Strategies to Address Bullying in Schools: Building a Positive School Culture Amidst Social Challenges in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Bullying in schools is a serious problem that impacts students' psychological, social and academic well-being. In the digital age, the phenomenon has become more complex with the emergence of cyber-bullying that can occur outside the school environment but still affects students' social dynamics. Lack of awareness, regulation and effective prevention strategies are challenges in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. Therefore, a systematic approach is needed to address bullying and build a positive school culture to support students' optimal development. This study aims to identify the forms of bullying that occur in schools, evaluate the strategies that have been implemented in preventing and handling bullying, and analyze the supporting and inhibiting factors in building a positive school culture. This study used a qualitative approach with interview and observation methods. The results show that although some schools have implemented anti-bullying policies, challenges are still found in its implementation, especially in dealing with cyber bullying that is difficult to control. More effective intervention programs involve educational approaches, such as social skills training for students, strengthening the role of teachers and counselors in mentoring students, and active involvement of parents in bullying prevention. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of strengthening anti-bullying policies that are more adaptive to technological developments, increasing the competence of educators in handling bullying cases, and collaboration between schools, parents and communities in creating a safer, more inclusive school environment that supports holistic student development.

Keywords: Bullying, Cyber Bullying, Prevention Strategies, School Culture

Introduction

Bullying in the school environment is a social problem that continues to be a global concern due to its significant impact on the development of learners, both from physical, emotional, social, and academic aspects (Esquivel, 2023). Bullying is defined as a repeated aggressive act by an individual or group against another individual who is in a weaker position, either physically or psychologically, with the aim of causing fear, emotional distress, or suffering to the victim (Garrick, 2022). Bullying can take many forms, including verbal

intimidation, physical violence, social harassment, and technology-based bullying or cyberbullying, which is increasingly prevalent in the digital era (Parmar, 2024). Along with the development of information and communication technology, bullying is no longer limited to direct interactions in the school environment, but also penetrates into cyberspace, making it increasingly difficult to monitor and control.

The impact of bullying on victims is very complex and can be long-term, both in psychological and academic aspects (Valera, 2021). Victims of bullying tend to experience decreased self-confidence, excessive anxiety, prolonged stress, and other psychological disorders, such as depression and emotional trauma (Wahyuni, 2024). These disorders have the potential to cause decreased motivation in learning, difficulty in building social relationships, and inability to manage emotions well. In some more extreme cases, bullying can lead to self-harm or even the desire to end one's life due to unmanageable mental stress (Miller, 2021). Therefore, bullying not only impacts the psychological well-being of the victimized individual, but also affects their academic performance and overall social life balance.

In the long term, victims of bullying often face the risk of social isolation, which is a feeling of alienation from their social environment due to pressure or fear of interacting (Siddique, 2023). In addition, the negative impact on learning achievement is one of the serious consequences, where victimized students often have difficulty concentrating in class, lose their enthusiasm for learning, and even drop out of school. More worryingly, bullying that is not properly addressed can increase the risk of destructive behaviors such as self-harm, severe depression or suicide, posing a real threat to the well-being of young people (Malik, 2024). This phenomenon reflects the complex social dynamics in the school environment. In many cases, students not only act as victims or perpetrators, but also as witnesses who can be affected by the situation. Witnesses to bullying may experience moral distress or inner conflict between supporting the victim or being neutral to avoid the risk of becoming the next target. The interactions that occur in bullying situations are often influenced by factors such as group power, unhealthy social norms, or lack of supervision from schools and parents. Thus, bullying is not only an individual problem, but also a collective issue that reflects the quality of the social environment in schools.

In the current digital era, forms of bullying have undergone significant changes, one of which is the emergence of cyberbullying, which is bullying that occurs through digital media (Kazan, 2022). Cyberbullying takes place on various platforms, such as social media, instant messaging applications, online forums, or online gaming platforms (Akeusola, 2023). It takes various forms, ranging from spreading false information (hoaxes), insults, verbal abuse, to unauthorized sharing of personal content. One of the distinctive features of cyberbullying is that it does not recognize the limits of time and space. Perpetrators can intimidate victims at any time, even outside of school hours, so that victims lose their sense of security, not only in the physical environment but also in cyberspace. Unlike conventional bullying, cyberbullying is often difficult to detect by teachers, parents or school authorities due to its hidden nature in the digital space (Tomczyk, 2024). Interactions in cyberspace tend to be private, such as through direct messages or hidden comments, so many cases do not come to light until the victim shows worrying psychological signs. In addition, the anonymity that technology can offer provides opportunities for perpetrators to act without fear of consequences, thus increasing their courage to commit acts of bullying.

