



Anti-Bullying Efforts in the United Arab Emirates: A Qualitative Analysis of Policy Makers' Perspectives

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Abstract

In 2018, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) launched an anti-bullying national strategy to address this pressing issue and to implement measures to combat it. The main aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of policymakers and those involved in the strategy and implementation to inform the design of an efficient and effective system for the prevention of bullying. The study used a qualitative exploratory method following a theory of program development approach. Semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted with policymakers and other stakeholders from the National Bullying Prevention Committee to evaluate their experience, views, actions, and plans to fight bullying in the UAE. The recorded interviews were translated, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using the NVivo qualitative analysis software. A total of 27 interviews were included in this study. Data saturation was achieved after the 20th interview. Additional interviews were conducted to enhance the robustness of the findings. Four major themes were coded based on the theory of change: “*Status Quo in anti-bullying efforts*,” “*Need for in-depth evaluation*,” “*Existing challenges*,” and “*Recommendations for enhancement*.” The findings of this study emphasized that despite the implementation of anti-bullying programs in the UAE, there is still a gap due to a lack of coordination among stakeholders and a clear mechanism to report bullying incidents. Unified and effective intervention policies following a precise pathway can contribute to reducing bullying nationwide.

Keywords School bullying · National anti-bullying strategy · Stakeholders perspectives · Policymakers · UAE

Introduction

Bullying is a multifaceted issue that encompasses physical, verbal, psychological, and cyber forms of aggression. It often targets vulnerable individuals, leading to significant psychological, social, and academic consequences (CDC, 2024; Olweus, 2013). While bullying is recognized as a global public health challenge, its dynamics and prevalence

vary across cultural and socioeconomic contexts, making region-specific studies vital (Moore et al., 2018). This is particularly relevant in diverse and multicultural environments where factors such as gender, ethnicity, vulnerability, and duration of residency can significantly influence bullying dynamics (Beydoun et al., 2017, Kamal et al., 2023).

Globally, bullying is associated with mental health consequences such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation,

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as well as reduced academic performance and social difficulties (Brendgen, 2018). Studies have also linked bullying to broader societal inequalities, with higher prevalence observed in regions experiencing significant socioeconomic disparities (Biswas et al., 2020; Due et al., 2009; Jadambaa et al., 2019). The Middle Eastern and African regions, for instance, report some of the highest bullying rates globally, yet there remains a dearth of focused research addressing the issue in these contexts (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010). Factors such as being male, having a below-average socioeconomic status, and being younger were associated with an increase in the likelihood of being bullied. In contrast, strong peer and parental support were associated with a lower bullying risk (Jadambaa et al., 2019).

In Australia, a 2017 meta-analysis showed that one in four students had experienced bullying (Vazsonyi et al., 2012). Similar trends have been identified in various studies conducted in the UK (Przybylski & Bowes, 2017). In the Arab world, the available data show a similar trend. For example, in Egypt, 67.5% of students reported experiencing bullying (Alsaleem et al., 2021), whereas in Saudi Arabia, the percentage of secondary school students who experienced bullying was 64.7% (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010).

In contrast, research from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) revealed a significantly lower prevalence, with 20–36% of students reporting bullying experiences (Alomosh et al., 2019; Al-Ketbi et al. 2024a).

In educational institutions, teachers' attitudes, students' behaviors, and the overall classroom environment stand out as primary indicators of bullying prevalence. A hostile classroom environment can exacerbate bullying and victimization, as observed in schools in the USA (Hektner & Swenson, 2012). Studies from Finland have reported a notable knowledge gap among teachers concerning bullying and a lack of effective strategies to combat it (Salmivalli, 2018). Moreover, research in Hong Kong suggests that gender of students may influence the type of aggression, victimization, and response to bullying, highlighting the need for gender-differentiated interventions (Fung, 2021).

Successful school-based interventions may reduce both in-school bullying and cyberbullying (Chen et al., 2020). Kennedy et al. (2012) reported the teachers' beliefs on their critical role in prevention efforts and expressed a need for more training, while administrators felt more comfortable engaging with parents of victims.

A program such as *Media Heroes* in the USA, which enhances media literacy and critical thinking to prevent cyberbullying through structured lessons and discussions (Gaffney et al., 2019); *ConRed* in Spain, which promotes responsible internet use and social-emotional learning through teacher-led activities and peer engagement (Bowllan, 2011); *NoTrap!* in Italy, a peer-led program that trains

students to intervene in bullying incidents and foster empathy (Del Rey et al., 2016); and the *ViSC program* in Austria, which focuses on social competence training through teacher development and structured classroom activities (OECD, 2018), have been implemented to address bullying. Despite their efforts, these interventions have shown varying effectiveness in reducing bullying prevalence (Bowllan, 2011; Del Rey et al., 2016; Gaffney et al., 2019; OECD, 2018).

In the UAE, bullying is a growing concern, particularly within the diverse and multicultural student population. Although recent national surveys indicate that approximately 36% of students experience bullying and an earlier study showed that 20% of students reported being bullied, there is limited qualitative research exploring the underlying causes, cultural factors, and systemic barriers specific to the UAE (Alomosh et al., 2019; Al-Ketbi et al., 2024a). Additionally, the multilingual and socioeconomically varied population presents unique challenges for implementing effective anti-bullying interventions.

The UAE launched its National Bullying Prevention Strategy in 2018, led by the Ministry of Education (MOE), in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations. The initiative aims to prevent and address bullying by raising awareness, educating students, and training teachers and parents (Ministry of Education, 2023). The strategy includes workshops, lectures, and interactive activities to empower stakeholders in bullying prevention. Additionally, the National Policy for the Prevention of Bullying in Educational Institutions provides guidelines for cyberbullying prevention, intervention strategies, and reporting mechanisms (ADEK, 2024). A recent scoping review showed that 59% of anti-bullying interventions in the UAE were government-funded, eight were at the federal level, and six were by private stakeholders. Four interventions addressed cyberbullying, and three involved multi-sectoral collaboration. The review concludes that while the UAE is developing its capacity for bullying prevention, there is limited knowledge of existing efforts, highlighting the need for further studies to assess current interventions, strategies, and policies (Al-Ketbi et al., 2024b).

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in aligning with international best practices. The Wadeema Law (Federal Law No. 3 of 2016) establishes a child protection framework, yet gaps in data sharing, coordination, and evaluation limit its effectiveness (UAE Government, 2016). Strengthening these aspects is crucial for a more comprehensive, evidence-based approach to bullying prevention in the UAE.

However, no studies have evaluated the impact of the national anti-bullying strategy or mapped existing interventions in the UAE. This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring policymakers' perspectives on anti-bullying initiatives using a

qualitative approach grounded in the Theory of Program Development. The study seeks to identify challenges, assess current interventions, and provide actionable recommendations tailored to the UAE's sociocultural and systemic context.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative exploratory approach, guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines (Tong et al., 2007) (see Supplementary Table 1). The primary objective was to capture a comprehensive understanding of anti-bullying strategies in the UAE through the perspectives of key stakeholders involved in policy, education, and health sectors. Given the complexity of bullying as a social, psychological, and systemic issue, a qualitative method was deemed appropriate to explore nuanced experiences, policy gaps, and intervention strategies.

