ISSN Online: 3006-4708
ISSN Print: 3006-4694
SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW ARCHIVES
https://policyjournalofms.com

Role of School Climate and Teacher Support in Preventing Bullying in Urban Secondary Schools

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1786

Abstract
Bullying in urban secondary schools remains a critical issue, influenced by socioeconomic disparities and community stressors, with significant implications for student well-being and academic outcomes. This review synthesizes empirical and theoretical evidence on the role of school climate a construct encompassing relationships, safety, teaching and learning, and institutional environment and teacher support in mitigating peer aggression. Drawing on frameworks such as Social-Ecological Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and bullying as "destructive communal coping," the analysis highlights how positive school climates foster connectedness, clear norms, and emotional security, reducing victimization by up to 30–50% in targeted interventions. Teacher support, through autonomy-supportive practices and proactive management, enhances bystander intervention and student engagement. Evidence from programs like Second Step and STAC-T demonstrates that integrated strategies, including policy enforcement and professional development, yield sustained reductions in bullying (e.g., 20–40% in urban districts). Recommendations emphasize systemic reforms tailored to urban contexts, including trauma-informed training and community partnerships, to promote equitable, safe learning environments.

Keywords: School Climate, Teacher Support, Bullying Prevention, Urban Secondary Schools, Social-Ecological Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Peer Aggression, Bystander Intervention, Autonomy-Supportive Teaching, Safe Supportive Learning Environments

1. Introduction

The pervasive nature of school bullying within urban secondary education necessitates a rigorous examination of the ecological and interpersonal variables that either exacerbate or mitigate peer aggression (Lee et al., 2021). Urban secondary schools operate within a unique socio-educational matrix, characterized by high student density, significant socioeconomic disparities, and frequent exposure to community-level stressors that inevitably permeate the school gates. Within this context, school climate a multifaceted construct encompassing safety, engagement, and the institutional environment emerges as a primary determinant of student well-being and behavioral outcomes (U.S. Dep of Edu, 2009). Concurrently, teacher support, manifesting through both high-quality interpersonal relationships and proactive classroom management, serves as the critical linchpin for effective bullying prevention (Yu et al., 2022).

2. The Multifaceted Construct of School Climate in Urban Education

School climate describes the collective conditions that influence student learning, integrating the school's

physical environment, the psychological safety of its members, and the quality of engagement across the school community. A positive school climate is not merely the absence of violence but a proactive state where the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students are effectively addressed (Bradshaw et al., 2021). For urban secondary students, the school often represents a central microsystem where complex social hierarchies are negotiated. When this climate is positive, students are more likely to develop trusting relationships with peers and educators, leading to improved academic performance and reduced engagement in destructive behaviors (Ey & Campbell, 2022).

2.1 Dimensions of the School Climate Framework

The conceptualization of school climate adopted by the United States Department of Education (USDOE) identifies four primary pillars: relationships, safety, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment

Table 1: Dimensions of the School Climate Framework

Climate Dimension	Functional Definition and Components	Impact on Peer Aggression and Bullying
Relationships	The quality of interpersonal connections, respect for diversity, and school connectedness (Adams & Roach, 2023; NC2S, 2024).	High levels of connectedness increase bystander intervention ("defending") and decrease relational aggression (Waasdorp et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022).
Safety	Protection from physical and emotional risk; clarity of school rules, norms, and behavioral expectations (NC2S, 2024; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2022).	Clear rules and a sense of emotional security reduce victimization and encourage help-seeking behavior (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2022).
Teaching and Learning	The academic experience fostering engagement, skill-building, and professional development (NC2S, 2024	Supportive learning environments reduce student alienation and the boredom that often precipitates bullying Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2022).
Institutional Environment	Physical school conditions, resource availability, and organizational culture (Ey & Campbell, 2022; NC2S, 2024).	Well-maintained facilities and active supervision signal adult control and deter violence (Ey & Campbell, 2022; Astor et al., 1999; Fram & Dickmann, 2012).

3. Theoretical Frameworks for Urban Bullying Prevention

Understanding bullying in urban secondary schools requires systemic, ecological perspectives. Several theoretical frameworks provide depth to analyze the complex interactions between urban students and their environments (Sakroni, 2025). The interaction of ecological systems, psychological needs, and institutional structures suggests a multilevel pathway through which bullying behaviors are either reinforced or disrupted. Figure 1 illustrates this integrated ecological model linking urban stressors, school climate, teacher support, and student behavioral outcomes.

