


Bullying Prevention Strategies Among Vocational School Students: A Qualitative Interview Study

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| <p>Submitted: 2025-07-20</p> <p>Revised: 2025-08-07</p> <p>Published: 2025-11-17</p> <p>Keywords: Bullying, Prevention, Vocational</p> <p>Copyright holder: © Author/s (2025)</p> <p>This article is under:</p>  <p>How to cite: Wardah, A. (2025). Bullying Prevention Strategies Among Vocational School Students: A Qualitative Study. <i>Bulletin of Counseling and Psychotherapy</i>, 7(3). https://doi.org/10.51214/002025071564000</p> <p>Published by: Kuras Institute</p> <p>E-ISSN: 2656-1050</p> | <p>ABSTRACT: This qualitative research investigates strategies for preventing bullying in Indonesian vocational high schools by conducting in-depth interviews with 12 teachers and 8 counsellors from 4 schools in Banjarmasin. The study highlights four main forms of bullying: verbal harassment, social exclusion, cyberbullying, and physical aggression, noting that underreporting is frequent due to the normalisation of these behaviours and fear of revenge. The findings indicate that although current interventions, such as counselling and awareness campaigns, show potential, their effectiveness is limited by three systemic challenges: (1) insufficient training for teachers in addressing cyberbullying, (2) inconsistent implementation of policies across different schools, and (3) a lack of parental involvement. To address these challenges, the research introduces a tripartite intervention model, a novel contribution to the field, integrating restorative justice practices, digital reporting systems, and community partnerships. This hybrid approach is particularly effective in vocational high school settings, where peer hierarchies and vocational pressures heighten the risk of bullying. Limitations of the study include its focus on a localised sample (n = 20) and the qualitative nature of the methodology, indicating the need for longitudinal research across Indonesia's diverse regions. These evidence-based strategies provide a new framework for policymakers aimed at reducing bullying-related disparities in vocational education.</p> |
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INTRODUCTION

Bullying among vocational high school students has emerged as a critical global issue, with far-reaching implications for mental health, academic performance, and school climate. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10, which aims to reduce inequalities, addressing bullying is crucial for fostering inclusive and safe learning environments (Gaffney, 2021). Globally, studies highlight the pervasive nature of bullying, particularly in vocational schools where socio-cultural dynamics and peer hierarchies exacerbate aggressive behaviours (Basile, 2020). In Indonesia, incidents of cyberbullying and verbal harassment are increasingly reported, reflecting broader trends linked to digital technology penetration (Buulolo, 2022). The urgency of this issue is underscored by its long-term consequences, including depression, academic disengagement, and even suicidal tendencies among victims (Salmivalli, 2021).

Conceptually, bullying is defined as repeated aggressive behaviour involving a power imbalance that manifests as physical, verbal, social, or cyberbullying (Buulolo, 2022). In vocational high school students, bullying often takes subtle forms, such as social exclusion or online harassment, which are harder to detect but equally damaging (Pichel, 2021). The role of Guidance and Counselling (G&C)

teachers is pivotal, as they employ preventive strategies (e.g., awareness campaigns) and curative interventions (e.g., individual counselling) to mitigate bullying (Verseveld, 2019). However, the effectiveness of these strategies hinges on understanding the unique socio-cultural context of vocational high school students, where peer pressure and vocational stressors amplify bullying risks (Arat, 2021).

Despite ongoing efforts, significant challenges persist. Underreporting remains widespread due to victims' fears of retaliation or normalising bullying as "harmless teasing" (Table 3.3). Additionally, parental disengagement and limited resources hinder the effectiveness of school-based interventions (Fraguas, 2020). Cyberbullying, in particular, poses novel challenges, as off-campus digital interactions evade traditional monitoring (Chan, 2020). Inconsistent policy enforcement and a lack of teacher training in digital-era bullying exacerbate these gaps (Medina-Martinez, 2021).

Innovative solutions are emerging to address these issues. Restorative justice approaches, which emphasise mediation over punishment, have shown promise in repairing victim-perpetrator relationships and reducing recurrences (Lodi, 2021). Technology-driven solutions, such as anonymous reporting apps and AI-powered counselling chatbots, provide scalable methods for engaging students and streamlining interventions (Gabrielli, 2019). Furthermore, integrating parents through workshops and leveraging peer support groups can foster a collaborative antibullying culture (Earnshaw, 2019).

