Building Character to Combat Bullying: Teachers' Initiatives in Early Childhood Education

Shafira Nurulita Salehuddin[1*], M. Ishaq[2], Eny Nur Aisyah[3]

[1,2,3] Universitas Negeri Malang

* e-mail: shafira.nurulita.2401548@students.um.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to explore teachers' efforts in building character to overcome bullying behavior in early childhood education. The focus of this study is the strategy for implementing effective character education. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. Data collection through observation and interviews. Data analysis is carried out through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and verification. The results of the study show that teachers' efforts are integrating character education through problem-based learning, projects and direct practice, creating school welfare, identifying bullying, and involving parents in supporting children's character formation. This strategy shows effectiveness in building empathy, concern, and positive behavior in early childhood. The implication of this study is that a holistic approach is needed involving teachers, parents, and the school environment. These findings can be a reference for the development of more inclusive and contextual character education policies for children.

Keywords: *Bullying; Character Building; Early Childhood Education; Teacher Efforts.*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is part of the current concern and has become a crucial issue in the educational environment (Gómez-Galán et al., 2021; Salmivalli et al., 2021). The existence of a policy on the importance of character formation from an early age is not part of the answer in overcoming this problem. In theory, education is an inclusive learning environment in shaping character and preventing deviant behaviors in students (Basic et al., 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2021). However, the facts on the ground show that there are still many cases or deviant behaviors that occur, both verbal and non-verbal (Blegur et al., 2023; Sarkiah, 2023). One of them is because it is affected by content that presents inappropriate things that are presented on various channels that can be enjoyed by various parties, especially children. Such content is such as jokes that insult someone's physique, bullying at school, and so on (Kapitanoff & Pandey, 2024; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021). In addition, there are limitations in instilling theory in practice, such as teacher training, lack of parental involvement, and children's awareness of bullying (Gaffney et al., 2021; Morales-Alexander, 2021). The existence of this gap requires a systematic approach to integrate theory and practice as an effort to instill children's character values from an early age to be applied effectively.

Research on character education in stimulating children's behavior is often applied. Study by Nastiti (2022) and Fitri & Na'imah (2020) Character education strategies need to be implemented in daily learning activities, habituation, and parental involvement. Other research by Elvira et al., (2024) stated that efforts to prevent bullying need to be carried out through socialization and coaching programs as an effort to increase the understanding and involvement of all parties in overcoming bullying. Research results by Danuwara & Maghribi (2024) The integration of character education can be through relative reasoning through student involvement, using learning with critical thinking skills to reduce the possibility of conflict in students. The research is strengthened by the results of the research Noboru et al., (2021) that the implementation of school regulations has a positive impact on improving the morale of adolescents in bullying cases which needs to be applied consistently to shape positive behavior of students and form a safe environment. The research focuses on the primary and secondary education levels, while research at the early childhood education level is still limited. The existence of this study seeks to fill the gap by focusing on the integration of character education through teacher strategies in combating bullying behavior.

The latest in this study focuses on a holistic approach in preventing bullying cases at the early childhood education level that can be implemented by teachers. This study will examine teachers' efforts in preventing bullying cases through such as through an educational approach that is integrated into the curriculum, school wellbieng management, and the involvement of parents in providing character education. In addition, this research also offers practical methods that can be applied by teachers or parents in teaching positive values as an effort to form children's character. The use of innovative models and strategies in creating an anti-bullying culture from an early age is the latest of this research from previous research.

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' efforts in initiating and implementing character building strategies in preventing bullying in early childhood. This research will also explore elements that can support character development in the fight against bullying. Building character is one of the urgency in preventing cases of bullying in children through teacher initiation based on a hoistic approach (Kaur & Saini, 2023; Pearce et al., 2024). The existence of character education is an effort to teach positive values in forming the foundation of children's behavior (Komariah & Nihayah, 2023; Suri & Chandra, 2021). However, conducting detection and intervention can also allow teachers to address bullying behavior in the school environment (Colvin et al., 1998; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Thus, this research is expected to provide practical and comprehensive recommendations to create an anti-bullying childhood education environment.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research design with a descriptive type of research. This qualitative research is used to deeply understand teachers' initiatives in building character to overcome bullying at the early childhood education level. The use of this research design is used to provide a comprehensive description of social phenomena and complex educational practices in educational institutions. The research was conducted at RA Ar-Rahman, Gondanglegi District, Malang Regency. This institution was chosen because it has implemented a holistic approach in integrating character education such as in the curriculum and supporting school well-being. RA Ar-Rahman is also considered representative as a case study that reflects good practices in dealing with bullying behavior in early childhood.

