



Bullying and Student Burnout: A Qualitative Case Study in a Rural Indonesian Junior High School

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Abstract

Bullying represents a critical challenge in educational settings, yet its specific role in fostering student burnout within rural Indonesian contexts remains insufficiently explored. This qualitative case study addresses this gap by investigating the nexus between bullying and student burnout at SMP Negeri 1 Bukit Malintang. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven school staff members, 25 hours of non-participant observation, and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed three central findings. First, students who lacked strong peer networks were identified as vulnerable targets for both physical and psychological bullying. Second, the experience of victimization manifested directly in the core symptoms of student burnout: emotional exhaustion, cynicism toward school, and a reduced sense of academic accomplishment. Third, the school's institutional response was characterized by reactive, teacher-centered interventions, highlighting a significant gap in proactive and systemic support strategies. The study concludes that bullying acts as a chronic psychosocial stressor that catalyzes student burnout, a process intensified by local contextual factors such as parental migration. These findings underscore the urgent need for educational policies and interventions that move beyond punitive measures to implement holistic, community-engaged programs designed to build inclusive environments and robust support.

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying represents a pervasive form of aggressive behavior, characterized by conscious and repeated actions intended to harm, intimidate, or dominate individuals perceived as weaker, whether through physical, verbal, social, or psychological means (Olweus, 1993; Fathoni et al., 2024). While a long-standing feature of human social interaction, its recognition as

a critical public health and educational issue has intensified in recent decades, largely due to a growing body of evidence detailing its severe consequences, particularly within school environments (Isa et al., 2021).

The etiology of bullying is complex, arising from an interplay of individual, familial, environmental, and cultural factors. Childhood experiences, social

environment, and a lack of adult supervision or intervention are significant contributors (Lereya et al., 2013). In the Indonesian context, bullying is a widespread phenomenon across all educational levels, with profound implications for victims' psychological, emotional, and academic well-being (Sujadi et al., 2023). The documented repercussions are extensive, including trauma, depression, diminished academic performance, and school avoidance (Handayani et al., 2023; Basith et al., 2023). This hostile environment can transform schools from places of learning into sources of chronic stress, leading to student burnout, a state of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). Students who are bullied often feel uncomfortable and unsafe, which erodes their learning motivation, fosters social isolation, and can trigger significant psychological distress, thereby cementing the link between victimization and academic disengagement (Rahmawati et al., 2022; Agatha & Pamungkas, 2024).

The specific context of SMP Negeri 1 Bukit Malintang in Mandailing Natal Regency provides a compelling case for this study. Despite its reputation as a well-regarded and high-achieving school in the community, it is not immune to behavioral issues, with several cases of student-on-student bullying being reported. A salient local factor potentially exacerbating this issue is the pattern of parental migration, which leaves many children in the care of grandparents. This situation can lead to a deficit of parental affection and guidance, which studies have linked to the

development of rude and aggressive behaviors in children, including bullying (Lereya et al., 2013). For the victims, the consequences are direct, often manifesting as fear, depression, and a reluctance to attend school.

Existing research has begun to map the contours of this problem in Indonesia. Previous studies have effectively highlighted the mental health risks associated with bullying (Kamilla, 2025), identified a correlation between bullying and academic burnout in higher education (Safitri et al., 2025), and explored the psychological consequences in junior high schools (Feilasifa & Sutoyo, 2023; Rotinsulu & Atikah, 2024). The broader dimensions of academic burnout have also been examined (Supriyanto et al., 2022), alongside investigations into the causes of bullying, such as school stress, social competence (Eldiorita & Layyindah, 2016), and emotional intelligence (Fauzi et al., 2024). The gravity of burnout is further underscored by professional studies linking it to negative outcomes like unprofessional conduct and impaired performance (Dyrbye et al., 2020).