Conceptual Framework

The Theory of Program Development served as the foundational framework for this study. This framework emphasizes the importance of structured planning, establishing causal relationships, and accountability through thorough documentation at every program phase (Funnell, 1997; Hernandez, 2000; Weiss, 1995). It involves systematic needs assessment, clear objectives, strategic implementation, evaluation, and continuous monitoring (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). In this study, the framework

informed the design of a semi-structured interview guide to explore stakeholder views on developing and implementing effective anti-bullying strategies.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the UAE University Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (ERS_2019_5867). All participants provided written informed consent after receiving detailed explanations regarding the study objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Participants were required to obtain workplace approval before enrollment. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Participants

Participants were recruited from the UAE National Bullying Prevention Committee and other stakeholders involved in anti-bullying interventions. Eligibility criteria included at least 2 years of experience in children's health, safety, or well-being sectors and familiarity with anti-bullying efforts (Refer to Table 1). A purposive and snowball sampling approach was employed to ensure diverse representation across policy-makers, educators, and healthcare professionals. While data saturation was reached after 20 interviews, an additional seven interviews were conducted to validate findings and ensure comprehensive coverage of perspectives. In total, 27 in-depth interviews were analyzed.

Table 1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria of key stakeholders

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Age	Over 18 years old	Less than 18 years old
Type of organization	GO, NGO, non-profit, or voluntary organizations	None
Location	Emirates of Abu Dhabi	Other Emirates
Scope of practice	Other key stakeholders promoting child and adolescent health, well-being, and safety	Other professions
Level of experience	He/she worked in the current sector or a related sector for a minimum of 2 years	Less than 2 years
Membership	Member of NBPC	
Knowledge	Sufficient knowledge of bullying or any other form of violence prevention	
Employment time	In his/her current position before the NBPS is launched	In the position after the NPMS launching
Level of authority at workplace	In policymaking or management position	Executive positions
Experience in anti-bullying interventions	He/she has managed an anti-bullying prevention or intervention program	
Knowledge	He/she should be recognized as having the capacity to answer questions based on their general knowledge about sector practice related to child and adolescent health and safety, and not based solely on their personal experiences	

Data Collection

Interview Tool and Topic Areas

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared in English and Arabic, covering six primary areas aligned with the Theory of Program Development (Supplementary Table 2). Topics included needs assessment, strategic planning, implementation, evaluation and monitoring, reporting mechanisms, recommendations, and challenges (Table 2). Two experienced qualitative researchers from the research team reviewed and finalized the interview guide. The interview tool was piloted with individuals who held positions in policy or management before being finalized. For a full interview guide, refer to Supplementary Table 2.

Interview Process and Study Setting

Due to the COVID-19 situation, online face-to-face interviews were conducted using MS Teams from May to July 2020. Participants were invited by phone and via email. After briefing participants about the study, those who agreed to be interviewed received a soft copy of the informed consent to sign and return it to the researcher via email. Interviews were conducted by trained data collectors and were recorded using MS Teams. Some interviews were in English, while the rest were in Arabic. Each interview lasted for approximately 60 min.

Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis approach following Braun and Clarke's six steps was used to extract the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic Extraction Process

After verbatim transcription and translation, all transcripts were uploaded to the NVivo software Version 12 (QSR

International Pty Ltd, 2023). Two team members (BAH and AK) independently coded the interviews. They verified the final themes with another experienced qualitative researcher (IE). To enhance reflexivity and avoid bias, transcribed interviews were shared with participants for content approval.

Coding

The assigned code for each participant was based on gender, participant number, and the abbreviated name of his/her organization. Gender was represented by "M" for male or "F" for female. Each participant was given a number as an identifier. Lastly, the organization's abbreviation was included in the code. For example, a code like "F10_MOC" would signify a female participant, identified as number 10, with ties to an organization represented by the abbreviation "MOC," such as the Ministry of Culture.

Enhancing Rigor

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, this study adhered to COREQ guidelines, used triangulation of data sources, and employed member checking. Additionally, researchers engaged in reflexive journaling to minimize bias and ensure analytical depth.

Findings

Participant Demographics

A total of 33 participants contributed to this study. Of these, 27 participants were included in the final analysis: 14 females and 13 males. The age ranged from 28 to 65 years. This diversity provided a wide range of perspectives and experiences. Most participants (24) were affiliated with the government sector, spanning both profit and non-profit organizations, while others represented academic and private sectors. The participants had significant professional experience, averaging 10 or more years, and diverse educational backgrounds ranging

Table 2 Summary of the interview guide

Topic #	Questions related to the topic identified	Time allocated
	Introduction to the study participant demographics	10 min
Topic 1	Assessment need	10 min
Topic 2	Plan	20 min
Topic 3	Implementation	5 min
Topic 4	Evaluation and monitoring	5 min
Topic 5	Documentation and reporting	5 min
Topic 6	Suggestions, limitations, and challenges	5 min
Total time	-	60 min

from bachelor's degrees to doctorates. This demographic diversity added depth and breadth to the study's insights. Detailed demographic data are provided in Table 3.

Themes

After refining extracted themes, four final themes were generated with many subthemes. The major themes are “*The existing situation—Status quo in anti-bullying efforts, achievements*

and gaps,” “The need for an in-depth evaluation,” “Existing systemic challenges in anti-bullying efforts,” and “Actionable recommendations for sustainable anti-bullying efforts.”

1. Theme One: The Existing Situation—Status Quo in Anti-Bullying Efforts-Achievement and Gaps

In this section, we describe the main findings on the status of anti-bullying efforts in the UAE, highlighting

Table 3 Summary characteristics participants' characteristics ($n = 33$)

	Code	Gender	Age	Level of education	Profession	Organization	Organization type	Years of experience
F1-AI	DA-AI	Male	47	PhD	Professor	Academic institution	Federal	12
M2-AI	NA-AI	Female	45	PhD	Dean/administrator	Academic institution	Federal	
F3-MOHAP	NS-MOHAP	Female		Bachelor	Physician	MOHAP	Federal	
F4-AWQAF	SA-AWQAF	Female		Bachelor	Religious figure	AWQAF	Federal	
M5-TDRA	AA-TRA	Male	28	Bachelor	Security analyst	TDRA	Federal	3
M6-MOI	AA-MOI	Male		Bachelor	Bachelor	MOI—CPC	Federal	10
M7-AQDER	IA-AQDER	Male	54	PhD	Advisor	MOI—Aqder	Federal	54
F8-MOE	AA-MOE	Female	28	Bachelor	Bachelor	MOE	Federal	3
F9-MOE	HA-MOE	Female	42	Bachelor	Department head	MOE	Federal	13
F10-MOE	MA-MOE	Female	40	Bachelor	Consultant physician	MOE	Federal	15
F11-MOE	MA-MOE	Female		Bachelor	Education specialist	MOE	Federal	
M12-ADP	AA-ADP	Male		Bachelor	Social support director	ADP	Federal	10
F13-MOCD	EH-MOCD	Female	50	Bachelor	Department director	MOCD	Federal	6
M14-ADEK	SA-ADEK	Male	41	Bachelor	Office director	ADEK	Local	1
F15-PMO	FA-PMO	Female	28	Bachelor	Research analyst	PMO	Federal	
F16- ADDCD	LA-ADDCD	Female	38	PhD	Department director	ADDCD	Local	0.8
F17- ADPHC	DM-PHC	Female		Bachelor	Health officer	ADPHC	Local	6
F18- ADSHS	NS-ADSHS	Female	50	Bachelor	Education specialist	ADSHS	Local	17
F19- ADSHS	NM- ADSHS	Female		PhD	Health director	ADSHS	Local	10
M20-ED	SA-ED	Male	35	Bachelor	Trainer/educator	ED	Private	14
M21-ET	OF-ET	Male	39	Bachelor	Safety officer	ET	Federal	16
M22- ADSC	MA-ADSC	Male	39	Bachelor	Statistician	ADSC	Local	12
M23- MHC	KK-MHC	Male	47	Bachelor	Child mental health consultant	MHC	Private	20
M24- ADM	HR-ADM	Male		Bachelor	Editor	ADM	Local	38
M25- UNICEF	ME-UNICEF	Male	64	Bachelor	Program officer	UNICEF	International	6
M26- ECRA	FA-ECRA	Male	44	Master	NGO founder	ECRA	NGO	3
F27- ADPHC	MA-ADPHC	Female		Bachelor	Maternal and child health officer	ADPHC	Local	6
F28- ADFDF	BA-ADFDF	Female		Bachelor	Department head	ADFDF	Local	5
F29- ADDFP	AA-ADDFP	Female		Bachelor	Prosecutor	ADDFP	Local	13
F30- ADFDF	FA-ADFDF	Female		Bachelor	Program officer	ADFDF	Local	6
F31- SCFMC	RA-SCFMC	Female	35	Bachelor	General undersecretary	SCFMC	Local	3
F32- ADECA	CA-ADECA	Female	62	Bachelor	Early childhood expert	ADECA	Local	1
F33- ADSCMAF	H-ADSCMAF	Female	50	Bachelor	Director	ADSCMAF	Local	25

