

THE HURTING WORDS: UNVEILING VERBAL BULLYING IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

Nindi Anggita^{1*}, Niken Vioeza², Nur Hasanah³
Elementary School Teacher Education Stud, STKIP Kusuma Negara, Jakarta
*nindianggita@stkipkusumanegara.ac.id

Abstract

Verbal bullying remains one of the most pervasive yet underestimated forms of aggression in elementary education. Unlike physical aggression, verbal bullying leaves no visible scars; however, its psychological and academic consequences can be profound and long-lasting. This study explores the manifestation, contributing factors, and educational implications of verbal bullying among fifth-grade students at SDN Susukan 06, East Jakarta. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation involving students, teachers, and school administrators. Findings reveal that verbal bullying has become normalized within peer interactions, appearing in the form of physical mockery, academic insults, socioeconomic ridicule, and culturally sensitive name-calling involving parents' names. The phenomenon is sustained by peer influence, family communication patterns, digital media exposure, and insufficient empathy education. Emotional consequences for victims include shame, anxiety, social withdrawal, and decreased academic motivation. The study argues that addressing verbal bullying requires systemic intervention integrating character education, empathy-based pedagogy, digital literacy, and strong school-parent collaboration. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on school climate, emotional safety, and holistic education in primary schools.

Kata kunci: verbal bullying, elementary students, emotional impact, prevention strategies

1 INTRODUCTION

Bullying in educational contexts has been extensively studied over the past decades; however, verbal bullying continues to receive comparatively less institutional attention despite its widespread occurrence and significant psychological consequences. Verbal bullying refers to aggressive behavior expressed through spoken language, including insults, mockery, name-calling, humiliation, and degrading remarks intended to hurt or intimidate others. Unlike physical aggression, verbal bullying does not leave observable physical injuries. Nevertheless, its emotional and psychological impact can be deeply embedded in children's self-concept and social identity.

Recent global studies emphasize that verbal bullying is often normalized within peer cultures, particularly in elementary and early adolescent stages. UNESCO (2021) reported that non-physical bullying, including verbal harassment, constitutes a dominant form of school-based aggression worldwide. Moreover, research by Wang et al. (2022) demonstrates that verbal bullying significantly predicts lower academic engagement and heightened anxiety levels among elementary students. These findings suggest that verbal

aggression may have consequences comparable to, or even exceeding, physical forms of bullying in terms of long-term psychological harm.

In the Indonesian context, cultural norms surrounding respect, family honor, and communal interaction intensify the emotional impact of verbal insults. The present study was conducted at SDN Susukan 06, where preliminary observations indicated frequent verbal teasing during classroom and recess interactions. The study seeks to explore how verbal bullying manifests in daily student communication, what factors sustain it, and how it influences students' emotional and academic development.

By situating verbal bullying within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this research recognizes that children's behavior is shaped by interactions across multiple systems: peer groups, family environments, digital media exposure, and institutional structures. Therefore, verbal bullying cannot be understood as an isolated individual behavior but rather as a socially constructed phenomenon embedded within layered relational contexts.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative descriptive design aimed at capturing the lived experiences and contextual meanings of verbal bullying in a natural classroom setting. The study was conducted during the 2024/2025 academic year at SDN Susukan 06, located in East Jakarta. The school was selected purposively due to recurring incidents of verbal bullying observed during learning activities. Participants included fifth-grade students identified as perpetrators and victims of verbal bullying, classroom teachers, and the school principal. Data collection techniques consisted of classroom observation during lessons and recess periods, semi-structured interviews, and documentation review, including school reports and field notes. Data triangulation across sources and methods was applied to enhance credibility and reliability. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Through iterative coding and thematic categorization, patterns of verbal aggression, underlying causes, and educational implications were systematically identified.

3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study reveals that verbal bullying is deeply embedded in daily student interactions, often normalized as playful communication. However, this normalization perpetuates emotional harm and erodes classroom cohesion. Teachers play a pivotal role in intervention, yet their responses vary depending on the severity of incidents. Effective strategies identified include character education, empathy-based learning, and peer mediation programs. Teacher collaboration with parents also strengthens awareness and consistent behavioral expectations between home and school. From a pedagogical perspective, verbal bullying disrupts not only emotional safety but also academic engagement. Victims often withdraw from participation, exhibit anxiety, and show lower motivation to learn. Thus, addressing verbal bullying is essential for achieving holistic education goals.