However, a clear gap remains in the literature. The aforementioned studies are often limited to specific populations, such as university students or urban settings, or they treat the concepts of bullying and burnout as parallel rather than interconnected phenomena. Crucially, there is a scarcity of research that explicitly investigates the causal pathways through which bullying serves as a chronic stressor leading to student burnout, particularly within the unique socio-cultural environment of rural Indonesian

middle schools. Furthermore, the role of specific subjects and the institutional response within these schools are often overlooked.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by conducting a focused investigation at SMP Negeri 1 Bukit Malintang. It seeks to understand how bullying manifests in this rural context and, more specifically, to elucidate the mechanisms by which it contributes to the development of student burnout. By examining these dynamics at the local level, this research will provide a nuanced understanding critical for developing targeted and effective intervention strategies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018). This approach was selected to facilitate an in-depth, contextual investigation of a complex contemporary phenomenon (The impact of bullying on student burnout) within its real-life educational setting (Creswell, 2013). The research was initiated in response to specific cases observed at SMP Negeri 1 Bukit Malintang, where instances of bullying were linked to student disengagement and school avoidance, making the school a critical case for understanding this particular issue. A qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for capturing and interpreting the nuanced lived experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders involved in these incidents (Tracy, 2020).

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 1, located in the Bukit Malintang District of Mandailing Natal Regency. This school was selected as the research

site due to documented reports of bullying incidents that had resulted in observable negative outcomes, including student absenteeism and manifestations of learning disengagement.

This research began with documentation studies, then continued with semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) lasting 30-60 minutes using 12 open-ended questions, and non-participant observations for 25 hours focusing on peer interactions and teacher interventions.

Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) flow model. The analysis involved three concurrent steps: (1) Data Condensation through inductive coding to identify initial codes (e.g., "fear of school," "social isolation," "mocking"); (2) Data Display by organizing codes into thematic matrices to visualize patterns; and (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification through constant comparison across data sources. Abstract categories were then synthesized into propositions, for example: "Bullying behavior leads to fear and avoidance, which in turn fosters school burnout." To strengthen validity, this study employed source triangulation (comparing principal, teacher, and BK teacher accounts), methodological triangulation (interviews, observations, documents), and theoretical triangulation. Thus, the methodology ensured depth, reliability, and theoretical grounding in explaining bullying-related student burnout.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure they possessed specific knowledge and experience relevant to the research focus. The inclusion criteria required participants

to be school staff members who had direct professional involvement in handling or supervising the reported bullying cases. The final sample consisted of seven participants: the school principal, several classroom teachers, and the Guidance and Counseling (BK) teacher. These individuals were integral to providing interventions for both affected students and perpetrators.

A critical ethical decision was made not to include student victims or perpetrators as direct informants. This was to avoid potential psychological harm and the re-traumatization that could arise from recounting their experiences (Tracy, 2020). This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of STAIN Mandailing Natal. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement. To ensure student perspectives were still represented, data on their experiences were gathered indirectly through the detailed accounts of the teachers and administrators who interacted with them during and after the bullying incidents.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through three primary methods to ensure methodological triangulation:

1. Document Study

The research began with a review of relevant school documents to provide context and background on past incidents and school policies.

2. Semi-structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with all seven participants, following a protocol guided by Seidman (2006). The interviews,

which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, utilized 12 open-ended questions designed to explore participants' understandings of bullying causes, manifestations, consequences, and the effectiveness of institutional responses.

3. Non-participant Observation

Observations were carried out over a total of 25 hours across various school settings (e.g., classrooms, hallways, courtyards). The focus was on peer interactions, group dynamics, and teacher interventions related to social behavior, providing direct evidence of the school's social environment.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three concurrent flows of activity:

1. Data Condensation

This initial stage involved a systematic process of inductive coding. Interview transcripts and observation notes were reviewed to identify recurring and significant units of meaning, leading to initial codes such as "fear of school," "social isolation," "daily mocking," and "teacher-led sanctions."

2. Data Display

The condensed codes were then organized into thematic matrices and networks. This visual display allowed for the identification of patterns, connections, and discrepancies across the different data sources (principals,

teachers, BK teachers) and methods (interviews, observations).

3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Throughout the analysis, constant comparative analysis was employed to verify emerging findings. Abstract categories were synthesized from the data, leading to the development of propositions that directly addressed the research problem, for instance: "Chronic peer victimization functions as a psychosocial stressor that engenders school fear and avoidance, which in turn fosters the core dimensions of student burnout."

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was central: source triangulation (cross-checking accounts from principals, teachers, and the BK teacher), methodological triangulation (corroborating findings from interviews, observations, and documents), and theoretical triangulation (interpreting data through the lens of existing theory on bullying and burnout) were all utilized. This multi-faceted approach ensured that the resulting analysis was depth-rich, reliable, and firmly grounded in both the empirical data and relevant theoretical frameworks.

