Bullying behavior and its implications for the formation of student character

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Bullying is not a new phenomenon, yet its prevention and management must be pursued in a continuous, collaborative, and systematic manner, particularly through character education, active teacher involvement, and support from families and communities. This study aims to explore the forms of bullying behavior and their implications for character development among students at UPT SPF SD Negeri Sangir, Makassar. Using a qualitative descriptive approach in the form of a case study, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving 12 informants, including students, teachers, and parents. The results show that bullying occurs in almost all grade levels, predominantly in the form of verbal and physical abuse. The impacts of bullying are highly significant on student character, affecting victims who tend to become passive, anxious, and lack self-confidence as well as perpetrators who display aggressive behavior and a lack of empathy. The development of positive character traits such as empathy, responsibility, and respect is hindered by an unsupportive environment. This study highlights the crucial role of teachers, parents, and the school environment in preventive, curative, preservative, and referral (reveral) efforts to address bullying. Systematic and continuous character education is key to creating a safe learning climate that supports students' holistic personality development.

INTRODUCTION

Technological development in civilization, particularly in the field of education, has had a significant impact on various aspects, one of which is the behavioral changes of students. These behavioral changes point to shifts in character and deviations known as bullying behavior. Bullying can be defined as negative behavior that is carried out intentionally and repeatedly, directed at an individual or group who finds it difficult to defend themselves (Dewinda et al., 2024; Goodwin et al., 2019; Olweus, 1993; Olweus et al., 2019; Vanderbilt & Augustyn, 2010). Character or disposition is a combination of all human traits that are stable and form a distinctive feature that differentiates one individual from another (Marzuki & Khanifah, 2016; Sulistijaningsih et al., 2024; Wiyani, 2012). Character is shaped by the influence of teachings on the development of an individual's basic personality (Berk, 2010). Teachers' understanding of students' characteristics and needs is essential for educators (Ashar et al., 2024; Azis et al., 2021).

Character development is crucial during elementary school age and must continue at higher levels of education. Elementary school age is a vulnerable phase in which children need to learn social values to implement them in daily behavior.

Internal factors contributing to bullying behavior include jealousy, the desire to dominate the victim through physical power or sexual attraction, difficulties in forming friendships, and poor emotional regulation. Victims often feel that they deserve such treatment and choose to remain silent. (Abed et al., 2023; Mabrur Haslan et al., 2021; Theodore & Sudarji, 2020; Wardhani et al., 2024; Zakiyah, 2017). External factors include family conflicts, social status inequality, and discriminatory school environments.

A case of bullying at SD Negeri Sangir Makassar involved a student pulling hair, pushing, and mocking others, resulting in trauma that significantly affected the character development of the victim. The forms of bullying at SD Negeri Sangir in Makassar include verbal bullying, such as name-calling, taunting, belittling, cruel criticism, personal defamation, racist slurs, and sexually suggestive or abusive remarks. These findings align with previous studies by Wardhani et al., (2024); Wiyani, (2012); and Zakiyah et al., (2017). In addition, physical bullying includes slapping, hitting, choking, poking, punching, kicking, biting, scratching, twisting, spitting, and damaging the victim's clothes or belongings. Based on these issues, the researchers formulated several efforts for bullying prevention, including preventive, curative, preservative, and referral approaches that are more effective in addressing this problem. Therefore, this study explores recent findings on bullying behavior and its implications for student character development.

Bullying has a significant negative impact on students' psychosocial development (Lickona, 1991; Santrock, 2011; Turner et al., 2013; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Victims of bullying often exhibit symptoms such as low self-esteem, social anxiety, and a tendency to withdraw from their environment, which also applies to the perpetrators of bullying. This obstructs the learning of essential moral and social values necessary for forming positive character traits. As emphasized by Dewi, (2021); Fitriliana et al., (2024); Nurhakim et al., (2024), eachers and parents must consistently integrate various values into character education to prevent bullying behavior, including mutual cooperation, integrity, and respect both in school and at home to develop students' anti-bullying character.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method using a case study approach (Cresswell, 2017, 2015). This method was chosen to deeply explore the phenomenon of bullying behavior in elementary school settings, to comprehensively understand its implications for student character development, and to interpret the events through the perspectives of the involved subjects (Creswell, 2015; Sugiyono, 2016). The researcher conducted direct observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis in the field regarding bullying behavior and its implications for students. A total of 12 informants were involved, consisting of six students, two classroom teachers, and four parents (Cresswell, 2017; Sugiyono, 2016, 2018), These informants represented students, teachers, and parents, providing a triangulated perspective on the data collected.
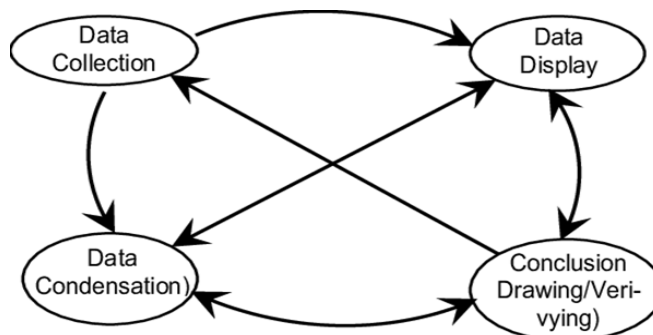