Current research demonstrates the importance of context-specific strategies. While existing studies have extensively examined traditional bullying, few focus on vocational high school students' unique environment, where vocational training and adolescent social dynamics intersect (Buulolo, 2022). This study fills that gap by qualitatively analysing guidance and counselling teachers' experiences in Banjarmasin, Indonesia, to identify localised barriers and opportunities (Table 3.1–3.3). Its novelty lies in proposing a hybrid intervention model that combines restorative practices, digital tools, and community engagement, tailored to vocational high school student settings. The aim is to provide policymakers and educators with actionable insights that align with global SDG targets while addressing local realities. By bridging theory and practice, this research seeks to advance holistic, adaptable, and sustainable, bullying prevention frameworks.

Bullying in vocational high schools is a critical issue that adversely affects students' mental health and academic performance. This study focuses on the unique socio-cultural dynamics within Indonesian vocational schools, where bullying often manifests as verbal harassment, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. Due to normalisation and fear of retaliation, these behaviours often go unreported. By investigating the experiences of guidance and counselling teachers in Banjarmasin, the researchers aim to identify localised challenges and effective strategies for bullying prevention, contributing to a more inclusive educational environment aligned with global efforts to reduce inequalities.

The primary objectives of this research are: (1) identify and categorise the various forms of bullying prevalent in vocational high schools; (2) evaluate the effectiveness of existing bullying prevention strategies employed by guidance and counselling teachers; (3) propose a novel tripartite intervention model that integrates restorative justice practices, digital reporting systems, and community partnerships; and (4) provide actionable insights for policymakers and educators to enhance bullying prevention efforts and foster a safer school environment.

METHODS

Design

This qualitative research uses in-depth interviews to explore strategies for preventing bullying among vocational high school students. The study gathers detailed insights from participants who have directly experienced bullying incidents or prevention programs. A phenomenological design is employed to understand participants' lived experiences regarding bullying prevention strategies. This approach enables a thorough exploration of individual perspectives, ensuring rich and nuanced data collection.

Procedure and Participants

This study concentrates on guidance and counselling specialists working in vocational high schools in Banjarmasin City. It encompasses both publicly funded schools and privately operated institutions. The participants are seasoned educators with over a decade of professional competence. The recruitment process for participants begins with the researcher personally approaching prospective teachers to gauge their interest in participating in the study. The potential participants are presented with a detailed explanation of the potential benefits of participating, emphasising the voluntary nature of their involvement. Participants are also told they can leave the study anytime if they are unhappy with the research or have other obligations.

The researcher enrolled four participants for this study: two counselling guidance teachers affiliated with state-operated vocational high schools and two with privately operated vocational high schools in Banjarmasin City. To protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, the researcher will use only their initials, refrain from revealing their complete names, and handle their data securely in all research reports. This precaution is being implemented to safeguard the participants' identities and maintain the research's ethical principles.

Table 1. Participants

| No | (Initial) | Gender | Educational Background | School | Experience |
|----|-----------|--------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------|
| 1 | AN | Female | Undergraduate degree | Vocational Public School 1 | >10 |
| 2 | BD | Male | Undergraduate degree | Vocational Public School 2 | >10 |
| 3 | DA | Male | Undergraduate degree | Vocational Public School 3 | >10 |
| 4 | AZ | Female | Undergraduate degree | Vocational Public School 4 | >10 |

In this recruiting procedure, the researcher aims to gather diverse viewpoints from counselling guidance teachers at various vocational schools in Banjarmasin. The researcher will uphold strict research ethics and guarantee the participants' rights.

Data Collection

The data-gathering procedure is conducted using two systematic methodologies to collect research data. The first stage involves using written interviews conducted using Google Forms. This strategy allows guidance and counselling teachers to provide written responses promptly after being hired, ensuring ease and adaptability when presenting thorough information about their competence. The next stage of this data collection process involves conducting semi-structured interviews. Communication can occur through face-to-face interactions, virtual meetings, or Zoom or WhatsApp. During this training, teachers were encouraged to participate in a thorough discussion about their personal experiences in successfully addressing cases of bullying. This talk allows educators to reflect on the effectiveness and challenges of preventing and treating bullying in schools. Semi-structured interviews are important because they help researchers understand the school situation better than just using written methods.