*Empty cells represent missing data

To address ethical considerations and protect privacy, we have chosen not to disclose the names of the institutions; in the abbreviations instead, we have assigned coded identifiers in the table

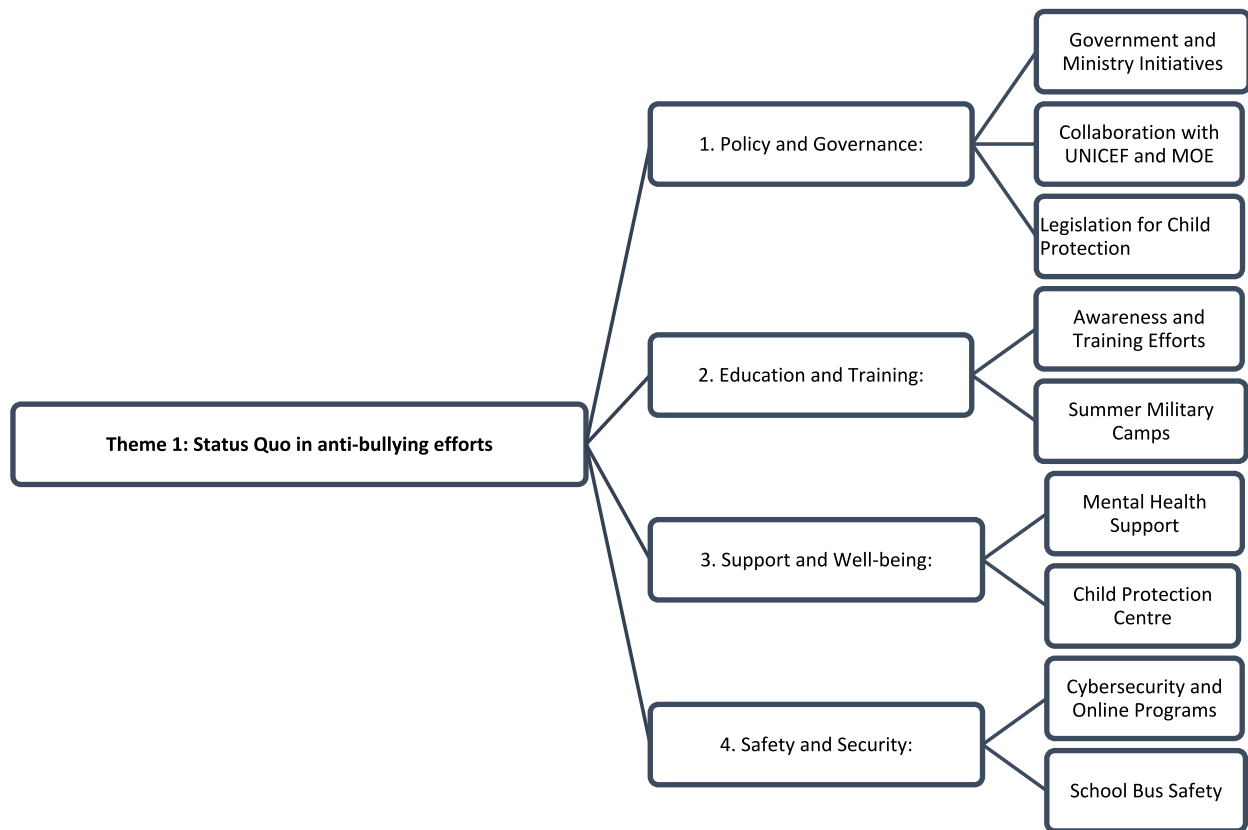


Fig. 1 Theme one - The existing situation – Status Quo in anti-bullying efforts and sub-themes

key achievements while identifying gaps in the national bullying strategy's implementation, coordination, and impact assessment. It highlights the collaboration between government initiatives and international organizations for policy and governance, educational programs for awareness, specialized camps for training, mental health support for well-being, and cybersecurity measures for safety and security. While various governmental and non-governmental initiatives have been launched, stakeholders emphasized the need for a more cohesive approach that ensures sustainability and measurable outcomes. Four sub-themes were identified, represented in (Fig. 1).

1a. Sub-theme One: Policy and Governance: Strengths and Shortcomings

Different opinions and insights on the existing situation concerning anti-bullying efforts, policies, and laws in the UAE were presented. The existing “Wadeema Law” (a Law in the UAE to protect children, which was implemented in 2016) was highlighted as the main legislation. Participants voiced their concerns about the scattered and uncoordinated programs except for collaboration organized with the United Nations International Children's

Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the Ministry of Education (MOE). Examples of these activities were workshops on well-being directed to students, staff, and parents, a published manual titled “Interactive Healthy Lifestyle” targeting students, and specialized training programs conducted for teachers and nurses to help them identify suspected bullying cases in students, with a focus on students' special needs and those on the autism spectrum.

The Wadeema Law and other child protection regulations serve as a strong legal framework, yet their practical application remains inconsistent. Stakeholders pointed to fragmented efforts, with multiple agencies running parallel programs without a central governing body ensuring alignment and standardization. The need for Wadeema Law and an integrated policy framework that consolidates governmental, educational, and civil society efforts was emphasized.

For example (M6_MOI) said: “...*Child protection has legislations in a special law on child protection and Federal Law No. 3 the year 2016, more generally known as Wadeema's law. This law, may God grant you peace, talks about the basic rights of the child, and one of his rights is the right of protection.*”

(F11-MOE) said: “We, as a federal ministry, are also suffering. This challenge is in both bullying and child protection, in efforts that were scattered, in the lack of data sharing, lack of participation in studies.”

(F3-MOHAP) explained: “I was working with UNICEF as a representative from the Ministry of Health. There was training for departments and educational personnel in schools on the issue of bullying. We have started as an initiative of the Ministry of Health and Prevention.”

(M5-TDRA) said: “The legal authority has laws. In case you post any photo that degrades someone, humiliates, bullies, or writes insults on the picture, there are two ways: sometimes it is reported to the authority, and the authority tells us to follow the list of student behavior, or sometimes they take procedures as legal authority...”

1b. Sub-theme Two: Education and Training: A Need for Systemic Integration

An important subtheme was the education and training efforts that are mainly not synchronized but reflect the intensive efforts by the UAE government to address the issue of bullying in schools, promote a healthy learning environment, and safeguard the well-being of students. Education and training efforts are widespread but often lack synchronization. Workshops and awareness campaigns have been conducted in schools, universities, and public transportation settings. Cyberbullying emerged as a key concern, with few entities addressing it comprehensively.

Other activities included training workshops, awareness campaigns, and the implementation of laws and policies that targeted various settings, including schools, universities, and public transportation. These initiatives also highlighted the importance of child protection laws and the role of different organizations in promoting positive behaviors and empowering students.

(M5-TDRA): “Cyberbullying was on the agenda and not addressed... It has been 3–4 years since my institution took the initiative during the Bullying Awareness Week (that was held and sponsored by the MOE) to introduce the issue of cyberbullying. At that time, more than 40 authorities or institutions were in the event, but no authority supported anti-cyberbullying until we stepped in.”