Figure 1. Data Analysis Technique

Bullying behavior and its implications for the formation of student character
Andi Muh Rezky AH, Sam'un Mukramin, & Ashar

39

The data analysis was carried out following scientific procedures based on the model by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (Miles et al., 2014), consisting of data collection, data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. This process was conducted interactively and continuously, with constant reflection on field findings. The process is illustrated in the Figure 1.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results are the main part of scientific articles, containing: final results without data analysis process, hypothesis testing results. Results can be presented with tables or graphs, to clarify the results verbally. Based on field data, bullying behavior among students and its implications for character building are presented in the following table 1.

Table 1. Research Findings on Bullying Behavior

Students' Bullying Behavior	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
Disturbing	2 students	2 students	4 students	2 students	3 students	1 student
Mocking/teasing	2 students	1 students	2 student	3 students	2 students	2 students
Yelling	1 student	1 student	1 student	-	-	1 student
Name-calling		2 students	2 students	3 students	1 student	2 students
Intimidating	-	-	1 student	-	-	1 student
Belittling	-	-	2 students	1 students	1 student	-
Humiliating	-	-	1 student	-	1 student	-
Threatening	1 student	1 student	-	-	-	-
Hitting	1 student	-	-	-	2 students	-
Pushing	-	-	-	-	1 student	-
Hair-pulling		1 student	2 students	1 student	-	2 students
Pinching	2 students	-	1 student	-	1 student	-
Kicking	-	-	1 student		1 student	

This table presents empirical data on the frequency and forms of bullying behavior exhibited by students from Grade 1 to Grade 6 at SD Negeri Sangir. The data was gathered through observation and interviews conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year. The table shows that bullying occurred across all grade levels, though the types and frequency vary. Verbal bullying was more dominant than physical, although both forms pose risks to character development. Ultimately, bullying contributes to mental health issues such as social isolation, school avoidance, and low self-esteem among students.

Types of Bullying Behavior Identified can descibes; 1) Verbal Bullying it including : disturbing, mocking, yelling, name-calling, intimidating, belittling, humiliating, and threatening. This form is the most frequent and appears in nearly all classes, indicating that harmful language is the dominant type of bullying; 2) Physical Bullying its includes hitting, pushing, hair-pulling, pinching, and kicking. These behaviours are notably frequent in Grades 3 and 5, with repeated instances of hair-pulling and hitting. Class-Specific Findings: a) Grades 1–2: Bullying mostly involved hair-pulling, pinching, and name-calling, indicating early-stage emotional control issues; b) Grade 3: Highest intensity of both verbal and physical bullying, showing multiple forms of bullying co-occurring; c) Grade 5: Notably aggressive behaviors like hitting and hair-pulling were common; d) Grade 6: A decrease in cases was observed, but mocking and hair-pulling still occurred.

These findings indicate that several students were still experiencing bullying from their peers. The most dominant forms were verbal and physical bullying, which severely affected character development. Some students even refused to attend school due to trauma. The school had taken various measures to address the issue.

Relevance of Bullying Behavior to Character Building

Watson stated that behaviorist learning theory is a theory that focuses on the role of the learning process in explaining human behavior (Nahar, 2016). In this theory, behavior is understood as something entirely determined by predictable and controllable rules. Watson believed that human behavior could be influenced by genetic inheritance, environmental influences, and mental conditions. Behavior is often controlled by irrational forces. This is considered a realization of environmental influences that can manipulate human behavior.