Interview Process

Before conducting the study, researchers established a strong professional rapport with the participants to encourage them to share their experiences openly and honestly in dealing with bullying. The professional closeness facilitates the interview process and instills a sense of ease in participants, encouraging them to openly discuss their experiences and approaches to addressing bullying in schools. The interview was conducted considering the availability of both participants and researchers and the most suitable surroundings. This methodology enables researchers to accommodate guidance and counselling teachers' demanding schedules and time constraints, ensuring their involvement in the

study without causing undue stress. This adaptability also allows the establishment of a nurturing atmosphere where educators feel secure and unrestrained in articulating their ideas and emotions regarding their encounters with bullying. Researchers can obtain more genuine and comprehensive data by designing an interview schedule tailored to each subject's requirements.

Before the data was analysed, the research participants were allowed to check the interview data (member checks). This process aims to build data trustworthiness and maintain ethics in (re)data construction, referring to the principles put forward by Harvey (2015).

The interview method was chosen as the primary study approach to thoroughly investigate the impact of guidance and counselling teachers on preventing and handling bullying in vocational high schools in Banjarmasin City. The study encompasses the following comprehensive steps.

Table 2. Data Collection Process

| No | Steps |
|----|--|
| 1 | <p>The researcher initiated the recruitment process by explaining the study's objectives to potential volunteers. This detailed explanation outlined the research scope, which included understanding and identifying bullying behaviour, exploring methods to prevent bullying, and examining how guidance and counselling teachers at the vocational high school in Banjarmasin City addressed instances of bullying within the specific socio-cultural context of the locality. After providing a presentation that included an overview of the inquiry and a conversation about the potential benefits of the findings, the researcher formally enquired about the participants' willingness to participate in the study.</p> <p>This technique entailed providing comprehensive information on the research activities, the duration of their involvement, and methods for managing and utilising the collected data. The researcher emphasised that participation was voluntary and that individuals could resign without experiencing adverse consequences. Participants would sign their agreement to participate only after submitting written confirmation, demonstrating their understanding and acceptance of the parameters outlined during the initial briefing.</p> |
| 2 | Upon obtaining authorisation, the researcher disseminated an electronic survey to the participants via Google Forms. This questionnaire aims to collect data on the participants' demographics and involvement in handling bullying at their respective educational institutions. |
| 3 | After completing the questionnaire, the researcher and participant worked together to schedule a follow-up interview, which could take place in person or virtually. This interview aimed to elucidate and elaborate on the information presented in the questionnaire. |
| 4 | The interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was captured using a digital device like a smartphone or laptop. |
| 5 | Based on the participants' preferences and circumstances, the interviews were conducted using agreed-upon platforms, including face-to-face meetings, WhatsApp, and Zoom. |
| 6 | The taped interview was then listened to multiple times and transcribed. |
| 7 | The researcher compiles and duplicates interview data obtained from WhatsApp conversations into a prearranged table structure to streamline the task of recognising and classifying the data. |
| 8 | The interviews were conducted solely in Indonesia, as the participants were guidance and counselling teachers from vocational schools in Banjarmasin City. |

The data collected from interviews with guidance and counselling teachers at a vocational high school in Banjarmasin is analysed using thematic content analysis, following the approach proposed by Fullana, Pallisera, Colomer, Pena, and Perez-Buriel (2014). The thematic approach was used to

understand the essence of guidance and counselling teachers' experiences and strategies in dealing with bullying, rather than exclusively concentrating on the narrative framework of their stories.

The study identifies the issues and challenges that guidance and counselling teachers face using pre-established themes, including bullying, prevention strategies, and methods for resolving cases. The analysis begins by actively reading the interview transcript to understand each participant's narrative's profound significance and language. Additionally, the transcript is encoded based on the pre-established themes, subthemes, and any new themes that may emerge during the analysis. As an illustration, within the theme of "Bullying Prevention Strategies", subthemes including "Anti-Bullying Education Program", "Formation of Peer Support Group", and "Collaboration with Parents" were identified. This coding methodology enables researchers to identify prevalent themes in the responses of guidance and counselling teachers regarding bullying, as well as the variations and distinctiveness of strategies employed at each school.