3.1 Social-Ecological Theory

Social-Ecological Theory posits that student behavior results from reciprocal interactions between individuals and the environmental systems they inhabit (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In this framework, bullying is viewed as a social phenomenon regulated by group status concerns and social contextual forces (Sutter et al., 2023).

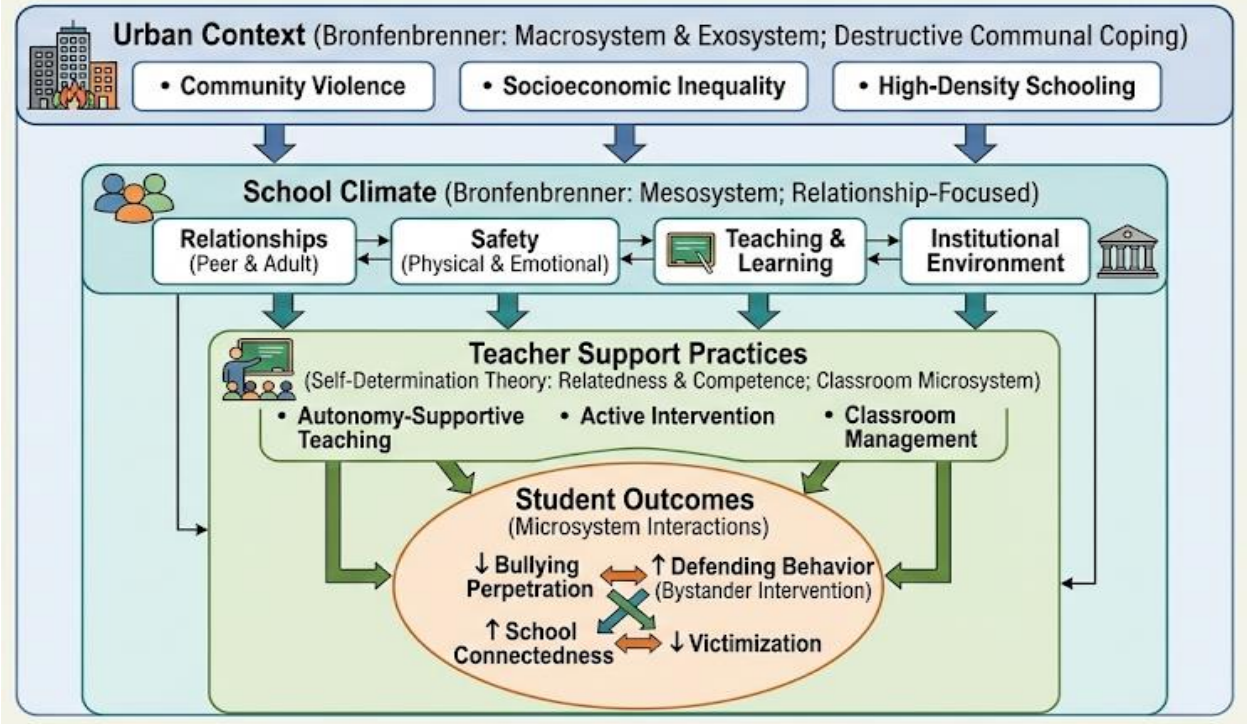
3.2 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy-supportive teaching (AST) can reduce aggression by creating an egalitarian classroom climate, When students experience autonomy satisfaction, they are less likely to participate in "mobbing" and more likely to intervene as "upstanders" (Vasconcellos et al., 2020).

3.3 Bullying as Destructive Communal Coping

A novel conceptualization views school bullying as a form of stress response within the school community, specifically identified as "destructive communal coping" (Sahin & Yildiz, 2024). External stressors can disrupt the integrity of the school community, leading members to rally around an artificially created confrontation with an "identified stressor" (a particular child or group), thereby reducing their own emotional tension (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As showed in figure 1. Ecological Model Linking Urban School Climate and Teacher Support to Bullying Outcomes.