Additionally, this methodological approach, focusing on the educators' perspectives within a single rural school case, was strategically chosen to directly address the research gap identified, to provide a nuanced, context-rich understanding of how bullying contributes to student burnout in under-researched rural Indonesian educational settings

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed three central themes elucidating the relationship between bullying and student burnout: (1) The Nexus of Social Isolation and Victimization; (2) Manifestations of Trauma and Burnout Symptoms; and (3) Institutional Response and Intervention Gaps.

Theme 1: The Nexus of Social Isolation and Victimization

The data consistently indicated that students who lacked robust peer connections were disproportionately targeted for bullying. This social isolation rendered them vulnerable to various forms of aggression. A teacher explained, "Students who are often alone, who don't have a 'gang,' are usually the ones who get picked on. The bullies see them as easy targets." The reported bullying was multifaceted, encompassing both overt physical acts, such as shoving and hitting, and more insidious psychological aggression, including persistent mocking, name-calling, and deliberate social exclusion. The BK teacher corroborated this, noting, "*The psychological bullying, like daily mocking and being left out of group work, is more common and often more damaging. It eats away at the student's spirit slowly.*"

This finding aligns with broader research on bullying dynamics. A study by Isa et al. (2021) found that a lack of social support from peers is a significant predictor of bullying victimization among school children, which in turn is strongly associated with psychological distress. The absence of a protective peer group creates a permissive environment for

bullies to operate, confirming that social vulnerability is a key risk factor.

Theme 2: Manifestations of Trauma and Burnout Symptoms

The consequences of sustained victimization closely mirrored the core dimensions of burnout as conceptualized by Maslach et al. (2001): emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment.

1. Emotional Exhaustion

Victims exhibited profound fatigue and a pervasive sense of dread associated with the school environment. One participant's statement vividly captured this: *"After being mocked every day, I pretended to be sick so I wouldn't have to go to school."* Teachers observed that these students appeared perpetually drained, displaying visible anxiety during classroom activities and having frequent absences. This chronic stress response is a direct pathway to burnout, where the school itself becomes a source of relentless psychological demand. This phenomenon is not isolated; recent studies link the intense stress from negative social environments, such as bullying, to burnout-like syndromes in students, a issue that became more pronounced during periods of remote learning (Junaidi et al., 2022).

2. Cynicism and Depersonalization

This dimension manifested as a detached, indifferent, and negative attitude towards school, academic work, and peers. Observations noted victims withdrawing from class participation and actively avoiding

social interactions. A teacher reported, *"They become indifferent, like they don't care about school or their friends anymore. It's a wall they put up."* This cynicism functions as a maladaptive coping mechanism, an emotional and cognitive shield to protect against further pain from social rejection and failure.

3. Reduced Personal Accomplishment

A marked decline in academic motivation, self-confidence, and perceived self-efficacy was evident among victims. Participants described how victims *"lost confidence in expressing themselves"* and showed *"diminished aspirations,"* feeling ineffective in their schoolwork. The constant negative feedback from bullies erodes the victim's belief in their own capabilities, directly leading to feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement.

However, the analysis also revealed that not all victims of bullying reported severe burnout symptoms. Some students shared that strong family support or the presence of one or two close friends helped them maintain motivation and continue attending school (Ayuningbudi & Hanami, 2023). This underscores the critical role of protective factors in building resilience. The buffering effect of family support is further supported by Zahra and Hidayat (2024), who found that a supportive family socioeconomic and emotional context can mitigate the risk of academic burnout. This highlights that while bullying is a potent risk factor, resilience fostered through external support systems can significantly mitigate its negative impact.

Theme 3: Institutional Response and Intervention Gaps

The school's primary response to bullying incidents was predominantly teacher-centered, focusing on reactive measures such as advising victims and imposing sanctions on perpetrators. While recognized as a necessary component, this approach was widely perceived as insufficient. The principal stated, *"We give warnings and call the parents of the bullies. For the victims, we provide counseling to be stronger."*

However, participants highlighted a critical gap in proactive, systemic, and holistic interventions. There was a notable absence of peer-support programs, school-wide anti-bullying campaigns, or structured rehabilitation for persistent offenders.