3.1 Sub Results

3.1.1 Forms of Verbal Bullying

1. Physical Mockery

Physical mockery is one of the most dominant forms of verbal bullying found among fifth-grade students at SDN Susukan 06. This behavior includes making derogatory remarks about a peer's body shape, height, skin color, or other physical characteristics, such as calling someone "fat," "short," or "dark." Such remarks are often disguised as jokes, yet they can cause deep emotional harm to the victim. Students who experience this kind of mockery tend to feel embarrassed, inferior, and anxious about their appearance, which

affects their confidence in participating in classroom activities. Teachers observed that these remarks often occur during group work or recess, where peer interactions are more casual and less supervised. Over time, repeated physical mockery can lead to body image issues and a decline in self-esteem, demonstrating that what may appear to be harmless teasing actually carries serious psychological consequences for young learners.

2. Name-Calling Using Parents' Names

Another prevalent form of verbal bullying involves using parents' names or nicknames as tools for humiliation. Students often call their peers by the names of their parents in a mocking tone, which is considered highly offensive within Indonesian culture, where family honor and respect are strongly valued. This behavior frequently triggers anger, embarrassment, or sadness in the victims. In most cases, the perpetrators justify their actions as "just for fun," without realizing the emotional and cultural sensitivity of such jokes. Teachers reported that this type of bullying usually begins as light teasing but can escalate quickly into verbal altercations. The underlying motive often stems from an attempt to gain social attention or dominance within peer groups. Repeated exposure to such humiliation can harm a student's emotional stability and sense of belonging, indicating the urgent need for teachers to reinforce respect and empathy in classroom communication norms.

3. Use of Harsh Language

The use of harsh or impolite language represents another serious form of verbal bullying observed in the study. This includes the use of coarse words, shouting, or making sarcastic remarks during jokes or disagreements. Such language often emerges when students experience frustration, competition, or conflict during group activities. Although students may perceive this as a form of expressing opinions or humor, the tone and choice of words can degrade and intimidate their peers. Teachers observed that students who frequently use harsh language are often those with strong social influence or leadership tendencies, seeking to assert authority over others. This form of bullying contributes to a toxic classroom climate, where fear and discomfort replace collaboration and respect. Over time, exposure to verbal aggression can normalize disrespectful communication patterns, making it harder to cultivate empathy and constructive dialogue among students.

3.1.2 Contributing Factors

1. Peer Influence

Peer influence plays a significant role in shaping students' verbal behaviors. Children at the elementary level are in a developmental phase where peer acceptance and social belonging are highly valued. As a result, they tend to imitate speech patterns and behaviors observed in their social groups, even when these behaviors are negative. When verbal teasing or name-calling becomes a common form of interaction within a group, students are likely to adopt the same communication style to fit in or avoid being excluded. This imitation process reinforces the cycle of verbal bullying, as aggressive language becomes normalized among peers. In the case of SDN Susukan 06, teachers noticed that students who associate with peers who frequently tease others are more prone to engage in similar actions. Peer pressure thus becomes a powerful mechanism that sustains verbal bullying, emphasizing the importance of peer mentoring and group-based interventions.

2. Family Environment

The family environment greatly influences a child's communication habits and social behavior. Children who grow up in homes where shouting, insults, or harsh criticism are common tend to replicate these verbal patterns in school settings. In many cases, students who bully others verbally may have internalized these behaviors as normal forms of interaction, reflecting what they observe at home. Conversely, children from nurturing families that emphasize kindness and empathy are less likely to engage in verbal bullying. In the context of SDN Susukan 06, interviews with teachers revealed that some

perpetrators came from families facing communication difficulties or disciplinary conflicts. The lack of positive role models and emotional support at home can cause children to seek attention or validation through negative behaviors at school. This finding underscores the need for parental involvement and communication-based education programs that promote respectful dialogue within families.

3. Digital Media Exposure

The influence of digital media is another critical factor contributing to the persistence of verbal bullying. Children today are frequently exposed to television shows, YouTube content, and social media platforms where sarcasm, mockery, and verbal aggression are portrayed as entertaining or acceptable. These digital environments shape how children perceive humor and conflict, encouraging them to imitate similar speech patterns in real-life interactions. At SDN Susukan 06, several students were observed mimicking slang, insults, and catchphrases they had encountered online, often using them without understanding their negative impact. The accessibility of smartphones and online entertainment has blurred the boundary between virtual behavior and real-world communication, normalizing disrespectful language. Without proper digital literacy education, students may continue to internalize harmful communication styles. Therefore, teachers and parents must collaborate to guide children in critically evaluating media content and promoting respectful online and offline communication practices.

