Overcoming bullying: A phenomenological study of students' perceptions

Riana Nurhayati [a]*****, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Jl. Colombo No.1, Karang Malang, Caturtunggal, Kec. Depok, Kabupaten Sleman, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia, riana_nurhayati@uny.ac.id

Suranto [b], Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Faculty of Education, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, suranto@uny.ac.id

Siti Irene Astuti Dwiningrum [c], Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Faculty of Education, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, irene@uny.ac.id

Heri Retnawati [d], Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Faculty of Education, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, retnawati@uny.ac.id

Herwin [e], Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Faculty of Education, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, herwin89@uny.ac.id

Abstract

Efforts to reduce bullying in schools require effective strategies. However, existing approaches primarily reflect teachers' perspectives, with limited attention to how students perceive and manage bullying. This study explores students' strategies for coping with bullying in schools in Special Region of Yogyakarta. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires administered via Google Forms. The 41 participants were selected through simple random sampling. Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's interactive model, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that students cope with bullying through social, internal, and external factors. Some effective strategies include reporting bullying incidents to parents, teachers, or peers, and fostering healthy friendships through participation in extracurricular and organizational activities. These findings highlight the importance of empowering students with coping mechanisms and promoting supportive school environments to mitigate the impact of bullying.

Keywords: Bullying; coping strategy; phenomenology; student perception.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Riana Nurhayati, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Jl. Colombo No.1, Karang Malang, Caturtunggal, Kec. Depok, Kabupaten Sleman, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia*. E-mail address*: riana_nurhayati@uny.ac.id /

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health has become a global issue, including in Indonesia. Mental well-being is closely related to psychological and functional well-being as well as one's life goals (Biswas et al., 2020; Melendez-Torres et al. 2019; Swartz and Bhattacharya 2017). Mental health is also very closely related to bullying cases, where students who experience bullying cumulatively will affect adolescent behavior, mental health, and academic achievement (Evans et al., 2019; Koyanagi et al., 2019). This means that one of the students' mental health factors is influenced by their experience of bullying. Bullying refers to aggressive behavior that is carried out intentionally over time by an individual or group by using some form of power to cause physical and/or psychological harm to another individual or group in a shared social context (Hall 2017; Nazir and Piskin 2015). Bullying involves repeated painful actions between peers where an imbalance of power exists (Källmén and Hallgren 2021; Keelan et al. 2014; Koyanagi et al. 2019). Bullying is closely related to severe mental health problems, such as self-harm and suicide.

Bullying remains a significant issue in educational settings, as it has not been fully resolved despite the implementation of various policies and regulations, such as the Child Protection Law in Indonesia (Undang-undang No. 23, 2002). While these regulations have had some impact in addressing bullying, they have not been sufficient to eliminate the problem entirely. Numerous school-based intervention programs have been developed and executed to reduce bullying within schools (Ismaili et al., 2024; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Hikmat et al., 2024). These policies reflect Indonesia's commitment to recognizing and safeguarding the rights of children (Nurhayati et al., 2021). School-based anti-bullying initiatives, which build upon government policies, aim to mitigate bullying by empowering schools and educators to address the issue effectively (Chalamandaris et al., 2017; Gaffney et al., 2019; Wachs et al., 2019). This approach aligns with the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education and Culture 2020-2024, which reports that bullying affects 41% of students in Indonesia on a frequent basis. Given this statistic, there is a pressing need for a collaborative effort involving the government, families, schools, and communities to address the issue of bullying more seriously (Dong et al., 2025; Tim, 2020). Consequently, a comprehensive school-based anti-bullying program is essential, not only as an intervention to address bullying incidents but also as a preventive measure (Ambarini et al., 2006).