Figure 1 – Integrated Ecological Model of Bullying in Urban Secondary Schools



4. The Urban Socioeconomic Matrix and its Impact on Safety

Urban schools face stressors rooted in the concentration of poverty and community-level violence. Students in high-poverty urban schools are significantly more likely to reside in neighborhoods where they observe criminal activity, which is a primary predictor of bullying (Evans & Smokowski, 2015).

Table 2: Comparison of Predictors and Protective Factors by Community Type

Community Type	Dominant Predictor of Bullying	Primary Protective Factor
Large Urban Centers	Student delinquent behaviors; high dispersion of bullying indices (Evans & Smokowski,	School social climate; institutional interventions (Evans & Smokowski,

	2015).	2015).
Smaller Towns / Rural	Neighborhood social capital; localized social bonds (Evans & Smokowski, 2015).	Neighborhood bonding capital; social cohesion (Evans & Smokowski, 2015).

4.1 Physical Environment and "Unowned" Spaces

Bullying frequently clusters in "hotspots" areas perceived as unowned by adults, such as stairwells and large playgrounds. Environmental design strategies must eliminate these pockets of risk to enhance student-adult interaction (Fram & Dickmann, 2012).

5. Teacher Support as a Strategic Intervention Point

Teachers serve as the primary "social guardians" in the classroom. Teacher support includes the quality of the student-teacher relationship and the efficacy of intervention strategies (Thornberg et al., 2024).

Table 3: Teacher Intervention Profiles and Associations with Bullying

Intervention Profile	Characteristics and Strategy Use	Association with Bullying
Highly Active (62%)	Low non-intervention; high disciplinary methods; strong victim support (Thornberg et al., 2024).	Associated with the greatest reduction in bullying and highest safety ratings
Moderately Active (32%)	Low non-intervention; moderate use of active strategies (Thornberg et al., 2024).	Mixed results; requires more consistency to be effective
Passive (6%)	Moderate to high non-intervention; low use of active strategies	Linked to increased bullying and student acceptance of aggression

6. Challenges for Marginalized Youth: The "Healthy Context Paradox"

Urban secondary schools are characterized by extreme diversity, which presents challenges regarding identity-based bullying. The "healthy context paradox" describes how a positive school climate can paradoxically worsen the mental health of victimized students as they compare themselves to non-victimized peers and engage in self-blame (Weeks & Sullivan, 2024; Berkowitz et al., 2023).

Table 4: Identity-Based Risks and Policy Implications for Marginalized Groups

Marginalized Group	Specific Risk and Climate Factors	Policy Implications
LGBTQ+ Youth	Higher rates of suicide attempts and in-person bullying	Policies must specifically enumerate anti-LGBTQ+ protections
Youth with Disabilities	Black girls with IEPs report lower social support in urban settings (Adams & Roach, 2023).	Interventions must address the intersection of race, gender, and disability (Adams & Roach, 2023).
Low-SES Students	More than twice as likely to have multiple adverse childhood experiences	Needs-based support and trauma-informed practices are essential (Yoo et al., 2025)

7. Evaluative Review of Bullying Prevention Programs

The effectiveness of school-based anti-bullying programs varies by design and implementation fidelity (Farrington & Ttofi, 2021).

