Journal of Integrated Elementary Education
ISSN 2776-1657 (online) 2828-223X (printed)
Volume 5, Number 2, April-September 2025, Page 554-568
Website: https://journal.walisongo.ac.id/index.php/jieed

Social Emotional Character of Bullying Perpetrators in Elementary School with Varying Levels of Aggression

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DOI:
https://doi.org/10.21580/jieed.v5i2.28105

Keywords:
social character, emotional development, bullying behavior, elementary education, aggression

Publisher:
Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, in collaboration with the Association of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Teacher Education Lecturers, Indonesia

Received: 25 July 2025,
Revised: 22 August 2025,
Accepted: 28 August 2025,
Published: 20 Sept 2025.

Abstract

Elementary school bullying is still a widespread and problematic phenomenon that negatively affects both the bully and the victim. The purpose of this study is to explore the social and emotional character of bullying perpetrators within an elementary school context as a mechanism for identifying intervention strategies that are both responsive and specific. This research utilized a descriptive qualitative method with a case study involving six male students in grade 5 from Public Elementary School 1 Sowan Lor who are classified as bullying perpetrators. Data were gathered through the use of in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and pertinent documentation, and analyzed following Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Findings of this study suggest that two students engaged in high-intensity bullying characterized by emotionally dysregulated, frequently aggressive verbal and physical acts of bullying targeted towards peers who were interpreted to be attention-seeking. The other four students demonstrated moderate levels of bullying–their behaviour influenced by peer relations and provocation, but with a greater degree of emotional control most of the time. These findings underscore the salience of emotional instability, low empathy, and peer influence for bullying behavior. This emphasizes the need to introduce early character-based educational incentives that build learners' emotional intelligence, empathy, and positive social connectedness, ensuring all young pupils experience a school climate where they feel safe and supported.

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying in elementary school is an urgent, complex problem that has adverse effects on victims and perpetrators (Ye et al., 2023). Although most research has focused on the psychological effects of the victim, little is known about the behavior and emotional development of perpetrators. Bullying: Bullying is rampant in the level of primary education in Indonesia, where there have been 861 cases reported involving bullying on behalf of educational institutions by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) from January to August 2023 (Rahmat, et al., 2023). This alarming figure highlights the larger systemic problem inherent in the social fabric of schools. Even though moral education is designed to reduce bullying behavior through value inculcation, the fact that bullying is still revealed suggests a misalignment between educators' intentions to impart moral values and students' real-life actions (Barsihanor et al., 2024).

Bullying aggressors have been generalized to be emotionally dysregulated, having low empathy and risk for violent behavior perpetuation within peer groups or dysfunctional family settings, as well as media violence exposure (Ahmad et al., 202; Delvati & Lega, 2025). These children are often emotionally immature learners who have difficulty with basic socio-emotional competencies, such as empathy, impulse control, and perspective-taking (Afni et al., 2024; Yani et al., 2023). As a result, their social interactions are often high in dominance and aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994), directing relatively high levels of hostility towards peers who are not as powerful or different from them, or students with special needs and those with social deficits (Mohan & Bakar, 2021). This phenomenon mirrors a broader developmental problem, the resolution of which demands more focused educational intervention.

Understanding the character traits of perpetrators involved in sexual harassment and cyberbullying is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention programs aimed at fostering an inclusive and positive school climate (Bäker et al., 2023; Thornberg et al., 2025). Strategies such as promoting emotional intelligence, encouraging peer support, and implementing character education show promise in reducing aggressive behaviors and enhancing prosocial interactions among students (Jemperu & Trihastuti, 2023; Julia et al., 2022). In addition, the ability to manage one's own emotions and relationships with others is highly predictive of long-term adjustment in school and psychological functioning (Bigelow et al., 2025). Therefore, studies that reveal some of the intrapersonal dynamics of those who engage in bullying can provide more effective and evidence-based initiatives to prevent bullying.

