

Bullying Intentions Among High School Students: Insights into Emotion Regulation and Cognitive Empathy

Sudirman^{1,*}, Abdul Rahim Karim², & Muhammad Irfan Hasanuddin³

¹Islamic Education Management Study Program, Universitas Islam Negeri Palopo, Indonesia

²Islamic Religious Education Study Program, Universitas Islam Negeri Palopo, Indonesia

³Department of Social Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, United Kingdom

*Corresponding email: sudirman_sudir@uinpalopo.ac.id

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Abstract: Bullying has emerged as a serious public mental health crisis in Indonesian educational settings, affecting adolescents' psychosocial well-being at multiple levels. Despite rising case numbers reported by national institutions, most school-based interventions remain reactive and punitive, failing to address the underlying psychological mechanisms that precede bullying behavior. Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offers a useful frame here. Emotion regulation and cognitive empathy have been theoretically and empirically linked to aggressive intentions. However, their roles have rarely been examined through in-depth qualitative inquiry, particularly in the Indonesian context. This study aimed to explore how emotion regulation and cognitive empathy shape bullying intentions among senior high school students in Palopo City, and to identify key themes underlying their interplay within real school contexts. A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed, involving 24 purposively selected participants from State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo City, comprising students, school counselors, and homeroom teachers. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Trustworthiness was established through source triangulation and member checking. Five core themes emerged; (1) emotion dysregulation, particularly failures in cognitive reappraisal, as a primary trigger of bullying intentions; (2) cognitive empathy deficits, especially low perspective taking, enabling moral disengagement; (3) peer group pressure accelerating bullying norms; (4) a substantial teacher-student perception gap undermining intervention effectiveness; and (5) maladaptive coping strategies sustaining cycles of aggression. Bullying intentions among adolescents are deeply rooted in deficits of emotion regulation and cognitive empathy, amplified by collectivist peer dynamics. Schools need to shift from punitive responses toward proactive social-emotional learning programs that explicitly cultivate cognitive reappraisal and perspective-taking skills as core psychological competencies.

Keywords: bullying intention, cognitive empathy, emotion regulation, preventive strategy, qualitative case study.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Something has shifted, quietly but unmistakably, in how students in Indonesian schools interact with one another over the past decade. What used to be written off as normal teenage roughhousing has grown into something far more troubling: a persistent undercurrent of aggression that, in many schools, seems to have

become part of the social fabric itself (Fathoni et al., 2024). Bullying, as researchers and practitioners now understand it, is no longer an occasional incident that resolves on its own, it has become a multidimensional public mental health concern that reaches well beyond classroom walls and leaves lasting imprints on students' psychosocial development. Left

unaddressed, it threatens to produce a generation carrying wounds that do not heal quickly (Burtenshaw, 2023; Kipper & Ramey, 2019).

Empirical data compiled by various credible institutions paint a grim picture of students' psychological safety in Indonesia. According to a 2023 report by the Indonesian Teachers' Union Federation (FSGI), there has been a significant surge in bullying cases within school environments, with 80% of all cases involving adolescents as both perpetrators and primary victims (Kurnianingrum, 2023). This figure is reinforced by data from the National Police Research and Development Agency (Puslitbang Polri), which highlights East Java as one of the provinces with the highest rates of reported bullying (Puslitbang). The empirical figures cited above, however, require a more theoretically grounded interpretation before they can be meaningfully connected to the construct of behavioral intention as defined within Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The statistic that 80% of bullying cases involve adolescents as both perpetrators and victims reflects the incidence of the behavior itself, that is, the observable outcome, rather than the cognitive antecedents that precede it. Within the TPB framework, a behavior such as bullying does not emerge spontaneously; it is the product of a structured cognitive pathway comprising three distinct determinants: *attitude toward the behavior*, *subjective norms*, and *perceived behavioral control*. All of which converge to form behavioral intention, the most proximal predictor of action. Consequently, the high prevalence of bullying documented by FSGI and Pusiknas Bareskrim Polri can be theoretically reframed not merely as a disciplinary or social problem, but as an indicator that a substantial proportion of adolescent perpetrators likely possessed strong prior intentions to engage in such conduct, intentions shaped by favorable attitudes toward dominance or aggression, perceived peer approval of such behaviors (subjective norms),

and a high sense of capability to carry out the act without consequence (perceived behavioral control). This reframing is critical because it shifts the analytical focus from reactive documentation of harm to a proactive understanding of the motivational architecture underlying bullying behavior, thereby justifying the present study's decision to employ TPB as its primary theoretical lens in examining the cognitive predictors of bullying intention among secondary school students in East Java.

High-profile incidents make the urgency even harder to ignore. Cases that surfaced in Surabaya toward the end of 2024 and into early 2025 demonstrated that bullying had moved well past ordinary adolescent mischief, entering territory that involved criminality and deliberate abuse of power (Romadhona S., 2024). A UNICEF study revealed what might be the most telling detail of all: while 87% of teachers believed their schools were handling harassment seriously, only 9% of students shared that confidence (UNICEF, 2020). That gap does not merely reflect a difference of opinion; it signals that many interventions are essentially performative, reactive gestures that never reach the root of what students actually experience.

This research is conducted in Palopo city, an urban hub in South Sulawesi characterized by significant social diversity. State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo city were chosen as research sites because they capture meaningful variation in the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of urban students. The bullying dynamics at these two schools warrant deep exploration, the kind that quantitative measurements alone cannot offer.

The persistent failure of punishment-based approaches to reduce bullying rates points to a different problem: the behavior does not simply emerge from external circumstances. It is preceded by intention, by a cognitive structure that forms before any action is taken. Ajzen's

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offers a useful frame here; intention, in this model, is the strongest single predictor of actual behavior (Ajzen, 1985). If we want to understand bullying, we need to understand its intent. The cognitive architecture described by TPB does not operate in an emotional vacuum, and this is precisely where a synthesis with emotional regulation theory becomes theoretically indispensable. Prior to the formation of behavioral intention, adolescents engage in an internal appraisal process in which they evaluate not only the perceived consequences of their actions, but also the social expectations they believe significant others hold regarding those actions, what Ajzen (1991) terms *subjective norms*. It is at this juncture that *cognitive empathy* enters as a mediating variable of considerable explanatory power. Cognitive empathy, defined as the capacity to infer and represent others' mental and emotional states accurately, serves as an internal regulatory mechanism that modulates how an individual interprets social cues and forms normative beliefs.