This reactive posture points to a significant opportunity for institutional growth. Effective bullying prevention, particularly in communal settings like Islamic boarding schools, requires a comprehensive character education approach that involves the entire school community (Ramli et al., 2023). Similarly, Jauhari (2022) emphasizes the importance of proactive institutional communication and policy (cyber public relations) to shape a positive public perception and address issues like bullying systematically, rather than merely reacting to incidents. The reliance on punitive and individual-level responses at the research site underscores a gap between necessary reactive measures and the comprehensive, community-engaged strategies advocated in the literature.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that bullying acts as a chronic interpersonal stressor that directly catalyzes the development of student burnout, effectively mapping onto the Maslach et al. (2001) model. The emotional exhaustion stems from the constant psychological strain and hyper-vigilance required of a target. The cynicism or depersonalization develops as a defensive coping mechanism to psychologically distance oneself from the painful reality of ongoing social rejection and victimization. Finally, the repeated experience of victimization systematically erodes self-efficacy, leading to feelings of reduced personal accomplishment.

Consistent with broader research patterns, victims of bullying at SMP Negeri 1 Bukit Malintang reported trauma and school avoidance. However, this study revealed several distinctive findings contextualized within its specific setting. First, the absence of strong peer clusters made isolated students far more vulnerable to being targeted, intensifying their feelings of loneliness and chronic stress, a dynamic confirmed in larger studies (Isa et al., 2021). Second, the phenomenon of parental migration left many victims without adequate emotional support at home, which in turn heightened their risk of burnout by removing a key protective buffer, a factor whose importance is highlighted in research on burnout antecedents (Zahra & Hidayat, 2024). Finally, the handling of bullying was dominated by teacher-centered strategies, with limited implementation of the peer-based, character-driven, or preventive

interventions that are increasingly recognized as essential for creating a safe and supportive educational environment (Ramli et al., 2023; Jauhari, 2022). This reflects a common challenge in resource-constrained environments where policy and comprehensive practice often diverge (Permatasari et al., 2023).

This in-depth, qualitative exploration through the perspectives of school staff has provided a nuanced understanding of the bullying-burnout nexus at SMP Negeri 1 Bukit Malintang. The case study approach has been instrumental in uncovering the specific contextual factors, such as parental migration and the reliance on teacher-centric interventions that shape this dynamic. While the findings are context-bound, the methodological rigor applied here offers a reliable template for understanding similar phenomena in other resource-constrained, rural educational settings

CONCLUSION

This study establishes that bullying functions as a critical psychosocial stressor and a primary driver of student burnout in rural Indonesian educational contexts. The findings delineate a clear pathway wherein socially isolated students face heightened victimization, which subsequently manifests in the core dimensions of burnout. These dimensions include emotional exhaustion, cynicism toward school, and reduced academic accomplishment, as defined by Maslach et al. (2001). This research thereby provides empirical validation of the theoretical link between peer victimization and burnout

within a previously underexplored demographic.

The distinct contribution of this study lies in its contextual analysis. The research reveals how specific rural conditions, particularly parental migration and the consequent lack of domestic support, intensify the bullying-burnout dynamic. This creates a cycle of distress and disengagement that is particularly acute in this setting. This contextual intensification represents a significant finding that distinguishes the rural educational experience from its urban counterpart.

The practical implications are substantial. For rural schools with similar socio-demographic profiles, this study demonstrates the critical insufficiency of reactive and punitive measures. Instead, it advocates for systematically integrated interventions including peer-support programs, school-wide positive behavior initiatives, and community-based counseling services that actively engage families. A holistic approach involving multiple stakeholders is essential to effectively disrupt the identified pathway from bullying to burnout.

This study acknowledges its limitations. The single-case design, while providing rich qualitative depth, necessarily limits the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, the ethical decision to rely on educator perspectives, while methodologically sound, means the subjective lived experiences of students are indirectly represented.

Future research should therefore focus on three main directions: first, employing comparative designs to further

elucidate contextual variations between rural and urban settings; second, developing ethically robust methodologies to safely incorporate student voices; and third, implementing longitudinal approaches to evaluate the long-term efficacy of proposed interventions.

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