Although the literature on school bullying is considerable, studies have mainly focused on victims and much less on the psychosocial profiles of perpetrators (Bettencourt et al., 2023; Gkatsa, 2024). In addition, studies on bullying have

primarily investigated the short-term consequences of bullying, or the prevalence of distinct expressions of bullying (Burger & Bachmann, 2021), but have not sufficiently explored its emotional, cognitive, and relational features in perpetrators, especially among children of elementary school age. In addition, little differentiation is being made between the different levels of bullying intensity and how such differences relate to socio-emotional development among perpetrators (Azzahra & Haq, 2019). This gap leaves unexplored the ways in which emotional regulation, empathy, and peer affiliation may influence an array of aggressive behaviors among young children.

Additionally, although many studies have been conducted on bullying cases (Noya et al., 2024; Nurhidayah et al., 2021), few have qualitatively analyzed these dynamics from perpetrators' perspectives. Many intervention models have been developed on the basis of assumed motivations and generic behavioral repertoires, and hence have lacked subtle contextual aspects like emotion triggers, group identity work, or moral reasoning in young offender populations (Bäker et al., 2023; Carmona-Rojas et al., 2023). Research that captures the intricate interpersonal and emotional landscapes of bullying among bullies in everyday school life is urgently needed (Fitriningdias et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by analyzing the social and emotional profiles of bullies in a sample of elementary school children divided into low and high levels of aggression. Using an in-depth case study methodology, this study directly investigated the experiences and motives of identified perpetrators themselves to provide a nuanced understanding of the cognitive-affective and situational factors that perpetuate bullying. The present study helps bridge the gap in our understanding of these differences and offers an empirical basis for developing more targeted and context-specific health-enhancing interventions (Bäker et al., 2023; Gkatsa, 2024).

Theoretically, this study was based on socio-emotional development theory, which suggests that children’s behavior is influenced by their emotional processing, impulse control, and maintaining positive social relations (Anggraeni et al., 2024). Emotional competence, or emotion-related abilities (e.g., empathy, self-regulation), is a core predictor of prosocial behavior and social adaptation. When challenged by provoking situations or peer pressure, and when caught in susceptible emotional conditions, students who have developed a low level of awareness will be more likely to exhibit maladaptive behaviors such as bullying (Yani et al., 2023).

Moreover, this study is informed by an ecological systems theory frame that contextualizes student conduct within nested levels of influence, from immediate personal/social transactions to more enveloping organizational and cultural contexts. From this standpoint, bullying behavior does not simply result from an individual deficit, but as a consequence of group processes, school culture, and the

presence or absence of adult guidance and correction (Almizri et al., 2022). By treating bullying as a function of these interfacing forces, this study aims to investigate the personal attributes and social formations that foster acts of violence in school environments.

Therefore, the overarching aim of this research is to investigate the social and emotional characteristics of primary school pupil bullies, paying particular attention to the severity and situation of such actions. Implications: The investigation presented here makes an important contribution to knowledge by offering a detailed qualitative exposé of bullying perpetrators and hence informing targeted character education and counseling intervention. Finally, the results may contribute to a safer and more empathetic school climate for students through practices from educators, counselors, and policymakers targeting these underlying causes of aggressive behavior among students.

METHODS

The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to further examine the social and emotional nature of elementary school students who bully (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study design was chosen because it allows for a deep understanding of social occurrences in real-life settings (Creswell, 2008). The study was conducted in Public Elementary School 1 Sowan Lor, Jepara, Indonesia. The participants included six male, 11-year-old fifth graders whom their teachers identified as presenting bullying behavior. Participants were purposively selected on the basis of identified and corroborated behavioral signs from preliminary interviews. Ethical procedures were strictly followed. The study received official approval from the school authority, and informed consent was obtained from the guardians of the participants. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of the study were assured to all participants.

