

Optimizing Bullying Prevention Strategies to Foster a Sense of Caring in the School Environment at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze bullying prevention strategies through character education at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang. The method used is descriptive qualitative with observation, interview, and documentation techniques. The results showed that the forms of bullying that often appear include verbal taunts, social exclusion, and mild physical actions that have an impact on the psychological and social conditions of students. Prevention strategies implemented by schools include rule enforcement, counseling services, psychoeducational activities, and extracurricular programs that instill the values of empathy, respect, cooperation, and responsibility. These efforts are effective in reducing the intensity of bullying and fostering positive attitudes among students. Teachers and counselors play an important role as facilitators and role models, although there are still obstacles in the form of limited facilities and uneven participation. In conclusion, character education integrated with counseling is a long-term strategic solution to create a healthy school climate and minimize bullying.

Introduction

The prevalence of violence among school-aged children today often occurs in schools, which should be places for acquiring knowledge and developing positive personal character, but instead have become breeding grounds for bullying, making children afraid to attend school (Sidiq, 2018). In reality, there are still many problems that arise in the educational process, including violence in schools, or what is commonly referred to as school bullying, where schools, which should be places for learning and helping to develop good character, have instead become places where bullying occurs (Putri, 2017).

Bullying in the school environment is a serious problem that affects students' psychological, social, and emotional development. This phenomenon not only causes fear and low self-esteem in victims, but also affects the overall learning atmosphere. Based on PISA 2018 data, as many as 41.1% of students in Indonesia admitted to having experienced bullying, which is much higher than the OECD average of only 22.7%. This places Indonesia fifth in the world in terms of the number of students who are victims of bullying, indicating that the problem of bullying is still very concerning in the national education environment (Kurnianingrum, 2023).

According to Kharis, 2019 in Bete & Arifin, 2023, bullying comes from the English word bully, which refers to intimidation, bullying, or harassment that refers to a threat made by one person against another or by the perpetrator against the victim, causing psychological distress to the victim in the form of stress, trauma that manifests as physical or psychological disorders, or both. Therefore, the broader meaning of bullying is a form of behavior that involves repeated actions to harass other children who are considered weaker than them. For this reason, bullying is a behavior that teachers in schools must pay attention to, as it can affect students' psychological well-being in learning.

Bullying can take many forms, including physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying. These acts often go undetected due to a lack of reporting and effective supervision in schools. Factors that contribute to bullying include an unsupportive family environment, authoritarian or permissive parenting styles, weak school supervision, and a lack of character education that instills moral values from an early age. Thus, the problem of bullying is not only the responsibility of individuals, but also the education system and the students' social environment. Character education is one of the main strategies in bullying prevention efforts. Character education based on the values of empathy, tolerance, and cooperation has proven to be effective in creating a positive school climate. Teachers play a crucial role as role models, facilitators, and mentors in helping students internalize these values. Teachers not only deliver academic material but also instill positive habits that can reduce students' tendency to engage in bullying (Rahman, 2024).

The implementation of comprehensive character education management includes the formation of character values, the cultivation of positive attitudes, and the promotion of a school culture that supports cooperation and mutual respect among students. Schools that successfully implement character education consistently are able to create a safe and conducive learning environment, increase student engagement, and reduce incidents of bullying. This shows that character education is not just an additional program, but a strategic foundation for building a healthy school community (Yulianti, 2024).

In efforts to prevent bullying, character education based on values such as empathy, tolerance, and cooperation has proven effective in creating a positive school climate. Character education not only teaches students about norms and rules, but also emphasizes the internalization of moral values that can shape healthy social behavior. By instilling empathy, students learn to understand the feelings of their peers, appreciate differences, and refrain from behavior that hurts others. The value of tolerance encourages students to accept diversity, whether in social, cultural, or individual abilities. Meanwhile, the value of cooperation teaches students to support each other in academic and non-academic activities, thereby creating harmonious interpersonal relationships (Yuyarti, 2018).

