



RESTORATIVE APPROACH CREATES A CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOL FREE OF BULLYING

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Abstract:

Bullying remains a critical challenge in schools, affecting students' psychological well-being and social development. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of the restorative approach in fostering anti-bullying behavior by enhancing empathy, responsibility, and social skills among students. Using a qualitative methodology, data were collected through observations, interviews, and focus group discussions involving students, teachers, and counselors. The findings indicate that restorative dialogue and mediation significantly reduced conflicts, increased students' awareness of the impact of their actions, and promoted positive behavioral changes among perpetrators. Victims reported feeling acknowledged and supported, while overall classroom interactions improved. This study contributes to the understanding of how restorative practices can transform school culture by prioritizing relationship restoration over punitive measures. The results suggest that implementing restorative approaches can effectively reduce bullying, enhance social-emotional skills, and support the development of an inclusive, child-friendly educational environment, offering practical guidance for educators and school policymakers.

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a pervasive social issue with profound implications for children's psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Research consistently shows that children exposed to bullying experience heightened anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, which can impede academic achievement and long-term psychosocial adjustment (Bamat et al., 2024; Ramos-Diaz et al., 2022; Tziner et al., 2023). The broader societal impact of bullying is significant, as it cultivates environments of fear, reduces empathy, and perpetuates cycles of aggression. Consequently, addressing bullying is not solely a school concern but a societal imperative, as early intervention can prevent the normalization of violence in social and professional contexts (Larrucea, 2021; Maor & Rogoz, 2025; Smith et al., 2023). By creating educational strategies that mitigate bullying, schools help cultivate responsible, empathetic, and socially competent individuals, which ultimately benefits societal cohesion.

Despite increasing awareness of its detrimental effects, bullying remains prevalent in schools, manifesting in physical, verbal, and psychological forms. Children often encounter teasing, exclusion, threats, or even physical harm from peers, which can

escalate if left unaddressed (Ningrum et al., 2024; Ross et al., 2022). Data from child protection studies indicate that a substantial proportion of students experience peer violence, with schools serving as a primary context for these incidents. Traditional approaches relying on punishment or strict discipline have proven insufficient, often addressing symptoms rather than root causes. Early childhood children, who are vulnerable to the influence of their environment, are often victims of bullying in the school environment (Kúld et al., 2021; Pratiwi et al., 2024). As a result, children remain vulnerable, and school environments may fail to provide safety or emotional support. This persistent challenge emphasizes the need for innovative strategies that not only prevent bullying but also foster constructive interpersonal relationships and social responsibility among students.

Prior studies have examined various interventions to address school bullying, including punitive measures, social skills training, and counseling programs. Nurlaela et al. (2023), Anggarina et al. (2024), and Azwad (2020) highlight the limitations of traditional disciplinary methods, which often fail to produce sustainable behavioral change. Exner-Cortens et al. (2020) and Abril-López et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of social-emotional learning in reducing aggression and demonstrates the role of dialogue-based approaches in restoring peer relationships. Similarly, Lestari (2025), Tan et al. (2022), and Shuib et al. (2024) indicate that interventions that focus solely on victims' protection, without engaging perpetrators, are less effective. Despite these contributions, gaps remain regarding systematic, school-wide practices that simultaneously improve empathy, responsibility, and peer connectedness. Previous research often lacks integrated evidence of how interventions influence overall school climate, and few studies explore mechanisms that actively involve all stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents.

The restorative approach is a transformative strategy that shifts the focus from punishment to relationship repair, dialogue, and the cultivation of empathy. Unlike conventional disciplinary methods, restorative practices involve perpetrators, victims, and peers in mediated discussions to identify the harm caused and collaboratively develop solutions (Azizah et al., 2024; Khasanah, 2023). This approach has been shown to improve students' social skills, foster accountability, and promote positive behavioral change. What distinguishes this research is its holistic examination of the effects of the restorative approach on school climate, child safety, and character development. By integrating theoretical insights with qualitative evidence from educators and students, this study advances understanding of how restorative practices can create a child-friendly school environment (Alfina & Anwar, 2020; Nurlaela et al., 2023). The novelty lies in linking these practices directly to broader social-emotional outcomes and providing practical guidance for implementing restorative strategies as a sustainable anti-bullying intervention.

The central research problem is how to implement restorative practices effectively to reduce bullying while promoting a safe, inclusive, and socially supportive school environment. Traditional methods often fail because they focus narrowly on punishment without cultivating empathy or understanding among students. In contrast, the restorative approach emphasizes accountability, dialogue, and relationship repair, aiming to transform perpetrators' behavior while supporting victims. Preliminary evidence suggests that mediation and restorative dialogue not only decrease aggressive behavior but also enhance peer relationships and classroom cohesion. This study argues

that implementing restorative practices systematically can address the limitations of conventional interventions, fostering long-term social-emotional development, reducing the recurrence of bullying, and promoting a harmonious learning environment. By examining both processes and outcomes, the research contributes original evidence on the practical application of restorative strategies in early childhood and elementary educational settings.