Data were gathered through three measures: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews with class teachers and student participants probing into motivation/emotions; (2) non-participant observation of classroom activities utilizing observation sheets for recording bullying-related behavior; and (3) document review, including school records and photographs during fieldwork. To ensure the credibility of the data, triangulation and member checking were adopted in this study. Data examination was conducted using triangulation, which is the comparison of findings across interviews, observation, and documentation, to member checking, including verification of key interpretations with the class teacher (Miles et al., 2018).

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model framework of Miles and Huberman: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2018). Social-emotional profiles were identified and discussed in

relation to participants' level of behavioral activity, their social contact, and the regulation of emotions derived from bullying severity.

RESULTS

1. Emotional Dysregulation and High-Intensity Aggression

A key discovery of this study was the profile of emotional dysregulation evidenced by high-intensity bully identified students. Two students, RA and L, received a score higher than 68%on the bullying rate, indicating that they were often involved in severe aggressive behaviors. RA tolerates social stimulation with anger and hostility, as evidenced by verbal provocations or physical forces such as kicking and pulling other children's hoodies. The RA responded in an interview: "Sometimes I feel sorry, ma'am, because the person is seeking attention and then I am angry," indicating ambivalence in feeling and inadequacy of emotional control.

Similarly, Student L frequently engaged in verbal and physical bullying. He mocked classmates using derogatory names like "crybaby" or "slow," and carried out disruptive actions like pushing chairs and taping his friend's mouth, which he later justified as jokes. Both RA and L demonstrated some capacity for emotional awareness, recognizing their behavior as wrong and occasionally expressing remorse. However, they failed to consistently regulate their actions or change their conduct after the teacher reprimanded them. See Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Bullying Intensity and Emotional Response

Student Initials	Age	Bullying Score (%)	Intensity Level	Emotional Regulation Behavior
RA	11	76.6	High	Explosive anger, occasional guilt, no behavior change
L	11	68.0	High	Harsh speech, impulsivity, indifferent to correction

Observations indicated that these students experienced sudden emotional escalation, particularly when they perceived their peers as violating group norms or seeking excessive attention. These reactions are often intensified by peer reinforcement and a lack of immediate disciplinary consequences.



Figure 1. Physical Bullying in the Classroom

Figure 1 shows a real-time observation of a student, RA, engaging in physical bullying by grabbing a classmate's hoodie during a recess. The image illustrates the unprovoked nature of aggression and the absence of adult supervision at the time of the incident.

2. Peer Influence and Group Dynamics

All six participants in the study belonged to the same friendship group, suggesting that peer affiliation significantly influenced their engagement in bullying behaviors. The group operated in a way that normalized verbal and physical bullying, encouraging even less aggressive students to participate either directly or passively. Students such as Q and C were more often followers than initiators, but admitted to joining or supporting aggressive actions because of peer pressure.

Student C was observed to provoke others not to associate with a specific peer, indicating subtle social exclusion. In his interview, student Q explained, "The teacher did not stop me," implying that he did not perceive the behavior as seriously wrong in the absence of an adult intervention. These findings suggest that group cohesion and collective identity enable bullying to persist and spread.

Despite differences in intensity, all students mirrored the behaviors modeled by their dominant peers, such as RA and L. Their justification of their actions as "jokes" reveals an internalization of peer norms where aggression becomes socially acceptable. Even when students acknowledged feeling guilty, they rarely distanced themselves from their groups or challenged their norms. See Table 2.

Table 2. Peer Group Involvement in Bullying Behavior

Student	Role in Bullying Group	Type of Bullying Participation	Self-awareness of Actions
RA	Leader/initiator	Physical and verbal	Partial awareness, justified aggression
L	Co-initiator	Physical and verbal	Occasional remorse, indifferent to advice
B	Reactive member	Physical retaliation	Justified as self-defense
R	Occasional participant	Verbal mocking, mild physical	Some empathy, lacks focus
Q	Follower	Verbal imitation, low aggression	Easily influenced, shows avoidance
C	Passive instigator	Verbal/social exclusion	Conforming to group norms

Figure 2 presents the documentation of the in-depth interview session conducted with the fifth-grade teacher. The teacher discussed the frequency, types, and perceptions of bullying behavior observed in the classroom, emphasizing that most bullying was verbal and often misinterpreted as "*jokes*" by the students.



