



STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF ANTI-BULLYING EDUCATION IN INCREASING SOCIAL AWARENESS

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Abstract:

Bullying remains a persistent problem in schools, indicating that anti-bullying education often fails to translate into meaningful social awareness among students. This study aims to examine how students interpret anti-bullying education and how these interpretations contribute to the Development of social awareness. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research involved 24 fifth-grade students and used open-ended interviews, reflective written responses, observations, and documentation analysis. The findings reveal three interrelated themes: students internalized bullying as a form of moral wrongdoing, demonstrated empathetic peer awareness through consistent social behaviors, and expressed pro-social responsibility through written and visual commitments such as pledges and posters. These results show that students' cognitive and moral meaning-making processes play a decisive role in shaping ethical judgment, empathy, and responsible action. The novelty of this study lies in highlighting students as active interpreters of anti-bullying education rather than passive recipients of program messages. The findings suggest that anti-bullying initiatives should prioritize reflective, empathy-based, and participatory strategies to promote sustained social awareness and positive peer relations.

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying has emerged as a critical social issue with far-reaching implications beyond individual victims, affecting the moral climate of schools and the broader social fabric. As educational institutions are expected to function as safe spaces for character formation, the persistence of bullying undermines their fundamental role in cultivating social awareness, empathy, and pro-social behavior among students (Faroh et al., 2025; Lestari, 2025; Maor, 2025). The importance of this issue lies not only in its prevalence but also in its long-term consequences, as exposure to bullying is strongly associated with psychological distress, reduced academic engagement, and impaired social Development. Empirical evidence indicates that bullying contributes to increased absenteeism, depression, and social withdrawal among students, thereby posing a serious challenge to educational quality and social cohesion (Alfarezel, 2025; Ayu, Sari, Rachim, & Arzaqi, 2025). Consequently, addressing bullying is not merely an educational concern but a societal imperative, as failure to resolve it risks reproducing cycles of violence and social insensitivity across generations.

Despite increasing public concern and institutional efforts, bullying remains a persistent problem within school communities. Educational policies and anti-bullying programs have been widely implemented; however, their effectiveness in reducing bullying cases appears limited (Alhamuddin, 2024; Yang, 2024). This gap between policy intention and actual outcomes reflects a broader social problem: preventive education often fails to translate into meaningful behavioral change. In many cases, students are exposed to anti-bullying messages without internalizing their moral and social significance (Mertayasa, 2024; Sangiuliano, 2023). As a result, bullying continues to occur even in schools that formally endorse child-friendly and violence-free principles, raising questions about the underlying causes of this persistent failure.

Previous research has extensively examined bullying from psychological, behavioral, and policy-oriented perspectives. Nurdianawati et al. (2025) and Siregar (2024) conceptualize bullying as intentional and repetitive behavior aimed at causing physical or psychological harm, while Yatiman et al. (2025), Burhan et al. (2025), and Tammouch et al. (2025) also emphasizes its long-term emotional consequences for victims. Hikmat et al. (2024) underscores the importance of anti-bullying education as a preventive strategy, with a focus on building empathy and respect for diversity. Meanwhile, studies such as Fuhaili et al. (2025) and Ulfah et al. (2025) demonstrate the strong association between bullying exposure and mental health risks, reinforcing the urgency of intervention. However, most existing studies concentrate on prevalence rates, program implementation, or psychological impacts, with limited attention to how students themselves cognitively interpret and assign meaning to anti-bullying education.

More recent literature on social awareness highlights its crucial role in preventing bullying behavior (Pratiwi, Riwanda, & Islamy, 2024; Snyman, Van Eeden, & Heyns, 2023). Social awareness, defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and respond empathetically to social situations, is widely acknowledged as a protective factor against violence. Pozharliev et al. (2021) and Greenbaum et al. (2021) argue that low levels of empathy and social concern among students exacerbate bullying practices. Nevertheless, these studies tend to treat social awareness as an outcome variable without sufficiently examining the internal meaning-making processes that shape it. This indicates a clear research gap: while anti-bullying education is assumed to enhance social awareness, little is known about how students interpret these educational messages and how such interpretations influence their actual social behavior.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on students' cognitive and interpretive processes as a critical missing link between formal anti-bullying education and the development of social awareness. Rather than evaluating programs solely based on their design or outcomes, this research positions students as active meaning-makers who may accept, reinterpret, or even reject anti-bullying messages (García et al., 2023; Shih, 2024). This perspective is essential because educational effectiveness is determined not only by content delivery but also by the depth of internalization and the personal relevance that learners construct (Nailasariy, Habibi, Kubro, Nurhaliza, & Setyaningrum, 2023; Rahmawati, Asy'arie, Aryani, & Waston, 2024). Addressing this gap is important, as understanding students' interpretations can inform more responsive and transformative educational strategies.