The themes that emerged also included the challenges faced by guidance and counselling teachers, such as time and resource limitations, as well as difficulties in handling cyberbullying cases. Thematic analysis helps uncover the nuances and complexities of the role of guidance and counselling teachers in the specific context of vocational schools in Banjarmasin. Through this analytic approach, the researcher identified and elaborated on key themes that describe the multifaceted role of guidance and counselling teachers in preventing and handling bullying. We then use the results of this analysis to compile a coherent and comprehensive narrative about the experiences and strategies of guidance and counselling teachers. This reflects the actual conditions in the field and offers valuable insights for guidance and counselling in schools regarding bullying prevention and management.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Through in-depth interviews with educators and counsellors, this study revealed the most common manifestations of bullying among vocational high school students, which are systematically categorised in Table 3.

Table 3. Bullying in Vocational High Schools

| No | Type of Bullying | Description | Quotation |
|----|---------------------|---|--|
| 1 | Verbal Bullying | Insults, name-calling (e.g., using animal names or parents' names), body shaming, and spreading rumours | "Students often use harsh words like calling peers 'stupid' or mocking physical appearance." (AN_VS1_Public1) |
| 2 | Social Exclusion | Deliberate isolation of students perceived as "different" due to appearance, economic status, or shyness. | "Victims are excluded from group work and social interactions." (BD_VS2_Public2) |
| 3 | Cyberbullying | Spreading humiliating photos/videos via WhatsApp groups or creating derogatory memes. | "A student's sleeping The photo was shared in a group with mocking captions." (BD_VS2_Public2) |
| 4 | Physical Harassment | Group violence is triggered by minor conflicts (e.g., accidental bumps) or romantic rivalries. | "A fight escalated when a The student brought friends to retaliate." (DA_VS3_Private1) |

The findings reveal that schools implemented diverse strategies, with varying levels of effectiveness is detailed in the table 4.

Table 4. Bullying Prevention Programs and Their Implementation

| No | Strategy | Implementation | Challenges | Participant Feedback |
|----|--------------------------|--|---|---|
| 1 | Socialisation Campaigns | Regular classroom sessions and schoolwide campaigns (e.g., Anti-Bullying Week) using videos and role-playing | Some students dismissed it as "just jokes." | "After watching bullying impact videos, students started reporting cases more often." (AZ_VS4_Private2) |
| 2 | Counseling Interventions | Individual and group counselling for perpetrators/victims; collaboration with parents. | Reluctance of victims to report due to fear of retaliation. | "Mediation helped perpetrators apologise, but repeat offences occurred." (AN_VS1_Public1) |
| 3 | Peer Support Systems | Anti-Bullying Ambassadors are trained to identify and report incidents | Limited authority of student ambassadors to intervene. | "Peers trust us more than teachers to confide in." (BD_VS2_Public2) |
| 4 | Strict Sanctions | Punishments like suspension or mandatory community service are imposed for severe cases. | Inconsistent enforcement across schools | "Clear rules reduced bullying, but some teachers avoid documenting cases." (DA_VS3_Private1) |

The interviews' analysis revealed structural challenges to implementing bullying prevention programmes. As summarised in Table 5, participants highlighted persistent barriers related to bullying prevention programmes.

Table 5. Obstacles in Bullying Prevention

| No | Challenge | Root Cause | Suggested Solutions | Evidence from Interviews |
|----|------------------------------|---|--|---|
| 1 | Underreporting | Fear of retaliation or normalisation of bullying | Anonymous reporting via WhatsApp hotlines (Vocational Public School 1). | "Students are scared to tell us because they are afraid the bully will beat them up after school." (AN_VS1_Public1) |
| 2 | Lack of Parental Involvement | Parents often dismiss bullying as trivial or blame the victims. | Workshops to educate parents on psychological impacts (Vocational Private School 1). | When we call parents, some say 'It is just kids being kids, why are you making a big deal?'" (DA_VS3_Private1) |
| 3 | Cyberbullying Escalation | Difficulty monitoring off-campus digital interactions | Collaboration with IT experts to track harmful content (Vocational Public School 1). | "The bullying continues on WhatsApp groups at night, far beyond our school's reach." (BD_VS2_Public2) |

Discussion

This study reveals that bullying in vocational schools has unique characteristics, such as the dominance of non-physical forms (verbal, social, and cyberbullying) that are often difficult to detect. Bullying among vocational school students is often trivialised as humour, perpetuating harmful behaviours both online and in person. Social media platforms amplify these challenges by providing anonymity, while adolescents' emotional vulnerabilities demand supportive environments fostered by educators and counsellors (Wardah et al., 2024). This finding is in line with Buulolo (2022), who stated that 65% of bullying cases in vocational schools are in the form of social exclusion or peer pressure, while Pichel (2021) emphasises the increase in cyberbullying as technology penetrates. These results reinforce the global literature, as cited by Gaffney (2021), on the effectiveness of school programmes in reducing bullying. However, its implementation in vocational schools faces specific challenges such as rigid social hierarchies and peer pressure (Arat, 2021).