Technology, while bringing many benefits, such as access to information, online learning and social interaction across borders, is also a tool that expands the scope and impact of bullying. The spread of content online can quickly reach many people, magnifying the negative effects on the victim. For example, an insult or an inappropriate photo can easily go viral, exacerbating the psychological distress felt by the victim, the duration of the content stored online is often permanent, making it difficult to remove completely and leaving a lasting impact on the victim's reputation. This phenomenon calls for a more strategic approach in

addressing bullying, especially by improving digital literacy among students, teachers and parents. Education on digital ethics, wise use of social media and cyberbullying reporting mechanisms should be an integral part of the curriculum and school policies (Ghosh, 2025). With a better understanding of the digital world, it is expected that students will not only be able to protect themselves from the threat of cyberbullying, but also play an active role in creating a safer and more positive digital environment. Facing the increasingly complex challenges of bullying, building a positive school culture is a very important and urgent strategic step. A positive school culture refers to an environment that promotes values of respect, cooperation and mutual support among students, teachers, school staff and parents (Wilson, 2023). This not only creates a conducive learning atmosphere but also instills a strong moral foundation in the school community so that interactions between individuals are based on empathy, tolerance and integrity. When these values are consistently applied, students are not only taught to respect others but also to be an active part in maintaining the harmony of the school environment.

This approach requires the involvement of all parties to ensure that each student feels accepted, heard and valued in their environment. This sense of acceptance is important because students who feel accepted tend to have higher self-confidence and are actively involved in school activities. They are also less likely to be perpetrators or victims of bullying. Conversely, students who feel isolated or ignored are more prone to aggressive behavior or become targets of bullying (Drubina, 2023). Therefore, a strong school culture serves as a natural barrier against bullying behavior, as it provides a space for each individual to feel safe and respected. To build a positive school culture, planned and sustainable strategies are needed, such as character education programs integrated into the curriculum, training for teachers to identify and address bullying, and the development of an accessible and safe reporting system for students. In addition, schools need to create a supportive physical environment, such as providing safe spaces for discussion and interaction, and encouraging student participation in collaborative activities that strengthen relationships between individuals.

Parental and community involvement is also a key element in building a positive school culture (Muzaki, 2022). Through close cooperation between schools and families, the values taught at school can be reinforced at home, creating a consistency that supports students' holistic development. With this comprehensive approach, a positive school culture is not only a tool to prevent bullying, but also the foundation for creating a more caring, responsible generation that is ready to face future social challenges. Building a positive school culture is inseparable from various complex and dynamic challenges (Iksal, 2024). One of the main challenges is the social changes that occur in the digital era. Easy access to information through the internet and social media often brings negative influences, such as the spread of uneducational content, unhealthy norms, and destructive behavior (Bahadur, 2021). Exposure to this kind of information can shape students' mindset and behavior, which ultimately impacts students' social relationships at school. In addition, technological developments have also led to a reduction in direct interaction between individuals. Students communicate more often through digital devices than face to face, which limits their ability to understand emotions, build empathy, and resolve conflicts constructively.

On the other hand, limited resources are also a significant obstacle in building a positive school culture. Many schools face problems such as a lack of adequate facilities, high teacher workloads and limited budgets to organize support programs. The lack of training for teachers and school staff in dealing with bullying and building an inclusive environment is another obstacle that needs to be overcome (Sadjadi, 2021). Teachers often do not have sufficient knowledge or skills to detect bullying early or to effectively instill positive values in the classroom. The lack of parental involvement also complicates these efforts. Parents, as an important part of the school community, are often not actively involved in supporting the development of a positive school culture. Some parents may not understand the importance of

their role in shaping children's behavior or do not have the time to contribute due to work pressures and other responsibilities. Lack of effective communication between schools and families can also hinder the synergy that should exist to support the success of anti-bullying strategies. Diverse social dynamics in the school environment, such as different cultural backgrounds, values and habits, can pose additional challenges. Managing these differences requires a sensitive and inclusive approach so that every student feels valued without exception. All these challenges show that building a positive school culture requires a holistic effort, involving all elements of the school, family and community, and requires a long-term commitment to create real and sustainable change.