The impact of bullying on children can be profound, leading to several negative consequences (Zeng et al., 2024; Evans et al., 2014; Källmén & Hallgren, 2021; Moore et al., 2017; StopBullying.gov, 2017; Swartz & Bhattacharya, 2017). These include: 1) psychological effects, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, self-harming behaviors (particularly in girls), substance abuse, aggression, and involvement in violence or criminal activities (especially in boys). Bullying can also exacerbate pre-existing mental health issues, making affected children more vulnerable. 2) Physical effects, which are often observable in the form of bruises or wounds from physical attacks. However, more significant are the long-term consequences, such as stress and trauma, which can manifest in physical symptoms like sleep disturbances, stomach pains, headaches, palpitations, dizziness, and weakened immunity, leading to a decline in overall health. 3) Academic consequences, including a drop in academic performance due to difficulties in concentrating during lessons (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009).

Perception refers to the process by which individuals interpret and understand their environment through their senses, shaped by personal experiences, which in turn influence their attitudes and behaviors (Akrim, 2022). In the context of education, students' perceptions significantly impact the quality of interaction and communication, fostering positive views toward others and enhancing learning experiences. Perception is essentially an individual's interpretation of events or actions, formed through the lens of their experiences (Amir et al., 2020; Yanti, 2021). In this study, student perception pertains to their understanding and

interpretation of bullying incidents, whether experienced directly or observed, influencing their attitudes and behaviors in response to such events.

1.1. Purpose of study

The role and support of teachers, parents, friends, and schools in overcoming bullying are very necessary because they function as factors that help students have good and healthy mental health, especially in bullying cases (Espino et al., 2025). Efforts to reduce bullying in schools can be made by making appropriate strategies, but so far strategies to overcome bullying are still seen from the teacher's point of view and do not see strategies to overcome bullying from student perceptions. In addition, only a few students dared to report and seek help from adults at school. Therefore, there is a need for a study of strategies to overcome bullying from students' perceptions.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

2.1. Research design

The research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological type. Data analysis of phenomenological models is an analysis that seeks to understand (understanding) by conducting participatory observations, open interviews, and personal documents (Mu'ammar 2017; Nugrahani 2014). The phenomenon to be analyzed is related to coping strategies for bullying from the student's perspective.

2.2. Participants

The participants of this study were high school students who had experienced bullying, and those who did not attend experience bullying. This research was conducted in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, namely the City of Yogyakarta, Bantul Regency, Sleman Regency, Kulon Progo Regency, and Gunung Kidul Regency. Data were collected through informants with interviews, Forum Group Discussion (FGD), and the results Google forms defined by simple random sampling. Interviews were conducted with eight students, and a Forum group discussion (FGD) with Five students representing each district, and the overall participants who filled in Google forms were as many as 41 students. When researchers searched for information through teachers at schools, they identified students who had experienced bully. Then the researcher traced who was involved and had experienced bully. In this case, students who did not experience bullying in high school were also interviewed as an additional perspective on coping strategies for bullying from the student's point of view. Table 1 shows the pre-test–post-test control group design .

Table 1
Pre-test–post-test control group design

Select Control Group	Pre-test	No treatment	Post-test
Experimental Group	Pre-test	Experimental treatment	Post-test

2.3. Data collection instrument

Data collection was carried out through interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and questionnaires with the assistance of Google Forms to get answers from students in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Interviews were conducted to explore the types of data bullies experienced by students when it happened fully, where it

happened fully, who is the culprit, and the strategy to get up and try to overcome bully while at school. FGDs were conducted to obtain confirmation, definition, and explanation of data interactions from a discussion group of participants, as well as to find out practices and events related to the case. of bullying at school.

2.4. Data analysis technique

Data analysis used the interactive analysis technique of Miles & Huberman, (1994), which consisted of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion of withdrawal or verification. This theory finds themes, relationships between themes, and conclusions. Activities in qualitative data analysis are carried out interactively and take place continuously until complete so that the data is saturated.