An adolescent who possesses well-developed cognitive empathy is more likely to perceive peer aggression as socially unacceptable, not merely because authority figures prohibit it, but because they can mentally simulate the suffering it inflicts upon the victim, thereby internalizing a norm against harm. This inhibitory function of cognitive empathy can be more precisely understood through Bandura's concept of moral disengagement, which describes the cognitive mechanisms individuals employ to deactivate the self-sanctions that would normally

accompany harmful conduct. Bandura identified several such mechanisms, including moral justification, euphemistic labeling of harmful acts, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of injurious consequences, and attribution of blame to the victim, each of which functions to disengage moral self-regulation from the act of aggression itself. Within the TPB framework adopted in this study, moral disengagement therefore represents the psychological pathway through which a favorable attitude toward aggression is sustained despite its objective harmfulness.

Conversely, deficits in cognitive empathy disrupt this regulatory function, leaving subjective norms vulnerable to distortion by dominant peer-group dynamics that may normalize or even valorize bullying behavior. In this sense, emotional regulation, specifically the capacity for cognitive empathy, does not stand apart from the TPB framework. Rather, it constitutes the affective substrate upon which subjective norms are constructed and through which behavioral intentions are either inhibited or reinforced. Integrating these two theoretical streams therefore allows the present study to move beyond a purely rationalist reading of bullying intention and to account for the emotional competencies, or their absence, that shape adolescent decision-making in social conflict situations.

Table 1 synthesizes prior empirical studies on bullying, emotion regulation, and cognitive empathy according to their principal thematic focus, situating each within the conceptual gaps that the present study addresses.

Table 1. Synthesis matrix of prior studies by thematic focus

Thematic Focus	Study	Design & Sample	Key Findings	Contribution & Gap Relative to This Study
Emotion regulation as a direct predictor of bullying	(Eilts et al., 2023)	Cross-sectional survey; SEM; 201 students aged 10–15	Dysfunctional emotion regulation directly predicts bullying and mediates the link between emotional attachment and bullying behavior.	Confirms the centrality of emotion regulation but leaves the qualitative "how" of emotional dysregulation in real school settings unexamined.

Cognitive empathy and emotion-regulation strategy choice	(Mu et al., 2025)	Survey study; Chinese high school students	Students with high cognitive empathy and low affective empathy were more likely to use adaptive interpersonal emotion-regulation strategies.	Establishes cognitive empathy's regulatory role, but the finding is variable-centered and not embedded in students' lived narratives.
School climate and emotion regulation as joint predictors	(Loveymi & Homaei, 2024)	Quantitative; brain-behavior mediation model; 257 students	School climate has a direct negative effect on bullying, while emotion regulation has a direct positive effect, mediated by brain-behavior mechanisms.	Adds an ecological (school-climate) layer but remains mechanistic and quantitative, missing contextual meaning-making.
Peer pressure and contextual/protective factors	(Juli et al., 2025)	Cross-sectional study; 401 Indonesian junior high students	Peer pressure predicts bullying victimization, while authoritarian parenting shows an unexpected protective effect within the Indonesian cultural context.	Grounds the phenomenon in Indonesia but is limited to junior high school and does not qualitatively probe intention formation.

Several gaps remain. First, the dominance of quantitative approaches means that the underlying psychological mechanisms of bullying intentions have not been examined in depth. Second, existing research rarely integrates emotional regulation and cognitive empathy simultaneously to develop a deep understanding of bullying intentions through a qualitative lens. Third, research on bullying in Indonesia remains limited, particularly studies employing a case study approach in the context of high schools outside Java.

The research question for this study is: How do emotional regulation and cognitive empathy influence the formation of bullying intentions among students at State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo city? This study addresses these gaps by employing a qualitative case study approach at State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo city, enabling an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding the role of emotional regulation and cognitive empathy in shaping bullying intentions within the socio-cultural context of South Sulawesi.

■ METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the phenomenon of bullying intent is a socially constructed, meaning-rich, context-dependent concept that cannot be reduced to mere numbers (Jeffrey & Stuart, 2020). The main objective is to gain a holistic, in-depth, and contextual understanding of how emotional regulation and cognitive empathy function in the formation of bullying intentions among adolescents.

The case study design was chosen because it allows researchers to investigate contemporary phenomena in depth within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomena and their contexts are not clearly defined (Harrison et al., 2017). In this study, the unit of analysis (case) is the psychological dynamics of students regarding emotional regulation, cognitive empathy, and bullying intentions in two schools with different characteristics, namely State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo city. Thus, this

study employs a multiple case study design, which facilitates cross-case analysis to identify broader patterns while understanding the uniqueness of each school context.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher approached this study as an external, non-affiliated investigator with no prior institutional role at State High School 1 or State High School 3, a positioning intended to reduce the risk of role-conflict bias when interviewing students, guidance counselors, and homeroom teachers about sensitive disciplinary matters. At the same time, the researcher's professional background in adolescent psychosocial research shaped the interpretive lens brought to the data, particularly the prior theoretical commitment to Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior and Gross's model of emotion regulation, which inevitably guided which participant statements were noticed as analytically salient during coding. To manage this influence, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting personal reactions to participant disclosures, especially first-person accounts of perpetration, and used these entries during the fourth stage of thematic analysis to check whether emerging themes reflected participants' meanings rather than the researcher's prior expectations. The researcher is also an adult outsider to adolescent peer culture. This positional distance was addressed by triangulating student self-reports with teacher and counselor perspectives and with direct observation, so that no single vantage point determined the final thematic structure. Finally, because the study involved minors disclosing experiences of bullying perpetration and victimization, the researcher was attentive to the power asymmetry inherent in the adult-researcher/adolescent-participant relationship and took steps, including rapport-building prior to formal interviews and reiterating participants' right to decline any question, to

reduce the likelihood that responses were shaped by a perceived obligation to comply.

Participants, Population, and Sampling

The study population consisted of all active high school students at State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo City, as well as educators who interact directly with students daily. In qualitative research, participant selection does not aim for statistical representativeness but rather to maximize the richness and depth of the information obtained (Severiano et al., 2025; Thomas, 2017).

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which involved selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Friday & Leah, 2024). Inclusion criteria for students include: (1) being actively enrolled as a student at State High School 1 or State High School 3 in Palopo City, (2) being willing to participate voluntarily, (3) having relevant experience as a witness, perpetrator, or victim of bullying, and (4) being able to communicate their experiences effectively. Inclusion criteria for teachers and homeroom teachers include: (1) having at least 2 years of experience at the school, and (2) actively interacting with students in the context of guidance and supervision. Data from each school and each informant group (students, teachers, and homeroom teachers) were first analyzed independently (within-case analysis) to preserve the contextual integrity of each case. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify convergent and divergent patterns across schools and informant groups, particularly in examining the teacher-student perception gaps.

The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, the point at which the collected data is sufficient to answer the research questions and no new themes emerge with the addition of participants. A total of 24 participants were involved.

