

Silent Bullying and Character Education in Madrasahs: An Analysis of Psychological Violence in the Religious Sphere

Abdul Kodir Nurhasan^{1*}, Nurul Aini², Shahzadi Hina Sain³

¹ Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah InsanKamil Bogor, Indonesia

² Institut Agama Islam Negeri Takengon, Indonesia

³ Beaconhouse School System, Pakistan

Email : abdulqodir@stitinsankamil.ac.id

Abstract

The phenomenon of silent bullying in a religious-based educational environment such as madrassas shows complexities that have not been widely revealed in the academic literature. This research aims to explore how moral practices and religious discourse are used indirectly as a legitimacy tool for acts of social exclusion that are latent but sustainable. The main focus is directed to one case study, namely MA Darul Lughah in Probolinggo, as a representation of madrassas based on strong Islamic values. A qualitative approach with a case study method is used to explore the relational, symbolic, and institutional dynamics behind the forms of covert bullying. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and school documentation. The results show that teachers' moral authority, the use of normative religious language, and the pressure of behavioral homogenization have created an educational climate that subtly removes the expression of diversity. These findings reveal a shift in the meaning of character development into a form of social control that limits students' psychological safe spaces. This research emphasizes the importance of redefining a more inclusive and empathetic approach to religious education. The implications of this study highlight the need for the development of spiritual values-based anti-bullying policies that not only emphasize moral compliance, but also protection of students' emotional well-being.

How to Cite:

Nurhasan, A. K., Aini, N., & Sain, S. H. (2025). Silent Bullying and Character Education in Madrasahs: An Analysis of Psychological Violence in the Religious Sphere. *Educazione: Journal of Education and Learning*, 2(2), 121–134.

Article History

Received : 24 / February / 2025
Revised : 03 / March / 2025
Accepted : 24 / April / 2025

Keywords:

Silent Bullying, Character Education, Psychological Violence

INTRODUCTION

Silent bullying, also known as relational or covert bullying, encompasses actions such as social exclusion, subtle mockery, and indirect criticism that gradually erode an individual's self-worth (Li & Liang, 2023; Omran & Yousafzai, 2023; Tuckey et al., 2024). Unlike overt bullying, it lacks physical or visible signs, making it harder to detect and address (Ejaz et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2022; Ríos et al., 2022). In educational institutions grounded in religious values such as *madrasahs* these behaviors are particularly complex, as they are often framed within the discourse of religious guidance and moral discipline. In Indonesia, where religious education is both culturally and institutionally embedded, schools often employ spiritual narratives to reinforce discipline and conformity. However, this well-intentioned framework can, in certain contexts, legitimize exclusionary practices, particularly toward students who deviate from the expected norm. Existing policy discussions around bullying in schools rarely account for the unique socio-religious dimensions of silent bullying in *madrasahs*, despite its potential to cause long-term emotional and psychological distress (Alamgir & Riach, 2025; Barton et al., 2021; Farooqui, 2025). This background raises critical concerns regarding the ethics of discipline within religious pedagogy.

Previous research has extensively documented bullying in schools, though studies often focus on physical and verbal forms. For example, Smith and Sharp (1994) conceptualized bullying as systematic abuse of power, highlighting how authority figures and peer dynamics reinforce aggression. Previous studies expanded this view by emphasizing the moral dimensions of school discipline, suggesting that teachers may unconsciously perpetuate exclusion through biased moral expectations (Johnson et al., 2025; Ko & Bal, 2024; Masri et al., 2024). In a local context, Salamah-Qudsi (2024) examined religious discourse in Islamic schools and found that moral rebukes often mirror patterns of emotional manipulation. Similarly, Some other studies observed that some Indonesian *madrasahs* apply religious sanctions that inadvertently isolate students labeled as "less devout" (Beardsley et al., 2021; Bureau et al., 2022; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). While these studies underscore the cultural and ethical implications of school discipline, few explicitly explore the intersection of religious instruction and emotional bullying. This research seeks to bridge that gap by examining how religious authority and moral discourse can function as mechanisms of silent social exclusion.

Although silent bullying has been recognized as a subtle form of aggression in school environments, there remains a significant gap in understanding how it manifests within religiously-oriented educational settings. In *madrasahs*, where religious discourse is integral to identity formation and moral development, expressions of discipline may unintentionally mask or normalize psychological marginalization. The central problem lies in the ambiguity between moral correction and emotional harm particularly when religious language is employed to justify exclusion.