3. RESULTS

The results of this study summarize the definition of bullying, perpetrators, and victims of bullying, the type of bullying, students' feelings when experiencing bullying, the location of the bullying incident, the impact of bullying, strategies to deal with bullying, and the most effective strategies to deal with bullying according to students' perspectives.

3.1. Definition Bullying

Students interpret bullying in various ways, encompassing actions such as oppression, the use of power to harm others, causing mental distress, disparaging individuals, demeaning others, both physical and non-physical violence, cornering, degrading, abusive behavior, berating, insulting, mocking, and actions that involve harming the vulnerable or slandering someone. The primary purpose of bullying is to inflict emotional pain, diminish the mental well-being of the victim, and create discomfort and suffering among other students, all of which are carried out with intentionality. Table 2 presents a summary of students' understanding of bullying, reflecting their perceptions and interpretations of these harmful behaviors.

Table 2
Results of reduction of understanding bullying

Response	Relationship between sub-themes
1. Bullying is an act that hurts someone continuously, both physically and mentally	Actions that can hurt a person's feelings or physically, through words, physical and non-physical the violence that is carried out intentionally by a person or group of people that can hurt the mental and inner feelings of others
2. Perform actions that hurt the physical / feelings of others with the aim of your satisfaction.	
3. Forms of physical and verbal violence	
4. Bullying of someone both physically and verbally.	
5. Bullying is an action that can hurt someone, both physically and non-physically	
6. Oppressive actions that can hurt someone's feelings or physically are carried out intentionally by a person or group of people.	
7. Bullying can include acts of physical or non-physical violence.	

8. Bullying actions that bring down some parties can be physical or non-physical

9. Bullying is an act of violence, both verbal and non-verbal, that disturbs the peace of the person being bullied.

10. In my opinion, bullying is bullying someone in a physical or non-physical form that hurts the mentality of the person being bullied.

11. Mockery and physical acts targeted at someone

12. Bullying is an act of violence, both physically and mentally.

13. Activities that can hurt students physically and mentally

14. Bullying is bullying other people. Including mocking friends.

15. Insulted, insulted, ridiculed, ostracized

16. Disrespectful behavior is bullying / demeaning others so that the person feels bullied.

17. Ridicule from others

18. Bullying people who can't afford it

19. Cruel bullying

20. Cornering someone for their shortcomings

21. When someone bullies or corners someone,,,,,,

Deeds are not commendable by bullying, cornering, demeaning, abusive behavior, insulting mocking someone on purpose of making other people uncomfortable

22. Bullying, in my opinion, is bullying behavior that is carried out intentionally by one person or group

23. An act of oppression or violence by a person or group intentionally

24. Bullying is any form of oppression or violence, which is carried out intentionally by one person or group that is stronger

25. It is any form of oppression or violence that is intentionally carried out by one

26. A person or group of people who are stronger against another person to hurt and is carried out continuously.

27. Bullying is an act that is oppressive to weak people

28. Violence is committed by some people against a certain person based on

29. Envy, jealousy, or revenge, or it could also be because that person is weak.

30. Bullying to hurt others

31. The nature of a person who aims to harm/ oppress or intentionally commit violence

32. against one person or group of people who are stronger towards another person is carried out continuously until

Oppressive or violent behavior that is intentionally carried out by one person or group who is stronger towards another person, based on envy, envy, and revenge to hurt and is carried out continuously, which is very detrimental to the victim until the perpetrator has his satisfaction

the perpetrator has his satisfaction, and it is very detrimental to the victim

33. Bullying is a form of oppression that is carried out by a person or group of people who feel they have more power over others
34. Bullying is a kind of oppression carried out by individuals/groups of people who feel strongly in which to hurt others (following desires).
35. Bullying is an act of oppression by a stronger party against a weaker party.