Table 2. Research participant profile

No.	School	Status	Number	Notes
1	State High School 1 Palopo City	Main Participants	8 Students	Grades X, XI, and XII (representing all majors)
2	State High School 3 Palopo City	Main Participants	8 Students	Grades X, XI, and XII (representing all majors)
3	State High School 1 & State High School 3	Guidance Counselors	2 Counselors	2 Guidance Counselors per School
4	State High School 1 & State High School 3	Homeroom Teachers	2 Teachers	2 Homeroom Teachers per School
Total Participants			24	

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, using an interview guide developed based on the dimensions of emotional regulation (Gross, 2014), cognitive empathy (Davis, 1983), and bullying intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes per participant and were conducted individually to ensure participants' comfort and honesty in sharing their experiences (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). All interview sessions, conducted between July and December 2025 at State High School 1 and State High School 3, Palopo City, were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Scheduling was coordinated with the school administration to minimize disruption to participants' academic activities.

Observations were conducted in the school environment, including classrooms, the cafeteria, the playground, and hallways, from July to December 2025, the first semester of the academic year at State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo City. This six-month observation window was deliberately chosen to capture the full range of social dynamics across different academic contexts, including examination periods, extracurricular activities, and routine school days. The focus of the observations was on emotional regulation behaviors in conflict situations, interaction patterns that reflect or disregard cognitive empathy, and behavioral

indicators pointing toward bullying intentions. To ensure systematic and rigorous documentation of observed phenomena, the observational phase was conducted with a structured set of complementary instruments designed to capture both the immediacy of social interactions and their broader context. The primary observational tool employed was a structured observation checklist, developed deductively from the theoretical constructs of the study, specifically, the three TPB components (attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) and the two dimensions of emotional regulation under examination (cognitive empathy and emotional suppression). Each checklist item corresponded to a discrete, observable behavioral indicator, such as a student's physical or verbal response during a peer conflict, bystander reactions, or the presence of dominant-submissive interaction patterns, thereby enabling the researcher to record behavioral occurrences with categorical precision rather than impressionistic judgment. Alongside the checklist, unstructured field notes were maintained in a dedicated field journal, capturing the contextual texture of each observation session, including situational antecedents, nonverbal cues, spatial arrangements, and temporal patterns that the checklist alone could not adequately encode. Each field note entry was timestamped and tagged according to location (classroom, cafeteria, playground, or hallway) and academic context

(routine day, examination period, or extracurricular session) to preserve the ecological validity of the data.

Following each observation session, raw field notes underwent a structured transcription and unitization process: narrative entries were transcribed verbatim into a digital document, then segmented into discrete meaning units, defined as the smallest passage of text that retained intelligible, self-contained meaning relevant to the research focus. These meaning units were subsequently labeled with preliminary descriptive codes, forming the initial textual corpus for the formal data reduction process using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) framework of condensation, coding, and thematic categorization. This systematic conversion from observational experience to codable text units was essential in ensuring that the qualitative data generated in the field could be handled with the same analytical rigor and traceability expected of more structured data collection methods.

The documents collected include guidance and counseling case notes, bullying incident reports, school anti-bullying action plans, and relevant academic data. These documents are used for data triangulation and provide a richer context for the findings from interviews and observations. With respect to the student inclusion criterion encompassing witnesses, perpetrators, and victims of bullying, these role-based accounts were not analyzed as separate analytic strata. Rather, all student data were coded together within each school's within-case dataset, with each coded excerpt tagged for the participant's self-identified role (witness, perpetrator, or victim), along with school and informant-group identifiers. This role tag was then used as a lens during the third and fourth stages of thematic analysis, where the researcher deliberately examined whether a candidate theme (for example, cognitive empathy deficits or maladaptive coping) was expressed similarly or

divergently across the three roles, rather than allowing any single role's narrative to dominate a theme's definition. Where role-based divergence was analytically meaningful, such as the perpetrator-specific "moment of empathy activation" reported under Theme 2 and the victim-specific perception of a "false sense of safety" reported under Theme 4, this is made explicit in the corresponding theme narrative in the Results section. Combining rather than stratifying the three roles was a deliberate design choice appropriate to a multiple case study, since the aim was to characterize the shared psychological and social dynamics of bullying intention operating within each school as a bounded case, not to produce independently generalizable profiles of witnesses, perpetrators, or victims.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke, which consists of six phases; (1) familiarization with the data through reading and reflective note-taking, (2) systematic initial coding across the entire dataset, (3) searching for themes by classifying codes into potential themes, (4) reviewing themes to ensure internal coherence and external differentiation, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Özden, 2024). In the *first stage*, the researcher engaged in an immersive and repeated reading of the complete dataset, comprising transcribed interview texts, converted field note meaning units, and open-ended questionnaire responses, while composing reflexive analytical memos that documented emerging impressions, tensions, and preliminary interpretive hunches regarding adolescent bullying intention, cognitive empathy deficits, and normative peer dynamics observed across both school sites. This familiarization process was deliberately prolonged over multiple reading

sessions to guard against premature closure and to ensure that the full semantic range of participants' expressions was captured before any coding commenced. In the *second stage*, initial codes were generated through a line-by-line and meaning-unit-by-meaning-unit reading of each data source, with codes assigned to capture both the manifest content, what participants explicitly stated or what was directly observed, and the latent content, the underlying assumptions, social orientations, and emotional postures implied by the data. In the *third stage*, related codes were grouped into candidate themes through an iterative collation process, during which the researcher physically mapped code clusters onto a thematic matrix, examining points of convergence and divergence between data generated at State High School 1 and State High School 3 Palopo to identify both shared patterns and site-specific variations in the social dynamics underpinning bullying behavior.

In the *fourth stage*, each candidate theme was subjected to a two-level review; first, at the level of internal coherence, by re-reading all data extracts assigned to a given theme to confirm that they formed a meaningfully unified interpretive category, and second, at the level of external differentiation, by comparing themes against one another to confirm that each captured a conceptually distinct dimension of the phenomenon rather than overlapping with adjacent categories. Themes that failed either criterion were either refined, merged, or dissolved back into the coding pool for re-examination. In the *fifth stage*, each validated theme was assigned a precise and analytically transparent name that reflected both its empirical grounding in the data and its theoretical resonance with the study's conceptual framework, specifically, the constructs of subjective norms, cognitive empathy, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intention as operationalized in this research. Finally, in the *sixth stage*, the write-up of findings

was structured not as a sequential recitation of themes but as an analytically layered narrative, in which each theme was presented alongside representative data extracts, interpretive commentary, and explicit connections to the study's theoretical framework, thereby ensuring that the reporting process itself constituted a final act of meaning-making rather than mere descriptive summary.