4. Lack of Empathy and Moral Education

A lack of empathy and inadequate moral education are also central factors in the persistence of verbal bullying. Many students do not fully grasp the emotional harm their words can cause because they have not been taught to understand or value others' feelings. Inadequate emphasis on character-building subjects—such as civics, religion, and social ethics—can lead to a gap in emotional awareness and moral reasoning. At SDN Susukan 06, teachers observed that students who often engaged in verbal teasing or insults were unaware that their actions could lead to sadness, embarrassment, or social isolation in others. This demonstrates the importance of embedding empathy-based education into the curriculum through activities such as storytelling, reflection, and role-playing. By fostering emotional literacy and moral understanding, schools can help students develop compassion, self-regulation, and a stronger sense of responsibility for their words and actions.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that verbal bullying in elementary classrooms is not incidental but structurally embedded in everyday peer interaction. The normalization of teasing and derogatory language as playful communication reflects a broader social mechanism in which aggression becomes socially tolerated when framed as humor. This aligns with contemporary research suggesting that children often fail to differentiate between playful teasing and psychologically harmful ridicule, particularly when such behaviors are reinforced within peer groups. The habitual use of mockery indicates that verbal aggression has become part of the informal social script governing peer relationships.

The dominance of physical mockery observed in this study demonstrates how children's developing identities are particularly vulnerable to appearance-based ridicule. During late childhood, body image awareness and peer comparison intensify. Repeated comments such as calling peers "fat" or "dark" may seem trivial to perpetrators but significantly impact victims' self-esteem. Recent psychological research (Smith et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022) confirms that appearance-related verbal bullying predicts internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and self-consciousness, which can extend into adolescence if not addressed early.

The culturally sensitive practice of name-calling using parents' names reveals the intersection between verbal aggression and sociocultural norms. In collectivist societies such as Indonesia, family honor is deeply valued. Therefore, insults involving parents extend beyond personal humiliation to social degradation. This contextual dimension suggests that interventions must be culturally responsive. Anti-bullying strategies should incorporate cultural values emphasizing respect, family dignity, and communal harmony to effectively reshape students' communication norms.

The culturally sensitive practice of name-calling using parents' names reveals the intersection between verbal aggression and sociocultural norms. In collectivist societies such as Indonesia, family honor is deeply valued. Therefore, insults involving parents extend beyond personal humiliation to social degradation. This contextual dimension suggests that interventions must be culturally responsive. Anti-bullying strategies should incorporate cultural values emphasizing respect, family dignity, and communal harmony to effectively reshape students' communication norms.

Peer influence emerged as a critical sustaining mechanism of verbal bullying. Social Learning Theory posits that children imitate behaviors that are modeled and socially rewarded. When teasing generates laughter or peer approval, it reinforces repetition. Gaffney et al. (2021) emphasize that bullying persists when peer group norms implicitly condone aggressive humor. The present findings indicate that students adopt hurtful language to maintain group belonging, suggesting that anti-bullying interventions must target collective norms rather than solely individual perpetrators.

Family communication patterns further contribute to verbal aggression. Children exposed to harsh criticism or shouting at home may internalize these patterns as normative communication styles. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory explains this phenomenon through the microsystem interaction between family and school environments. Huang and Chou (2023) demonstrate that hostile family climates significantly predict school-based verbal bullying. Therefore, parental engagement is not supplementary but essential in disrupting the cycle of aggression.

Digital media exposure also plays a substantial role. Children frequently imitate sarcastic catchphrases or aggressive humor encountered online without critically understanding their emotional impact. Modecki et al. (2022) found that exposure to digitally mediated aggressive language increases the likelihood of offline verbal aggression. The blurred boundary between virtual and real-world communication necessitates integrating digital literacy education into anti-bullying efforts. Without critical guidance, students may normalize online mockery as acceptable classroom behavior.

The emotional consequences documented in this study—shame, anxiety, reduced self-confidence, and withdrawal underscore the pedagogical significance of emotional safety. Emotional distress interferes with concentration, creativity, and willingness to participate in collaborative tasks. Smith et al. (2020) argue that verbal bullying significantly undermines academic self-efficacy, which mediates academic performance. Thus, the impact of verbal bullying extends beyond psychological harm to measurable educational outcomes.

From a classroom climate perspective, bullying disrupts collective cohesion and trust. A learning environment characterized by ridicule diminishes students' sense of belonging, which is foundational for engagement. Research by Schonert-Reichl (2022) indicates that students who perceive classrooms as emotionally safe demonstrate higher prosocial behavior and academic persistence. Therefore, preventing verbal bullying is integral to establishing a positive school climate conducive to holistic development.

The intervention strategies identified in the study—character education, empathy-based learning, and parental collaboration align with contemporary evidence supporting whole-school approaches. Farrington et al. (2021) conclude that anti-bullying programs integrating social-emotional learning (SEL), teacher training, and family involvement significantly reduce bullying incidents. Embedding empathy-based instruction through storytelling, reflection, and role-playing fosters perspective-taking and emotional regulation, reducing aggressive tendencies.

