Racist bullying and childhood marginalization in multicultural school settings: evidence-based and resilience-oriented interventions in primary education

Vassiliki Pliogou* and Sophia Tromara

Department of Early Childhood Education, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Western Macedonia, Florina, Greece

Introduction

Globalization and migration have reshaped the demographic and cultural composition of schools worldwide. While these changes offer opportunities for richer learning experiences, they also coincide with rising xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, which threaten social cohesion, equity, and democratic values. Schools, as microcosms of society, often mirror these broader tensions, with racist bullying emerging as a critical challenge. This form of bullying targets students based on ethnic, racial, cultural, or immigrant backgrounds. Victims' experiences intersect with gender (Pliogou et al., 2025), socioeconomic status, and other social identities, which can exacerbate marginalization (Baah et al., 2019). Empirical evidence shows that immigrant and minority students are disproportionately affected compared to native peers (Košir et al., 2023; Basilici et al., 2022).

Racist bullying affects not only victims but also perpetrators, bystanders, and the broader school community, shaping social norms, school climate, and collective identities (Moody and Stahel, 2025; O'Brien et al., 2024). Despite extensive research on general bullying (Zapata Celestino and Manríquez Madrigal, 2026; The Smile of the Child, 2023), racist bullying remains underexplored, particularly in primary education, often treated as a subcategory rather than a distinct phenomenon requiring targeted interventions (Sapouna et al., 2023; Nikolaou et al., 2019).

Resilience—the capacity to adapt and thrive despite adversity—offers a promising lens for mitigating the impact of racist bullying (Masten et al., 2021; Ungar and Theron, 2020). By examining resilience at individual, relational, and systemic levels, teachers can foster protective and transformative environments that support identity development, social connectedness, and inclusion. The present article explores the complexity of racist bullying in primary education, identifies its driving factors, presents evidence-based interventions, and advocates for holistic, culturally responsive, and resilience-oriented approaches.

Racist bullying, marginalization, and resilience

Racist bullying mirrors unequal power relations, positioning minority students as "others" (O'Brien et al., 2024). Victims often experience emotional distress, threats to identity, social withdrawal, and reduced academic achievement, while perpetrators may internalize superiority narratives, limiting empathy and civic engagement (Moody and Stahel, 2025; Castleberry, 2022).

Resilience operates ecologically through the interplay of individual strengths and contextual supports (Masten et al., 2021; Ungar and Theron, 2020). In racist bullying, resilience enables positive adaptation despite adversity, interacting across three levels. At the individual level, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and problem-solving empower children to cope with discrimination. Interpersonally, supportive relationships with teachers and peers buffer psychological harm and foster belonging. Systemically, inclusive school climates, culturally responsive pedagogy, and community engagement create structural resilience against exclusion (Ungar et al., 2019).

Indicatively, quantitative studies with Chinese primary students show that children with greater resilience scores are more likely to respond with positive, prosocial actions—supporting peers or seeking help—rather than dismissive or combative reactions (Lu et al., 2022). Many interventions, however, focus narrowly on personal coping while underemphasizing relational and structural dimensions, limiting their effectiveness in promoting belonging and mitigating marginalization (Brown et al., 2025).

Despite these insights, early schooling, which is the period when social identities, empathy, and moral reasoning develop, is understudied, and younger children's vulnerabilities remain insufficiently understood (Scheel et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019). Existing interventions frequently overlook racial and cultural dimensions, limiting long-term impact (Wu and Jia, 2023; Earnshaw et al., 2018). Racist bullying is often subsumed under "bias-based" aggression, which risks obscuring its unique social and structural dynamics and impedes targeted interventions (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2024).