Teachers play a central role in this process, not only as providers of material, but also as role models. Teachers who are able to show empathy, respect differences, and act fairly will become models that students follow in their daily interactions, making it easier to consistently implement character education in the school environment. In addition, the implementation of comprehensive character education management is also an important strategy for creating a safe and conducive learning environment. This includes planning activities that instill positive values, fostering attitudes through various extracurricular programs, and promoting a school culture that supports healthy social interaction. Schools that are able to integrate character education into every aspect of learning, from classroom rules and teaching methods to extracurricular activities, will help students understand and

practice these values in their daily lives. A positive school environment not only reduces the likelihood of bullying, but also increases mutual trust, a sense of security, and student engagement in learning activities. Thus, well-managed character education creates a school ecosystem that supports students' psychological and social development optimally (Razzan, 2024).

Among various character values, respect occupies a central position in preventing bullying. Strengthening respect through mentoring activities, lectures, and hands-on practice in the classroom can increase students' awareness of the importance of respecting themselves and others. By respecting differences, students learn not to tease, bully, or isolate their classmates. This practice of respect also fosters a sense of caring, enabling students to see the impact of their behavior on others and act more empathetically in social interactions (Mooztava, 2023).

Thus, strengthening the character trait of respect in the school environment is a strategic step in preventing bullying. The integration of respect values into the curriculum and daily activities not only reduces negative behavior but also shapes students' mature, responsible, and caring characters (Rahman, 2024). This implementation is particularly relevant for SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang, where social interactions between students are quite intense and the potential for conflict is high. Bullying prevention strategies based on strengthening respect are an important foundation for creating a learning environment that is safe, harmonious, and supports students' optimal psychosocial development.

Method

This research uses descriptive qualitative research methods. Based on the views of McMillan and Schumacher (2010), defining that qualitative research is a concept of social science whose results depend on observing the object under study within the scope of the research and involving all parties in the event. Qualitative research is a type of research that focuses on understanding phenomena in depth through descriptive data collection, such as words, text, images, or behavior, not numbers. This research emphasizes the meaning, experience, and perspective of the subject in a particular context. According to Moleong (2017) that qualitative research is research that intends to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by the research subject, such as behavior, perception, motivation, action, holistically, and by means of descriptions in the form of words and language in a special natural context.

According to Hasibuan, qualitative research is an approach that produces broad and in-depth descriptions through subjective and naturalistic understanding of the object under study. This method emphasizes meaning rather than numbers, and is suitable for examining social phenomena contextually (Hasibuan et al., 2022).

Data collection in this study was conducted through three main techniques, namely participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Observations were conducted to see social interactions and the implementation of bullying prevention programs at school. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and students to obtain information regarding the form of strategies implemented and their impact on caring behavior. Meanwhile, documentation studies were conducted by reviewing school documents, such as rules of conduct, violation reports, and activity programs. The research subjects consisted of Counseling Guidance (BK) teachers, homeroom teachers, IPM

administrators, and several students who had been involved in bullying cases both as perpetrators and victims. The research location was at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang. Quoting Sugiyono's opinion,

Participatory observation is a data collection technique in which the researcher participates in the activities being observed, so as to obtain more complete and in-depth data (Sugiyono, 2018).

Results and Discussion

The phenomenon of bullying in schools remains a serious problem that disrupts the educational process. Schools, which should be safe places for learning, often become places where bullying occurs. This is in line with Sidiq's (2018) findings that schools are not only places for learning, but also often fertile ground for bullying. Putri (2018) also adds that bullying is a problem that often arises in the dynamics of education and has an impact on students' psychological development. The effects of bullying not only hurt the victim physically, but also affect them psychologically, socially, and emotionally. Kurnianingrum (2023) emphasizes that based on PISA 2018 data, around 41.1% of students in Indonesia admit to having experienced bullying, a figure that is far above the OECD average (22.7%). This condition places Indonesia in fifth place in the world in terms of bullying cases, showing how serious the problem of bullying in schools is.