Based on the results obtained from Google Forms, 22% of students (9 students) reported engaging in bullying behavior, while 78% (32 students) indicated that they were not bullies. Data related to bullying victims revealed that 15 students (68%) reported being victims of bullying, while 7 students (31%) stated that they had never been bullied. Interviews with students further revealed that only one student was identified as a bully, with the rest of the participants reporting that they had not engaged in bullying behavior. The perpetrators of bullying, as reported by the students, included classmates, underclassmen, seniors, teachers, and even family members. Table 3 presents a summary of the perpetrators and victims of bullying according to student reports.

Table 3
Results of reduction of perpetrators and victim bullying

Response	Relationship between sub-themes
1. I never bullied because, in my opinion, when I was in high school, the average person was already thinking of adults	Students who do not *bully* feel mature enough to start thinking that bullying is wrong and shouldn't be, and some students become victims *bully* as well as the perpetrator *bully*.
2. I had one bully at that time I was just joking, and it turns out I just realized that it hurt my friend's feelings, but in the end, I also became a victim of bullying, so I don't want to bully again	
3. I don't bully, but I've seen and become a place to vent for my friends who are being bullied; my friend is physically fat and not tall, so I bully	
4. I've been a victim bully because I have acne on my face, and I get ridiculed a lot.	

3.2. Type of bullying

The types of bullying that students have experienced include cyberbullying, physical, verbal, and social bullying; however, some students reported never having been bullied. Each student's experience varied, with some only encountering social bullying, while others experienced a combination of social, physical, and verbal bullying. Specifically, four students (10%) reported experiencing cyberbullying, seven students (17%) reported

physical bullying, twelve students (29%) reported verbal bullying, and eight students (20%) reported experiencing social bullying. Additionally, eight students (20%) stated that they had never been bullied. Table 4 presents a summary of the types of bullying as reported by the students.

Table 4

Results of species reduction bullying

Response	Relationship between sub-themes
1. At that time, I was a victim *bully*, because I had acne on my face, and I was often teased, so I was verbally bullied	Type bullying experienced by students are verbal and physical in the form of ridicule, social which is done by staying away, and *cyberbullying* on social media.
2. I've been shunned by my friends, and my other friends also stay away from me	
3. My friend's view of me and his words, because I don't socialize easily, are finally shunned by my friends.	
4. Sis insinuated	
5. After posting photos on social media	
6. I've been teased by friends, and I don't think that includes bullying, which has a big impact; I'm just hurt and offended. Especially when physically bullied	

3.3. Students' feelings when experiencing bullying

Students who have experienced bullying expressed a wide range of emotions, which can be categorized into three main types: 1) Self-defense responses, such as being indifferent, acting normally, and distancing themselves from the bullies; 2) Mental health issues, including heartache, trauma, anxiety, sadness, fear, low self-esteem, insecurity, difficulty finding inner peace, depression, insomnia, and excessive worry or overthinking; and 3) Feelings of despair, such as loneliness, disappointment, and a sense of helplessness or worthlessness. Table 5 summarizes the emotional responses reported by students when they encountered bullying.

Table 5

Results of reduction of students' feelings when experiencing bullying

Response	Relationship between sub-themes
1. Compared to fear, I feel sadder because I must fight with my Classmates.	Mental problems
2. Overthinking, upset, upset, afraid	
3. Feeling ashamed, hurt, inferior	
4. Sad, feel useless	
5. Sad, worried, angry	
6. Sad, sick, can't be described by words	
7. Heartache hurts more than a breakup	
8. Sad, anxious and afraid	
9. Sad, scared, angry,	
10. Of course, it hurts and affects mental	

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11. Not calm, sometimes like to be afraid, and restless	
12. Scared/anxious & confused	
13. I'm traumatized, sis; I'm afraid to meet the bullies	
14. Not confident talking to other people	
15. Feeling the most wrong, feeling alone	Hopeless
16. Sad, depressed, feeling worthless, not excited to come to that place	
17. I feel helpless and disappointed to the point of being uncomfortable	
18. It's normal, silly	Good self-defense
19. I avoid the perpetrator fully	

3.4. Location of the incident of bullying

On average, students experience bullying in various locations, including at school, in the classroom, within the community, and on social media. This finding aligns with research by Ariefa (Efianingrum et al., 2020), which highlights that bullying can occur at home, at school, and in the community. Schools, as educational environments, should ideally provide protection and a safe space for students. A comprehensive approach that fosters a positive school environment, prioritizing student well-being while promoting inclusivity and diversity, is essential for preventing bullying. Table 6 presents a summary of the locations where bullying incidents occur, as reported by students.