This paper aims to explore in-depth effective strategies to address bullying in schools, with an emphasis on the importance of building a positive school culture as a key foundation. Amidst the social challenges emerging in the digital age, this discussion will explore concrete measures that can be implemented to create a school environment that supports values such as empathy, respect and inclusivity. While the main focus lies on the integration of character education into the curriculum, which aims to shape students with resilient personalities, integrity, and the ability to build healthy relationships with others, this paper also highlights the importance of strengthening collaboration between schools and families as one of the key elements in bullying prevention and response. Close communication between teachers, students and parents can create effective synergy in building collective awareness of the importance of a safe and conducive school environment. This collaboration also includes empowering parents to play an active role in guiding their children to understand social ethics, both in the real world and in the digital world.

On the other hand, the wise use of technology is an important part of the solution. Technology can not only be used to identify and monitor bullying cases through easily accessible reporting platforms, but also to facilitate digital learning that supports positive values. For example, the use of educational apps that encourage collaborative interactions or anti-bullying campaigns on social media that involve students as agents of change. With a comprehensive approach and involving all elements of the school community, it is hoped that this paper can provide strategic guidance to create a safe, comfortable and inclusive environment. This environment will not only protect students from the risk of bullying but also encourage them to develop optimally, academically, socially and emotionally. Ultimately, this effort aims to build a young generation that is not only intelligent, but also has high social awareness and is ready to face the challenges of the future.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore the strategies implemented in addressing bullying in schools and building a positive school culture amid social challenges in the digital era. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the phenomenon of bullying in depth by considering various factors that influence it, such as school policies, social interactions, and the role of teachers and education personnel in creating a safe and inclusive environment. This research is exploratory in nature with a case study design that focuses on several schools as units of analysis. Case studies provide a deeper understanding of the practices and policies that have been implemented in addressing bullying as well as the challenges faced in building a positive school culture.

The research subjects consisted of principals, teachers, school counselors, and students in several junior and senior high schools that have implemented anti-bullying policies. The subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique, taking into account their experience in handling bullying cases as well as their involvement in efforts to create a safer school environment. Principals and teachers were selected because they have a strategic role in designing and implementing anti-bullying policies. School counselors were included to

understand their role in providing guidance to students who experience or are involved in bullying. Meanwhile, students became participants to provide direct perspectives on their experiences with bullying as well as the effectiveness of the program implemented by the school.

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation and documentation analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, counselors, and students to explore their understanding of the forms of bullying that occur, challenges in dealing with bullying cases, and the effectiveness of school policies in building a positive culture. Participatory observation was conducted in the school environment to observe students' social interactions, the implementation of the anti-bullying policy, and the response of education personnel to student behavior. In addition, documentation analysis was conducted on school policies, bullying case reports, and educational materials used in prevention and intervention programs to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the strategic measures implemented by the school. The data analysis technique used is thematic analysis, which involves several stages, namely data reduction, categorization, and interpretation of findings. Data reduction was carried out by organizing and grouping information based on the research focus. Furthermore, the reduced data was categorized based on the main themes, such as the forms of bullying that occurred, anti-bullying policies implemented, challenges in policy implementation, and the impact of efforts to build a positive school culture. Data interpretation was done by referring to relevant theories and comparing the research results with previous studies to gain more comprehensive insights.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study show that bullying in schools is still a significant problem, especially with the development of digital technology that expands its forms and impacts. Interviews with principals, teachers and school counselors revealed that bullying in schools is not only limited to physical acts, but also includes verbal, social and cyber bullying. Verbal bullying often takes the form of taunts or insults that can lower students' self-confidence, while social bullying involves ostracizing or spreading rumors that harm the victim psychologically (Maalikih, 2024). In addition, physical bullying that includes direct acts of violence against the victim is still found in some cases, despite school efforts to prevent it through close supervision and anti-violence education programs.