To ensure the validity (trustworthiness) of the research, four main criteria were used: (1) credibility through triangulation of data sources and member checking, (2) transferability through thick description, (3) dependability through an audit trail, and (4) confirmability through researcher reflexivity (Shenton, 2004). Member checking was carried out through a structured two-stage procedure. In the first stage, following each interview transcript, a verbatim summary of the key points and preliminary interpretations was prepared and returned to the respective participant within one week of the interview. Participants were invited to review this summary, verify the accuracy of their statements, and provide corrections or elaborations where they felt the researcher's interpretation did not adequately reflect their intended meaning. In the second stage, after the five main themes had been formulated through thematic analysis, a brief thematic summary document was shared with a representative subset of participants (comprising student participants, guidance counselors, and homeroom teachers selected from both schools). These participants were asked to assess whether the identified themes and sub-themes resonated with their lived experiences and whether any important dimensions had been omitted or misrepresented. Feedback received during both stages of member checking was documented systematically and used to refine the thematic descriptions, correct factual inaccuracies, and strengthen the interpretive credibility of the findings.

Prior to the commencement of data collection, this study obtained approval from each school. Research approval was granted following a review of the research protocol, participant recruitment procedures, data confidentiality safeguards, and the provisions for protecting the welfare of minor participants. Given that this study involved minors (students under 18), informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians of all student participants before they participated in any research activities. The informed consent process was conducted through information provided to each student's guardian, which explained in clear, accessible language the purpose of the study, the nature of participation (including interview and observation activities), the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence,

the procedures for ensuring anonymity and data confidentiality, and the contact information of the researcher. Student participants were additionally provided with an age-appropriate assent form to ensure their own informed and voluntary agreement to participate.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on a thematic analysis of data from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document studies collected at State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo City, five main themes were identified that describe the role of emotional regulation and cognitive empathy in the formation of bullying intentions among adolescents. The following summarizes these main themes:

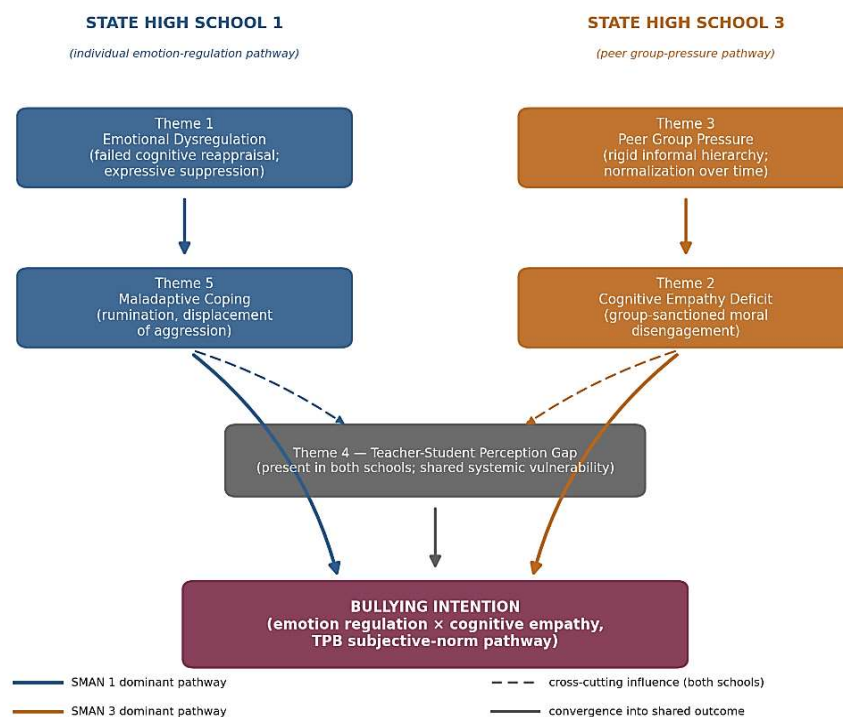


Figure 1. Summary of main themes of the research findings

Theme 1: Emotional Dysregulation as a Trigger for Bullying Intentions

All student participants identified as tending to bullying reported difficulty managing negative emotions, particularly anger and frustration. The most dominant pattern was a failure to apply

cognitive reappraisal, the ability to reassess situations that trigger negative emotions in order to avoid reacting impulsively.

As expressed by one student participant from State High School 1 (initial R, XIth grade), “Once I am angry, it is hard to think clearly. I

want to retaliate right away, regardless of the consequences.” This statement reflects the dominance of the limbic system over cognitive control (the prefrontal cortex), which is not yet fully matured during adolescence. This condition creates a window of psychological vulnerability that, without appropriate intervention, can crystallize into structured bullying intentions.

Meanwhile, the strategy of expressive suppression, suppressing the external expression of emotions, was also identified as a dominant maladaptive strategy, particularly at State High School 1. Rather than alleviating internal pressure, this strategy accumulates emotional tension that eventually “explodes” as aggressive actions toward those perceived as weaker.

Further elaboration on emotional dysregulation as a trigger was obtained from multiple participants who described distinct patterns of emotional escalation preceding aggressive actions. Student participant F (State High School 1, XIIth grade) described the process with striking clarity: *“When someone teases me in front of my friends, I feel like my head is going to explode. I know I should calm down, but it feels impossible. My body reacts faster than my brain.”* This phenomenological description is consistent with the neurobiological model of adolescent emotional dysregulation, in which the hyperreactive amygdala overrides the still-maturing prefrontal cortex, generating impulsive behavioral responses.

Student participant M (State High School 3, XIth grade) offered a complementary perspective that highlights the social dimension of emotional dysregulation: *“At home I can control myself, but at school when the whole group is watching, I can’t just walk away. Staying silent feels like losing. So I do something, even if it means hurting someone else.”* This statement reveals how the school social environment, with its audience dynamics and status-based hierarchies, amplifies the difficulty of adaptive emotion regulation.

The homeroom teacher at State High School 1 (initials A) confirmed this pattern through systematic observation: *“Students who are involved in bullying cases almost always have a short fuse. I’ve observed that many of them come from home environments where emotional outbursts are normalized, even rewarded as signs of strength. When they bring this pattern to school, it collides with the school’s social structure and leads to incidents.”* This teacher’s account highlights the ecological layering of emotional dysregulation, connecting family socialization patterns to school-based behavioral expressions.

Taken together, the data from Theme 1 establish a clear pathway: an underdeveloped emotion regulation repertoire, rooted in both neurobiological immaturity and inadequate socialization, functions as the primary psychological trigger for bullying intentions. The absence of cognitive reappraisal as a learned skill, combined with the social pressures of the school environment, creates a volatile internal state that predisposes certain students to default to aggression in response to interpersonal friction.

Theme 2: Deficit in Cognitive Empathy as an Enabler of Bullying Intentions

Analysis of interview and observation data revealed that students with a high tendency toward bullying consistently demonstrated deficits in perspective-taking ability. They tended to fail to process the emotional and psychological impact of their actions on the victims.