This blurring of intent and impact creates a dangerous space where students may suffer psychological distress while educators remain unaware of the harm being inflicted. Furthermore, existing anti-bullying frameworks in Indonesia do not adequately address the symbolic or moral dimensions of relational aggression within religious pedagogy. Hence, the research problem centers on uncovering the subtle mechanisms of silent bullying in madrasahs and understanding how religious narratives may inadvertently serve as tools of psychological control and social stratification.

This research contributes a novel perspective by situating *silent bullying* within the socio-religious context of Indonesian madrasahs, a domain that has been largely overlooked in both national and international educational discourse. While previous studies have addressed moral instruction and bullying separately, this study uniquely investigates how religious language intended to educate and discipline can unintentionally foster exclusion, stigma, and internalized oppression. By focusing on MA Darul Lughah in Probolinggo, the study presents an in-depth case that reflects broader patterns in faith-based schooling. The research offers critical insight into how well-intentioned moral frameworks can function as systems of symbolic violence when not reflexively examined. Using qualitative methods rooted in case study analysis, the study captures lived experiences, emotions, and interpretations that are often excluded from policy discussions. This research not only deepens theoretical understandings of bullying but also informs culturally responsive and ethically sound approaches to character education in religious settings.

This study investigates the phenomenon of silent bullying within the religious educational setting of MA Darul Lughah in Probolinggo, focusing on how moral and religious discourse can function as instruments of social exclusion and psychological control. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the research aims to explore the lived experiences of students and educators to uncover how certain disciplinary practices though framed as religious guidance may contribute to emotional marginalization. The study seeks to understand how language, norms, and authority operate within the moral infrastructure of a madrasah to construct subtle forms of bullying that often go unrecognized. By integrating interviews, observations, and document analysis, the research aspires to illuminate the hidden dimensions of emotional aggression within faith-based education. Ultimately, the study contributes to educational theory and practice by offering a culturally contextualized understanding of relational bullying, challenging educators to reflect critically on how moral instruction can both nurture and harm students.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was carried out at Madrasah Aliyah (MA) Darul Lughah, located in Probolinggo Regency, East Java. MA Darul Lughah was chosen as the location of the research because it reflects a strong religious education environment, where social norms and religious practices underlie all social interactions. This context is very relevant to the issue being researched, namely the phenomenon of silent bullying hidden in the practice of religion-based moral coaching. The qualitative approach with the case study type is used because it allows researchers to explore in depth the phenomenon in a real-life context, where religious values are not only taught, but also used as a tool of social control (Priya, 2021; Prosek & Gibson, 2021; Younas et al., 2023). This approach is inductive, allowing meaning to be constructed from the ground up based on the narratives, experiences, and symbols that emerge from the participants. This approach is particularly suited to unearthing hidden meanings, power relations, and complex social experiences that cannot be solved through quantitative approaches.

The data collection method was conducted through in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations, and document analysis, all of which were designed to capture the complexity and diversity of meaning in the practice of religious communication in madrasas. Interviews are conducted with teachers, students, and madrasah heads to gain a thorough understanding of how religious values are translated in daily actions, including in the practice of reprimands or behavior correction. Observations were carried out directly in classrooms, religious activities, and informal social interactions, in order to capture communication patterns that may not be aware of by the perpetrator or the victim. Meanwhile, documents such as religious textbooks, madrasah rules, and lecture transcripts were analyzed to understand the construction of discourse that underlies behavioral norms in madrasas. The combination of these three methods enriches the validity of the data because it is able to photograph phenomena from various points of view and strengthen the triangulation of data sources, so that the findings obtained are not only in-depth, but also contextual.

Data analysis is done manually using qualitative analysis techniques developed by Miles and Huberman (Bingham, 2023; Kalpokas & Radivojevic, 2022; Ndawo, 2021), which includes three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion withdrawal and verification. In the data reduction stage, the researcher repeatedly read the results of interviews and observation notes to identify key words, phrases, and important narratives that contain indications of silent bullying. The relevant data were then classified into thematic categories such as "religious innuendo", "social exclusion", and "stigma-laden moral correction". The presentation of data was carried out by compiling a thematic matrix and a citation categorization table, which assisted the researcher in seeing patterns and relationships between themes. Conclusions are drawn in a reflective and repetitive manner, where the interpretation of the data is consulted with key informants to ensure the validity of meaning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The Hidden Nature of Silent Bullying in Madrasah