(M25-UNICEF) said: “UNICEF trained the education sector on how to deal with bullying in general in

schools, and there was more than one workshop after that with the Ministry of Education, we attended, of course, as partners of the Ministry of Health. The main sector in this matter is the education sector.”

Although educational interventions, including training sessions and workshops, are frequently conducted, these remain sporadic and lack long-term strategic planning. Stakeholders called for an evidence-based, unified curriculum that addresses bullying prevention comprehensively, including cyberbullying and psychological interventions.

1c. Sub-themes Three: Students Well-Being and Support Systems: Strengthening Psychological Interventions

The third theme is the programs that support students' well-being, such as “The Child Protection Centre,” which coordinates and develops legislation, policies, and internal procedures to deal with children's protection at the national level. Programs such as the “Child Protection Centre” coordinate legislation and train school staff to manage bullying cases. Additionally, general practitioners provide mental health support to adolescents impacted by bullying. To further support the students' well-being, a referral guide was created, and school staff was trained on bullying awareness under the supervision of MOE. Furthermore, general practitioners gave special attention to the mental health of adolescents who were victims of bullying, particularly in primary care.

(F11-MOE) said: “The child protection unit protects children against any abuse or wrongdoing, and bullying is one of these. So, the unit's role is to protect the child in case of any suspicion of bullying from inside or outside the school.”

Stakeholders indicated that available services often lack accessibility and proactive engagement. A more structured school-based mental health referral system, incorporating psychologists and counselors with specialized training, is necessary to ensure timely intervention.

1d. Sub-Theme Four: Safety and Security Measures: Technology and Community Engagement

Another theme is the safety and security of existing programs and initiatives, including cybersecurity laws and improving community awareness. Efforts include cybersecurity laws, youth empowerment competitions, and safety initiatives such as installing cameras on school buses. Online programs include youth electronic empowerment competitions, research proposals, videos, awareness workshops, and social media posts. Another highlighted initiative is the “Khalifa Program,” which aims to promote positive behavior in the community.

(M7- AQDER) said: “So our role in Khalifa Program is to enable appropriate social and behavioral skills and lifestyle so it is one of our duties to address the new generations using their own language and needs..... In the competition that we initiated against bullying, we asked children to develop videos against bullying, and in that way, we aimed to deliver the message.” Other activities that ensured students’ safety include installing school bus cameras and training parents, teachers, drivers, and public transport personnel.

(M21-ET) said: “As a result, the Ministry of Education took serious measures, directing the Emirate’s transport system to install seven cameras per bus to provide a comprehensive view of the location.” The participant continues, “Special awareness workshops were also organized for parents, drivers, and bus supervisors, where they were trained on how to manage bullying situations on public transport... As such, they were delivered in multiple languages to ensure that everyone could understand and benefit from them. The ministry also instructed that school buses must be installed with security cameras.”

Cybersecurity initiatives and safety measures, such as school bus monitoring systems, have been implemented, yet their effectiveness is hindered by limited awareness and

inconsistent enforcement. Stakeholders recommended leveraging artificial intelligence and data-driven monitoring tools to proactively identify and mitigate bullying behaviors.

2. Theme Two: The Need for an In-Depth Evaluation

The second major theme identified the need for an in-depth evaluation of the current situation and the needed steps. This theme highlights the critical need for comprehensive analysis and assessment of anti-bullying strategies. It stresses the importance of creating strategic plans, fostering collaborations for unified training programs, and sharing insightful research findings. The theme also focuses on the necessity of regular reporting to maintain accountability. Three sub-themes were identified, as presented in Fig. 2.

2a. Sub-theme One: Strategic Planning and Collaboration: Moving Beyond Isolated Efforts

Participants highlighted the importance of strategic collaborations and unified training programs to strengthen anti-bullying strategies. The need for a strategic plan and cooperation with academic and government institutions to increase awareness and provide appropriate services was emphasized. Also, the importance of conducting surveys and sharing research results with policymakers was stressed. The

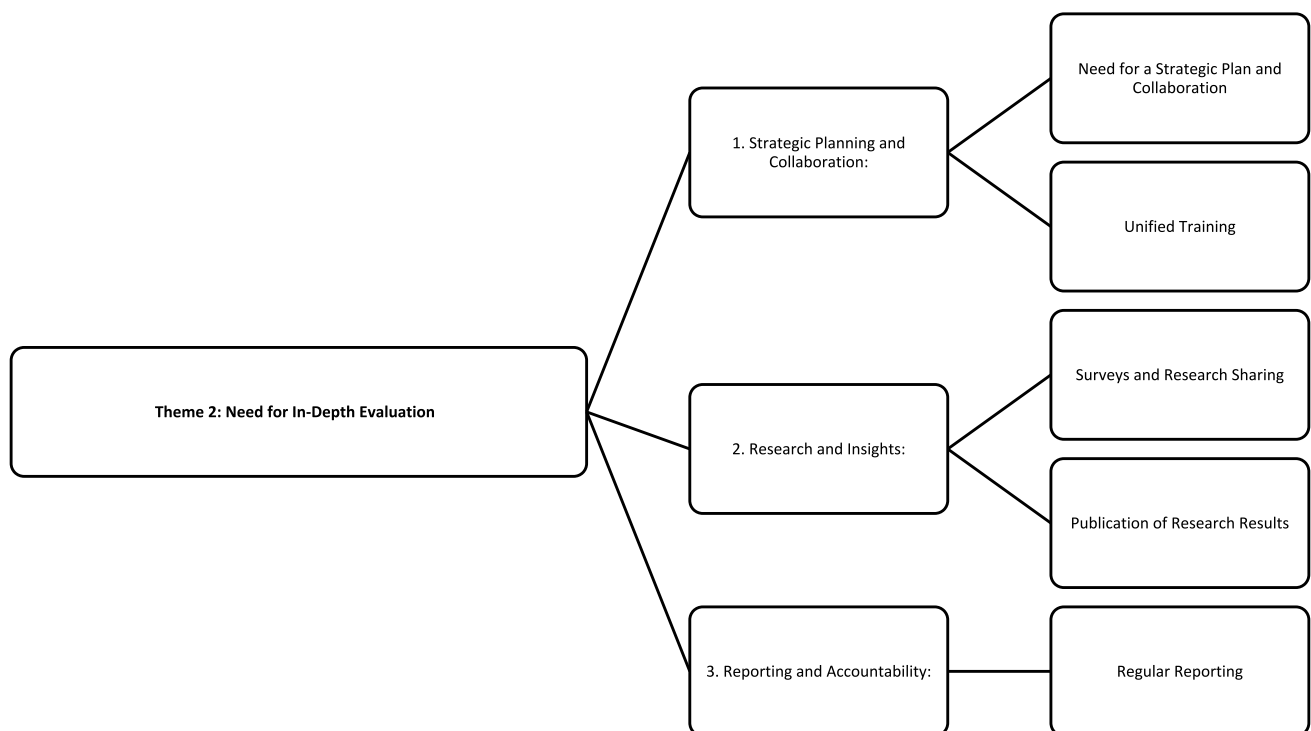


Fig. 2 Theme Two – The need for an in-depth evaluation and sub-themes

participants agreed on the importance of raising awareness among teachers, parents, and the community.

(F1-AI) said: "... I ran an operational plan in college for three years, taking initiatives that had a close relationship with the local community and its institutions, including the Ministry of Education. For example, this week, the ministry celebrated Bullying Awareness Week during which we cooperated and arranged a seminar for them...."

(F3-MOHAP) said: "...my opinion from my experience in school is that we need a more unified operational plan. The policies should be clear and standardized across the country."

There were suggestions to involve academic researchers to fill the research gaps and disparities in communication between stakeholders, researchers, and government.