Bullying itself can take many forms, including physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying. According to Bete & Arifin (2023), bullying behavior includes intimidation, harassment, and threats that are repeated to the point of causing trauma, stress, and physical and psychological disorders. Therefore, teachers in schools need to pay special attention to the emergence of bullying behavior because it can interfere with students' concentration and character development. One relevant strategy to prevent this is character education. Rahman (2024) emphasizes that character education based on empathy, tolerance, and cooperation can create a positive school climate and reduce students' tendency to bully. Yulianti (2024) also adds that comprehensive character education management has been proven effective in creating a safe, conducive school environment that is oriented towards strengthening students' positive attitudes. In line with this, Yuyarti (2018) explains that strengthening the values of empathy, tolerance, and cooperation is not just a theory but must be instilled through direct practice in schools. Teachers have a central role as role models who can exemplify empathy, fairness, and respect for differences in everyday life so that character values can be consistently internalized in students' lives.

Observations at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Palembang found that the most common form of bullying was verbal abuse. Some students habitually called their friends names that were inappropriate or demeaning to their physical appearance. Although often considered a joke by the perpetrators, this caused the victims to feel ashamed and eventually reluctant to interact (Putri, 2018). In addition, social bullying in the form of exclusion from friendship groups was also found. Some students deliberately avoid or refuse to associate with certain friends, causing the victims to feel lonely, isolated, and unaccepted in their environment (Yohana & Siagian, 2025). There are also many students who experience psychological bullying due to past trauma. They find it difficult to trust others, are easily anxious, and are reluctant to socialize, which ultimately affects their courage to participate in learning activities (Kurnianingrum, 2023). Although no cases of severe physical violence were

found, there were minor physical behaviors such as pulling, pushing, or light hitting during excessive joking. If left unchecked, such actions have the potential to cause trauma and could escalate into more serious violence (Bete & Arifin, 2023).

Students' responses to bullying vary. Some choose to withdraw and isolate themselves because they feel uncomfortable in class and fear that the bad experience will repeat itself (Yohana & Siagian, 2025). Some students also experience insecurity after being verbally teased, for example, feeling that they are not pretty enough, not handsome enough, or not as smart as their friends, making it difficult for them to feel confident speaking in public (Rahman, 2024). Some students even carry psychological trauma from previous experiences of bullying, which makes it difficult for them to adapt, causes them to be easily anxious, and makes them reluctant to interact with their environment (Kurnianingrum, 2023). However, not all student responses are negative. Through the "Friends Growing, Friends Sharing" counseling program, some students have begun to share their experiences and accept their past, making them feel more heard and understood, and enabling them to rebuild their confidence. This is in line with research by Mujib, Rachman, & Hidayat (2024), which confirms that character-based counseling can help victims of bullying recover.

In an effort to prevent bullying, SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Palembang has taken several strategic steps. The school has implemented clear rules and regulations regarding the prohibition of bullying and emphasizes the importance of mutual respect. These rules are posted in classrooms and on bulletin boards to serve as reminders for students. This strategy is effective because clear rules can internalize moral values in students (Prima & Maghribi, 2024). In addition, the role of guidance counselors is very important in overcoming bullying. Guidance counselors conduct observations, individual and group counseling, and provide a safe space for students to talk and find solutions. The "Friends Growing, Friends Talking" counseling program has been proven to help students understand the impact of bullying while building empathy (Mujib, Rachman, & Hidayat). The school also conducts educational activities in the form of PSY S.A.Y. (Stop Bullying, Start Caring) seminars and webinars on adolescent mental health, which aim to instill awareness of the dangers of bullying and equip students with mental health skills. These psychoeducational activities have been proven to increase students' collective concern for one another (Mooztava, 2023). In addition, positive culture is also strengthened through extracurricular activities such as scouting, August 17th competitions, and religious recitations. These activities foster cooperation, sportsmanship, and respect for diversity, which play a major role in preventing bullying (Rohmah & Adhawiyah, 2025).