The source of information in this study is through teachers and school principals. Data were collected through direct observation as well as semi-structured interviews. Data analysis is carried out through three stages, namely condensation, data presentation, and verification to draw conclusions (Sugiyono, 2022). The analysis method includes content analysis of the narrative from interviews and discussions, as well as interpretation analysis to explore the deep meaning of the research findings. This study provides comprehensive insight into the strategies applied by RA Ar-Rahman in building children's character in preventing cases of child bullying.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Finding

Integrating Character Education in the Curriculum

The integration of character education in RA AR-RAHMAN, Gondanggi District, Malang Regency is packaged through a curriculum. The curriculum developed at this institution includes teachers' efforts in developing the values of empathy and concern for others through formal or non-formal learning. This character education is integrated through learning planning that combines values in the formation of positive attitudes and behaviors in early childhood such as problem-based learning and projects about natural disasters, cultural diversity, and themes that contain moral values. The selection of learning topics at this institution is also related to real life as an effort to help children understand and practice positive behaviors in social interactions in their environment. This is in line with the results of an interview by the principal of RA AR-Rohman who said that,

> "The curriculum that we integrate is by raising problem-based learning and projects to build children's problem solving to an existing problem. Through this method, it will make children actively involved in learning and can build the concept of empathy and sympathy for the problems given. We also often reflect on learning with children through discussions about what can be imitated or the moral message of the issues that have been raised (W_KS, 2024)".

> This was reinforced by Nita as a class teacher who stated, "we try to integrate the value of caring in every learning activity in the classroom or in the school environment such as agreeing on rules with children, organizing picket schedules, and appreciating small achievements made by children (W_N, 2024)".

Both statements show that the institution's commitment to shaping children's character can be integrated through existing learning and habits. This is one of the important efforts in supporting the formation of positive character that can be applied by teachers in the school environment. Institutional commitment to make character education an integral part of learning.

In line with the results of the observations carried out, it shows that all stakeholders have the same commitment in integrating the value of empathy and care through several programs in schools. This can be seen in the learning process that teachers often do role playing learning which is raised through stories either through stories or visual media by raising problem-based stories. After that, the children were asked to play what kind of role had been presented from the story. This encourages that the integration carried out by institutions in supporting character values is not only taught in the form of theory, but also the direct involvement of children in its application.

Based on the results of the interviews and observations, a common thread can be drawn that the integration of empathy and caring values carried out by RA AR-Rahman is presented through various creative methods. The application of moral stories and role playing activities allows children not only to understand positive values, but also to be applied in everyday contexts. The integration of the curriculum implemented in formal and non-formal learning shows the commitment of the institution in shaping children's character with real activities.

Overall, the integration of character education is implemented through two main approaches, namely problem-based and project-based learning, as well as hands-on practical activities in shaping children's care. This pattern shows that there is a balance between theory and practice presented where children not only learn to understand the intentions of the character but also encourage them to implement it in daily life. This approach reflects a holistic strategy by adapting to the needs of early childhood.

Facilitating a Safe and Supportive Environment (School Wellbeing)

School well-being is one of RA AR-Rahmad's efforts in creating a safe, comfortable, and supportive educational atmosphere in developing students' potential optimally. In this context, the implementation environment carried out in supporting school well-being includes anti-bullying policies, inclusive atmospheres, and mutual respect among others. A supportive environment is not only related to the physical aspect, but also the encouragement to stimulate the social-emotional aspect to help children feel accepted and valued in their environment.

> Based on the results of the interview with Mita, a teacher at RA AR-Rahman explained that, "We emphasize the importance of mutual respect between all school residents and always ensure that there are no acts of violence in this school. Rules in the school environment are part of reducing the negative actions given. However, we also provide space for all parties to agree on new rules that are not listed in the school rules that have been set (W_M, 2024)."

> This statement is in line with the opinion of Yaya, as a teacher of class B who explained that, "The habit we do to create a safe environment in learning is to agree on rules with students before starting learning. This is to provide opportunities for children to express their opinions, as well as learn to be responsible for decisions that have been previously determined to be fulfilled together. Cooperation and discussion are our keys to creating an inclusive atmosphere (W_Y, 2024)".