Based on the preceding discussion, the central problem of this study is the limited understanding of how students cognitively and morally interpret antibullying education and how these interpretations influence their social awareness in everyday school

interactions. While anti-bullying programs are widely implemented, their effectiveness is often assessed through policy compliance or behavioral outcomes, rather than through students' internal meaning-making processes. Consequently, there is insufficient empirical insight into how students perceive bullying as a moral issue, how they construct empathy toward peers, and how these understandings translate into socially responsible actions. This gap raises a critical research question: How do students interpret antibullying education, and how do these interpretations contribute to the development of their social awareness?

This study argues that students' interpretations of anti-bullying education are a decisive factor in fostering social awareness, as ethical understanding, empathy, and pro-social responsibility emerge through reflective meaning-making rather than mere exposure to rules or slogans. By positioning students as active interpreters of educational messages, this research offers an original contribution to anti-bullying scholarship, which has predominantly framed students as passive recipients of interventions. The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative exploration of students' moral reasoning, empathetic awareness, and social commitments as interconnected processes shaped by anti-bullying education. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by enriching discussions on social awareness and moral education, and practically by informing the design of participatory, empathy-based anti-bullying initiatives that promote sustainable ethical behavior and positive peer relationships in schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' interpretations of anti-bullying education and its contribution to the Development of social awareness. A qualitative case study was selected because the research aims to understand meaning-making processes, subjective experiences, and cognitive interpretations constructed by students within a specific educational context (Acuna, Hernandez-Perlines, & Cisneros, 2024). This design enables an in-depth exploration of how anti-bullying education is perceived, internalized, and translated into social awareness, an area that quantitative measures cannot adequately capture. The case study approach is particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena, such as bullying and social awareness, in their real-life school settings.

The research was conducted at SD Labschool UNNES, an elementary school affiliated with a teacher education institution. This site was selected purposively for several reasons. First, the school has demonstrated institutional concern regarding bullying prevention and character education. Second, it actively supports educational interventions and collaborative research activities. Third, the school environment provides a relevant, information-rich setting for examining students' responses to anti-bullying education within a structured yet natural learning context. These considerations align with the qualitative principle of selecting sites that best illuminate the phenomenon under investigation.

The participants in this study were fifth-grade students who participated in the anti-bullying education program facilitated by the research team. Fifth-grade students were selected because they are at a developmental stage in which peer interaction intensifies and social awareness becomes more explicit. Participant selection was conducted using purposive sampling, based on criteria directly related to the research objectives, namely: (1) students' participation in the anti-bullying education activities, (2)

their ability to express reflective responses verbally, and (3) their active involvement in classroom social interactions. The distribution and characteristics of the informants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informants and Selection Rationale

Informant Group	Number of Students	Educational Background	Selection Rationale
Fifth-grade students	24	Elementary school students (Grade 5)	Actively participated in anti-bullying education; cognitively able to reflect on experiences; represent peer interaction dynamics relevant to bullying phenomena

Data collection in this study relied on primary qualitative data, obtained through open-ended interviews and reflective written responses (Ratna, 2021). Interview questions were designed to elicit students' understanding of bullying, their perceptions of the anti-bullying education activities, and the meanings they constructed regarding empathy, responsibility, and social interaction. The open-ended format allowed students to express their thoughts freely using their own language, thereby capturing authentic interpretations rather than predetermined responses. Data were collected after the anti-bullying education sessions to ensure that students' reflections were grounded in direct experience.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative analysis model comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Waruwu, Pu`at, Utami, Yanti, & Rusydiana, 2025). First, data condensation was conducted by selecting, simplifying, and focusing the raw interview and reflective data relevant to students' interpretations and social awareness. Second, the condensed data were organized and presented in thematic displays, enabling the identification of recurring patterns related to empathy, pro-social responsibility, and the internalization of anti-bullying norms. Finally, conclusions were drawn through continuous verification, ensuring that interpretations were consistently supported by empirical evidence from participants' narratives.