Thus, it can be concluded that bullying in schools is a real problem that encompasses verbal, social, psychological, and mild physical aspects. Students' responses to bullying also vary, ranging from withdrawal, insecurity, to trauma, although some have begun to recover through counseling. The strategies implemented by schools through regulations, guidance counseling, educational activities, and extracurricular activities demonstrate the importance of synergy between rules, character education, and counseling. By strengthening the character traits of respect, empathy, and responsibility, the school climate is expected to become more inclusive, safe, and free from bullying.

After the bullying prevention strategy was implemented at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang, there was a significant change in student attitudes. Students who previously tended to remain silent and ignore bullying behavior began to show the courage to report

incidents to teachers, provide support to friends who were victims, and show a more open attitude in resolving problems peacefully. This phenomenon aligns with research indicating that when empathy is instilled through character education, students become more sensitive to their surroundings and strive to reduce aggressive behaviors such as bullying (Fitriani, 2021). Similar results also reveal that the internalization of character education can foster mutual respect and responsibility among students, thereby creating healthier social interactions at school (Fadila et al., 2023). Preventing bullying at school requires strategies that not only emphasize punishment but also efforts to build collective awareness among students. One effective preventive measure is to involve all members of the school community, from teachers and counselors to peers, in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. Through group discussions, peer counseling, and programs that promote mutual respect, students are more easily guided away from bullying behavior. This strategy has been proven to reduce bullying rates because it fosters awareness within students themselves, rather than simply fear of punishment (Sari et al., 2020).

In addition, a preventive approach can also be taken by integrating character values into each subject. Teachers are expected to focus not only on academic achievement, but also on fostering caring, empathy, and tolerance. This integration can be done by incorporating concrete examples related to the dangers of bullying and the importance of friendship into learning activities. Research shows that integrating character education into the curriculum contributes positively to preventing aggressive behavior among students (Utami et al., 2021). Prevention can also be strengthened through the involvement of parents and the community around the school. Parenting and socialization activities regarding the impact of bullying make parents more sensitive to their children's behavior, both at home and at school. This is in line with research that found that effective communication between schools and parents is an important factor in preventing bullying, as students feel more supervised and accompanied in their social development process (Prasetyo et al., 2019). Comprehensive and continuous prevention efforts have proven to be more effective than reactive strategies. Therefore, prevention must be a top priority in school policy in order to create a healthy, supportive, and caring educational climate (Wahyuni et al., 2022).

In addition, the growth of concern, empathy, and solidarity among students is also evident in classroom dynamics and extracurricular activities. Students are becoming accustomed to greeting each other, helping friends in need, and taking the initiative to create a conducive learning environment. This shows that bullying prevention strategies not only reduce the number of violent incidents but also play a role in creating a positive school climate. Other studies confirm that instilling values such as empathy, tolerance, and social responsibility can shape students' social sensitivity so that they not only avoid hurtful behavior but are also encouraged to provide support to their peers (Santika, 2023). In line with this, it was also found that character education can increase prosocial behavior, such as solidarity and cooperation, which then strengthens relationships between students and reduces the chances of bullying (Syawalia et al., 2024). After the implementation of bullying prevention strategies at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang, there were significant changes in students' social attitudes. One of the most striking positive impacts was an increase in empathy among students. They began to be more sensitive to the feelings of their classmates, especially those who had previously been victims of bullying. Students who were previously indifferent to their friends' suffering now show concern and

support. For example, they more often offer help to friends who are struggling with their studies or facing personal problems. This shows that character education that emphasizes human values can shape students' social awareness to care for others (Agustiani, 2025).

In addition, solidarity among students has also increased. Students have begun to work together to complete group assignments, help each other in extracurricular activities, and support friends in need. They no longer see differences as barriers, but rather as assets that enrich social relationships at school. Research shows that through learning that instills tolerance, empathy, solidarity, and respect for differences, students are expected to have a high level of social awareness that discourages bullying (Agustiani, 2025).