(F3-MOHAP) said: ".... for example, we will be designing a program that we did in the Emirate of Sharjah, in which we encountered a large group of children and students from different age groups, genders, and nationalities and consequently were able to identify their needs. Secondly, finding out that studies had already been done, for example, the "Global School Health Survey" which is conducted every five years."

Despite multiple anti-bullying initiatives, stakeholders emphasized the lack of inter-agency collaboration and strategic planning. Calls were made for a unified operational framework integrating academic research with policy implementation, ensuring anti-bullying programs are data-driven and contextually relevant.

2b. Sub-Theme Two: Research, Data Sharing, and Training Addressing the Knowledge Gap

Participants shared their views on the importance of conducting research to provide evidence-based practice. They reiterated the strong need for evidence-based practices, regular reporting, and sharing of research findings to inform policies and interventions. Also, the importance of evaluating interventions and sharing reports and findings with the concerned departments was reinforced. Moreover, training and conducting workshops in schools in collaboration with other stakeholders is essential to raise awareness among parents and the community.

(F3-MOHAP) said: "We publish quarterly reports that include numbers, training programs, content, duration and increase its volume, the number of relevant cases and statistics, should be published monthly or weekly, because something that cannot be measured cannot be controlled."

(F15-PMO) provided an example of initiatives that were built on evidence, saying: "We built it using figures by looking at the global report "PISA," which is OECD's Program for International Student Assessment," and UAE data, which showed very high bullying percentages, a weak sense of belonging to the school and a feeling of loneliness, all these facts made us think what could be offered to school students and we planned based on them?"

(F28-ADFDF) said: "The implementation of four workshops in schools, by the Ministry of Education, the Department of Education, the institution's schools and centers and also collaborated with government agencies, including Dar Zayed."

Stakeholders noted that while extensive data exists, it is often underutilized in policymaking. The absence of systematic research and evaluation leads to ineffective interventions. The importance of longitudinal studies, real-time data analysis, and knowledge exchange between educators, health professionals, and policymakers was emphasized as essential for refining intervention strategies.

2c. Sub-theme Three: Reporting and Accountability Institutionalizing Continuous Education

The participants stressed the importance of the critical role of expert evaluation and mandatory reporting, which are essential to address challenges and refine school strategies. Also, the need for a specialized team to assess the implementation of school strategies, address any arising challenges, and establish school policies was stressed.

(M14-ADEK) said: "I need a specialized team with a psychologist because I need someone to intervene with the challenges in the way the plans are drawn up by the school."

(M14-ADEK) continues: "We as an administration review the reports about complaints in schools on a monthly basis and the way schools deal with and classify these."

(M14-ADEK) said: "We produce periodic reports and reports upon request, and of course, from federal agencies such as the Ministry of Education. Sometimes, we are asked for reports."

(M14-ADEK) said: "No one asks for a voluntary report. If the report is requested, it means that it is mandatory."

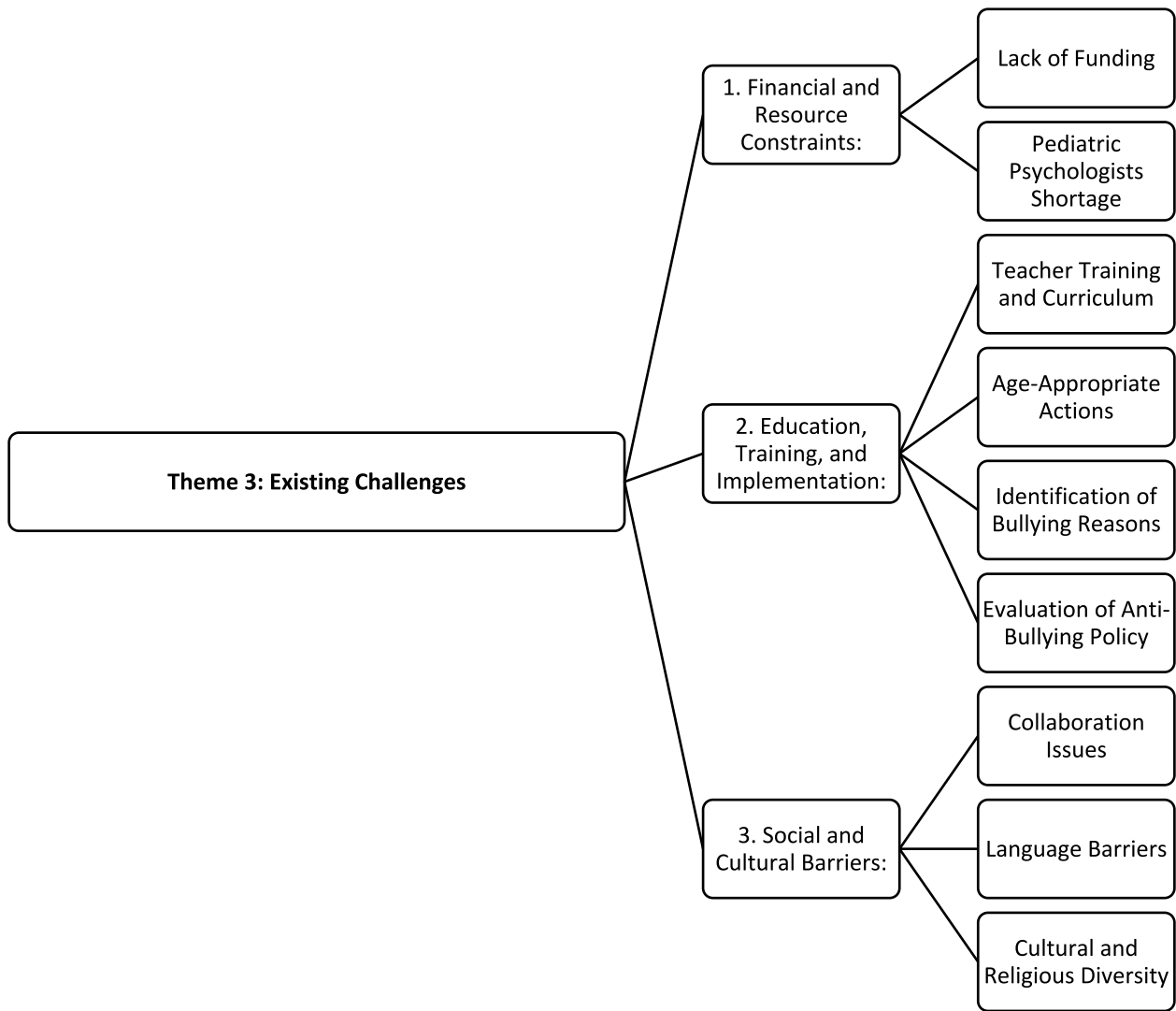


Fig. 3 Theme three-Existing challenges and sub-themes

The lack of mandatory reporting and accountability mechanisms in schools and governmental agencies was highlighted as a major barrier to effective anti-bullying policies. Stakeholders advocated establishing a specialized oversight body responsible for continuous evaluation and policy refinement.

3. Theme Three: Systemic Challenges in Anti-bullying Efforts

This theme captures the systemic, social, and cultural barriers that hinder anti-bullying efforts in the UAE. It is related to challenges in the UAE that delay actions and are considered significant obstacles to addressing bullying effectively. It categorizes these into financial constraints, including a lack of funding; educational, including a shortage of professionals and lack of training; social and cultural barriers,

like language differences and diversity issues; and systemic problems, such as a fragmented political system, insufficient reporting mechanisms, and poor policy evaluation. Highlighting these challenges sets the stage for developing targeted solutions to strengthen anti-bullying strategies. Three sub-themes were identified, as presented in Fig. 3.