To ensure the data's trustworthiness and validity, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement in educational activities and through iterative questioning to clarify students' meanings. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail of data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations directly in students' statements rather than the researcher's assumptions. These procedures collectively strengthened the rigor of the qualitative findings and ensured that the results accurately reflected students' perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study reveal how students interpret and respond to anti-bullying education within the school context. The results are organized into three interrelated themes that highlight students' moral understanding of bullying, the Development of empathetic peer awareness, and the strengthening of pro-social responsibility. Together, these findings illustrate the pathways through which anti-bullying education influences students' social awareness and everyday behavior.

Students internalize bullying as moral wrongdoing

Operationally, this sub-finding concerns how students view bullying as a form of moral wrongdoing rather than merely inappropriate behavior or a violation of school rules. In the field, moral internalization was assessed by students' ability to explain why bullying is wrong, drawing on ethical considerations, the emotional harm it causes, and fairness toward others. Students demonstrated awareness that bullying negatively affects victims' feelings, dignity, and sense of safety. This understanding reflects a cognitive and moral evaluation, positioning bullying as an action that contradicts shared values of respect and empathy. Notably, this moral framing emerged after students participated in anti-bullying education activities, indicating that the educational process helped shape their ethical interpretations. Thus, internalizing bullying as moral wrongdoing means that students no longer see bullying as typical joking or peer conflict, but as an unjust action that should be rejected regardless of context or intention.

Interview findings indicate that students articulated explicit moral judgments when describing bullying. One student explained, "Bullying is wrong because it hurts people's feelings and makes them afraid to come to school." This statement reflects an understanding that bullying causes emotional harm and disrupts others' Well-being. The researcher interprets this response as evidence that the student evaluates bullying through a moral lens centered on the consequences experienced by victims. The student does not rely on external rules to define wrongdoing; instead, they use empathy and concern as moral criteria. This suggests that the student has internalized ethical values that guide judgment independently of authority. The ability to connect bullying with emotional suffering indicates that moral reasoning is grounded in awareness of others' experiences rather than superficial definitions of misbehavior.

Another interview revealed a more profound sense of moral responsibility. A student stated, "Even if friends say it is just a joke, it is still wrong if someone feels hurt, so we should stop." This response highlights the student's recognition that intention does not justify harmful outcomes. The researcher interprets this as a sign of moral maturity, where peer norms are challenged by ethical reasoning. Rather than conforming to group behavior, the student prioritizes moral evaluation based on harm and fairness. This finding suggests that anti-bullying education encouraged students to critically reflect on everyday interactions and question socially accepted behaviors that may cause harm. The student's statement indicates an internal moral compass that guides decisions, demonstrating a shift from passive acceptance of bullying toward ethical accountability in social situations.

Observational data corroborated the interview findings, showing that students' moral understanding influenced their behavior. During classroom activities, students were observed refraining from using mocking language and reminding peers not to tease others. In several interactions, students intervened verbally, stating that certain jokes were "not nice" or could "make friends sad." The researcher interprets these actions as expressions of internalized morality. Restated, students who identified bullying as morally wrong consistently acted in accordance with this belief in their daily interactions. Overall, the data reveal a clear pattern: students conceptualized bullying as an unethical act and translated this understanding into socially responsible behavior. This pattern indicates that anti-bullying education contributed to the Development of moral awareness that guided both judgment and action within the school environment.

Anti-bullying education fosters empathetic peer awareness

Operationally, this sub-finding refers to the visible Development of students' ability to recognize, respond to, and care about their peers' emotional conditions during everyday school interactions. In the field, empathetic peer awareness was identified through observable behaviors such as offering help to classmates, discouraging teasing, showing sensitivity to others' feelings, and adjusting behavior to avoid causing harm. Empathy was not defined by students' verbal claims but by consistent social actions that reflected concern for peers' Well-being. These behaviors emerged during classroom activities, group work, and informal peer interactions following the anti-bullying education sessions. Thus, empathetic peer awareness in this study is understood as a practical and relational competence, demonstrated through students' willingness to notice others' emotional states and respond in socially supportive ways.