Table 6

Results of reduction of occurrence locations bullying

Response	Relationship between sub-themes
1. When outside/in class, coming home from school	Students see *bull*ies at school, in the classroom, in the community, and on social media
2. At school (in the classroom, in the field, etc.)	
3. While in a class with classmates	
4. During the study, during a break	
5. At home	
6. In an organization outside of school	
7. When you are at the mosque	
8. When outside of class	

3.5. Impact of bullying

Students who experience bullying report various impacts, including: 1) Mental health issues, such as insecurity, suspicion, overthinking, depression, trauma, irritability, lack of confidence, and fear (e.g., fear of making friends or being stared at by strangers); 2) Social withdrawal, including being quiet, reluctance to attend school, constantly ruminating on the bullying incident, and feeling fear or discomfort when in the same space as the perpetrator; 3) Exclusion by peers and a diminished interest in exploring new opportunities, coupled with fear, loss of self-confidence, resentment toward the perpetrator, lack of enthusiasm in activities, and a general sense of detachment from the surrounding environment; 4) Motivation to prove oneself and the desire to improve. Table [X] presents a summary of the impacts of bullying as reported by students.

Table 7

Impact Reduction Results Bullying

Response	Relationship between sub-themes

1. I've never experienced bullying. But in my opinion, bullying will greatly affect a person's mentality and can change the personality of the person who is the Victim of bullying.	Mental disorders such as *insecure*, suspect, *overthinking*, depression, trauma, irritability, irritability, lack of confidence and cowardice
2. Mental stress, mental stress	
3. So uncomfortable & afraid to be in the same place with bullies	
4. Mentally down, often take Paracetamol without a doctor's prescription.	
5. mental disorders hit, overthinking stress	
6. Afraid to start other people's conversations, easily overthinking	
7. Being shy to post photos	
8. More sensitive and less sociable / slightly anti-social.	
9. Lazy to school	
10. Lack of confidence, easily offended	Avoided by friends and less interested in exploring new things
11. become a very quiet person, become insecure, there's a possibility I'm Ed (but still not sure)	
12. I became less confident and insecure when talking to people. I also become uncomfortable carrying out activities.	
13. Away from friends, feeling unmotivated when carrying out activities	
14. Many people think of me as bad as the group that bullied me was rumored to be. I was shunned by friends.	
15. Become inferior and close yourself	
16. Afraid to greet people first, less able to interact with new people	
17. Even more motivated to be better than him	Motivated to prove and can be better
18. Often worried, overthinking, and emotional	

3.5. Coping strategy for bullying

Students employ various strategies to overcome bullying, which can be categorized into social, internal, and external factors. In terms of social environment strategies, students seek out better friends, ignore or forget hurtful words, and avoid individuals who make them uncomfortable. Internal strategies involve actions such as reading self-love articles online, accepting the situation, defending oneself in a constructive manner, and focusing on self-improvement. Students also engage in positive activities to prove to others that they are not defined by the bullying and to demonstrate their potential through achievements. Forgiveness plays an important role, as students understand that the perpetrator is no better than the victim, and they may confide in their parents for support and motivation. They focus on future goals and engage in positive activities like listening to music, praying, exercising, or watching television to redirect negative thoughts.