3a. Sub-Theme One: Financial and Resource Constraints: Prioritizing Funding

There were concerns about the lack of funding opportunities, proper teacher training, an updated curriculum teaching values, and more local efforts and collaboration between stakeholders. Participants cited funding shortages, insufficient teacher training, and the need for updated curricula. Moreover, language barriers, cultural differences, and a fragmented political system were mentioned as essential

challenges of bullying prevention efforts. They stressed that reporting and evaluating anti-bullying policies are strongly needed.

(M2-AI) said: *“Well, some of the funds came from ADEK (Department of Education and Knowledge) and the minister, but honestly, it was not much. But I wish to carry out a campaign like the one you mentioned where I could make plans and activities for the schools, give educational researchers funds, and encourage them to go to schools.”*

(F13-MOCD) said: *“The ministry suggested including these specialties. Including these specialties is a system about children’s protection and the harms that would affect children by being insulted and/or experiencing violence and such. So, the psychological specialist would contribute more when they come to the fieldwork if they had this system.”* The participant continues: *“The inclusion of these specializations involves a course on child protection, addressing the potential harm that a child may suffer from abuse or violence. Considering that if specialists and psychologists undergo this course at the university, it would undoubtedly contribute more to practical implementation in the field.”*

Insufficient funding was identified as a significant hindrance, particularly in training specialized professionals and implementing nationwide anti-bullying programs. Stakeholders called for targeted budget allocations prioritizing child protection, mental health services, and educational initiatives.

3b. Sub-theme Two: The Need for Capacity Building

Participants emphasized the importance of teacher training and precise reporting mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies. Educators’ and teachers’ training and updated curriculum teaching with emphasis on local values were highlighted as essential for successful anti-bullying programs and efforts. A fragmented political system adds challenge to the existing efforts.

(M2-AI) said: *“We should start the program from the early school levels. Once they show any bullying incidents or any student provokes his colleagues by calling them names. We deal with them with teachers who spot bullies. Schools should have training programs to defuse the negative energy of students, and the curriculum should have lessons or activities that teach students to cooperate, treat their colleagues like brothers and sisters, and show them that there is no need to be rivals or competitive.”*

Moreover, a precise reporting mechanism for schools and clear action steps within the education system are needed. Research to identify bullying risk factors and causes is essential, too.

(M12-ADP) said: *“I came from the Department of Education and Knowledge. However, we need to assess whether the Department of Education evaluates the policy, as every policy undergoes evaluation every two years, and updates are made based on the evaluation results.”*

(M7-AQDER) said: *“In my view, logistical challenges can sometimes pose obstacles, and I believe the primary hindrance is the interference of individuals without expertise in the matter.”*

The shortage of trained professionals and inadequate curriculum integration were recurrent concerns. Stakeholders recommended mandatory training for teachers, social workers, and healthcare providers to enhance their ability to identify and address bullying effectively.

3c. Sub-Theme Three: Social and Cultural Barriers: Addressing Multicultural Sensitivities

Understanding the extent of bullying in the community within the multi-cultural and religious diversity in Abu Dhabi is one of the most important themes that occurred. This was highlighted as being particular in private schools as students come from multicultural societies and diverse backgrounds with different perceptions of bullying. Taking appropriate actions based on age is also an essential factor, as children may find it difficult to speak about their bullying experiences in specific age categories. The themes identify multiculturalism and language diversity as significant challenges in addressing bullying in the UAE.

(M20-ED) said: *“Maybe because in UAE there are a lot of nationalities, races, and religions in the country, and for adults, it’s normal to accept differences, but for younger people and students, it’s hard for them to understand that, and to accept differences, to accept people regardless of their skin color, weight, body shape or race and so on. For adults, that’s normal, but for kids, it’s so easy to separate themselves from others as this person is not praying like us or he has a different skin color and so on.”*

(M20-ED) said: *“Some of them don’t open up or talk to their parents about it because sometimes they would be afraid even to talk to anyone about what they are facing in schools, sometimes they are even afraid to get punished for talking.”*

(F4-AWQAF) said: *“Communicate with people using language they comprehend. Indeed, in cer-*

tain regions, you may encounter situations where the language of traditional Arabic preaching might not be well understood. In such cases, efforts.”

4. Theme Four: Actionable Recommendations for Sustainable Anti-Bullying Efforts

Stakeholders proposed a set of evidence-based recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies through policy reform, research prioritization, sustainable education programs, and accountability mechanisms. Four sub-themes were identified, as presented in Fig. 4.

4a. Sub-theme One: Strengthening Collaboration and Policy Reform

The need for research, data analysis, and funding for children’s well-being, mental health screening tools, and referral systems was highlighted. Collaboration with international

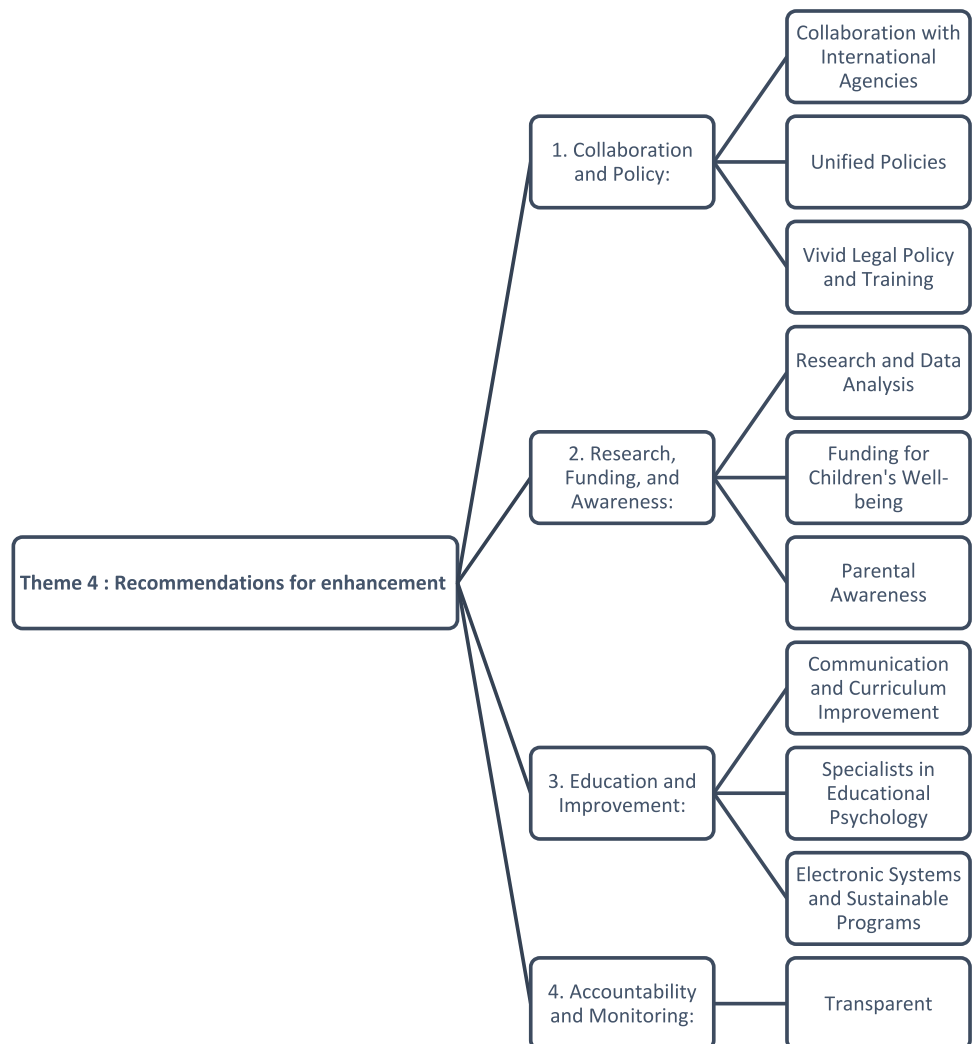
agencies such as WHO, UNESCO, and UNICEF was emphasized. Unified policies and transparent reporting mechanisms were also recommended.