Bullying can be defined as negative behavior that is carried out intentionally and repeatedly, directed at an individual or a group of individuals who have difficulty defending themselves (Dewinda et al., 2024; Goodwin et al., 2019; Olweus & Limber, 2019; Sumarmi et al., 2024). Several forms of bullying have been identified in an elementary school in the city of Makassar, namely verbal bullying and physical bullying. Verbal bullying is the most common form of bullying experienced by both boys and girls (Wardhani et al., 2024; Zakiyah et al., 2017). Verbal bullying can take the form of name-calling, taunting, belittling, cruel criticism, personal defamation, racist slurs, sexually suggestive remarks, or sexually abusive comments. On the other hand, physical bullying Rejekiningsih & Taher, (2025); Wiyani, 2012) is the most visible and most easily identified form of bullying. It includes behaviors such as slapping, hitting, choking, poking, punching, kicking, biting, scratching, twisting, spitting, and damaging the victim's clothing or belongings.

Character refers to noble values that are embedded within an individual and manifested through behavior, resulting in a well-rounded personality. This allows individuals to become good and successful people in various aspects of life (Marzuki & Khanifah, 2016; Sulistijaningsih et al., 2024; Zakariya, 2018). According to Lickona, (1991), character encompasses several elements, including moral behavior (moral action), moral knowledge (moral knowing), and moral feeling. Character development, as explained by Sinta et al., (2023); Wibowo, (2012) can be carried out through the habituation of discipline in daily life and within the school environment. This includes compliance with rules and regulations, punctuality, and completing tasks on time, in accordance with social norms within the school. Additionally, Ardianti et al., (2022) state that character formation can be achieved through role modeling. In this context, teachers must provide good or positive examples to their students, motivating them to consistently engage in positive behaviors—whether in appearance, attitude, or speech.

Bullying is an issue that cannot be ignored, Akbar & Wirasti Kusuma, (2021); Mabrur Haslan et al., (2021); Zakiyah et al., (2017) as it has far-reaching consequences. Students who become victims of bullying are at a higher risk of experiencing various health problems, both physically and psychologically. The issues faced by students who were bullied may include mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia, which can persist into adulthood. Physical complaints may include headaches, stomachaches, and a sense of insecurity when at school. Additionally, bullying can lead to a decline in motivation to learn, which in turn negatively affects their academic performance.

The motives behind bullying behavior can be categorized into two main factors. The first is internal factors, which include self-concept, personal values, personality traits, worldview, self-control, self-esteem, and emotional intelligence (Abed et al., 2023; Suparwi et al., 2015; Zakiyah et al., 2017). The second is external factors, such as broken homes (divorce, conflict, a high-pressure or overly protective household environment), social class differences (economic status, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, and culture), seniority traditions, and a discriminatory school environment that is indifferent to students who are victims of bullying—often failing to impose appropriate sanctions on the perpetrators. This aligns with what Swearer & Hymel, as cited in Theodore & Sudarji, (2020) states: that a lack of family attention, negative home environments, lack of emotional support, authoritarian parenting, parental violence, and inconsistent discipline

may all contribute to a student developing a negative perspective that leads to bullying behavior. On an individual level, it is often found that students who engage in bullying tend to possess higher social skills and social status compared to their peers.

Bullying is a serious issue that affects the psychological, physical, and socio-emotional aspects of students. Victims are vulnerable to mental health disorders such as anxiety, stress, and depression, which can persist into adulthood. In addition, victims' academic performance tends to decline due to feelings of discomfort and fear while at school. The process of character building, which should serve as a fundamental aspect of a child's education, is instead obstructed by bullying behavior. Key character traits such as empathy, respect, responsibility, and discipline cannot develop optimally if students are in an environment that is unsafe and unsupportive..

The factors that trigger bullying can be categorized into two types: 1) Internal factors, which include personality, low self-esteem, poor emotional control, and inaccurate social perceptions; 2) External factors, such as disharmonious family conditions, discriminatory school environments, and social norms that tolerate violence or dominance. Thus, bullying is not only a form of behavioral deviation but also a serious threat to students' character development. Therefore, the active involvement of teachers, families, and the school environment is essential in building an educational ecosystem that supports the development of positive character values.

Implications of Building Behavior on Character Building
The relationship between bullying behavior and the character development of students has become a major focus for many experts in education and psychology. Among them are: 1) According to Santrock, (2011) experiences of bullying either as a victim or a perpetrator can influence the formation of students' moral character. Victims tend to display passive personalities and low self-confidence, while perpetrators often show aggressive behavior and a lack of empathy toward others or peers. 2) Olweus, (1993) suggests that bullying may cause long-term psychological effects on victims, such as decreased self-esteem, excessive anxiety, and depression. These conditions hinder the development of positive character traits such as courage, independence, and empathy. 3) The formation of good and positive character must take place within a positive environment that upholds values like respect for parents, teachers, and peers, as well as responsibility for one's actions. The presence of bullying disrupts this process, making it difficult for students to develop moral and ethical character (Lickona, 1991). Therefore, the link between bullying behavior and character formation is deeply interconnected. If bullying continues without intervention, both the victims and the perpetrators are likely to develop negative character traits. Rigby (2003), explained that victims of bullying often experience feelings of hopelessness or a lack of life direction. They may also suffer from social alienation or exclusion, which impedes their character development. Meanwhile, perpetrators tend to develop a lack of concern and empathy for others, focusing instead on asserting social dominance.