One participating guidance counselor from State High School 3 (initials S) observed, *“When confronted, bullies usually admit they did not realize their actions were hurtful. They say, ‘I was just joking’. This is not a lie; they genuinely cannot imagine another person’s pain.”*

This finding aligns with Bandura’s concept of moral disengagement, wherein bullies employ cognitive mechanisms to distance themselves from

moral responsibility for their actions. A deficit in cognitive empathy is the primary driver of this mechanism.

A Student participant E (State High School 1, Xth grade), who self-identified as having previously engaged in bullying behavior, offered a retrospective account of his perspective-taking failures: *“At the time, I genuinely thought it was fun. I did not understand that the other person was suffering. It was not until a teacher sat with me and made me imagine myself in that situation that I started to feel guilty. Before that, there was just nothing, no feeling at all about what the other person was going through.”* This testimony is particularly significant because it documents the moment of empathy activation and demonstrates that perspective-taking can be externally scaffolded, with direct implications for intervention design. The cumulative evidence from Theme 2 thus establishes that cognitive empathy deficits function not merely as a passive absence, but as an active enabler of bullying; they permit the perpetrator to proceed without the moral friction that would ordinarily inhibit aggressive behavior.

Theme 3: Peer Group Pressure as an Accelerator of Bullying Intentions

The pressure to conform to bullying-tolerant group norms was documented with particular clarity at State High School 3, where a more rigid informal social hierarchy was observed during field observations. Students in perceived high-status peer groups exercised considerable informal authority over the social behavior of lower-status members. Participant H (State High School 3, XIth grade) articulated the mechanics of this conformity pressure; *“If you do not do what the seniors or the popular group expect, you become the next target. It is like an unspoken rule. Everyone knows it, and everyone follows it because no one wants to be on the receiving end.”*

The dynamics of conformity observed at State High School 3 also exhibited a temporal dimension that warrants attention. Several participants described how initial reluctance to participate in bullying gradually eroded over repeated exposures, as the behavior became increasingly normalized within the group context. Participant J (State High School 3, XIth grade) explained: *“The first time, I felt really bad and I tried to stay out of it. However, after seeing it happen again and again without consequences, I started to think maybe it is just normal here. After a while, I stopped feeling bad about it.”* This account of gradual normalization through repeated exposure is theoretically significant, as it suggests that the subjective norm does not merely reflect pre-existing group attitudes but actively constructs and escalates them over time, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of norm intensification.

Participant D (State High School 3, Xth grade) stated, *“If I don’t join in, I’ll be the one excluded. So, whether I like it or not, I have to go along with it, even though I don’t want to deep down.”* This statement confirms the relevance of the subjective norm component in Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior within the context of high school students in Palopo city.

A guidance counselor from State High School 3 (initials T) further elaborated on this group dynamic from a professional perspective: *“What we see here is not simply a few bad students. The problem is structural. There are informal leaders in the student body who set the tone for how conflicts are handled. When those leaders normalize bullying as entertainment or as a way to establish dominance, it creates enormous pressure on other students who may not personally want to bully but feel they have no choice.”* This structural framing resonates with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, specifically the mesosystem dynamics where peer group norms

intersect with school culture to create permissive conditions for aggression.

Importantly, several participants who had personally experienced this conformity pressure reported significant internal conflict. Participant K (State High School 3, XIIth grade) stated, *“Even now, I regret what I did. I knew it was wrong when I was doing it. However, at that moment, the fear of rejection by the group was stronger than my conscience. You have to understand, at that age, being accepted by your peers feels like survival.”* This internal conflict between moral judgment and social conformity illustrates the subjective norm component of TPB operating at maximum intensity; the perceived social expectation outweighs both personal attitude and individual moral agency. Theme 3 thus reveals that bullying intentions in a collectivist educational context are not solely individual-level phenomena; they are co-constructed within group dynamics that must be targeted directly by school intervention strategies.

Theme 4: Teacher-Student Perception Gaps in Bullying Intervention

Direct interview data from student participants provided compelling evidence of this perception gap from the victim’s perspective. Participant N (State High School 1, XIth grade, victim of repeated verbal bullying) stated, *“The teacher said the problem had been resolved after they called us both in. However, the bullying just moved online and became more secretive. I did not dare report it again because I was afraid it would only make things worse. I felt more alone after the teacher got involved than before.”*

This structural gap between formal intervention and student-experienced reality was further evidenced by the discrepancy between school anti-bullying policy documentation and actual implementation practices. Both schools

possessed formal written anti-bullying policies, as verified through document review, which emphasized disciplinary consequences and complaint-handling procedures, with limited explicit provisions for proactive socio-emotional programming. The absence of a feedback loop between student experience and formal school response represents a fundamental design flaw that allows the teacher-student perception gap to persist despite formal policy commitments to student safety.

This situation creates a “false sense of safety” where students do not feel safe to report bullying incidents, allowing the cycle of violence to continue beneath the radar of formal school oversight. This perception gap also contributes to the internalization of the norm that bullying is normal and inevitable.

A homeroom teacher from State High School 3 (initials B), speaking with evident professional self-reflection, acknowledged the systemic dimension of this gap: *“We handle cases when they are reported. However, I am aware that most cases are never reported to us. Students have their own codes. They handle things internally. By the time it reaches us, it is already severe. Our system is reactive, not preventive, and I think students know that, so they do not trust us to solve it at an earlier stage.”* This teacher’s candid assessment points to a fundamental design flaw in current school-based bullying intervention. This reactive, incident-based model only activates after significant harm has occurred, leaving chronic low-level bullying largely invisible to formal oversight.

Document review of bullying incident reports from both schools further corroborated this pattern. A significant proportion of documented cases had been preceded by unreported prior incidents acknowledged by the involved parties during interviews, suggesting that formal documentation substantially underrepresents the actual incidence of bullying.

The analysis of guidance and counseling case notes also revealed a tendency to frame resolutions in terms of behavioral compliance (“both parties agreed to stop”) rather than addressing the underlying psychological dynamics, a procedural approach that may create the appearance of resolution without effecting genuine behavioral change. Theme 4 thus exposes a critical structural vulnerability in school-based bullying prevention: the formal intervention system generates a false sense of security that inadvertently perpetuates rather than disrupts the bullying cycle.

Theme 5: Maladaptive Coping Strategies and Their Role in the Intensification of Aggression

Detailed accounts of maladaptive coping emerged most prominently from students at State High School 1 who described extended periods of rumination following social conflicts. Participant P (State High School 1, XIth grade) described this pattern vividly: *“When someone says something bad about me, I can’t let it go. I replay it in my head over and over, each time getting angrier. By the time I see that person again, I’ve been building up to a reaction for days. It’s like a pressure cooker, and when I finally explode, it’s much bigger than what the situation actually warranted.”*

Importantly, several participants at State High School 1 described unsuccessful prior attempts to adopt more adaptive coping strategies, only to abandon them after finding insufficient support or reinforcement in the school environment. Participant R (State High School 1, Xth grade) stated, *“I once tried talking to a teacher about feeling overwhelmed, but it felt like they were too busy and did not really know what to do. After that, I stopped trying. I figured it was better to just deal with it myself, even if my way of dealing with it wasn’t always the right way.”* This account highlights how

institutional unresponsiveness to students’ adaptive coping efforts can actively push them back toward maladaptive strategies, underscoring the critical importance of trained, responsive adult support as a component of effective school-based socio-emotional programming.