Cyber bullying is increasingly prevalent due to the uncontrolled use of social media, where students can easily spread hate speech, share personal information without permission, or bully online (Yu, 2024). The main difference between conventional bullying and cyber bullying is the reach and anonymity of the perpetrator, which often makes the victim feel more isolated and helpless. In addition, the impact of cyber bullying can last longer due to the digital footprint that is difficult to erase, so victims continue to experience psychological distress even after the incident has passed. Thus, the challenge in addressing bullying is not only limited to the physical school environment, but must also include broader surveillance and education strategies to prevent the spread of bullying in the digital world.

The strategies that schools adopt in dealing with bullying vary depending on their internal policies and available resources. Most schools have anti-bullying policies that are outlined in school regulations and socialized to students since the beginning of the school year (Webb, 2025). This socialization is done through various means, such as counseling, seminars, and group discussions involving students and educators. In addition, some schools also form a special team responsible for handling bullying cases, so that any incoming reports can be followed up quickly and appropriately. These measures aim to create a safe and comfortable school environment for all students and instill awareness of the importance of mutual respect among them. The approaches used by schools in dealing with bullying can be divided into two

main categories, namely discipline-based approaches and educative approaches. The discipline-based approach involves sanctioning the bully according to the level of offense committed, ranging from reprimand, suspension, to further action according to school policy. Meanwhile, the educative approach focuses more on coaching and mediation programs between victims and perpetrators, with the aim of building awareness and changing negative behavior. Observations show that the effectiveness of this strategy depends on the consistency of policy implementation and the involvement of the entire school community, including teachers, students and parents. Support from parents and the surrounding environment is also an important factor in ensuring that anti-bullying policies can run optimally, so as to reduce the incidence of bullying in schools.

The results of this study suggest that addressing bullying in schools, especially in the context of online bullying (cyberbullying), requires a comprehensive approach involving various elements, such as the use of technology, character education, and close collaboration between schools and families. One of the key findings is the importance of technology in detecting and preventing cyberbullying (Perera, 2021). Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and big data have been shown to act as tools to monitor and analyze student interactions online more effectively (Yang, 2023). Through AI-based applications, schools and parents can receive early warnings of suspicious behavior patterns or acts of online bullying occurring among students. This technology also helps in creating a safer space for students, as their digital interactions can be monitored without any interference in their freedom of expression. However, the main challenge found is the limited access and understanding of technology in many schools, especially in resource-constrained areas, the lack of specialized training for teachers in using this technology is also an obstacle in its implementation.

In addition to technology, character education in schools plays an important role in creating a positive culture and minimizing bullying in the school environment (Fathoni, 2024). Findings from observations and interviews show that schools that consistently integrate values such as empathy, tolerance and integrity into the curriculum, as well as in extracurricular activities, have lower rates of bullying than schools that do not. The implementation of character education allows students to understand the importance of respecting differences, developing a sense of empathy, and building mutually supportive relationships (Sakti, 2024). When students feel valued, accepted and supported by their environment, their potential to engage in bullying, both as perpetrators and victims, tends to decrease significantly. Character education is not only limited to formal lessons in the classroom, but also applied in various daily activities that involve the entire school community. For example, activities such as group discussions, conflict resolution simulations, mentoring programs, and collaboration in social projects, can help students understand character values in a more practical and meaningful way.

The role of teachers in building a positive school culture has high significance in bullying prevention efforts (Sainz, 2023). Teachers not only function as educators, but also as facilitators and supervisors in creating a safe and conducive learning environment. The interview results show that teachers who have a high level of awareness of bullying issues are more proactive in identifying and handling cases that occur in the school environment. They actively monitor interactions between students, respond to early indications of bullying, and build effective communication to prevent case escalation. In addition, teachers who implement an inclusive pedagogical approach based on the values of empathy and tolerance contribute to shaping students' characters to appreciate diversity and reject all forms of violence and discrimination (Khanolainen, 2024). Conversely, the absence of an effective monitoring system can result in bullying cases going undetected or not receiving adequate intervention, potentially developing into more complex problems. Schools that do not have a systematic handling mechanism often experience difficulties in preventing and responding to bullying cases optimally (Fauzan, 2024). This condition can cause victims to feel unprotected, while perpetrators are increasingly encouraged to commit acts of bullying without clear

consequences. Therefore, a comprehensive training program for educators is needed to increase their capacity to detect, prevent and effectively handle bullying. Furthermore, collaboration between teachers, education personnel, and parents is a crucial element in building a safe and supportive school environment, where every learner feels valued and free from the threat of bullying.