The effects of bullying behavior have both direct and indirect impacts on students' character development. Victims often develop a passive, insecure character and suffer emotional disturbances such as anxiety, depression, and social fear. In contrast, perpetrators usually exhibit aggressive, dominant traits and a lack of empathy, which may become ingrained if not addressed early. A school environment that does not promote values such as empathy, responsibility, and mutual respect will worsen the situation. If bullying continues unchecked, students will grow up in a non-conducive atmosphere, resulting in disrupted moral and ethical character formation.

Positive character cannot thrive in a negative and threatening social climate. Therefore, creating a safe, supportive learning environment that upholds humanistic values is essential in educating students to develop strong, integrity-based character. Thus, the relationship between bullying and character formation is causal and complex, requiring serious attention from all educational stakeholders to prevent the emergence of negative character traits rooted in bullying experiences whether in victims or perpetrators.
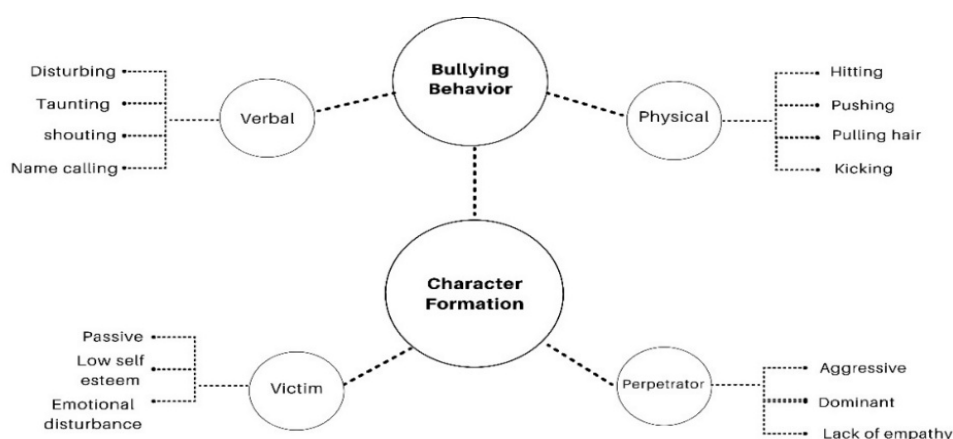
Figure 2. The relationship between bullying and character formation

Implementation of Character Education as a Preventive Measure Against Bullying Among Students

Character education is a form of education aimed at fostering and developing students' character, so that they grow to possess noble values which can later be applied in their daily lives (Kurnianto et al., 2024; Regita et al., 2023; Wibowo, 2012). As stated in Law No. 20 of 2003, Article 3, the function of national education is to develop capabilities and shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation in order to educate the life of the nation. It aims to develop students' potential so that they become faithful and pious individuals who are morally upright, healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens.

Teachers play a vital role in education. They serve as role models for students, and their behavior is closely observed and emulated. A teacher is not only expected to deliver subject material effectively but also to skillfully educate students by instilling social values and norms, enabling students to interact wisely within their social environment (Mulyasa, 2013). Bullying is not only the responsibility of guidance counselors but must be addressed collectively by all school stakeholders, including parents, who must collaborate to combat bullying in schools. Bullying must be handled comprehensively—addressing both the perpetrators and the victims. The school, as an educational institution, plays a crucial role, especially since most bullying cases occur within the school environment.

The teachers, as the key agents within the school, can contribute significantly to combating bullying. Based on interviews with homeroom teachers, bullying behavior can be addressed through several approaches: 1) Preventive this refers to efforts made to prevent the emergence of bullying behavior among students. Strategies include anti-bullying education and awareness campaigns, both direct and indirect, such as through posters, banners, and socialization in classrooms or during school events. Socialization may occur through various social groups such as family, friends, schools, workplaces, and media (Azis et al., 2021). Serta membuat poster atau spanduk tentang anti Bullying dan sebagainya. 2) Curative (Treatment): When a guidance counselor becomes aware of a bullying case, they must address the issue by providing interventions for both the victim and the perpetrator. This includes ensuring the victim feels safe and instilling values such as empathy, tolerance, and respect in both the victim and perpetrator. The teacher is responsible for thoroughly resolving the issue. 3) Preservative (Maintenance): After the bullying issue has been resolved, there must be an effort to maintain and enhance positive traits in students to ensure they are preserved, not damaged, and allowed to grow and develop further. 4) Referral: If the bullying problem cannot be resolved within the school, the matter must be reported to the relevant authorities, especially if it constitutes a kriminal offense..