Students' social awareness is also growing. They care not only about their close friends, but also about less popular friends or those who are often bullied. Students are beginning to report incidents of bullying they witness to teachers or school officials, showing that they feel responsible for creating a safe and comfortable school environment for everyone. Social activities such as community service, visits to orphanages, and anti-bullying campaigns have become effective means of fostering students' concern for others (Lestari, 2024). Overall, the implementation of bullying prevention strategies at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang has not only succeeded in reducing the number of bullying cases, but also in fostering values of care, empathy, and solidarity among students. This proves that consistently implemented character education can shape a positive school culture that is free from bullying behavior.

From a theoretical perspective, character education-based bullying prevention strategies are effective because they focus not only on rules and sanctions, but also on the internalization of affective values in students. When values such as empathy, responsibility, and caring become part of one's personality, students will be more likely to act positively without being forced by external rules. Research explains that developing empathy through character education enables students to control aggressive impulses and choose healthier ways of interacting (Fitriani, 2021). Other findings also reveal that character education helps students internalize empathy, which is an important tool in preventing bullying behavior (Yuliani, 2022). In other words, the attitude change that occurred in students at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang demonstrates the success of the strategy implemented because it is in line with the concept of character education that emphasizes a balance between cognitive, affective, and social aspects. The bullying prevention strategy implemented at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang is in line with the principles of character education theory, which emphasizes the importance of comprehensive moral, affective, and social development of students. This theory states that effective education not only transfers knowledge but also instills life values such as empathy, care, responsibility, and honesty, so that students can act positively in their daily lives (Hidayati, 2023).

In practice, bullying prevention strategies integrate activities that foster care and empathy. For example, students are involved in group activities that encourage cooperation, social projects, and reflection on personal experiences. These activities help students understand their friends' feelings and feel the consequences of uncaring behavior, so that caring values become part of their daily behavior (Putri, 2022). In addition, this strategy also utilizes modeling or examples from teachers and educators. By exemplifying caring, respectful, and responsive attitudes towards other students' feelings, teachers act as agents of character value internalization. Students indirectly imitate these positive

behaviors, which is in line with the principle of character education theory that moral learning is effective when these values are applied and exemplified in real interactions. Overall, this school bullying prevention strategy shows that strengthening the value of caring through character education not only reduces bullying but also creates a supportive, empathetic, and collaborative school environment. With this approach, the values of caring are truly embedded and become part of the culture (Kusuma & Rahman, 2024).

These findings are also consistent with other studies in Indonesia. Previous research explains that character education as a bullying prevention effort can strengthen social awareness values among high school students (Santika, 2023). In addition, it is also emphasized that the role of teachers in applying character values such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy has been proven effective in reducing bullying behavior in schools (Riawati, 2020). Similarly, it was found that character education can improve students' emotional intelligence, which makes them better able to control their emotions and refrain from aggressive behavior (Herdiansyah, 2020). Interesting findings were also shown through a study in elementary schools that value-based character education programs significantly reduced bullying behavior and encouraged the growth of mutual respect (Rianti, 2023). Furthermore, other studies emphasize that the implementation of character education not only reduces negative behavior but also creates a more supportive, inclusive, and caring school climate (Syawalia et al., 2024). Thus, it can be understood that the bullying prevention strategy at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang not only serves to reduce bullying cases but also fosters values of care, empathy, and solidarity, which are important foundations in creating a healthy school environment. This change reinforces the evidence that character education, when implemented consistently, is an effective approach in building a bullying-free school culture while fostering a generation that cares for others.

The implementation of bullying prevention programs in schools is inseparable from a number of barriers that affect their effectiveness. The main obstacle that arose was the limited venue for the implementation. In the early stages, the program was planned to be attended by 200 participants, but due to inadequate room capacity, the number of participants had to be significantly reduced to 34 people. This condition shows that the availability of facilities and infrastructure is a determining factor in the smooth running of the program. Wahyuni, Putra, and Anwar (2022) asserted that the quality of school physical facilities has a direct effect on the implementation of bullying prevention programs, because limited space can limit student participation and interaction. Similarly, Yulianti (2024) stated that a less conducive learning environment can reduce the success of character education.

