issues. Yuxuan (2023) found that SMTs use digital channels strategically for anonymous reporting and awareness campaigns. Critically, SMTs promote a whole-school approach to discipline, combining anti-bullying policy implementation with emotional literacy programs and restorative justice methods. Reduced bullying instances and better student well-being have been connected to leadership visibility, consistency in enforcing regulations, and modeling of inclusive behavior (Hall, 2017). As a result of their strategic orientation, SMTs can function as visionaries of a safe, caring school climate, rather than just regulatory enforcers.

Contemporary literature emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive leadership in tackling bullying, particularly in diverse or marginalized educational systems. According to Juan et al. (2025), SMTs must be sensitive to the cultural and socioeconomic aspects that influence bullying practices and disciplinary responses. Inclusive policy design, coordinated by SMTs, ensures that anti-bullying methods are equitable, avoiding disproportionate penalties for disadvantaged groups. According to Mulyani et al. (2020), SMTs that incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) into school discipline frameworks see greater lasting behavioral change among students. Strategic leadership also entails continuous capacity building, with SMTs facilitating teacher training on conflict resolution and early detection of bullying signals. Zhao (2020) highlights the growing involvement of SMTs in crisis leadership, notably during disruptive events such as COVID-19, when cyberbullying and online misconduct increased. In response, SMTs modified their strategic tools to include digital citizenship education and virtual policy enforcement measures. Furthermore, SMTs promote accountability through frequent audits, stakeholder feedback, and open reporting methods. Overall, this literature indicates that SMTs, when equipped with strategic insight, cultural competency, and collaborative abilities, are critical to create safe, disciplined, and inclusive school environments through effective anti-bullying leadership.

## 2.4. Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded on Transformational Leadership Theory and School Climate Theory, which provide a holistic lens for understanding how School Management Teams (SMTs) may strategically manage discipline enforcement and minimize bullying in schools.

### 2.4.1. Transformational Leadership Theory

Bass (1985) established Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes leaders' ability to motivate followers to choose communal goals over self-interest, hence encouraging ethical behavior and higher performance. School Management Teams (SMTs) exemplify transformational leadership by inspiring staff and students to work together to create a secure, inclusive, and bully-free environment. The theory identifies four key leadership behaviors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and customized concern (Bass & Riggio 2006). SMTs serving as moral role models (idealized influence) promote anti-bullying attitudes and establish explicit behavioral norms. Inspirational motivation is articulating a compelling vision that inspires group responsibility for preserving a positive school culture. Intellectual stimulation encourages creative problem solving and challenges prevailing disciplinary norms. Individualized attention addresses the emotional and behavioral needs of both victims and perpetrators using restorative and punishing tactics. These leadership strategies foster widespread commitment to anti-bullying measures and ensure consistent discipline enforcement. Furthermore, transformational leadership promotes stakeholder trust, respect, and collaboration, hence increasing policy legitimacy and accountability. While some critics point to idealization and ambiguous causal linkages (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), this study considers follower behavior and institutional context to better understand SMTs' impact on school safety and discipline outcomes.

### 2.4.2. School Climate Theory

School Climate Theory focuses on the social, emotional, and physical characteristics of the school environment that influence student conduct and safety (Cohen et al., 2009). It encompasses factors such as safety, relationships, educational approaches, and the physical environment (Thapa et al. 2013). A pleasant school climate promotes student well-being, academic achievement, and effective behavior management (Wang & Degol, 2016). Physical and mental safety are critical; pupils who feel protected are less likely to misbehave (Molinari & Grazia, 2023). Fair and consistent discipline enforcement is critical to preserving this good environment (Thapa et al., 2013). According to Gregory et al. (2011), discipline includes teaching respect, justice, and belonging in addition to punishment. Positive climates also reduce bullying risks by promoting emotional safety, which is critical for resilience and achievement (DuPaul, 2003; Cornell & Huang, 2016).