These maladaptive strategies create a vicious cycle: failure to regulate emotions adaptively results in the buildup of internal pressure, which is then vented through aggressive behavior toward others perceived as weaker or easier targets.

The displacement of aggression, the redirection of frustration from its actual source to a perceived weaker or more accessible target, was identified as a closely related mechanism. Participant Q (State High School 1, XIIth grade) acknowledged, *“Sometimes I’m angry at something that happened at home or in class, but I can’t take it out on my parents or my teacher. So I end up picking on someone smaller or quieter at school. I know it’s wrong, but in the moment it releases the pressure inside me.”* This account is a textbook illustration of displacement as a defense mechanism, highlighting how unresolved emotional tension from one context finds its outlet in another, transforming the school social environment into an arena for processing domestic or academic frustrations.

The guidance counselor at State High School 1 (initials C) contextualized these individual patterns within a broader institutional framework: *“We have students who are excellent academically but are ticking time bombs emotionally. The academic pressure here is very high. When students don’t have an outlet, the emotional pressure finds its own way out. We need structured spaces for emotional processing, something we currently lack almost entirely.”* This professional observation introduces an important institutional variable: the absence of legitimate channels for emotional

expression within the school environment actively contributes to the accumulation of emotional pressure that, when combined with maladaptive coping repertoires, creates the internal conditions for bullying. Theme 5 thus reveals the institutional co-responsibility of schools in the perpetuation of bullying, pointing to a critical need for structural intervention at the level of school climate and emotional support infrastructure.

The qualitative evidence presented in Theme 1 and 5 collectively constructs a detailed phenomenological account of how dysfunctional emotional regulation generates and sustains bullying intentions. Participant narratives consistently described a failure of the cognitive reappraisal process at the moment of emotional activation, not as a deliberate choice but as an experienced absence of cognitive tools. This is a conceptually important distinction: the students did not choose to be dysregulated; they lacked the psychological resources to be otherwise. This framing aligns with Gross's process model of emotion regulation, which situates cognitive reappraisal as a learned, practice-dependent skill rather than an innate capacity (Gross, 2014).

The theoretical implication of this finding is that interventions targeting emotion regulation in Indonesian school contexts must explicitly address the cultural valuation of expressive suppression. Simply teaching cognitive reappraisal techniques will be insufficient if students continue to perceive suppression as the culturally appropriate and socially rewarded response to negative affect. Effective intervention must therefore include a cultural competency component that validates the cultural context while introducing alternative frameworks for understanding emotional self-management, one that distinguishes between genuine self-regulation (adaptive) and mere emotional concealment (maladaptive). This represents a nuanced pedagogical challenge that requires culturally sensitive program design and delivery by facilitators with deep contextual understanding.

Emotional Regulation and Bullying Intentions: Confirmation and New Insights

The finding that emotional dysregulation, specifically failure in cognitive reappraisal, plays a role in shaping bullying intentions confirms and enriches the findings of Eilts et al. and Loveymi and Homaei, who identified dysfunctional emotional regulation as a significant predictor of bullying behavior (Eilts et al., 2023; Loveymi & Homaei, 2024). However, this study adds a deeper dimension of understanding by identifying specific psychological mechanisms through participants' narratives.

The immaturity of the emotional regulation system in adolescents, which is neurobiologically caused by the limbic system developing faster than the prefrontal cortex, creates a particular vulnerability (Krishnan, 2020). In the context of Palopo city, with its complex urban social dynamics, this vulnerability is exacerbated by a lack of adult role models who model adaptive emotional regulation, as well as a scarcity of safe spaces at school to express and process emotions.

The finding that expressive suppression predominates as a maladaptive strategy, particularly at State High School 1, provides an important contextual nuance. This strategy, although at first glance it appears to be self-control, actually accumulates internal pressure that eventually erupts as more intense aggression. This aligns with the findings of Sheppes and Gross, who assert that suppression actually increases physiological stress compared to cognitive reappraisal (Sheppes & Gross, 2012).

The prevalence of expressive suppression at State High School 1, as documented through both participant self-reports and teacher observations, reveals a critical irony in the social construction of emotional self-control within Indonesian school culture. Many participants described suppression as an outwardly praised behavior, equated with maturity, self-control, and social respectability. This cultural valorization of

emotional suppression, while appearing prosocial on the surface, may in fact constitute a risk factor for aggression by preventing the adaptive processing and resolution of negative affect (Aka, 2023). This finding extends and contextualizes the theoretical argument of Sheppes and Gross by situating it within the specific sociocultural dynamics of an Indonesian urban high school, where suppression is not merely a personal coping choice but a socially mandated performance.

Critically, the ecological analysis of this study, which integrated school-level observation and document review with individual interview data, suggests that the scarcity of adaptive emotion regulation is not solely a product of individual psychological deficits. It is also a product of an institutional environment that provides minimal structured opportunities for students to develop, practice, and receive feedback on emotion regulation skills. This finding has direct implications for intervention design: targeting individual cognitive-behavioral skills (e.g., cognitive reappraisal training) without simultaneously restructuring the school environment to provide both models and practice opportunities for adaptive emotion regulation is likely to yield limited, unsustained effects.

These findings collectively advance the theoretical understanding of the emotion regulation–bullying relationship by demonstrating that this relationship is not a simple, direct pathway but a multiply mediated process shaped by neurobiological maturity, socialization history, cultural norms around emotional expression, and the institutional ecology of the school. Future research employing longitudinal designs would be well-positioned to trace how these multiple influences interact over time to shape the trajectory of individual emotion regulation competence and its downstream effects on bullying behavior.

Cognitive Empathy as a Moral Brake: Implications of Deficits in Perspective-Taking

The evidence for cognitive empathy deficits documented across Themes 2 and 3 extends the theoretical conversation in several important ways. First, the finding that perspective-taking failures function as active mechanisms of moral disengagement, rather than merely passive omissions, aligns with and empirically enriches Bandura's social cognitive theory of moral agency. The perpetrators in this study were not simply ignorant of their victims' suffering; their cognitive schemas actively excluded this information from moral processing, allowing aggression to proceed without the internal inhibitory response that would ordinarily accompany harm-inflicting behavior (Bounoua et al., 2022).