In addition to limited facilities, another obstacle was the change in the implementation schedule. Programs that are supposed to involve many students at certain hours are forced to be followed by only a small number of participants due to conflicts with other academic activities. The time factor is often a problem in school-based activities because students and teachers have to adjust to a busy academic agenda (Utami, Hidayat, & Puspitasari, 2021). As a result, student involvement is uneven and some students do not gain direct experience from the program. From a theoretical perspective, this obstacle can be explained through the concept of school climate proposed by the National School Climate Center (2023). A positive school climate requires the support of harmonious physical, social and academic environments. When one aspect, such as facilities or time, does not support it, the bullying prevention program will experience limitations. Prasetyo,

Susanto, and Lestari (2019) added that ineffective communication between the school, teachers, and parents has the potential to increase obstacles because immature coordination can lead to sudden changes in the implementation of activities.

The implication of these obstacles is the importance of schools viewing bullying prevention programs as a long-term investment, not just an additional activity. Schools that are consistent in implementing prevention programs will reap the benefits of increased solidarity, empathy, and a culture of caring among students (Agustiani, 2025). In the long run, a positive school climate can reduce the incidence of bullying, improve students' mental health, and strengthen relationships among students and between students and teachers (Mooztava, 2023). Therefore, barriers such as limited space, limited number of participants, and time constraints should be seen as challenges that can be solved with the right strategy.

A strategy to optimize this program is to strengthen facilities planning and management so that activities can accommodate more participants. If facilities in schools are limited, alternative utilization of public spaces such as village halls or mosques can be an option. In addition, schedule management must be designed more carefully so that it does not clash with the academic agenda. Another effort is to develop a peer mentoring system as a solution to the limited number of participants. By training some students as mentors, caring values can be spread more widely even though not all students participate in the core program directly (Mooztava, 2023). This step is proven to increase empathy and solidarity among students as shown in Agustiani's research (2025).

In addition, periodic evaluations of the program need to be conducted through questionnaires, interviews, and student and teacher reflections to identify technical and non-technical obstacles. This evaluation allows schools to adjust methods to make them more effective (Nurhayati, 2021). Strengthening character education must also be integrated into the curriculum and extracurricular activities so that the values of respect, empathy, cooperation and responsibility are not only taught in special programs, but become part of everyday school life. Rahman (2024) asserts that consistent character education is proven to reduce students' aggressive behavior and increase social solidarity. Furthermore, collaboration with parents and the surrounding community is necessary. Bullying prevention programs will be more effective when supported by families and the environment outside the school, for example through parenting socialization or awareness campaigns, so that students feel supervised, accompanied, and strengthened from various sides (Prasetyo et al., 2019).

Thus, although the implementation of the program faced obstacles in the form of limited space, changes in the number of participants, and time constraints, the results showed that optimal strategies such as strengthening planning, peer mentoring systems, periodic evaluations, integration of character education, and collaboration with parents and communities can be effective solutions. The long-term implication of this program is the creation of a safe, inclusive and caring school culture. With consistency and synergy between the school, students, parents, and the community, bullying prevention can run more optimally, sustainably, and have a positive impact on students' character development.

Conclusion

This study concluded that the bullying prevention strategy implemented at SMK 1 Muhammadiyah Palembang through character education proved effective in answering the research objectives. Internalization of values such as empathy, mutual respect, tolerance, cooperation, and responsibility contribute to reducing bullying behavior, fostering solidarity, and creating a safer and more inclusive school climate. Teachers, counselors, and extracurricular activities have a central role as facilitators and role models in shaping students' attitudes. Despite the constraints of limited facilities, time, and participation, a preventive approach that integrates character education, counseling, and parental and community involvement has proven to be more sustainable than reactive, punishment-based strategies. Therefore, strengthening character education is a strategic and long-term solution to build a positive school culture, minimize bullying, and support students' psychosocial development.

Declarations

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