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do School Management Teams (SMTs) implement anti-bullying policies within the framework of daily school governance practices?
2. In what ways are the strategies employed by SMTs perceived to be effective in promoting discipline and reducing bullying incidents?
3. What institutional, cultural, or structural challenges hinder the consistent enforcement of anti-bullying policies in schools?
4. What evidence-based recommendations can be derived to strengthen the leadership capacity of SMTs in addressing bullying through strategic policy implementation?

## 4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this study is to explore how SMTs contribute to enforcing anti-bullying policies within the broader framework of school discipline. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. To investigate how SMTs implement anti-bullying policies in day-to-day school governance.
2. To assess the perceived effectiveness of these strategies in promoting discipline.
3. To identify institutional, cultural, or structural barriers to policy enforcement.
4. To offer evidence-based recommendations to enhance the leadership capacity of SMTs in this area.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

### 5.1. Research Design

To capture a comprehensive understanding of the topic, a mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data provided insight into patterns and prevalence, while qualitative data offered depth and context to leadership practices and school culture.

### 5.2. Sample and Context

The study was conducted in ten secondary schools, selected for diversity in terms of geography (urban and rural), governance (public and semi-private), and demographic composition. Participants included 30 SMT members, 50 educators, 100 learners, and 20 parents. This allowed for a well-rounded exploration of perspectives across stakeholder groups.

### 5.3. Data Collection Tools and Procedures

The research engaged a diverse cohort drawn from ten secondary schools, thoughtfully selected to capture a broad spectrum of contexts. These schools varied in location, spanning urban and rural areas, as well as governance, encompassing both public and semi-private institutions. Participants included 30 members of School Management Teams (SMTs), 50 educators, 100 students, and 20 parents. This range of voices provided a well-rounded perspective on how anti-bullying policies are experienced and enacted across different school communities.

To collect comprehensive data, a multi-method approach was employed:

Surveys were distributed to students, educators, and parents to capture quantitative data on the frequency of bullying incidents, perceptions of disciplinary practices, and levels of awareness regarding anti-bullying policies. The surveys combined structured, scaled questions with open-ended prompts, allowing participants to share reflections in their own words.

Semi-structured interviews with SMT members offered deeper insight into leadership roles, the strategies adopted in enforcing policies, and the challenges faced in daily governance. The interview format allowed for flexible dialogue, encouraging participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring coverage of key themes.

Document analysis involved a careful review of each school’s anti-bullying policies, disciplinary records, and strategic plans. This examination helped to evaluate the alignment between official policy frameworks and their application in practice.

### 5.3.1. Quantitative Survey Presentation and Analysis of Findings

#### 5.3.1.1. Frequency of Bullying Incidents

- Students (n = 100):
- 32% reported experiencing bullying at least once a week.
- 47% observed others being bullied at school regularly.
- Only 38% felt confident reporting incidents to staff.

#### 5.3.1.2. Perceived Policy Awareness and Effectiveness

- Educators (n = 50):
- 82% indicated awareness of the school’s anti-bullying policy.
- 56% believed the policy is “sometimes” enforced consistently.
- Parents (n = 20):
- 40% were aware of the school’s anti-bullying protocols.
- 65% expressed uncertainty about whether their children were protected from bullying.

#### 5.3.1.3. Role of SMTs in Policy Enforcement

- 76% of educators reported that SMTs play a “visible but reactive” role.
- Only 18% of students felt SMTs were “actively involved” in preventing bullying.

### 5.3.2. Qualitative Interview Presentation and Analysis of Findings (Saldaña Coding Process)

| First Cycle: Initial Codes  | Second Cycle: Pattern Codes    | Emergent Themes                       | Subthemes   |
|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| “Depends on the principal”<br>“Reactive not proactive”                      | Leadership inconsistency       | Leadership Visibility and Variability | a) Dependence on principal leadership<br>b) Inconsistency in SMT role execution               |
| “Policy on paper, not in action”<br>“No clear steps”<br>“Lack of follow-up” | Gaps in enforcement culture    | Policy-Practice Disconnect            | a) Poor communication of policies<br>b) Absence of monitoring systems                         |
| “Parents disengaged”<br>“Learners don’t report”<br>“Teachers overwhelmed”   | Limited stakeholder engagement | Stakeholder Disengagement             | a) Cultural normalization of bullying<br>b) Student fear of retaliation<br>c) Parental apathy |
| “We lack training”<br>“Not enough support staff”<br>“Short on time”         | Resource and training deficits | Resource and Training Limitations     | a) Lack of staff development opportunities<br>b) Staff overload and multitasking              |

Each theme is elaborated below with illustrative quotes and linked back to the survey data.