Silent bullying in madrassas often takes a subtle and hidden form, manifested in indirect verbal actions, social exclusion, and innuendos that are seen as a form of moral or religious formation. These forms of violence are often seen as an attempt to improve students' behavior or direct them to a better path in accordance with religious teachings. However, while the intention may be to form character, these actions can be easily misunderstood, as they are often disguised within the framework of the religious values being taught. Innuendo and criticism directed at certain individuals, perceived as incompatible with religious norms or expected behavior, can lead to shame, alienation, and inferiority, even though the perpetrator may not intend to harm. The main difficulty in identifying silent bullying lies in the fact that it does not appear explicitly as a form of psychological violence, so it is often overlooked or not recognized as a problem that needs to be taken seriously.

In the madrasah environment, silent bullying tends to occur in the form of indirect verbal innuendo, often using language with religious nuances. This action can arise when a student is considered "incompatible" with the social or religious values that apply in the madrasah. Social exclusion is also common, with students perceived as lacking "obedience" or "discipline" being subjected to ridicule or unfair treatment, both outside and in the classroom. One example found in the field is when a teacher delivers a critique to a student in front of the class using a religious approach:

"If you can't focus like your friends, it will take you away from God. Don't make yourself a bad example to others."

Here, although the teacher's intention is to guide students to be more obedient and focused on learning, the message can risk embarrassing students and creating a negative stigma against them. This action creates a social exclusion effect, where students who do not conform to established norms feel alienated from their group. In this case, the use of religious values, which are supposed to prioritize compassion and empathy, actually worsens the psychological condition of students. One student revealed a similar experience that reflected the pattern of silent bullying that occurred in madrasahs:

"When I couldn't do well with my classes, my friends started to think I was lazy, and they said, 'If you really want to study, you have to put in more effort and draw closer to God.' I feel isolated."

From the interview, although the message conveyed was related to religious formation, there was an impact of social exclusion that occurred, where students who had difficulty felt judged and excluded. The mention of "drawing close to God" in such a context, while intended to motivate, can feel like a demeaning criticism and isolates the student from his or her peers. The results of the two interviews described above can be understood as in table 1.

Table 1. The Hidden Nature of Silent Bullying in Madrasah

Theme	Supporting Quotes/Excerpts	Meaning/Interpretation
Forms and Patterns of Silent Bullying in Madrasah	"If you can't focus like your friends, it will take you away from God. Don't set a bad example for yourself."	Silent bullying is hidden in criticism delivered using religious values, which are often mistaken for moral coaching. This leads to stigma and social exclusion in students.
Patterns of Social Exclusion in a Religious Context	"If you really want to learn, you have to put in more effort and get closer to God."	The use of religious values as a tool to criticize or guide students without empathy can create social isolation and exclusion in the madrasah community.

The phenomenon of silent bullying that occurs in madrassas is closely related to social construction built on the basis of religious values. On the one hand, religious values serve to shape students' moral behavior, guiding them to live in accordance with the ethical and moral principles taught in a religious context. However, on the other hand, such values can serve as a tool to create an exclusive social structure, in which those who are perceived to do not conform to religious norms or do not conform to the expectations of the group are considered "bad" or "disobedient". Silent bullying, in this case, is not only a social practice that harms individuals, but is also closely related to how power is exercised through accepted religious norms without question.

Based on the theory of symbolic interactionism, such actions also reflect how individuals (in this case, students) are trapped in social constructs shaped by social symbols and norms that prevail in madrasahs. According to this theory, social interactions are often influenced by the meanings given to certain symbols, which create social structures and hierarchies within the group. The "mark" or label labeled on isolated students such as "lazy" or "disobedient" is the result of a social process that involves the assessment and interpretation of existing norms. This process creates a cycle in which the student is seen as "other" or different, which further worsens their social relationships with classmates or teachers. These negative labels not only affect others' perceptions of students, but also shape their self-perception, which can exacerbate their sense of isolation and hinder their social and emotional development.

The Psychosocial Impact of Silent Bullying on Character Development in Madrasah

Silent bullying has a significant psychosocial impact on the development of students' character, especially in terms of developing Islamic values such as empathy, compassion, and *ukhuwah*. The experience leads to feelings of isolation and reduces students' ability to form healthy and harmonious social relationships with their peers.