(F1-AI) said: “*Collaboration with international organizations such as the World Health Organization, UNESCO, and UNICEF should be established.*”

They also highlighted the importance of unified policies, improving communication about school curricula, incorporating bullying prevention in targeted programs, and implementing transparent reporting and monitoring systems. Utilizing artificial intelligence for early detection of bullying, developing electronic systems for better record-keeping, and providing mental health support and protocols for students were emphasized, as well as the need for experienced psychologists and experts and a clear legal policy.

A central recommendation was establishing a national anti-bullying task force that aligns with international standards (WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF). This body would oversee

Fig. 4 Theme four—Recommendations for enhancement and sub-themes



policy implementation, ensure stakeholder collaboration, and develop an integrated response framework.

4b. Sub-theme Two: Research, Funding, and Awareness

Increased funding for children's well-being and research and targeted awareness campaigns for parents were highlighted. Participants explained that the MOE has massive data that has not yet been used for research or evaluation purposes and that research should tackle many areas, including interventions and evaluation studies.

(M2-AI) said: *"Well, I can say that university specialists in education have done a lot of research at post-graduate or PhD level in all fields like management, teaching, even in the most technical subjects like cognition of neuroscience, but no substantial research can be found over bullying."*

Most of the stakeholders described that funds should be allocated for children's well-being. Also, they emphasized the importance of setting up national mental health screening tools and referral systems, including bullying, along with nurses' training programs. They emphasized the importance of a monitoring system and evaluation process for policymaking in both private and public schools. Moreover, improving parental awareness was also highlighted.

(F3-MOHAP) said: *"...In a broad sense..., I've observed widespread collaboration and a collective willingness to act. The key concept is to establish a cohesive effort encompassing a unified policy and a coordinated action plan. I emphasized the presence of a designated leader appointed by the state, signaling that we should all align ourselves with this leadership. We are collectively focused on the same objective."*

Stakeholders stressed the urgency of leveraging big data and artificial intelligence to track bullying trends, inform policymaking, and refine intervention strategies. Furthermore, nationwide awareness campaigns targeting parents, educators, and students were recommended to enhance early detection and prevention.

4c. Sub-theme Three: Education and Mental Health Integration

Participants suggested that programs should be sustainable, equipped with better mental health support, and the incorporation of anti-bullying measures into curricula. A few participants explained that an electronic system should be developed so that schools can update their activities automatically to maintain a better record. Furthermore, sustainable anti-bullying programs are needed at the school level, along with all other multidisciplinary teams, social workers, and nurses, according to the age requirements of the students.

(F11-MOE): *"The role of school leadership should also be evaluated, assessing its role in modifying the behavior of bullying students within its overall evaluation."*

The need for an experienced psychologist for each school, providing better mental health support for students and strict protocols to be implemented to improve student's mental health status was also highlighted.

(M12-ADP): *"...We need a specialist in educational psychology. We don't have a lot of experts in this field. They mostly lack experience because many of the employees in schools are fresh graduates."*

The importance of embedding anti-bullying strategies within the national curriculum and enhancing school-based mental health services was emphasized. Additionally, establishing specialized training programs for psychologists and social workers was identified as a key strategy for strengthening school support systems.

4d. Sub-theme Four: Implementing Transparent Monitoring and Accountability Systems

An emerging theme was proposed: using artificial intelligence to detect bullying and improve monitoring systems. Some participants suggested that schools should have a transparent system for reporting and monitoring bullying and utilize artificial intelligence to detect early bullying.

(F27-ADPHC) said: *"Allow me to share my perspective. Drawing from my own experiences, I have a vision. I envision harnessing the power of artificial intelligence to proactively identify bullying in schools, including cyberbullying. With determination and effort, I believe we can turn this vision into reality. I am committed to supporting initiatives that explore and leverage artificial intelligence to address these issues, and I look forward to contributing to the creation of a platform dedicated to this purpose."*

A major recommendation was the development of a standardized reporting mechanism that utilizes artificial intelligence to detect early signs of bullying. Stakeholders also proposed a national monitoring and evaluation system that tracks the progress of anti-bullying initiatives and ensures policy enforcement.

Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into the current anti-bullying initiatives and programs in the UAE, particularly focusing on the Abu Dhabi Emirate. By exploring the

perspectives of key stakeholders, this research highlights the existing efforts, challenges, and gaps in the implementation of anti-bullying strategies, as well as opportunities for improvement. The findings underscore the urgent need for a cohesive national framework to combat bullying effectively, ensuring a safer and more inclusive educational environment. This exploratory study aimed to identify the needs and the action plan for creating a national framework for bullying prevention in the UAE. Our study was an attempt to understand the existing programs in the Abu Dhabi Emirate and the available anti-bullying interventions, challenges, and gaps in implementation from stakeholders' perspectives. It aimed to explore ways of approaching these gaps. In general, we found that while a few efforts are in place, there is a significant need for increased collaboration and coordination within the country.

The findings of this study reinforce the importance of collaborative and strategic planning, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of anti-bullying programs in the UAE. Also, it highlights the importance of improving access to data and research, training teachers, parents, and students, and employing psychologists and mental health experts in schools. Drawing from similar global studies that have successfully implemented national anti-bullying programs (Bowlan NM, 2011; Del Rey R, et al., 2016; OECD, 2018; Connell, 1995; Gaffney et al., 2019; Low et al., 2014; Palladino et al., 2016), it is clear that guided by the Theory of Program Development, this study highlights the need for a unified, structured approach to bullying prevention. A thorough needs assessment, coordinated strategies, and active stakeholder involvement are essential for developing a comprehensive framework. Policymakers should prioritize the creation of specialized training modules, mental health assessments, and targeted interventions to address the unique challenges of the UAE's diverse educational landscape. The UAE can create a nurturing educational atmosphere that promotes student well-being and safety by adopting a holistic strategy that integrates research, policy, and community engagement.

This study served as a needs assessment and identified issues related to training, program sustainability, surveillance and monitoring, fragmentation, and lack of unified and stratified implementation programs. Also, it has identified issues related to cultural, language, and social problems that are particular to the UAE. As per the theory of program development, the program planning should consider all factors identified by this mapping of anti-bullying strategies, as well as suggestions and challenges identified by stakeholders.

Despite existing programs, including scattered workshops, awareness campaigns, and legislative measures such as "The Wadeema Law," bullying remains a persistent issue in the UAE. These findings align with prior research,

which identified high bullying rates among UAE students, with reports indicating that nearly 20–36% of students are victims of bullying (Al-Ketbi et al. 2024a; Alomosh et al., 2019) and 26.3% engage in bullying behaviors (Al-Darmaki et al., 2022).

The UAE's multicultural and diverse student population may exacerbate the risk of bullying, as similar studies in Qatar have shown that factors such as gender, ethnicity, and years of residence contribute significantly to bullying dynamics (Kamal et al., 2023). While laws such as "The Wadeema Law" and cybersecurity measures exist, their implementation remains inconsistent. The study highlights the need for comprehensive policies enforced uniformly across all schools, with regular monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Clear links between educational reforms and anti-bullying policies are crucial for their integration into broader educational strategies (Connell, 1995). This integration ensures that policies are implemented and sustained through systemic changes. The situation of the UAE as per this study is similar to other Arab countries which reported lack of comprehensive policies and training as well as integration of antibullying programs due to limited resources which has been persisting through the last decade (Rabah et al., 2005; Beydoun et al., 2017; Save the Children, 2019; Samara et al., 2020; Kamal, 2023).

The results highlight the critical role of coordinated and strategic efforts in addressing bullying. Internationally, successful national anti-bullying programs have been rooted in robust research, effective collaboration, and integrating interventions into school systems (Bowlan, 2011; Del Rey et al., 2016; OECD, 2018). The UAE can draw lessons from these models to build a unified, evidence-based framework.