#### Theme 1: Leadership Visibility and Variability

The impact of school leadership on policy implementation was evident. SMTs’ proactive behavior led to clearer protocols, while in other cases, discipline was inconsistently enforced.

| Participant          | Quoted Response   | Linked Subtheme                     |
|----------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| SMT Member A         | “We have the policy, but unless the principal pushes it, nothing really happens.” | Dependence on principal leadership  |
| Deputy Principal B   | “Some SMT members are very active, others are just names on paper.”               | Inconsistency in SMT role execution |
| Principal C          | “If I don’t bring it up in meetings, nobody follows up on bullying reports.”      | Dependence on principal leadership  |
| SMT Member D         | “There’s no consistent message—we each manage things our own way.”                | Inconsistency in SMT role execution |
| Head of Department E | “When leadership is visible, staff take the policy more seriously.”               | Dependence on principal leadership  |

This theme aligns with the quantitative result that 76% of educators viewed SMTs as “visible but reactive.”

## Theme 2: Policy-Practice Disconnect

Though schools formally adopted anti-bullying policies, execution was fragmented. Documents lacked clarity, and staff expressed confusion about procedures.

Table 1: Illustrative SMT Responses on Policy-Practice Disconnect.

| Participant          | Quoted Response  | Linked Subtheme                |
|----------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| SMT Member A         | "The rules are there, but no one explains how to follow them."   | Poor communication of policies |
| Principal B          | "We have anti-bullying guidelines, but they're buried in general policy documents that staff rarely read." | Poor communication of policies |
| Deputy Principal C   | "There's no checklist or timeline for how to respond when a bullying case is reported."                    | Absence of monitoring systems  |
| Head of Department D | "Different staff members handle things in different ways—there's no standard approach."                    | Absence of monitoring systems  |
| SMT Member E         | "We talk about the policy during staff meetings, but there's little training on how to implement it."      | Poor communication of policies |

Only 4 out of 10 schools communicated their policies clearly to students, supporting this theme with strong evidence from both data sources.

## Theme 3: Stakeholder Disengagement

Limited involvement from learners and parents reduced the effectiveness of policy enforcement. Cultural norms in some communities contributed to minimization of bullying concerns.

Table 2: Illustrative SMT Responses on Policy-Practice Disconnect

| Participant          | Quoted Response   | Linked Subtheme                    |
|----------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Principal A          | "Some parents think bullying is just part of growing up."                                   | Cultural normalization of bullying |
| SMT Member B         | "Even when we invite parents to discuss these issues, the turnout is very low."             | Parental apathy                    |
| Head of Department C | "Learners are afraid to report bullying because they think it will just make things worse." | Student fear of retaliation        |
| Deputy Principal D   | "We send circulars and messages home, but most parents don't respond or follow up."         | Parental apathy                    |
| SMT Member E         | "Many learners say, 'What's the point of reporting? Nothing changes.'"                      | Student fear of retaliation        |

With only 38% of students feeling safe reporting bullying and 40% of parents aware of the policy, this theme strongly reflects the survey results.

## Theme 4: Resource and Training Limitations

SMTs frequently cited a lack of training and staffing as major barriers to policy enforcement. The following were their responses:

Table 3: Illustrative SMT Responses on Resource and Training Limitations.

| Participant          | Quoted Response  | Linked Subtheme                         |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Deputy Principal A   | "We're managing too many roles; discipline often falls through the cracks."                        | Staff overload and multitasking         |
| Principal B          | "Most of us haven't had any formal training in bullying prevention, just general school policies." | Lack of staff development opportunities |
| SMT Member C         | "We don't have a dedicated counselor, and our teachers are already stretched thin."                | Staff overload and multitasking         |
| SMT Member D         | "Training is usually a once-off event. There's no follow-up or practical support after that."      | Lack of staff development opportunities |
| Head of Department E | "Sometimes, we simply don't have enough people on duty to monitor behavior during breaks."         | Staff overload and multitasking         |

This was further supported by document reviews indicating only two schools conducted recent anti-bullying workshops.