Driving factors of racist bullying

Racist bullying emerges from intersecting structural, interpersonal, and societal factors. Institutional inequalities, tracking practices, and limited minority representation in curricula reproduce racial hierarchies and normalize exclusion (Sapouna et al., 2023; Wills, 2019). At the interpersonal level, children internalize stereotypes from peers, family, and media, shaping discriminatory perceptions (Wu and Jia, 2023; Xu et al., 2020). School climate further mediates bullying: environments lacking anti-racist norms, culturally responsive teaching, or teacher intervention enable uncontrolled racist behavior (Sieben-Aduful et al., 2025). Broader sociopolitical tensions, including rising xenophobia and polarized public discourse, filter into classrooms and shape racial identity construction (Huang and Cornell, 2019; Bayram Özdemir et al., 2024). Collectively, these factors normalize racist attitudes and increase the possibility of targeted bullying.

Consequences of racist bullying

The impact of racist bullying is extensive. Victims experience diminished psychological well-being, self-esteem, trust in institutions, social withdrawal, and long-term disengagement (Xu et al., 2020). Perpetrators internalize stereotypes and antisocial norms, which can reduce school participation, impair academic achievement, and reinforce exclusionary identities (Jansen et al., 2016). Dual marginalization occurs as victims face rejection and invisibility, and perpetrators experience moral and social isolation, fostering school climates characterized by fear and division. Peer relationships suffer, with victims withdrawing and bystanders internalizing fear or apathy, weakening overall sense of belonging (Košir et al., 2023). Resilience-focused approaches can counter these outcomes by restoring social connection, empowering students to act as upstanders, and reinforcing collective responsibility.

Evidence-based interventions

Interventions are most effective when they are culturally relevant, systemically integrated, and relationally focused. Whole-school approaches that engage students, teachers, leaders, parents, and communities have shown promise in addressing race and culture while fostering inclusion (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017). Socio-emotional learning programs enhance perspective-taking and emotional literacy but are most effective when embedded in everyday classroom interactions (Wu and Jia, 2023).

Culturally responsive pedagogy validates diverse identities, enhancing belonging and reducing stereotype-driven aggression (Earnshaw et al., 2018). Teacher professional development in bias recognition, intercultural dialogue, and conflict mediation equips educators to foster inclusive classrooms (Okagbue et al., 2022). Integrating anti-racist curricula and promoting school-wide anti-racist norms strengthens systemic resilience, enabling proactive inclusion (Hay et al., 2024). Approaches lacking cultural relevance or relying on punitive measures rarely achieve lasting impact (Hong et al., 2018).

At a practical level, culturally responsive pedagogy can be implemented through curriculum content (i.e., using stories from students' cultural background especially in literacy classes), classroom examples, discussions, and assessments reflecting students' cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2018). Anti-racist curricula should explicitly address discrimination and social justice (for example through role-playing exercises), enabling students to recognize unfairness and engage inclusively (Sieben-Aduful et al., 2025; Janssen et al., 2024). Teachers can support inclusion through multicultural literature, counter-stereotypical narratives, and inquiry-based discussions (Abdalla and Moussa, 2024; Samuels, 2018). Whole-school initiatives maintain anti-racist norms via shared messaging, inclusive visuals, and collective agreements as supported by the European Commission (2025).

Sustained professional development translates these strategies into practice. Collaborative learning communities, case discussions, and reflective dialogues allow teachers to examine biases, share best

practices, and co-develop responses to racist bullying (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2024; Hay et al., 2024). Long-term, embedded professional learning, rather than one-off training, is essential to build teachers' capacity to recognize and respond to bias and foster systemic, equity-oriented change (Virella et al., 2025; Legette et al., 2023).