The results of the interviews with the two informants showed that the strategies carried out by teachers in creating school well-being in supporting children's welfare not only paid attention to physical aspects, but also encouraged to stimulate children's social-emotional aspects. This is in line with the results of the observation made by the researcher that the learning environment is well conceptualized to support interaction with each other so that it looks comfortable and safe for children to learn. The classroom and school environment is neatly conceptualized which can provide free movement space for children and can participate in every activity. The presence of teachers in this learning is not only as a speaker, but as a facilitator in supporting learning by prioritizing the principle of mutual respect. This is evidenced by the active involvement of children to always cooperate and help each other, as well as the lack of actions that lead to bullying in the classroom. This condition not only supports the welfare of children in learning, but also encourages the meaning of what has been learned. Overall, the conditions and atmosphere of the learning environment at RA AR-Rahman look positive, safe, and can support children's development holistically.

Based on the results of the interviews and observations, a common thread can be drawn that this institution has successfully managed and implemented school well-being for early childhood. Efforts made to reduce bullying cases and create a safe environment for children seem to be successful by showing that children feel safe, accepted, and valued in the process of interaction. Policies that are enacted in reducing bullying need to be instilled from an early age, so that the environment can also support aspects of children's development holistically. In addition, teachers' efforts to fulfill children's development in the school environment are the key to providing welfare to children in academic and non-academic aspects.

The initiation that has been carried out by RA AR-Rahman in creating school well-being is integrated through policies and the creation of an inclusive and supportive atmosphere. Interaction between others is the key to creating a prosperous learning environment. The comfort that children feel in interacting is an indication of reducing cases of bullying in the school environment, because children will feel valued and accepted by each other. Based on the available data, overall this institution has shown that a safe environment can support can create a school that is conducive to learning and developing children's character.

Identifying and Addressing Bullying Behavior

Creating a safe and comfortable environment is not one of the solutions in reducing bullying cases in the school environment. However, identification is also needed as an effort to prevent bullying cases. This has also been applied in RA AR-Rahman that the identification of this case as a way to take steps to overcome and prevent cases of bullying in the school environment. Bullying is not only in the physical aspect, but also related to sexual and social bullying that harms other parties. The identification carried out by this institution is by observing the interaction between students, becoming an informant for children, and being a good listener to what children complain about. Handling the problem of bullying in children requires the right approach as a teacher, such as giving equal attention to each child, applying positive affirmations of each child's achievements, and being a guide to create social relationships that are good for each child.

Based on the results of the interview with the principal, it was found that "The lack of bullying cases that occur in this institution does not mean that we do not need to take action. However, we still initiate several efforts to continue to create a learning environment without bullying. Yes, because we will not know what the conditions will be in the future, so we as stakeholders need to monitor in identifying cases in learning (W_KS, 2024)".

In line with what Yaya, as a class teacher, said that "We often have small conversations with children. We also monitor their interactions frequently. Physical bullying is rarely seen in this environment, perhaps more verbal bullying that occurs outside of the child's control. Therefore, we continue to strive to create positive interactions, in addition to avoiding unwanted bullying by various parties in this school environment, as well as providing understanding with the meaning of every sentence spoken (W_Y,2024)".

The results of interviews with the two informants proved that the identification and handling of child bullying was carried out attentively which focused on interaction and providing in-depth understanding. This is supported by the results of observations that show that RA AR-Rahman teachers intervene to several children who are indicated to be bullying either verbally or physically. Teachers are also often seen to pay special attention through interaction with conversations – conversations that invite children to have an opinion. During the conversation, the teacher also gives advice and questions that do not corner the child so that the child has the opportunity to express his feelings in a positive way.

The results of these interviews and observations show that efforts are made to prevent bullying by identifying and handling behavior with a preventive approach. Teachers are always active in supervising children's interactions and being transmitters to create a good social environment. The efforts made focus on providing understanding and action through good communication. This approach is an effort to ensure that children can learn from mistakes, improve behavior, and understand the consequences of actions that have been taken. This shows that RA AR-Rahman does not focus on academic improvement, but also the formation of positive character in its students.

Overall, RA AR-Rahman initiated bullying by identifying and handling bullying behavior. This is applied through international observation of child interactions to identify the potential for bullying. In addition, in handling this case, it is carried out through a dialogical approach so that it does not corner the child's mistakes, but provides an opportunity for the child to express his feelings. This can create a safe, healthy, and empathetic environment. Communication is the main key in preventing cases of bullying at the early childhood level.