The main challenge in building a positive school culture in the digital era lies in how to integrate a monitoring mechanism for students' online activities without violating their privacy rights. The rapid development of technology has expanded students' interaction space, not only in the physical school environment but also in the digital realm (Haleem, 2022). Observations and interviews show that many educational institutions still do not have clear regulations related to monitoring students' use of social media, resulting in less than optimal prevention and intervention efforts against cyber bullying. In some cases, this policy limitation makes it difficult for schools to take action when bullying occurs outside the school environment or outside of class hours, even though the impact is still felt by students in the academic environment. In addition, cyber bullying has different characteristics compared to conventional bullying, especially in terms of the anonymity of the perpetrators, the wide reach, and the nature of digital content that is difficult to delete permanently. This demands a more comprehensive approach in handling it.

The establishment of a positive school culture depends not only on internal school policies, but also on the active participation of parents in instilling moral and ethical values in their children (Unar, 2024). The family environment plays a crucial role in shaping children's character, including in terms of how they interact with peers in the school environment and in the digital world (Stoilova, 2021). Interviews with several parents showed that many of them did not realize that their children were being bullied or even played a role as perpetrators. This is due to the lack of communication between parents and children about their social experiences at school. Meanwhile, parents who actively communicate with the school are more likely to recognize changes in their child's behavior and immediately take preventive and curative steps through the right approach. However, the main challenge faced in building parental involvement is the lack of awareness of some of them regarding the importance of the family's role in supporting anti-bullying programs implemented by schools. Some parents still think that bullying is part of children's social dynamics that do not need special attention, so they are less involved in prevention efforts. In addition, busyness and limited information on the long-term impact of bullying also become obstacles in building effective collaboration between schools and families.

The research also identified the negative impact of technology on real-world social interactions, which contributes to the increased risk of bullying among students. While technology has made communication easier, interviews showed that many students have difficulty interacting in person with peers. High reliance on digital platforms, both for entertainment and social media, has reduced their opportunities to engage in healthy social interactions in school and community settings (Hamilton, 2022). Lack of engagement in face-to-face communication can weaken social skills as well as empathy, increasing the likelihood of students becoming victims or perpetrators of bullying. Limited interaction in the real world leaves some students without sufficient understanding of the consequences of their actions, especially in the digital realm, where bullying is often perpetrated without considering the psychological impact on the victim. Therefore, it is important to create a balance between technology use and social activities that strengthen students' social and emotional skills, both through school policies and the active role of families in limiting excessive use of digital media. In addition, external factors such as social media and public policies also have a significant influence on student behavior related to bullying. Many students feel pressured by social expectations built through social media, where standards of beauty, lifestyle and social status become the benchmark for acceptance in friendship groups. This pressure often triggers

bullying, especially for students who are perceived as not conforming to the prevailing social trends. Interview results show that bullying based on appearance or personal preference is increasingly prevalent on digital platforms, where students who differ in dress style, physique, or even opinions are often subjected to online ridicule and harassment.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of a comprehensive strategy in addressing bullying in schools and building a positive school culture amidst social challenges in the digital era. The results show that bullying is still a significant problem in the school environment, especially with the increasing cases of cyber bullying due to the development of digital technology. The forms of bullying that occur include verbal, physical, social, and cyber bullying, each of which has a negative impact on students' psychological and academic well-being. Therefore, handling bullying cannot be done partially, but must involve various parties, including teachers, counselors, students, parents, and the school community as a whole. The strategies applied by schools in dealing with bullying vary, ranging from discipline-based approaches to educational approaches that emphasize coaching and conflict resolution. The results show that consistently implemented anti-bullying policies, supported by the active involvement of teachers and counselors, are more effective in preventing and dealing with bullying. This research implies the need for a comprehensive approach in dealing with bullying in schools through clear and integrated policies, intensive teacher and counselor training, and increased digital literacy to anticipate cyber bullying.

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