## 5.4. Summary Table of Coding and Themes

| Saldaña Coding Stage | Category/Code  | Theme                                 | Subthemes   |
|----------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| Initial Coding       | "Depends on the principal"<br>"Reactive not proactive"                     | Leadership Visibility and Variability | Principal-driven enforcement<br>Inconsistent SMT leadership                       |
| Initial Coding       | "Policy on paper"<br>"Lack of follow-up"                                   | Policy-Practice Disconnect            | Poor communication of policy<br>No policy monitoring                              |
| Initial Coding       | "Parents disengaged"<br>"Learners don't report"                            | Stakeholder Disengagement             | Cultural normalization of bullying<br>Student silence due to fear                 |
| Initial Coding       | "Teachers overwhelmed"<br>"We lack training"<br>"Not enough support staff" | Resource and Training Limitations     | Educator role fatigue<br>Lack of professional development<br>Resource constraints |

This dual-method analysis, anchored in Saldaña’s qualitative rigor and reinforced by quantitative data, offers a deeply layered view of how anti-bullying policies are interpreted, applied, and perceived across school communities. It emphasizes the pressing need for targeted leadership development, more inclusive policy communication, and sustainable resource allocation.

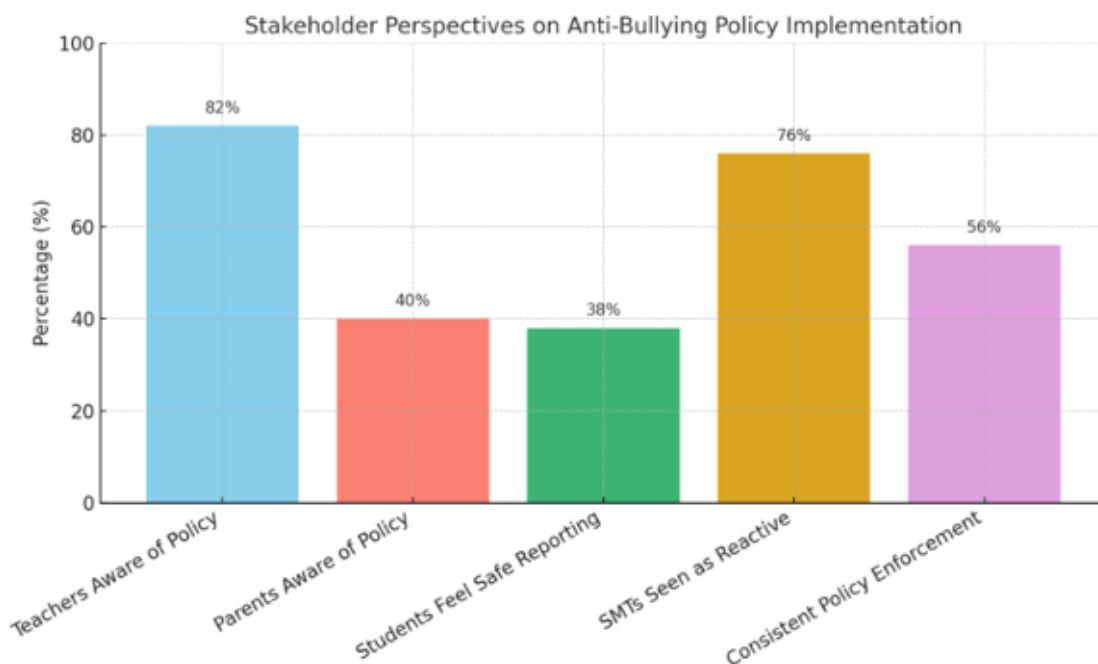


Figure 1: Stakeholders’ Perspectives on Antibullying Policy Implementation.

## 5.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative responses were analysed using basic descriptive statistics to identify trends and variations. Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data, following the coding procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Emerging themes were compared across schools to detect patterns in strategic leadership and policy enforcement.