Policy, leadership, and community collaboration

Addressing racist bullying requires coordinated, multi-level action that integrates policy, teacher education, leadership, and community engagement. Policies should define bias-based behaviors, establish reporting protocols, and mandate incident data collection to enable timely responses (Hall, 2017; Cornell and Limber, 2015). Teacher education must integrate intercultural competence and emotional well-being through structured coursework, reflective practice, and scenario-based training, equipping teachers to recognize, address, and discuss racist bullying effectively (Sieben-Aduful et al., 2025; La Salle-Finley et al., 2024). Developing socio-emotional and intercultural competencies underpins inclusive pedagogy, while emotional competence training enhances teachers' capacity to manage classroom-climate and support student's well-being (Calandri et al., 2025; Skočić Mihić et al., 2024). Monitoring systems can include climate surveys, incident logs, and structured observations, identify trends, guide interventions, and track progress to ensure equitable educational outcomes for all children (Maryati et al., 2025; European Commission, 2025).

School leadership is pivotal in shaping inclusive school culture because principals and administrators who model equitable practices, institutionalize inclusive policies, and establish safe reporting channels (Bahari et al., 2025) influence school norms, resource allocation, and expectations for staff and students. Prior research shows that equity-focused leaders set shared goals, enact clear anti-bias disciplinary codes, facilitate structured staff dialogues on race/ethnicity, and ensure systematic monitoring of school climate. All these reinforce that equity is central to the school's mission (Savvopoulos et al., 2024; Miller, 2023; Leithwood, 2021).

Community engagement, including partnerships with families, NGOs, and local organizations, reinforces inclusive values, strengthens social cohesion, and complements school-based efforts (Pliogou and Tromara, 2025; Radu, 2021). Community engagement can be strengthened through co-designed events with families, collaboration with cultural organizations, parent workshops on anti-bias socialization, and partnerships with NGOs offering mediation, language support, or multicultural resources, because as prior research shows that intentional, participatory family–school and community partnerships deepen trust, shared decision-making, and collective strategies that support inclusive and safe school environments (Markovich Morris and Cheng, 2025; Spruijt et al., 2022). By integrating individual, relational, and systemic strategies, schools can cultivate supportive communities that nurture empathy, belonging, and civic engagement.

Conclusion

Racist bullying in primary education is a pressing social and educational issue, perpetuating inequity and social disintegration. Fragmented or narrowly focused interventions fail to address the structural and relational causes of exclusion. We argue that the most effective approach combines culturally responsive, resilience-oriented pedagogy with systemic, whole-school strategies that actively engage teachers, students, families, and communities. Teachers may serve as agents of change by integrating anti-racist content, fostering socio-emotional skills, modeling inclusive practices, and facilitating reflective dialogue. Primary education thus becomes a critical arena for early intervention, where exclusion can be transformed into opportunities for identity formation, social learning, and collective responsibility. This approach aligns also with SDG4 ("Quality Education") and SDG10 ("Reduced Inequalities"), reinforcing the need for equitable and inclusive learning environments. Anti-racist pedagogy addresses the structural conditions that perpetuate racial and cultural inequities by critically examining and transforming educational practices that reproduce discrimination and exclusion. Beyond its contribution to SDG 4, systemic resilience and anti-racist pedagogy directly support SDG 10 ("Reduced Inequalities") by confronting the institutional and cultural mechanisms that disproportionately disadvantage minority children. By challenging racialized stereotypes, creating equitable learning conditions, and fostering inclusive school cultures, these approaches help reduce early educational disparities that often evolve into long-term social inequities (Câmara, 2025).

Author contributions

VP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ST: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

Abdalla, H., and Moussa, A. (2024). Culturally responsive teaching: navigating models and implementing effective strategies. *Acta Pedagogia Asiana* 3, 91–100. doi: 10.53623/apga.v3i2.432

Baah, F. O., Teitelman, A. M., and Riegel, B. (2019). Marginalization: conceptualizing patient vulnerabilities in the framework of social determinants of health—an integrative review. *Nurs. Inq.* 26:e12268. doi: 10.1111/nin.12268

Bahari, N., Fauzi, M., Noorzeli, N., Aziz, M., and Aziz, K. (2025). Creating and sustaining positive school climates: evidence from Malaysian schools. *Creat. Educ.* 16, 1172–1183. doi: 10.4236/ce.2025.168073