This trainability of perspective-taking ability carries important practical implications that extend beyond the immediate school context. If cognitive empathy can be activated and developed through structured educational interventions, then the investment in empathy-focused components within school-based bullying prevention programs is not merely a values-based commitment but an evidence-grounded strategy with demonstrable potential for behavioral change (van Noorden et al., 2015). The existing evidence base for perspective-taking interventions, including role-play exercises, structured dialogue across social divides, and narrative-based empathy training, provides a rich toolkit that Indonesian school guidance counselors could adapt and implement within the specific socio-cultural context of their student populations.

It is important to note that the cognitive empathy deficits identified in this study are not permanent or unchangeable conditions. Unlike affective empathy deficits, which may have more stable neurobiological components, perspective-

taking ability is a cognitive skill that can be developed through appropriate interventions. The findings of Mu et al., which indicate that students with high cognitive empathy tend to use more adaptive emotion regulation strategies, provide a strong foundation for integrative interventions (Mu et al., 2025).

The moment-of-empathy-activation account provided by Participant E (Theme 2) is particularly theoretically significant. His description of experiencing genuine guilt only after an adult actively scaffolded a perspective-taking exercise suggests that the cognitive empathy deficit observed in this sample is not a fixed dispositional trait but a situationally addressable cognitive skill gap. This is a finding of considerable practical importance, as it implies that structured perspective-taking interventions, implemented in the school context by trained guidance counselors, may activate latent empathic capacity in students who would otherwise remain in a state of moral disengagement.

The intersection between cognitive empathy deficits and peer group dynamics, most evident at State High School 3, introduces a collective dimension to the empathy literature that has received limited attention in prior studies. When perspective-taking failures are not merely individual but are group-sanctioned, with the group collectively failing to acknowledge or respond to the victim's distress, the inhibitory power of cognitive empathy is neutralized at both the individual and collective level (Vorauer & Petsnik, 2023). This creates a particularly resistant form of bullying that cannot be adequately addressed through individual-level interventions alone; it requires group-level norm restructuring strategies.

The finding that students with higher levels of cognitive empathy served as informal bystander protectors in both schools is an underexplored but potentially high-leverage observation. In several documented incidents

during field observation, students who demonstrated perspective-taking ability intervened verbally or physically to interrupt bullying episodes. These organic bystander interventions were significantly more effective in the short term than formal teacher interventions, likely because they carried peer credibility and required no escalation through formal channels. This observation supports the growing evidence base for bystander-focused anti-bullying programs that seek to cultivate the perspective-taking capacity of the broader student body, rather than focusing exclusively on perpetrators or victims.

Taken together, these findings position cognitive empathy development, specifically perspective-taking training, as a potentially high-yield component of school-based bullying prevention programs in the Indonesian context. The evidence from this study suggests that such training should be integrated within the regular guidance and counseling curriculum, delivered through active, experiential methods rather than didactic instruction, and supported by a school climate that models and reinforces empathic engagement across teacher-student and peer interactions.

Peer Group Dynamics: Contextualizing the Theory of Planned Behavior

The contextual confirmation of TPB's subjective norm component provided by Theme 3 invites a theoretically productive re-examination of how this component operates in a collectivist, high-context cultural setting. Ajzen's original formulation of subjective norms assumed a relatively individualistic actor who weighs perceived social expectations against personal attitudes. However, the participant narratives from this study suggest that for adolescents embedded in Indonesia's collectivist social fabric, the subjective norm is not merely one factor among several; it is often the primary determinant of

behavioral intention, capable of overriding both negative personal attitudes toward bullying and genuine moral misgivings.

The data from this study also highlight an important protective factor that operates through the same peer-group dynamics that enable

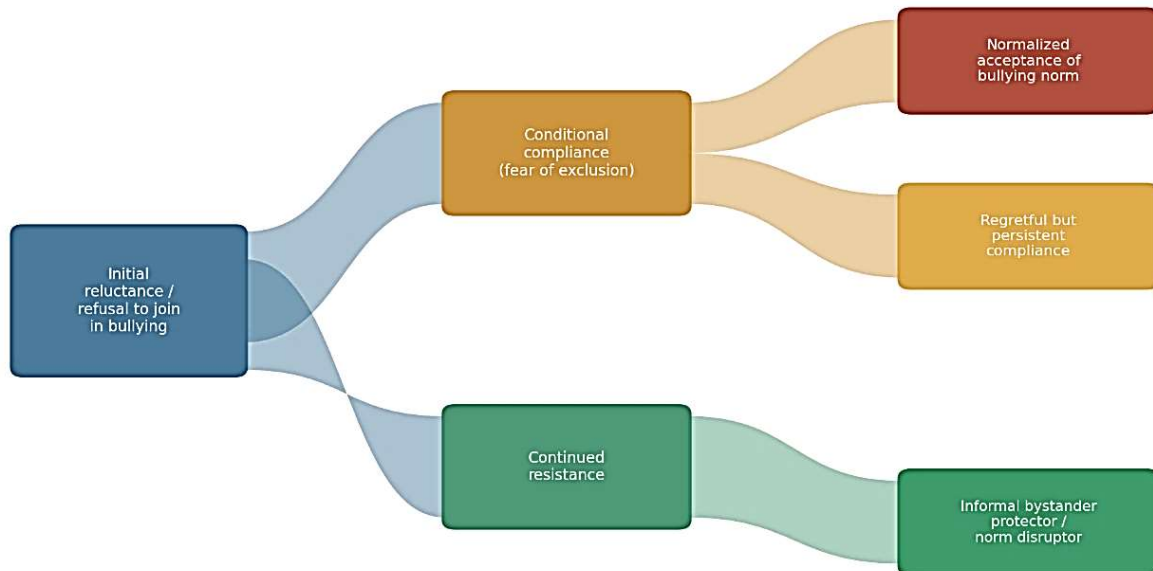


Figure 2. Conceptual flow of student conformity to bullying-tolerant peer norms over repeated exposure

bullying: the presence of empathically skilled peers as informal norm-disruptors. In both schools, participants described instances in which a single student's willingness to publicly name bullying behavior as wrong or to express solidarity with the victim was sufficient to interrupt an episode and shift the group's behavioral orientation. This observation is consistent with the emerging evidence base on bystander intervention programs. It suggests that cultivating empathic "norm entrepreneurs" within student peer groups may represent a high-leverage, culturally congruent strategy for shifting the subjective norms that currently facilitate bullying in Indonesian high school environments.

However, Indonesia's collectivist cultural context adds a dimension not fully captured in the TPB model, which was developed within a more individualistic Western context. In a collectivist culture, group cohesion and the fear of being ostracized carry far greater psychological weight, making the peer group's subjective norms

a dominant factor in shaping adolescent behavior, including bullying intentions (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009).

This finding has profound implications for intervention design. Programs that focus exclusively on changing individual attitudes (anti-bullying awareness campaigns) may be systematically ineffective in collectivist school environments, not because students do not understand that bullying is wrong, but because understanding that it is wrong provides insufficient protection against the social pressure to participate. Effective interventions in this cultural context must target the subjective norm directly, either by restructuring peer-group norms through positive leadership development programs or by creating formal social structures (monitored peer support groups) that provide students with alternative sources of social belonging independent of bullying-tolerant norms.