A key recommendation is the capacity building of educators, including teachers, academic leaders, and school principals, through targeted training programs. Prior research, such as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, has demonstrated that training school stakeholders and equipping students with behavioral skills significantly reduces bullying (Bhui et al., 2017). Similarly, studies have shown that involving school psychologists in anti-bullying initiatives enhances their effectiveness by addressing students' mental health needs (Grading et al., 2016; Midgett et al., 2021). Participants in this study emphasized the importance of employing mental health professionals in schools to assess and support students facing bullying, a gap that needs immediate attention.

The study reinforced the necessity of rigorous evaluation and research to inform anti-bullying policies. Participants highlighted the lack of coordination in data sharing and the need for evidence-based practices to guide interventions. Drawing from international experiences, such as the "Step to Respect" program, it is evident that integrating behavioral

interventions into school curricula and fostering collaboration among stakeholders is essential for success (Gradinger et al., 2016). Furthermore, establishing a centralized database to monitor bullying prevalence and evaluate interventions would significantly enhance the UAE's ability to tackle this issue effectively.

Widespread community awareness initiatives are critical for addressing bullying effectively. Direct engagement with parents, students, and community members can help dismantle cultural and social barriers, particularly in the UAE's multicultural context. Participants emphasized the importance of parental involvement and community participation in anti-bullying campaigns, a sentiment echoed in global studies that highlight the role of families and communities in fostering positive behaviors (Ortega-Barón et al., 2019).

The findings also stress the importance of enhancing school safety and security measures. Recommendations include using advanced technologies like artificial intelligence to detect and prevent bullying. For example, implementing AI-based tools to identify bullying behaviors early and monitor school environments can significantly improve intervention outcomes (Midgett et al., 2021). Allocating sufficient funding for these initiatives and ensuring their sustainability is vital for long-term success.

Current initiatives in the UAE primarily consist of intermittent school and college campaigns, media coverage, and a series of uncoordinated workshops to raise awareness and equip educational staff with the necessary training on the subject. Our study participants emphasized the negative impact of bullying on children's mental health and academic performance and that bullying can lead to aggressive and anti-social behavior, which is in agreement with the literature (Gomes et al., 2020; Guarini et al., 2019; Kamal et al., 2023; Nocentini et al., 2019; Ortega-Barón et al., 2019). Our participants highlighted the necessity for carefully designed, coordinated, and well-executed interventions in the UAE despite the existence of scattered programs and initiatives. Although laws and legislation exist in the UAE to combat bullying and to penalize those who engage in such behavior, bullying persists. This has been reported previously.

A study conducted in Sharjah reported that almost 20% of students in UAE schools are victims of bullying (Alo-mosh et al., 2019). Another two recent studies identified that 26.3–37% of surveyed students were engaged in bullying, either being bullied or being exposed to bullying (Al-Ketbi et al., 2024a; Al-Darmaki et al., 2022).

Being diverse and multicultural with various school types, programs, and backgrounds, students in the UAE may be at higher risk of being exposed to bullying. A study conducted in Qatar identified gender, age, ethnicity, school grade, and years of living in Qatar, showing significant differences among the students (Kamal et al., 2023).

Moreover, our study findings reinforce the importance of training and building skills of educators, including teachers, academic leaders, and school principals, being vital for effectively addressing bullying in educational settings. Educators' and teachers' involvement, enhanced educator abilities, and capacity building were previously identified as crucial for anti-bullying initiatives' success (Ferrer-Cascales et al., 2019; Hirschstein et al., 2007; Letendre et al., 2016; Petersen et al., 2013). Findings of a previously conducted study examining the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program for bullying prevention focused on training school stakeholders and developing skills for children to stop bullying (Bhui et al., 2017). Our stakeholders also suggested integrating behavioral interventions into the school curriculum.

An important point raised in this study was the need for professional mental health experts on school boards, considering their crucial role in all such initiatives. The school psychologist's positive contribution to the "Step to Respect" program demonstrated their influential role (Gradinger et al., 2016). Moreover, the presence of a school psychologist will help assess a child's mental health if facing bullying (Midgett et al., 2021).

Our study emphasizes the need for widespread community awareness initiatives that involve direct engagement with residents. Additionally, it highlights the critical importance of effective communication between government authorities and stakeholders for developing and implementing appropriate legislation. It suggests that anti-bullying intervention programs and social support will promote feelings of safety and decrease the prevalence of bullying and adverse mental health outcomes. Policymakers must implement a holistic strategy that ensures a nurturing educational atmosphere for every student and protects their well-being (Connell, 1995). When employing a robust anti-bullying policy at the national level, it is crucial to articulate a clear connection between leadership and educational reforms. This linkage ensures that the policy is integrated into broader educational strategies. Efforts to create effective anti-bullying strategies rely on rigorous evaluation research, which will help to improve existing interventions and develop evidence-based programs, ensuring a safe learning environment for all students.

The importance of safety and security measures was highlighted to protect children. Also, allocating funds, using high technology for safety and security, and improving intervention systems were highly recommended. Other interventions have also highlighted this (Midgett et al., 2021; Ortega-Barón et al., 2019).

Utilizing the program development theory as a guiding framework, the study identified the necessity for rigorous research and the creation of mental health assessments and interventions to support children subjected to bullying. By

adopting a unified strategy and engaging all relevant parties, policymakers can reinforce existing measures and facilitate the creation of specialized modules and national training programs to tackle bullying comprehensively. The research highlighted the critical demand for a thorough needs assessment, coordinated strategies, stakeholder involvement, and robust implementation that includes community participation.

Study Limitations

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The study relied on a convenience sample composed primarily of government officials and policymakers, which may limit the generalizability of findings to the broader community, including educators, students, and parents. As a result, the perspectives captured may reflect institutional priorities rather than grassroots-level experiences. Future research should incorporate a more diverse participant pool to ensure a holistic understanding of bullying prevention efforts across all societal levels. Despite these limitations, this study offers critical recommendations for strengthening anti-bullying strategies through enhanced collaboration, robust monitoring mechanisms, and targeted policy reforms.

Conclusions

This study provides valuable insights into the perspectives of policymakers and key stakeholders, identifying systemic gaps, challenges, and opportunities. The findings of this research highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive, coordinated, and data-driven approach to anti-bullying initiatives in the UAE. While current efforts provide a strong foundation, they remain fragmented, inconsistent, and reactive, requiring greater integration, accountability, and cultural adaptability. A nationwide, evidence-based framework incorporating insights from government, education, civil society, and youth will ensure sustainable and effective interventions.

The UAE can transition from reactive, isolated efforts to a unified, proactive national strategy by addressing these systemic gaps. A collaborative, research-driven, and culturally inclusive approach will reduce bullying prevalence and foster a safer, more supportive, and inclusive educational environment for all students.

Ensuring the long-term success of anti-bullying strategies requires continuous government commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and an unwavering focus on data-driven policies. The UAE has the opportunity to become a regional

leader in bullying prevention, setting a global benchmark for effective and sustainable intervention models.

This study serves as a critical step toward that vision, providing actionable recommendations that can drive systemic change and protect future generations.

Abbreviations *COREQ*: Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research; *ADEK*: Department of Education and Knowledge; *UNESCO*: The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization; *UAE*: United Arab Emirates; *UNICEF*: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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Author Contributions MG and AALK conceptualized the idea and developed the study. AALK and BAH collected the data, AALK, BAH, and IEL analyzed the data and extracted the themes. All authors participated in drafting the manuscript, reviewing it, and finalizing it.

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Data Availability Data can be requested from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The study adhered to the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki, and we obtained ethical approval from the UAE University Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (ERS_2019_5867).

Consent to Participate All participants received explanations about the study and signed an informed consent form.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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