Table 2. Observational Findings on Empathetic Peer Awareness

Observation	Indicator
Students stopped peers from teasing classmates.	Sensitivity to others' emotional discomfort
Students offered help to peers who appeared upset	Emotional responsiveness and care
Students adjusted their language during group work.	Awareness of peers' feelings
Students included isolated classmates in activities.	Social concern and inclusivity
Students reminded peers to be respectful.	Empathy-driven social regulation

Table 1 indicates that students demonstrated empathy through concrete social behaviors. The researcher interprets these behaviors as evidence that students recognized emotional cues and acted accordingly to protect peers from harm. Restated more simply, students did not remain passive when witnessing discomfort or exclusion; instead, they demonstrated awareness and concern through their actions. For instance, stopping teasing and modifying language reflect an understanding that words can affect others emotionally. Similarly, helping peers and encouraging inclusion suggest an awareness of social vulnerability. The consistency of these behaviors across contexts supports the interpretation that empathetic peer awareness was not incidental but instead developed through engagement in anti-bullying education. These observations illustrate how empathy became embedded in students' daily interactions rather than remaining an abstract concept.

Overall, the data reveal a clear behavioral pattern in which students increasingly displayed empathy as a shared social practice. Empathetic actions were not limited to isolated individuals but were observed across multiple students and interaction settings. This pattern suggests that anti-bullying education contributed to a collective awareness of peers' emotional experiences. Students tended to regulate their behavior in response to others' feelings and demonstrated social sensitivity during peer engagement. The repeated appearance of empathetic responses indicates that empathy functioned as a guiding norm in social interaction. In summary, the findings show that anti-bullying education fostered empathetic peer awareness by shaping how students perceived and responded to the emotional realities of those around them.

Meaningful interpretation strengthens pro-social responsibility

Operationally, this sub-finding refers to students' ability to translate their understanding of anti-bullying education into concrete expressions of pro-social responsibility, as reflected in written and visual learning artifacts. In the field, pro-social responsibility was evidenced by students' documented commitments to respectful behavior, collective responsibility, and active participation in fostering a safe school environment. These documents included written reflections, anti-bullying pledges,

worksheets, and campaign posters produced after the educational activities. The presence of explicit moral statements, action-oriented language, and collective commitments within these artifacts indicates that students did not merely comprehend the content cognitively but interpreted it as a meaningful guide to responsible social conduct. Thus, in this study, pro-social responsibility is defined as a normatively grounded commitment, as evidenced by documented student work.

The documentation process followed a precise sequence: students' participation in anti-bullying education, guided reflection activities, and the production of learning artifacts. The findings indicate that students produced various forms of documentation, including written pledges not to bully, reflection sheets outlining ways to help peers, and posters promoting kindness and respect. Suitable visual evidence for this sub-theme would include photographs of students' anti-bullying posters displayed in classrooms, copies of written commitments signed by students, and completed worksheets outlining pro-social actions. These artifacts collectively demonstrate how students transformed educational messages into tangible expressions of responsibility. The researcher interprets these documents as material evidence of meaning-making, in which abstract values were translated into visible social commitments.



Figure 1. Photos of anti-bullying posters of students displayed in the classroom

Observational engagement with the documentation revealed that students completed these artifacts with seriousness and personal involvement. Many students used assertive language, such as commitments to protect friends, to report bullying, and to maintain respectful interactions. The researcher interprets this as indicating that students perceived anti-bullying education as relevant to their social roles rather than as a formal task. The act of writing commitments and creating posters reflects intentional participation in shaping a positive social environment. These documented behaviors suggest that students were not passive recipients of information but active contributors to collective norms. Through documentation, students expressed their sense of responsibility in a form that could be shared, remembered, and reinforced within the school community.

Restated more simply, the documentation shows that students understood anti-bullying education as a call to take responsibility for others, not just to avoid wrongdoing. The artifacts consistently conveyed messages of care, mutual protection, and shared accountability. The pattern across documents indicates that meaningful interpretation of anti-bullying education led students to adopt pro-social responsibility as a personal and

collective norm. Rather than isolated statements, the documentation reveals a recurring emphasis on commitment and action. Overall, the data demonstrate that when students meaningfully interpret anti-bullying messages, they are more likely to express sustained responsibility through documented social commitments that support a safe and inclusive school environment.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that students internalized bullying as a form of moral wrongdoing rather than merely a violation of school rules. This result aligns with previous literature that conceptualizes bullying as an ethical and relational problem involving harm, power imbalance, and injustice, rather than isolated misbehavior. Studies on moral Development suggest that when students frame harmful actions through moral reasoning, such as fairness, empathy, and concern for others, they are more likely to regulate their behavior independently of external authority (Hikmah, 2025; Yatiman et al., 2025). However, this study extends prior research by showing that such moral framing can be actively shaped through anti-bullying education, rather than being solely a product of individual moral maturation. Unlike studies that emphasize rule compliance, the present findings highlight students' ability to critically evaluate peer behavior in terms of ethical consequences, indicating a deeper internalization of moral values.