External strategies involve seeking help by reporting bullying incidents to teachers, friends, or parents. Teachers are expected to create a supportive and creative learning environment to reduce bullying and foster student comfort. Effective communication between teachers and students is crucial for creating a safe atmosphere where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Collaboration with parents helps in identifying and addressing bullying issues comprehensively, while students can also act as anti-bullying ambassadors, monitoring bullying cases and providing a platform for their peers to express concerns.

4. DISCUSSION

Students' perspectives on bullying define it as an intentional act of harm, both physical and psychological, that is repeatedly carried out by one or more individuals. These actions include insulting, demeaning, and vilifying others, leading to discomfort, mental anguish, depression, social withdrawal, and even trauma. This view aligns with previous research, which suggests bullying is a manifestation of broader systemic issues, school climate, and cultural values (Ansary et al., 2015). Bullying is often seen as a pervasive form of violence in schools, indicating that educational institutions must create a culture that ensures safety and comfort for all students.

The experiences of students with bullying vary, with many reporting being victims rather than perpetrators. Bullying often occurs in various environments, such as schools, classrooms, and social media, with verbal bullying being the most common, followed by physical and social bullying. Verbal bullying typically involves name-calling, mocking, and belittling, while physical bullying focuses on insults related to physical appearance, such as body size or skin conditions. Social bullying involves exclusion or rejection by peers.

The consequences of bullying are significant and can result in mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, trauma, and low self-esteem. Victims may withdraw from their social environment, develop an aversion to school, or experience trauma and fear when encountering the bully. Some victims may even engage in self-destructive behaviors or seek revenge. The mental toll on victims can be severe, resulting in a sense of helplessness and isolation.

To combat bullying, teachers need to implement creative learning strategies that address bullying prevention at three levels: the school level, the classroom level, and the individual level (Dwiningrum & Wahab, 2020). Effective strategies include fostering a supportive social environment, encouraging positive self-resilience in students, and creating external support systems through communication with teachers, friends, and family. Schools should emphasize tolerance and acceptance, providing students with diverse cultural examples and fostering an inclusive environment. Additionally, strategies such as cooperative learning, moral education, and extracurricular activities can further help reduce bullying.

The most effective strategies, according to students, include reporting bullying incidents to teachers, parents, or peers, staying focused on personal goals, minimizing interaction with bullies, and seeking positive friendships. Support systems, including a healthy school culture, family involvement, and peer support, play a vital role in addressing bullying. However, students also identify several challenges, such as weak school rules, a stagnant school culture, and the normalization of bullying behaviors. These barriers can hinder the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies.

Ultimately, a collaborative effort between schools, families, and communities is essential to address bullying comprehensively. Schools must foster positive social relationships and strengthen non-cognitive skills, while teachers should enhance their teaching strategies through professional development. A well-

coordinated approach, supported by clear school policies, parental awareness, and community involvement, is crucial to reducing bullying and ensuring the well-being of all students.

5. CONCLUSION

The researchers conclude that students employ a variety of strategies to overcome bullying, which can be categorized into three main areas: the social environment, internal factors (individual resilience), and external factors. Among these, the most effective strategies for addressing bullying include reporting the incident to parents, teachers, or peers, displaying indifference towards the bully, establishing positive and supportive friendships, and maintaining a strong focus on personal goals and academic achievements. These approaches allow students to regain control over the situation and reduce the emotional impact of bullying.

The success of these strategies is largely supported by a strong support system within the school, including accessible guidance and counseling services, as well as comprehensive school-wide socialization programs that promote anti-bullying initiatives. When students feel supported by both their peers and school staff, they are better able to navigate the challenges of bullying and foster resilience.

However, several factors inhibit the effectiveness of these strategies. These include a lack of firm school policies and enforcement regarding bullying, an unchanged school culture that does not actively discourage bullying behavior, and the prevalent perception that bullying is a common or acceptable occurrence in the school environment. These challenges highlight the need for more robust anti-bullying interventions and a cultural shift within schools to ensure that all students feel safe and supported.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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