Figure 2. Interview with the Fifth Grade Teacher of Public Elementary School 1 Sowan Lor

3. Forms and Triggers of Verbal and Physical Bullying

Bullying behavior in SDN 1 Sowan Lor manifests in both verbal and physical forms. Verbal bullying was more frequent, including mocking, swearing, and derogatory name-calling, such as "stupid," "crybaby," or referring to peers' parents. Physical bullying, such as kicking, pushing, and grabbing, tended to occur during less supervised moments, especially during recess or when teachers temporarily left the classroom.

Student B primarily reacted physically when provoked by pinching or hitting. He said in the interview, "If I am harassed, I will retaliate," indicating that he believed aggression was acceptable in defense. Student R mocked peers when frustrated or bored, but he also called out others in his group to stop bullying, reflecting ambivalent empathy. In contrast, Q and C mostly echoed their peers' behaviors without fully owning their actions.

The primary trigger for bullying was annoyance with peers, who were perceived as attention-seeking. Students frequently referred to this justification when asked why they bullied others, suggesting that their tolerance for differences and emotional expressiveness was limited.

Table 3. Observed Forms of Bullying by Type and Trigger

Student	Verbal Bullying Examples	Physical Bullying Examples	Trigger
RA	"Attention seeker", mocking parents	Kicking, grabbing headscarves	Irritation at peer behavior
L	"Crybaby", swearing	Duct-taping, kicking chairs	Boredom, seeking group validation
B	Rare verbal	Pinching, retaliatory hitting	Reacts defensively
R	"Stupid", "dirty"	Light pushing, elbowing	Social frustration
Q	Mimicking group taunts	Rare direct action	Peer imitation
C	Social exclusion tactics	Passive contact only	Following group pressure

4. Emotional Recognition and Inconsistent Empathy

Among students with moderate bullying scores (B, R, Q, and C), there were signs of emotional self-awareness, but empathy and behavioral consistency were lacking. These students occasionally expressed guilt or remorse but continued their bullying involvement, particularly when supported by peers. For example, Student B acknowledged retaliation when annoyed and claimed to feel satisfied afterward. R admitted feeling bad at times and told friends to stop bullying, but failed to remove himself from the group's dynamics.

Student Q demonstrated some emotional control, such as isolating himself when angry, while Student C appeared capable of recognizing wrong actions when reprimanded but often followed group behavior, regardless. During classroom group activities, students showed limited engagement and minimal prosocial contributions, preferring silence or disengagement.

This pattern indicates underdeveloped emotional intelligence: the students recognized basic emotions but lacked the deeper regulation and empathy needed to sustain behavioral change.

Table 4. Emotional Recognition and Response in Moderate Bullies

Student	Emotional Triggers	Emotional Response	Empathy Level
B	Feeling harassed	Retaliation, self-soothing	Low, reactive
R	Teasing, criticism	Silence, mocking	Moderate, ambivalent
Q	Group pressure	Withdrawal avoids conflict	Moderate
C	Peer influence	Passive involvement	Low to moderate

5. Gender-Based Targeting of Victims

The final key finding was the gendered nature of the bullying observed in this study. Female students were targeted disproportionately, especially by the RA, L, and R. These students admitted to choosing girls as victims because they perceived them as "weaker" or more likely to cry. Repeated behaviors, such as grabbing headscarves, mocking crying girls, and excluding them from group activities, were observed and reported in the interviews.