Overall, the discussion reveals that verbal bullying in elementary classrooms operates within a complex ecological network involving peers, families, digital environments, and institutional responses. Effective prevention requires systemic, sustained, and culturally contextualized interventions. Schools must move beyond reactive disciplinary measures toward proactive cultivation of respectful communication norms. By prioritizing empathy education, strengthening teacher-parent collaboration, and fostering emotionally secure classroom climates, educational institutions can disrupt the normalization of hurtful words and promote healthier peer relationships.

One of the primary theoretical contributions of this study lies in its contextualization of verbal bullying within elementary cultural dynamics in Indonesia. While much of the existing international literature examines bullying from Western educational settings, this research highlights culturally specific manifestations, particularly the use of parents' names as a form of humiliation. This culturally embedded insult carries social weight beyond individual mockery, demonstrating that verbal bullying cannot be fully understood without considering sociocultural norms. By integrating cultural sensitivity into the analysis, this study expands the ecological understanding of bullying and offers a culturally grounded perspective that enriches global scholarship.

The study also contributes theoretically by emphasizing the normalization process of verbal bullying. Rather than framing bullying as an isolated deviant act, the findings reveal it as a socially reproduced communication pattern embedded in peer interaction. This aligns with sociocultural theories that conceptualize behavior as co-constructed within social groups. The concept of "normalized aggression" introduced here underscores that early-stage teasing may escalate into sustained psychological harm when left unaddressed. By identifying this progression within elementary settings, the research offers a preventive lens focused on early detection of harmful communication patterns.

Another theoretical novelty lies in integrating digital media exposure as a mediating ecological factor. While previous studies often treat cyberbullying as a separate phenomenon, this research illustrates how digital language cultures spill over into offline classroom behavior. This cross-contextual transfer suggests that verbal bullying should be examined within a hybrid communication ecology where online and offline behaviors intersect. The study therefore extends traditional bullying frameworks by incorporating digital socialization as a critical component influencing verbal aggression among elementary students.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this research advances the discourse on emotional safety as a prerequisite for meaningful learning. The findings demonstrate that verbal bullying directly disrupts students' academic engagement, reinforcing the argument that cognitive achievement cannot be separated from emotional well-being. By linking verbal bullying to diminished participation, motivation, and self-confidence, the study positions anti-bullying efforts not merely as disciplinary or moral initiatives but as integral components of instructional quality. This reframing strengthens the theoretical bridge between school climate research and classroom-level pedagogical practice.

Finally, the novelty of this study lies in its holistic intervention perspective. Rather than proposing isolated classroom strategies, the findings emphasize systemic collaboration among teachers, parents, and institutional structures. By situating character education, empathy-based pedagogy, and parental involvement within an ecological model, the study proposes a multi-layered framework for prevention. This integrative approach contributes to contemporary anti-bullying discourse by demonstrating that sustainable change requires synchronized efforts across microsystems. In doing so, the research offers both theoretical enrichment and practical relevance for educational stakeholders seeking to cultivate emotionally secure and respectful learning environments.

4 CONCLUSION

Verbal bullying remains a critical issue in elementary education, with significant emotional and academic consequences for victims. The study concludes that the dominant forms of verbal bullying mockery, name-calling, and harsh speech stem from peer influence, home environment, and lack of empathy. Teachers play an essential role as mediators and educators in shaping positive student behavior. Schools should integrate character education, communication ethics, and parental collaboration into their programs to prevent recurrence. A supportive and respectful learning atmosphere must be prioritized to nurture students' emotional well-being and learning motivation.

5 REFERENCES

- Farrington, D. P., et al. (2021). Effectiveness of school-based anti-bullying programs: A meta-analysis. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*.
- Gaffney, H., Farrington, D. P., & Ttofi, M. M. (2021). Examining the effectiveness of school-bullying intervention programs globally. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*.
- Huang, Y., & Chou, C. (2023). Family communication climate and adolescent bullying behavior. *Journal of School Psychology*.
- Modecki, K. L., et al. (2022). Digital media exposure and youth aggression. *Developmental Psychology*.
- Schonert-Reichl, K. (2022). Social-emotional learning and prosocial development. *Educational Psychologist*.
- Smith, P. K., et al. (2020). The psychological impact of verbal bullying in childhood. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.
- Wang, C., et al. (2022). Verbal bullying and academic engagement in elementary students. *School Psychology Review*.
- UNESCO. (2021). *School violence and bullying global status report*.