The psychological impact experienced by students who are victims of silent bullying can be seen from feelings of anxiety, isolation, and inferiority. Students who experience social exclusion or verbal innuendo from their peers often feel a loss of confidence and feel unappreciated. In addition, students who are victims of bullying tend to become more introverted, avoid social interactions, and have difficulty building empathy for others. This is certainly contrary to the purpose of character education in madrasahs which seeks to form students who are empathetic, compassionate, and have *ukhuwah*. This is as stated by one of the students:

"I feel very isolated. Friends started avoiding me, they laughed at me in the back, and it made me feel very sad. I don't know what I have to do to be accepted back."

Other students also gave an overview of how the impact of silent bullying reduces their sense of empathy for others. One of the students said:

"I was bullied because of the way I dressed which was considered not in accordance with the rules of the madrasah. Friends used to laugh behind me and I felt like no one cared."

From the two statements above, it describes the feeling of isolation experienced by students as a result of silent bullying. Instead of developing a sense of empathy and compassion, students actually feel a detrimental impact on their emotional and social development. It also affects their ability to interact positively with peers. In addition, the feeling of isolation experienced by students as a result of silent bullying. Instead of developing a sense of empathy and compassion, students actually feel a detrimental impact on their emotional and social development. It also affects their ability to interact positively with peers. The psychosocial impact of silent bullying on character development is as shown in figure 1.



Figure 1. The Psychosocial Impact of Silent Bullying on Character Development

Silent bullying not only interferes with the emotional development of students, but also contradicts the main goal of education in madrasas, namely the formation of character based on Islamic values. In Islamic teachings, empathy, compassion, and respect for others are values that are highly emphasized in building harmonious social relationships. However, hidden practices of silent bullying, such as ostracization and sarcasm, actually undermine these social relationships and go against those principles. As a result, students who become victims not only experience psychological impacts, but also lose a sense of security and connectedness in their communities. Character education in madrasas should prioritize the value of ukhuwah (brotherhood) and support each other in the process of student growth and development, not marginalization and exclusion which actually exacerbate social and emotional tensions among them.

Intervention Strategies Based on Islamic Values to Overcome Silent Bullying in Madrasah

Intervention strategies to deal with silent bullying in madrasas can be developed by integrating Islamic values, such as ukhuwah (brotherhood), compassion (rahmah), and ta'dib (moral education). An approach based on Islamic values can provide contextual and applicative solutions in creating a more inclusive, supportive, and free environment from psychological violence.

In dealing with cases of silent bullying, some research participants proposed that it is important for madrasas to develop an intervention approach based on Islamic values that prioritizes morality, empathy, and brotherhood. These values can be used as a foundation for creating a culture that supports each other and prioritizes compassion in social interactions. One approach that can be applied is to conduct character education in more depth, integrating the concepts of ukhuwah (brotherhood) and rahmah (affection) in every aspect of madrasah life. Where this is as conveyed by one of the teachers:

"In madrasas, we must focus more on character education that teaches ukhuwah, not just rules or discipline. Students should be given a clear understanding that we are all brothers, and every individual should be treated with compassion."

The same thing was also conveyed by one of the students regarding the intervention strategy to deal with silent bullying in madrasas:

"We must be taught about how to forgive, not just see the wrong person as an enemy. Teaching the value of compassion and brotherhood in the classroom can help us understand each other."

Character education based on Islamic principles like this can promote mutually supportive values, which in turn will reduce bullying. Intervention strategies based on ta'dib (moral education) in Islam can strengthen students' awareness of the importance of being empathetic and tolerant of differences between them. In addition, with this activity, madrassas can create a culture that supports social awareness and empathy. This will provide an opportunity for students to interact in a more open atmosphere, without fear of being insulted or shunned.

Islamic-based character education provides a solid foundation to build better student character, which is able to overcome and prevent the practice of silent bullying. Ukhuwah as a basic value in Islam teaches that every individual is a brother, so unfair treatment of others is considered a violation of human values. Integrating these values in the daily activities of the madrasah will help build stronger bonds between students and create an inclusive environment. A restorative approach based on Islamic values can also be applied to resolve conflicts constructively. Rather than punishing or ostracizing the perpetrator, the restorative approach focuses on restoring relationships and collective awareness of the importance of human and religious values. This is especially relevant to Islamic teachings that emphasize mercy or compassion for others, even to those who may have made mistakes.