According to the class teacher, "Most often children commit acts of bullying just mocking each other with the intention of joking, but there are also those who are ridiculed to the point of crying." Victims with learning difficulties or fewer social connections were also more frequently targeted. Students often cited annoyance as a justification, especially towards classmates who were more expressive or had special needs. This pattern suggests not only gender bias but also an underdeveloped capacity for tolerance and inclusion among perpetrators. Without intervention, such targeted risks reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and marginalize vulnerable students in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

1. Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study are consistent with those of recent studies showing that bullies demonstrate a strong relationship with underdeveloped emotional regulation and negative social functioning among perpetrators. Bullies are more likely to be using non-adaptive emotion regulation strategies like impulsivity and reactive aggression; they are chronically unsuccessful in developing healthy social relationships with their peers, and as such have difficulties trusting others (Baker & Hawn, 2022). This inability to regulate emotions is also aggravated by social isolation and lack of empathy, so that victims rarely observe long-term bullying behavior even though they may feel bad on occasion (Malin & Gumpel, 2023). Moreover, peer normative support of bullying and low levels of moral adjustment serve to maintain aggressive behavior at school (Carmona-Rojas et al., 2023).

The findings from this study suggest that social-emotional level skills, empathy, and emotion self-regulation are the targets of interventions in both bullies and bystanders, aiming at the healthiest supportive school environment (Gomes et al., 2024). In addition, this study suggests that fostering positive relationships among students and between students and teachers can enhance protective effects for the victim, as well as promote more prosocial defending behavior (Swit et al., 2023). However, emotional intelligence is not enough; a systematized approach that promotes empathy and the development of the capacity to manage emotions in an effective way can have a preventive effect on bullying behavior over time (He et al., 2023; Malin & Gumpel, 2023).

These behaviors are situated within the framework of socioemotional development theory, which emphasizes the role of emotional competence in shaping interpersonal relationships and prosocial behaviors (Anggraeni et al., 2024). The inability of RA and L to internalize feedback or sustain self-control under peer pressure reflects low levels of emotional maturity, as theorized in Goleman's emotional intelligence framework. While some bullies were able to articulate feelings of guilt or pity, their continued engagement in harmful behaviors suggests that emotional recognition had not yet been translated into empathetic action (Thornberg et al., 2025).

In terms of social dynamics, the study revealed that all six students operated within a tight peer group, where bullying behaviors were normalized and encouraged. This result is consistent with ecological systems theory, which suggests that peer groups and school culture shape student behaviors (Almizri et al., 2022). Group thinking, collective justification of aggression as a comedy, and a lack of adult intervention create a spiral in which bullying is both normal and socially acceptable. The result is a mingling of schizophrenic proportions; for instance, students find themselves "jesting" or "teasing" at each other with duct tape, but at the same time,

“joke” presentations have a harmful impact on young children (Butar & Karneli, 2022).

The peer group's influence also helps spread responsibility among members; students who participate in moderate bullying, such as Q and C, imitate the behavior of leading peers without feeling personally guilty or remorse between themselves, and such behaviors align with the findings of Noya et al. (2024) and Fitri Ningdias et al. (2023). Their conduct appears to be more influenced by group loyalty and the need for social acceptance, both factors that contribute to the continuation of violence.

Another key point made by this research is the gender-based targeting of its perpetrators. Of all the students, female pupils are most likely to be chosen as targets by their male classmates out of the feeling that they are emotionally more fragile and less capable of retaliation. This was in line with the findings of Asran (2021) and Mohan and Bakar (2021) that girls and children with learning or behavioral differences will face higher bullying rates. This reflects the fact that these kinds of behavior patterns carry deep gender discrimination, a lack of respect, or compassion regarding emotional things among peers.

Finally, although some students possessed a degree of emotional self-awareness and regret, their behavioral patterns were inconsistent. These findings resonate with Kusumardi et al. (2024), who argued that bullies need to mediate their actions and restitute through interventions. In addition, teachers should involve parents more closely when dealing with these students. The lack of ongoing empathy or accountability in this study indicates a gap in character formation that needs to be addressed by educators, particularly regarding emotional literacy and conflict-resolution skills.