Bullying behavior and its implications for the formation of student character
Andi Muh Rezky AH, Sam'un Mukramin, & Ashar

43

Character education is a fundamental foundation for shaping students who are not only academically capable but also morally, socially, and spiritually responsible. In the context of addressing bullying at the elementary school level, character education serves as a strategic instrument to foster positive behaviors in students from an early age.

The teacher's role as the primary role model is crucial in this process. Teachers are not only transmitters of academic knowledge, but also moral and social guides who must be capable of instilling values such as empathy, tolerance, and responsibility (Ikhwan et al., 2024). Moreover, collaboration among schools, parents, and the wider community is the key to successful bullying prevention and intervention. Efforts to prevent bullying can be carried out through four main approaches: 1) Preventive – by promoting awareness, education, and the habituation of anti-bullying values from the beginning, both through direct instruction and through school-based media; 2) Curative – by providing immediate interventions for perpetrators and psychological protection for victims, including fostering empathy and respect for others; 3) Preservative – by maintaining and reinforcing positive student behavior after the intervention to ensure bullying does not recur; 4) Referral – when internal solutions are insufficient, the school must involve legal authorities, especially when the case escalates to a legal matter. In conclusion, the implementation of integrated and continuous character education is a comprehensive solution for preventing and addressing bullying in elementary schools.
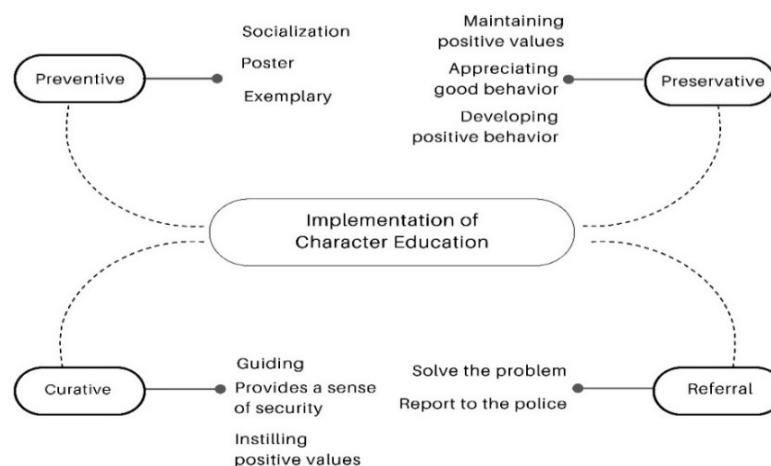

Figure 3. Integrated and continuous character education on character building

CONCLUSION

Bullying behavior in elementary schools remains a real and persistent issue occurring across various grade levels, with the most common forms being verbal bullying (such as mocking, yelling, and name-calling) and physical bullying (such as hair-pulling, pinching, and kicking). This phenomenon is not merely incidental but occurs repeatedly and is widespread across almost all grade levels.

Bullying has negative consequences for both victims and perpetrators. Victims often experience low self-esteem, social anxiety, and even trauma, which disrupts their learning process and school attendance. On the other hand, perpetrators tend to exhibit aggressive behaviour, a lack of empathy, and difficulty forming healthy social relationships. Therefore: 1) Students' character

development is disrupted due to the negative interactions they experience. Moral values such as empathy, respect, responsibility, and cooperation are difficult to instil when the school environment is not conducive or tolerant of bullying behaviour. 2) There is a strong relationship between bullying behaviour and character formation. If bullying is left unaddressed, it has the potential to shape students into being passive, withdrawn, or aggressive individuals. Conversely, a school environment that consistently instils character values can serve as a primary defence in preventing and addressing bullying. 3) The roles of teachers, parents, and the surrounding environment are crucial in character building and bullying prevention. Character education must be implemented holistically through role modelling, habit formation, and ongoing social-emotional guidance.

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Bullying behavior and its implications for the formation of student character
Andi Muh Rezky AH, Sam'un Mukramin, & Ashar

45

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