The other finding also shows that anti-bullying education fosters empathetic peer awareness, which corresponds with research emphasizing empathy as a key protective factor against bullying behavior. Existing studies commonly report that empathy reduces aggressive tendencies and promotes prosocial interaction (Bestin, Nugroho, Juwita, Kolaboratif, & Kampanye, 2025; Nurdianawati et al., 2025). The current findings support this view but add a crucial behavioral dimension: empathy was not only expressed verbally but consistently enacted through observable actions such as helping peers, discouraging teasing, and promoting inclusion. This contrasts with some prior studies that rely heavily on self-reported empathy measures, which may not fully capture actual social behavior (Fuhaili et al., 2025; Tammouch et al., 2025). By grounding empathy in observed interaction patterns, this study demonstrates that anti-bullying education can cultivate empathy as a shared social practice rather than an individual disposition, reinforcing its role in shaping everyday peer relationships.

The last finding that meaningful interpretation strengthens pro-social responsibility resonates with educational theories that emphasize meaning-making as central to behavioral change. Previous literature often treats anti-bullying education as effective when it transmits correct information or enforces discipline (Junaidi, 2025; Lestari & Laili, 2025). In contrast, the present study shows that students' documented commitments and artifacts reflect a deeper process in which educational messages are transformed into personally and collectively held responsibilities. This finding differs from intervention studies that focus primarily on short-term behavioral outcomes, as it reveals how responsibility is constructed symbolically and normatively through written and visual expressions (Burhan et al., 2025). The documentation evidence illustrates that students who meaningfully interpret anti-bullying education are more likely to adopt sustained commitments to protecting peers and maintaining a respectful environment.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to the literature on bullying and moral education by positioning students as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of prevention programs. The study supports interpretive and

constructivist views of education, which argue that learning outcomes are shaped by how learners cognitively and morally interpret messages. By integrating moral internalization, empathy, and pro-social responsibility into a single interpretive framework, this study bridges psychological, ethical, and sociological approaches to bullying prevention. Theoretically, it suggests that the effectiveness of anti-bullying education lies not only in program design but in the depth of students' internal meaning-making processes that connect cognition, emotion, and action.

In practice, the findings imply that schools should move beyond rule-based anti-bullying policies toward educational strategies that encourage reflection, empathy, Development, and moral engagement. Anti-bullying programs should prioritize interactive methods, reflective documentation, and opportunities for students to publicly and collectively express their commitments. Teachers and school leaders can use written pledges, posters, and reflective activities as tools to reinforce pro-social responsibility and sustain behavioral change. Overall, this study suggests that when anti-bullying education is designed to foster moral understanding, empathetic awareness, and meaningful responsibility, it has greater potential to produce lasting social change within school communities.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the effectiveness of anti-bullying education is strongly determined by how students interpret and internalize its messages. The most important finding is that students who meaningfully engage with anti-bullying education tend to construe bullying as a form of moral wrongdoing, develop empathetic awareness toward peers, and adopt a pro-social orientation in everyday interactions. The key lesson derived from this research is that social awareness does not emerge automatically from exposure to policy or from rule enforcement, but rather from students' internal meaning-making processes that connect moral reasoning, empathy, and action. When students understand bullying in terms of ethical considerations and emotional consequences, they are more likely to regulate their behavior independently and intervene in harmful situations. This highlights that anti-bullying education functions most effectively when it fosters moral reflection and social sensitivity rather than merely transmitting norms. As such, the study underscores the importance of viewing students as active moral agents whose interpretations shape the success of educational interventions aimed at creating safe and inclusive school environments.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to research on bullying and education by advancing an interpretive framework that integrates moral internalization, empathetic peer awareness, and prosocial responsibility. Its strength lies in shifting the analytical focus from program outcomes and prevalence data toward students' cognitive and moral meaning-making processes. This area has been underexplored in prior studies. Methodologically, the qualitative case study approach provides rich, contextual insights into how educational messages are translated into social behavior. However, this study is limited by its single-site design and relatively small participant group, which may restrict the generalizability of findings. Additionally, the study focuses on short-term interpretations rather than long-term behavioral sustainability. Future research is recommended to involve multiple schools, longitudinal designs, and comparative contexts to examine how students' interpretations evolve over time and across

sociocultural settings, and how these interpretations influence enduring patterns of social awareness and anti-bullying behavior.

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