Basilici, M. C., Palladino, B. E., and Menesini, E. (2022). Ethnic diversity and bullying in school: a systematic review. *Aggress. Violent Behav.* 65:101762. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2022.101762

Bayram Özdemir, S., Caravita, S. C. S., and Thornberg, R. (2024). Bias-based harassment and bullying: addressing mechanisms and outcomes for possible interventions. *Eur. J. Dev. Psychol.* 21, 505–519. doi: 10.1080/17405629.2024.2376047

Brown, C., Douthwaite, A., Donnelly, M., and Olaniyan, Y. D. (2025). Resilience through belonging: schools' role in promoting the mental health and well-being of children and young people. *Behav. Sci.* 15:1421. doi: 10.3390/bs15101421

Calandri, E., Mastrokoukou, S., Marchisio, C., Monchietto, A., and Graziano, F. (2025). Teacher emotional competence for inclusive education: a systematic review. *Behav. Sci.* 15:359. doi: 10.3390/bs15030359

Câmara, J. N. (2025). Towards critical, anti-colonial and anti-racist education in national and global contexts. *Int. Rev. Educ.* 71, 255–279. doi: 10.1007/s11159-024-10110-9

Castleberry, C. L. (2022). *The Global Culture of Bullying: Explorations and Recommendations, 1st Edn.* India: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781003300663-1

Cornell, D., and Limber, S. P. (2015). Law and policy on the concept of bullying at school. *Am. Psychol.* 70, 333–343. doi: 10.1037/a0038558

Earnshaw, V. A., Reisner, S. L., Menino, D., Poteat, V. P., Bogart, L. M., Barnes, T. N., et al. (2018). Stigma-based bullying interventions: a systematic review. *Dev. Rev.* 48, 178–200. doi: 10.1016/j.dr.2018.02.001

European Commission (2025). *Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training.* Issue paper on countering hate in and through education. European Commission.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice, 3rd Edn.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger E (2024) Teachers need socio-moral competencies to successfully address bias-based bullying: the case for promoting professional ethos. *Front. Educ.* 9:1406932. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1406932

Hall, W. (2017). The effectiveness of policy interventions for school bullying: a systematic review. *J. Soc. Social Work Res.* 8, 45–69. doi: 10.1086/690565

Hay, N., Davies, E., and Sapouna, M. (2024). Teacher responses to racially motivated bullying in Scotland. *Front. Educ.* 9:1376017. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1376017

Hong, J. S., Peguero, A. A., and Espelage, D. L. (2018). Experiences in bullying and/or peer victimization of vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed children and adolescents: an introduction to the special issue. *Am. J. Orthopsychiatry* 88, 399–401. doi: 10.1037/ort0000330

Huang, F. L., and Cornell, D. G. (2019). School teasing and bullying after the presidential election. *Educ. Res.* 48, 69–83. doi: 10.3102/0013189X18820291

Jansen, P. W., Mieloo, C. L., Dommisse van Berkel, A., Verlinden, M., van der Ende, J., Stevens, G., et al. (2016). Bullying and victimization among young elementary school children: the role of child ethnicity and ethnic school composition. *Race Soc. Probl.* 8, 271–280. doi: 10.1007/s12552-016-9182-9

Janssen, J. J., Spinrad, T. L., Gaias, L., Gal-Szabo, D. E., Eisenberg, N., Laible, D., et al. (2024). Racial and gender education in the early school years: an examination of teachers' reactions to discrimination. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* 151:104743. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2024.104743

Košir, K., Zakšek, M., and Kozina, A. (2023). School belongingness and family support as predictors of school bullying perpetration and victimization in adolescents: are relations the same for students with an immigrant background? *Vict. Offenders* 20:1–19. doi: 10.1080/15564886.2023.2181251