The role of informal social hierarchies in creating and maintaining bullying-permissive

norms, particularly documented at State High School 3, suggests that school-based interventions must also address the structural conditions that enable these hierarchies to form and persist. The guidance counselor's observation that "informal leaders" set the behavioral tone for student cohorts implies that targeted engagement with high-status students as potential agents of positive norm change may be a more efficient intervention strategy than broad-based campaigns directed at the entire student body.

The parallel with Juli et al.'s findings regarding peer pressure as a critical predictor of bullying victimization among Indonesian junior high school students is noteworthy (Juli et al., 2025). The consistency of this finding across two independent qualitative and quantitative studies, spanning both junior and senior high school levels, and conducted in different Indonesian regional contexts, significantly strengthens the evidential base for peer group dynamics as a structurally important variable in Indonesian bullying research. This convergent evidence points toward the need for a systematic, national-level approach to peer relationship quality as a foundational component of school bullying prevention in Indonesia.

Cross-Case Comparison: State High School 1 *vis-à-vis* State High School 3 Palopo City

The cross-case comparison between State High School 1 and State High School 3 yields several theoretically and practically significant insights that transcend the findings of any single theme. First, it demonstrates that the pathway from psychological vulnerability to bullying intention is not uniform; it is shaped by the interaction between individual-level risk factors and school-level contextual variables. At State High School 1, the dominant pathway runs through individual emotional dysregulation and maladaptive coping, potentiated by high academic pressure and a culture of emotional suppression. At State High School 3, the dominant pathway

runs through conformity to peer-group norms, reinforced by a rigid informal social hierarchy and weaker formal norm enforcement.

The practical implication of this cross-case analysis for school administrators and policymakers is clear: effective bullying prevention in Indonesia requires a tiered, ecologically informed intervention model. The first tier should address the development of universal socio-emotional competencies (emotion regulation and cognitive empathy) for all students. The second tier should provide targeted support for schools with identified specific risk profiles, whether rooted in individual maladaptive coping (as at State High School 1) or in group norm dynamics (as at State High School 3). The third tier should ensure that responsive, trauma-informed individual support is available for students identified as high risk. This tiered approach, grounded in the empirical findings of the present study, offers a theoretically coherent and contextually appropriate framework for reducing the incidence and severity of bullying in Indonesian high schools.

Although there are differences in the dominant mechanisms, both schools exhibit similar patterns regarding teacher-student perception gaps and the limitations of existing preventive programs. These findings suggest that while each school requires customized intervention strategies, there are fundamental needs that transcend specific contexts.

This contextual differentiation has a clear implication for intervention policy, a one-size-fits-all anti-bullying program is unlikely to be optimally effective when applied uniformly across schools with structurally different bullying ecologies (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009). The evidence from this study argues for a diagnostic phase in any school-based anti-bullying initiative, one that maps the specific risk pathways operative in each school before determining the most appropriate combination of intervention components. This diagnostic

approach would require schools and policymakers to invest in formative assessment capacity, potentially drawing on the qualitative methods employed in this study.

A second cross-case insight concerns the teacher-student perception gap, which was present in both schools despite their different bullying ecologies. The universality of this gap across both case contexts, combined with its consistency with the UNICEF global data cited in the Introduction, suggests that this gap is not an artifact of specific school conditions but a systemic feature of school-based bullying governance more broadly (UNICEF, 2020). The mechanisms underlying this gap, including students' fear of retaliation following reporting, the procedural focus of existing resolution processes, and the limited time and training available to teachers for proactive monitoring, are all amenable to targeted intervention.

The comparison also reveals a shared deficit in preventive infrastructure: neither school had a systematic, proactive program to develop students' socio-emotional competencies (emotion regulation and empathy) as foundational psychological assets. Both relied almost exclusively on reactive, punitive, or administrative responses to bullying incidents. This shared deficit, observed in two schools that otherwise differ substantially in their social dynamics, suggests that the absence of preventive socio-emotional programming is likely to be a widespread issue across Indonesian high schools, with implications for national educational policy.

Finally, the cross-case analysis reveals that the co-occurrence of emotional dysregulation and cognitive empathy deficits, identified as separate themes in the thematic analysis, tends to produce more severe and persistent bullying patterns than either factor in isolation. When a student experiences both high emotional reactivity and low perspective-taking capacity, the absence of both a regulatory brake and a moral brake creates

conditions for recurrent, escalating aggression. This synergistic risk interaction argues for integrated, dual-focus interventions that simultaneously target both emotion regulation and empathy development, rather than treating these as separate program components. Such integrated approaches represent the most theoretically coherent and practically promising direction for future evidence-based anti-bullying program development in Indonesia.

■ CONCLUSION

This study examined the roles of emotion regulation and cognitive empathy in the formation of bullying intentions among students at State High School 1 and State High School 3 in Palopo City through a qualitative multiple-case study approach. The analysis yielded five principal themes; (1) emotional dysregulation, particularly failure in cognitive reappraisal, as the primary trigger of bullying intentions, (2) deficits in cognitive empathy, especially low perspective-taking, as an enabler of moral disengagement, (3) peer pressure as an accelerator of bullying intentions operating through subjective norms, (4) teacher-student perception gaps that create a false sense of safety for the continuation of bullying, and (5) the dominance of maladaptive coping strategies that create a persistent cycle of aggression. These research findings confirm that the phenomenon of bullying in schools is a multidimensional and deeply contextual issue that cannot be addressed solely through punitive or administrative approaches. A holistic, evidence-based approach is needed, one that is sensitive to the local socio-cultural context, particularly one that integrates the development of socio-emotional competencies as the core of a healthy educational ecosystem. By understanding the psychological mechanisms and contextual dynamics underlying bullying intentions, schools can design more precise preventive strategies, not merely responding to bullying after it occurs, but

proactively building students' capacity for emotional regulation and cognitive empathy as psychological immunity against aggression.

■ LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. *First*, as a case study limited to two schools in Palopo city, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to a broader population. The transferability of the findings depends on the similarity of the context to other research settings. *Second*, although various efforts were made to build rapport and trust with participants, self-reported data from interviews still potentially contain social desirability bias, the tendency for participants to provide answers considered "socially correct". *Third*, the limited data collection period may not have captured the full range of social dynamics occurring in schools throughout the year. Future research could employ a mixed-methods approach to combine the qualitative depth of this study with the generalizability of quantitative methods, thereby yielding a more comprehensive understanding. In addition, the development and evaluation of intervention programs based on these research findings, particularly programs that integrate cognitive reappraisal and perspective-taking training, should be a priority for future research.

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