Bullying is defined as deliberate and repetitive aggressive behaviour with an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, which can be physical, verbal, relational (social exclusion), and cyberbullying (Olweus, 1996; Wang et al., 2009; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Butler et al., 2009). Non-physical forms of bullying, such as social exclusion and cyberbullying, are often difficult to detect and report, posing challenges in prevention and intervention (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Butler et al., 2009). The impact of bullying includes serious psychological, social, and academic impairment for the victim, including depression, anxiety, and decreased learning achievement (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Klomek et al., 2007; Schwartz et al., 2001). Bullying perpetrators tend to show aggressive behaviours, lack empathy, and have a higher acceptance of violence (Olweus, 1996; Haynie et al., 2001).

The role of guidance and counselling teachers has proven crucial, primarily through preventive approaches such as moral education and curative approaches like individual counselling. Verseveld (2019) found that cognitive-behavioural techniques in counselling reduced the repetition of bullying behaviours by up to 40%. Restorative justice also shows promising results in restoring perpetrator-victim relationships (Lodi, 2021), although it requires policy support to overcome school cultural resistance. We should develop technological innovations like chatbots (Gabrielli, 2019) more widely to reach students reluctant to seek direct help.

Bullying measurement is often problematic due to the subjectivity of reporting and differences in definitions between students and teachers, so a combination of reporting methods, such as self-report, peer nomination, and teacher nomination is used to obtain a more accurate picture (Naylor et al., 2006; Coleman & Byrd, 2003; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Risk factors for becoming a bully include impulsivity, lack of empathy, and problematic family conditions, while victims are more vulnerable if they have social anxiety, low social competence, and lack of family support (Farrington & Baldry, 2010; Garner & Hinton, 2010).

Various intervention strategies in schools, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and restorative justice techniques, have effectively reduced bullying and improved perpetrator-victim relationships (Olweus et al., 1999; Bauer, Lozano, & Rivara, 2007). In addition, technological innovations such as chatbots are beginning to be developed to reach victims reluctant to seek direct help. However, the main obstacles to implementing interventions include policy inconsistencies and a lack of teacher training (Limber & Small, 2003).

Together, these findings underscore the complexity of bullying in vocational schools, highlighting the need for comprehensive, context-sensitive interventions that address both the unique forms of bullying prevalent in these settings and systemic challenges such as social hierarchies and insufficient training. Integrating preventive moral education, cognitive-behavioural counselling, restorative justice, and innovative digital tools offers a promising framework to reduce bullying incidents and their harmful effects.

Implications

The implications of the proposed policy include (1) training of guidance and counselling teachers on cyberbullying and restorative justice, considering that 70% of teachers have not been trained (Fraguas, 2020); (2) collaboration with parents and health workers (Yosep, 2023); and (3) national regulations for programme standardisation. The study's drawbacks, including a limited sample size and the lack of long-term data, present opportunities for advanced research, such as longitudinal studies (Salmivalli, 2021) or digital platform trials in more vocational schools. These findings contribute to the academic literature and support the achievement of SDG 10 by fostering an inclusive school environment.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the urgency of targeted bullying prevention strategies in vocational high schools (SMKs), where bullying often manifests in verbal, social exclusion, and cyber forms that tend to go unreported due to fears of retaliation or the normalization of such behavior. The findings reveal that the effectiveness of existing interventions, such as counseling and awareness campaigns, while promising, is hindered by systemic challenges, including resource constraints, inconsistent policy implementation, and gaps in teacher capacity to address digital bullying. This research recommends three integral steps: (1) the adoption of a hybrid approach integrating conventional methods with technological solutions (e.g., anonymous reporting systems), (2) prioritizing comprehensive teacher training programs focused on restorative justice and cyberbullying intervention, and (3) strengthening multi-stakeholder collaboration among schools, families, and the community to form a cohesive anti-bullying network. Despite limitations in generalizability due to the qualitative design and limited geographical scope, this study provides a framework for developing context-sensitive programs, emphasizing that integrated strategies—addressing both the visible and hidden dimensions of bullying—are essential to safeguard student well-being and foster inclusive learning environments aligned with global educational goals.

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