Involving Parents in the Educational Process

Building partnerships with the social environment is an effort to support the realization of educational goals. This has been applied in RA AR-Rahman that in supporting children's development, especially in character formation and reducing bullying behavior, it is carried out by

involving parents in the educational process. This involvement is carried out in various ways such as regular meetings once a month, daily internal communication, parental participation in school programs, and collaboration in the application of positive character values in the family environment. This is an effort that the formation of children's character is not only the teacher's task, but also needs to be stimulated in the child's social environment.

> This was stated by Mita, as a class teacher who stated that, "This institution is consistent in inviting parents in collaboration to support children's development, especially in character building. We as classroom teachers also consistently communicate with parents on children's development and invite parents to teach the value of empathy and mutual respect in the home environment (W_M, 2024)".

> The Principal emphasized that, "The implementation of activities in encouraging children's potential certainly needs to be supported by various parties, especially parents. This is an effort to harmonize the stimulation provided between school and at home so that inequality does not occur. We always create a school program that involves parents and children to provide the right stimulation in this golden age of children (W_KS, 2024)".

Based on the interview, it can be concluded that the institution is committed to supporting children's development through social environmental support, especially parents. This is in line with the observation results that show that when parents meet with teachers, many parents are present and active to discuss their child's development. This involvement shows that the stimulation provided in educational institutions and at home is synchronized so that it can strengthen the goal of building children's character from an early age.

The results of interviews and observations show that character formation requires harmony in the provision of stimulation, with collaboration with parents providing a positive impact in providing appropriate stimulation. Good cooperation between parents and educational institutions is able to strengthen the character of children. The existence of consistent communication allows supporting children's character values to be applied at school or at home. This can create a consistent and holistic environment in supporting children's development.

Overall, the institution's efforts provide strong synergy by involving parents in providing the right stimulation and habituation for children. The involvement of parents in the educational process not only has an impact on academic development, but also the formation of children's character through positive values applied on both sides. This condition allows success in the formation of children's positive character from an early age and reduces cases of bullying in early childhood education institutions.

Discussion

The integration of character education implemented in RA AR-Rahman through problem-based and project-based learning, as well as hands-on application that reflects this strategy uses a holistic and relevant approach to early childhood education. This is in line with the results of research by Ghosheh Wahbeh et al., (2021) which states that project-based learning has a positive impact in helping children connect between theory and practice in real experience. Meanwhile, the results of the study Suri & Chandra (2021) highlighting that character education needs to be instilled from an early age by implementing it in practice. The results of the study are in accordance with this study that the implementation of education at RA AR-Rahman emphasizes a holistic approach that is tailored to local needs such as integrating religious and cultural values. This research has implications for effective strategies to build children's character holistically, but the form of success depends on the consistency of teachers in its implementation.

The management of school well-being as an effort to create an anti-bullying environment applied at RA AR-Rahman supports the theory of Blewitt et al., (2021) which states that the environment around the child will affect the child's social-emotional development. However, the

efforts implemented at this institution focus on creating school well-being through interpersonal relationships as unique. This has implications for the inclusivity function which can reduce the potential for bullying and support student well-being. This is related to good interpersonal can increase a sense of security, while the lack of interaction will have an impact on social isolation or conflict between children (Della Longa et al., 2022; Ye et al., 2021).

Creating an effective learning environment also requires identification through a dialogical approach as a form of reducing and dealing with bullying in the school environment. This is in line with research by Aulia et al., (2024) who emphasized that communication is the key to strengthening positive behavior. However, this study found a new study that giving space to children to express their feelings is also important. This effort will have implications for the environment so that it can change negative behavior into a positive response in the next behavior. Functionally, efforts with this approach can create a sense of trust between teachers and students.

Strengthening the efforts that have been made by the school in combating bullying cases also requires the involvement of parents. This is in line with the view Karimov (2021) that collaboration between institutions and the social environment, especially the family, will have an impact on the formation of children's character. The positive implication of parental involvement makes the stimulation balanced between at home and at school, so that the formation of character values can be sustainable (Kong & Wang, 2021; Paul et al., 2022). But on the other hand, the lack of parental involvement in child development will weaken character building support due to the inconsistency of the application of values in children's daily lives.

CONCLUSION

This research emphasizes the importance of character education in early childhood through a holistic approach, problem-based and project-based learning, and role models to reduce bullying. This approach helps children understand and apply character values in daily life. School well-being and dialogical approaches are also effective in dealing with bullying, while parental involvement strengthens character education. This study provides a new perspective on the practical implementation of character education through dialogical methods as well as problem-based and project-based learning. However, this research is limited to one educational institution. Further research is expected to provide a more inclusive and comprehensive picture.

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