Discussion

This research aims to explore the phenomenon of silent bullying that occurs in madrassas and its impact on students' character education, especially in the context of religious values applied in the education. The findings provide important insights into how this form of psychological violence is hidden in the social and religious norms accepted in the madrasah environment, as well as its implications for the development of students' character. In this discussion, we will analyze how these findings answer the research questions asked, whether they support or challenge existing theories, and what implications these findings have for future research, theory, and practice.

This study found that silent bullying in madrassas often appears in the form of verbal innuendo wrapped in religious values. For example, criticism that uses religious language such as "If you can't focus like your friends, it will take you away from God" or "If you really want to learn, you should put more effort and get closer to God" are not only meant to guide, but also create social stigma and exclusion. This answers research questions about how silent bullying occurs in madrassas and how it impacts student character development. These findings show that psychological violence in the form of social exclusion and verbal innuendo actually hinders the development of Islamic values such as empathy and ukhuwah, which should be the foundation of character education in madrasahs.

The findings of this study support the theory of symbolic interactionism put forward by Gottardello (2023) who posits that individuals are often trapped in social constructs shaped by certain symbols and norms that prevail within their group. In the context of madrasas, religious values serve as social symbols that influence the way students interact and judge each other. The use of religious values in social criticism and social exclusion creates a social hierarchy that excludes those who are perceived as incompatible with prevailing religious or social norms (Chigbu et al., 2024; Killen et al., 2022; Van Wart et al., 2023). This phenomenon shows how the practice of silent bullying operates as an invisible form of power, which worsens students' psychological states and damages their social relationships.

These findings are also in line with previous research showed that bullying in the context of religious education often occurs in more hidden forms, such as sarcasm or ridicule wrapped in moral and religious values (Choudhury, 2024; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Richter, 2021). However, this study makes a new contribution by highlighting how religious values that are supposed to build affection and brotherhood are actually used as a tool to criticize or exclude students who are considered disobedient.

These findings make significant contributions to the theory of symbolic interactionism and the theory of power. By integrating religious values in the formation of social structures in madrasas, this research expands our understanding of how power can operate in a highly religious society. The findings also pose a challenge to theories that assume that religious values always have a positive impact on character development. Instead, these findings suggest that when religious values are misinterpreted or used to judge, they can exacerbate the psychological state of individuals who are perceived as not meeting social or religious norms.

Educational practices in madrassas must be more sensitive to the potential for silent bullying that occurs in the classroom and the social environment of the madrasa. An Islamic value-based approach that emphasizes *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *rahmah* (compassion), and *ta'dib* (moral education) must be applied consistently in every aspect of madrasah life. Teachers and educators need to be trained on how to avoid practices that have the potential to offend or isolate students, even with the intention of educating. A more inclusive approach, which prioritizes mutual support and understanding, will help create a safer and more harmonious environment for students.

This study reveals that silent bullying in madrassas is often hidden in verbal criticism wrapped in religious values, which indirectly creates social exclusion and negative stigma against students. These findings make an important contribution to understanding how hidden psychological violence can damage social relationships in religious education settings.

In addition, this research also offers new insights into how theories of symbolic interactionism and theories of power can be used to explain this phenomenon in the context of madrasas. These findings remind us that Islamic values-based character education should prioritize the principles of compassion and brotherhood, not just an emphasis on adherence to social or religious norms.

CONCLUSION

This research raises the phenomenon of silent bullying in madrasas, which is often disguised in the form of criticism based on religious values, as well as its impact on the development of students' character. Key findings suggest that this practice leads to social exclusion and negative stigma against students who are perceived as disobedient or less disciplined. Although it is intended as moral coaching, criticism with religious nuances actually worsens the psychological state of students and damages social relations in madrasas. The implications of this study underscore the importance of Islamic values-based approaches, such as *ukhuwah* and *rahmah*, in creating an inclusive and supportive environment. More in-depth character education and sensitivity to the potential for psychological violence is needed to prevent silent bullying. These findings open up opportunities for further research on faith-based interventions to reduce bullying practices in religious education settings, as well as improve understanding of the power hidden in social and religious norms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have contributed to the completion of this research. First and foremost, I extend my sincere appreciation to the administrators, teachers, and students of MA Darul Lughah, Probolinggo, for their valuable time, insights, and cooperation throughout the study. Their willingness to share their experiences made this research possible. I also want to thank my academic supervisor for their guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback that greatly improved the quality of this work.

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