## 6. FINDINGS

### 6.1. Strategic Leadership Practices

Several key practices emerged as hallmarks of effective SMT engagement:

- **Leadership Visibility:** Schools where principals and senior staff took active roles in addressing bullying, through assemblies, classroom visits, or direct communication with students, saw stronger policy adherence.
- **Policy Integration:** Where anti-bullying strategies were aligned with broader school development plans, they were more likely to receive consistent attention and support.
- **Staff Training and Support:** SMTs that prioritized staff development helped build a shared understanding of bullying and empowered teachers to intervene confidently.

### 6.2. Barriers to Effective Implementation

Despite good intentions, a range of challenges hindered policy effectiveness:

- **Resource Limitations:** Most schools lacked adequate counselling services, trained staff, and monitoring tools.
- **Inconsistent Enforcement:** Discrepancies in how different staff members applied rules often led to perceptions of unfairness or inaction.
- **Cultural Resistance:** In some communities, bullying behaviours were normalized, making it difficult to shift attitudes without broader community engagement.

### 6.3. Outcomes on School Climate and Discipline

Schools with strategic SMT involvement reported:

- A decrease in repeat bullying incidents.
- Improved learner confidence in approaching staff.
- Enhanced cooperation between school and home in addressing behavioral issues.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The study illustrates that SMTs are not merely administrative bodies but are central to the cultivation of a school culture that actively resists bullying. Their leadership shapes not only how policies are enacted but also how safety, respect, and responsibility are communicated throughout the school community. When SMTs take ownership of anti-bullying initiatives, they are better positioned to lead with consistency and moral authority. However, structural and social challenges, especially lack of resources and cultural normalization of bullying, must be addressed for policies to be truly transformative.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following actions are proposed to strengthen SMT capacity:

1. Ongoing Leadership Development: Include strategic policy enforcement and conflict management in leadership training programs for SMTs.
2. Enhanced Monitoring and Evaluation: Develop clear benchmarks and regular review mechanisms to assess policy impact.
3. Learner-Centered Initiatives: Support student-led advocacy and peer mentorship programs to promote reporting and inclusivity.
4. Community Partnerships: Engage families and local leaders in anti-bullying campaigns to shift cultural perceptions.
5. Integrated Policy Frameworks: Ensure anti-bullying policies are not isolated documents but are embedded within the school's overall development and disciplinary structures.

## 9. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry important implications for educational leadership, policy-making, and systemic school improvement. Firstly, they highlight the need for schools to reconceptualize discipline not as punitive control, but as a shared responsibility rooted in preventative leadership. SMTs should be recognized and supported as change agents capable of transforming school cultures through values-driven governance.

Secondly, at the policy level, Ministries of Education and school governing bodies must ensure that anti-bullying measures are not only mandated but are supported by resources, training, and mechanisms for accountability. The success of any school policy hinges on the institutional will and leadership skills of those tasked with its implementation.

Finally, the research underscores the necessity for a whole-school approach one that aligns leadership, curriculum, stakeholder engagement, and community norms in a coherent strategy for learner safety. Schools cannot address bullying in isolation; systemic support is essential to sustaining safe and inclusive environments.

## 10. CONCLUSION

School Management Teams (SMTs) play an important role in the successful implementation of anti-bullying policies in secondary schools. Although formal policies exist to safeguard students, their practical effectiveness is usually undermined by institutional constraints, ambiguous duties, and disconnected communication. SMTs are well-positioned to address this gap by using flexible leadership techniques, encouraging stakeholder cooperation, and personalizing strategies to their specific school settings. To realize this potential, however, comprehensive support mechanisms are required, including continued professional development, increased decision-making freedom, and active interaction with families, students, and the larger community. Rather than perceiving SMTs as policy implementers, it is critical to see them as change agents capable of establishing inclusive and supportive school cultures. Building their leadership skills is critical to developing long-term, effective responses to bullying. Schools can achieve long-term, substantial gains in learner safety and school atmosphere by adopting a holistic approach that goes beyond policy purpose.

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