2. Pedagogical and Policy Implications

The implications of this study's findings highlight the critical need to integrate emotional literacy and character education into early childhood education, particularly at the upper primary level. First, educators need to be educated in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks that explicitly guide students on how to recognize, express, and regulate emotions in a healthy way. These are the kinds of skills needed to nip bullying in the bud before it is solidified into a social norm.

Second, schools need to develop proactive peer culture programs that redefine group identities towards empathy, inclusion, and responsibility. Peer mentorship programs, in which older students or peers who have been trained, demonstrate positive interactions and intervene early in bullying situations, can interrupt the destructive group process (Julia et al., 2022). Promoting student-centered anti-bullying campaigns may help build students’ sense of moral agency and shared responsibility.

Third, specific policy actions are required to ensure ongoing and visible adult interventions. Teachers and school personnel should be educated to recognize early signs of social ostracism and verbal abuse, not just physical violence. It means specific and clear behavioral expectations that are restorative as opposed to punitive. For example, restitution techniques and structured reflection meetings may assist offenders to explore the consequences of their actions and identify prosocial options (Kusumardi et al., 2024).

Fourth, a special focus on the most marginal students, such as those with disabilities or psychosocial vulnerabilities, may be important. These students are singled out disproportionately, as this study makes clear, and they need tailored protection. School policy should require inclusive classroom practice, the development of peer support networks, and a differentiated curriculum that promotes participation and recognition.

Finally, policy interventions need to go beyond awareness campaigns and systemic reforms. Posters and anti-bullying slogans are symbolic, but they should be part of a broader institutional response: an active counseling department; regular conferences among teachers, parents, and students; and long-term monitoring to assess the school's atmosphere. In these circumstances, schools, families, and communities work together to model, teach, and support empathy.

3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is preliminary due to its small sample size and exclusive focus on one elementary school, indicating a lack of generalizability. Focusing only on male students at the one-grade level may miss gender-specific or age-related differences in participation in bullying. Moreover, the information was mainly based on conjoined self-report interviews and observations, and it could be contaminated to some extent by social desirability or observer bias.

Further studies could include comparative studies between multiple schools and regions to examine the general cultural and institutional influences on bullying. Longitudinal studies assessing temporal changes in these socio-emotional characteristics over time would provide further understanding of the effectiveness of intervention strategies. In addition, examining the voices of victims and teachers alongside those of perpetrators may enhance our comprehension of the school bullying ecosystem and provide more comprehensive avenues for its prevention.

CONCLUSION

Through an exploratory qualitative case study with six fifth-grade boys in a primary school in Indonesia, this study offers insight into the social–emotional health of aggressive children. Findings revealed that perpetrators' social and emotional correlates were closely related to bullying, particularly problems in emotional regulation, low empathy, and the strong effect of peer influence. In

addition, this study found a difference between high- and moderate-intensity bullies. High-intensity aggressive students, such as RA and L, also showed emotional dysregulation, expressing anger/hostility that they sometimes did not manage to contain, even if followed by feelings of guilt. However, medium bullies showed more control of their emotions but not enough empathy to adjust their behavior, even when encouraged by other children. The study also highlighted the importance of peer groups, which normalize bullying and excuse it as "joking," allowing the behavior to become pervasive. Moreover, victims were subject to attacks mainly regarding sex, and female students were traditionally seen to be "weak," which meant that the risk of being chosen as targets of sexual violence was higher.

The current study expands the existing literature by providing a rich, qualitative description of the intrapersonal and emotional dynamics associated with bullying perpetration from the perpetrators' standpoint, a phenomenon that has not yet been adequately explored within this context in elementary schools. These results have implications for the design of targeted interventions. It has implications for the importance of early character education, including emotional intelligence, empathy, and good social relationships. This indicates that schools need to make systemic changes, such as proactive programs shaping peer culture, consistent adult supervision, and targeted help for vulnerable students, so that everyone can operate in a safer and more inclusive learning environment.

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