La Salle-Finley, T., Yang, C., Espelage, D., and Jimerson, S. R. (2024). Understanding and promoting school climate, bullying, and social-emotional learning: transdisciplinary and transnational science advancing positive youth outcomes. *Sch. Psych. Rev.* 53, 417–424. doi: 10.1080/2372966X.2024.2386235

Legette, K. B., Iruka, I. U., Halberstadt, A. G., and Forte, A. B. (2023). Teachers' awareness of systemic and individual racial bias as a first step towards anti-racist schools. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* 132:104213. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2023.104213

Leithwood, K. (2021). A review of evidence about equitable school leadership. *Educ. Sci.* 11:377. doi: 10.3390/educsci11080377

Lu, L., Fei, L., Ye, Y., Liao, M., Chang, Y., Chen, Y., et al. (2022). Psychological resilience may be related to students' responses to victims of school bullying: a cross-sectional study of Chinese grade 3–5 primary school students. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 19:16121. doi: 10.3390/ijerph192316121

Markovich Morris, E., and Cheng, Y.-L. (2025). Parents as allies: innovative strategies for (re)imagining family, school, and community partnerships. *Educ. Sci.* 15:533. doi: 10.3390/educsci15050533

Maryati, N. M., Hidayat, H., Sulastri, N., and Anwar, S. (2025). School management in preventing bullying in primary schools. *J. Innov. Res. Prim. Educ.* 4, 1891–1903. doi: 10.56916/jirpe.v4i4.1770

Masten, A. S., Lucke, C. M., Nelson, K. M., and Stallworthy, I. C. (2021). Resilience in development and psychopathology: multisystem perspectives. *Annu. Rev. Clin. Psychol.* 17, 521–549. doi: 10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081219-120307

Menesini, E., and Salmivalli, C. (2017). Bullying in schools: the state of knowledge and effective interventions. *Psychol. Health Med.* 22, 240–253. doi: 10.1080/13548506.2017.1279740

Miller, P. (2023). School leaders leading anti-racism and inclusion: evidence from schools in England. *Eq. Educ. Soc.* 3, 46–60. doi: 10.1177/27526461231175168

Moody, Z., and Stahel, T. (2025). School bullying: children and adolescent norms, cultures and identity development. *Front. Educ.* 10:1497681. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1497681

Nikolaou, G., Kaloyirou, C., and Spyropoulou, A. (2019). Bullying and ethnic diversity: investigating their relation in the school setting. *Intercult. Educ.* 30, 335–350. doi: 10.1080/14675986.2019.1582208

O'Brien, N., Acton, F., Hajisoteriou, C., Stefanek, E., Echsel, A., Hipp, K., et al. (2024). "Student voices, migration, and bullying: a narrative review across six countries," in *International Perspectives on Migration, Bullying, and School: Implications for Schools, Refugees, and Migrants,* eds. H. Fandrem, and J. O'Higgins Norman (New York: Routledge), 15–35. doi: 10.4324/9781003439202-2

Okagbue, E. F., Wang, M., and Ezeachikulo, U. P. (2022). Does school bullying show lack of effective multicultural education in the school curriculum? *Int. J. Educ. Res. Open* 3:100178. doi: 10.1016/j.ijedro.2022.100178

Pliogou, V., and Tromara, S. (2025). Dealing with the complexity of racism: teachers' perspectives in Greek Primary Education multicultural settings. *Rev. Lusófona Educ.* 68, 119–148. doi: 10.24140/issn.1645-7250.rle68.dt06

Pliogou, V., Tromara, S., Hajisoteriou, C., and Angelides, P. (2025). Preventing and combating school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV): laying the foundations for a safe, equitable, and inclusive school. *Front. Educ.* 10:1520731. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1520731

Radu, M. B. (2021). "Educational disparities among marginalized groups of students: do bully victimization and unsafe schools impede students' educational attainment?," in *Research Anthology on School Shootings, Peer Victimization, and Solutions for Building Safer Educational Institutions,* ed. M. Khosrow-Pour (IGI Global), 81–105. doi: 10.4018/978-1-7998-5360-2.ch004