7.1 The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP)

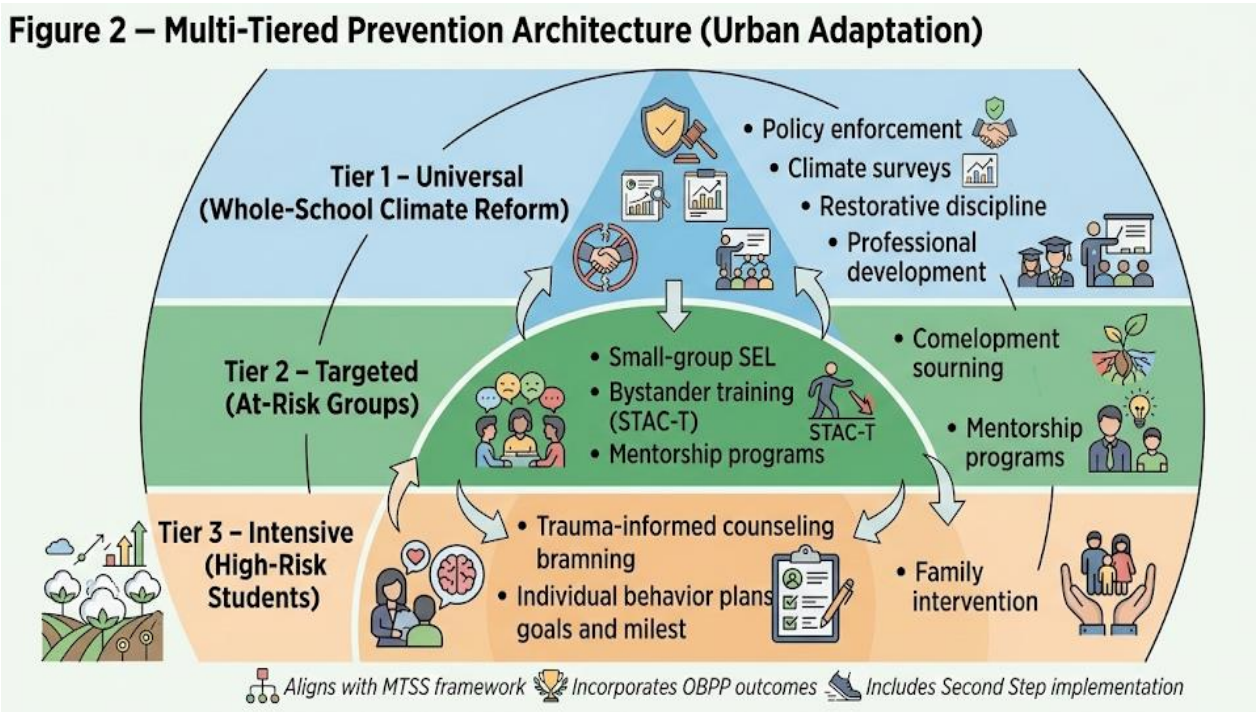
An eight-year study in US urban middle schools serving low-income, predominantly African American populations revealed significant decreases in aggression and victimization (Farrell et al., 2021).

Table 5: Timeline of Outcomes for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP)

Timing of Effects	Outcome Category	Statistical / Observational Findings
Years 1-2	Victimization	Significant decreases in physical and relational victimization (Farrell et al., 2021).
Year 3	Aggression	Reductions in perpetration (bullying others) remained significant (Farrell et al., 2021).
Long-term	Community Safety	17 percent reduction in the risk of violent crime in surrounding zones (Farrell et al., 2021).

8. Policy Implications and Institutional Architecture

Anti-bullying policies set the foundation for safety efforts (Hall, 2017). Effective policies in urban districts should emphasize restorative practices and mandatory reporting rather than punitive "zero-tolerance" measures, which often disproportionately affect marginalized youth (Adams & Roach, 2023). To ensure success, schools must conduct regular needs assessments, provide ongoing professional development, and prioritize teacher self-care (Yoo et al., 2025; JRI, 2025). Effective bullying prevention in urban secondary schools requires a coordinated, multi-tiered institutional strategy rather than isolated classroom interventions. Figure 2 presents a prevention architecture that aligns universal climate reform, teacher-led practices, and intensive supports within a cohesive system. As showed in figure 2. Multi-Tiered Prevention Architecture for Bullying Reduction in Urban Secondary Schools.



9. Future Frontiers: Cyberbullying and the Digital Realm

By 2025, cyberbullying has officially overtaken in-person bullying, with 46 percent of teens reporting online harassment. Relational aggression is often facilitated by AI-generated content and the metaverse (Ey & Campbell, 2022). Despite this digital shift, the presence of a "trusted adult" remains the core protective factor, making students 40 percent more resilient to the effects of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001).

10. Conclusion

School climate and teacher support are indispensable pillars in combating bullying within urban secondary schools, where ecological stressors amplify peer aggression. By cultivating strong relationships, enforcing clear safety norms, and integrating autonomy-supportive pedagogical practices, educators can disrupt cycles of victimization and foster resilient, inclusive communities. Theoretical insights underscore bullying as a systemic response to unmet needs, necessitating multifaceted interventions that empower "upstanders" and address root causes. Empirical successes from evidence-based programs affirm that targeted professional development and policy alignment can achieve meaningful reductions in incidence, ultimately enhancing student social-emotional outcomes and academic equity. Future efforts must prioritize urban-specific adaptations, ongoing evaluation, and cross-sector collaboration to sustain these gains amid evolving societal challenges.

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