Rodríguez-Hidalgo, A. J., Calmaestra, J., Casas, J. A., and Ortega-Ruiz, R. (2019). Ethnic-cultural bullying versus personal bullying: specificity and measurement of discriminatory aggression and victimization among adolescents. *Front. Psychol.* 10:46. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00046

Samuels, A. J. (2018). Exploring culturally responsive pedagogy: teachers' perspectives on fostering equitable and inclusive classrooms. SRATE J. 27, 22–30. Available online at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1166706.pdf

Sapouna, M., de Amicis, L., and Vezzali, L. (2023). Bullying victimization due to racial, ethnic, citizenship and/or religious status: a systematic review. *Adolesc. Res. Rev.* 8, 261–296. doi: 10.1007/s40894-022-00197-2

Savvopoulos, D., Saiti, A., and Arar, K. (2024). The role of the school head in inclusion and culturally responsive leadership. *J. Educ. Adm. Hist.* 56, 107–131. doi: 10.1080/00220620.2022.2122419

Scheel, N. L., Natoli, A. P., Langley, H. A., and Esat, G. (2024). Bullied immigrant youth, emotional distress, and social well-being: moderating roles of family and school. *Sch. Psych. Rev.* 54:1–16. doi: 10.1080/2372966X.2024.2361615

Sieben-Aduful, K. M. A., Willems, R. A., Völlink, T., van der Wiel, N., Sapouna, M., de Bruijn, P., et al. (2025). Teachers' responses to racism and racist bullying in Dutch primary schools. *Front. Psychol.* 15:1393719. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1393719

Skočić Mihić, S., Butković, M., and Mrvić, N. (2024). "Teachers' socio-emotional and intercultural competencies in the context of inclusive education," in *INTED2024 Proceedings* (IATED), 4971–4979. doi: 10.21125/inted.2024.1288

Spruijt, R., Kassenberg, A., and Willemse, M. (2022). *Working Together Towards Family-School Partnership: What Works?*. Abstract from European Research Network about Parents in Education, Nijmegen, Netherlands.

The Smile of the Child (2023). *6 March 2023: National Day Against School Violence and Bullying – Panhellenic School Awareness Campaign "Mila tora" ("Speak Now").*

The Smile of the Child. Available online at: https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/ta-nea-mas/panelhnnia-hmera-bullying/ (Accessed November 20, 2025).

Ungar, M., Connelly, G., and Liebenberg, L. (2019). How schools enhance the development of young people's resilience. *Soc. Indic. Res.* 145, 615–627. doi: 10.1007/s11205-017-1728-8

Ungar, M., and Theron, L. (2020). Resilience and mental health: how multisystemic processes contribute to positive outcomes. *Lancet Psychiatry* 7, 441-448. doi: 10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30434-1

Virella, P. M., Ayari, C., and Tozer, S. (2025). Professional learning for antiracist district transformation: the role of transformational leadership and double-loop learning. *Front. Educ.* 10:1584097. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1584097

Wills, J. S. (2019). Silencing racism: remembering and forgetting race and racism in 11th-grade U.S. history classes. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* 121, 1–44. doi: 10.1177/016146811912100408

Wu, Q., and Jia, F. (2023). Empowering students against ethnic bullying: review and recommendations of innovative school programs. *Children* 10:1632. doi: 10.3390/children10101632

Xu, M., Macrynikola, N., Waseem, M., and Miranda, R. (2020). Racial and ethnic differences in bullying: review and implications for intervention. *Aggress. Violent Behav.* 50:101340. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2019.101340

Zapata Celestino, K., and Manríquez Madrigal, D. (2026). Bullying explained by bullies: understanding school violence in Mexico from the aggressors' perspective. *J. Sch. Violence* 25, 45–59. doi: 10.1080/15388220.2025.2529877