This study contributes to both theory and practice by providing empirical insights into the implementation of restorative approaches for bullying prevention. The research demonstrates how restorative methods improve students' empathy, responsibility, and interpersonal skills while fostering an inclusive and supportive school climate. These findings have implications for educators, school administrators, and policymakers seeking evidence-based strategies to create child-friendly schools. The study also offers practical recommendations for integrating restorative policies into school programs, including teacher training, parental involvement, and structured mediation protocols. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of a collaborative approach in which the entire school community participates in preventing violence and promoting positive behavior. Ultimately, the study underscores the potential of restorative practices to transform schools into environments where students feel safe, valued, and capable of developing socially responsible behavior.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the implementation of the restorative approach in creating a child-friendly, anti-bullying school environment. The case study method was selected because it allows an in-depth examination of complex social phenomena within real-life contexts, providing detailed insights into the processes, experiences, and interactions involved in restorative practices (Kekeya, 2023). By focusing on a single school as the unit of analysis, the research captures the nuanced dynamics of bullying incidents, mediation practices, and students' social-emotional development, which are difficult to quantify or generalize but offer a rich, contextualized understanding and practical implications.

The research was conducted at SD Islam Addasuqi, an elementary school affiliated with the Addasuqi Islamic Boarding School Foundation. This location was chosen due to its ongoing efforts to implement restorative practices and its recognition as a child-centered school. The school provides an environment where both teachers and students actively engage in social-emotional learning, making it suitable for observing and analyzing the effectiveness of restorative interventions. Focusing on this school allowed the researchers to examine authentic cases of bullying, the responses of staff and students, and the institutional support mechanisms that facilitate or hinder restorative practices.

A total of 18 informants participated in this study, including five teachers, the school principal, two counselors, and ten students who had either experienced or witnessed bullying. Informants were selected purposively for their direct involvement in bullying cases, knowledge of school policies, and ability to provide detailed perspectives on social interactions and conflict resolution. Teachers and counselors had professional backgrounds in education and guidance, ensuring informed insights into school practices. Students were selected to represent different social groups, genders, and ages within the

fifth-grade cohort to capture diverse experiences and viewpoints, allowing a comprehensive understanding of bullying dynamics and restorative interventions.

Data were collected using multiple techniques, including participatory observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document review (Cole, 2024). Observations focused on student interactions, classroom climate, and social-emotional behaviors to detect both overt and subtle bullying incidents. Interviews and focus groups provided detailed narratives on the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of teachers, counselors, and students regarding restorative practices. Document review included school policies, disciplinary records, and case reports, which complemented primary data and provided evidence of institutional approaches to bullying. These triangulated techniques ensured comprehensive data coverage and enhanced the credibility of findings.

Data analysis followed a systematic qualitative procedure, including data condensation, data display, and verification (Lee et al., 2024). First, raw data were reduced through summarization and coding to identify key themes and patterns, such as types of bullying, perpetrators, victims, and contextual factors. Next, data were organized into visual and narrative displays, linking behaviors with school practices and restorative interventions. Finally, data verification involved triangulation across multiple sources, member checking with informants, and peer review to ensure reliability and validity. These procedures enabled the researchers to interpret findings accurately and provide evidence-based recommendations for implementing restorative practices in elementary school settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the study's findings on the implementation of restorative practices in elementary schools. The results highlight how structured interventions such as mediation, restorative dialogues, and restorative circles empower students, reduce bullying, and foster a child-friendly, inclusive, and safe learning environment. The discussion covers changes in students' behavior, social-emotional development, and overall school climate.

Empowering Students through Restorative Practices

In this study, the restorative approach is operationally defined as a series of practices aimed at restoring relationships and promoting social responsibility among students, while addressing bullying behaviors. It includes structured interventions such as mediation sessions, open dialogues, and restorative circles, in which students, perpetrators, victims, and educators collaboratively resolve conflicts. The approach prioritizes empathy, accountability, and mutual understanding over punishment, ensuring that both victims and perpetrators actively participate in the problem-solving process. Bullying, in this context, encompasses repeated aggressive behaviors, verbal harassment, social exclusion, or physical intimidation among students. The focus is on creating a child-friendly school environment that nurtures positive interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, and cooperative learning. Operationally, success is measured by improvements in students' social interactions, reduced recurrence of bullying incidents, and the establishment of safe, supportive classroom climates in which all students feel heard, valued, and empowered to participate constructively in resolving conflicts.

One teacher explained, “When a student teases another repeatedly, we immediately involve both students in a mediation session to talk about what happened and how it affected each person.” Another teacher added, “We encourage the perpetrators to express remorse and understand the feelings of those they hurt, while the victims can voice their experiences and suggest ways to restore the relationship.” These statements indicate that the restorative approach empowers students by giving them active roles in resolving conflicts, fostering empathy, and taking responsibility. The researcher interprets this as evidence that both perpetrators and victims are learning to recognize the consequences of their actions and engage in constructive problem-solving. It also shows that teachers serve as facilitators rather than enforcers, creating opportunities for students to reflect on behavior, communicate openly, and collaboratively develop solutions, which strengthens interpersonal skills and reduces reliance on punitive methods.

A counselor shared, “We hold regular restorative circles where students can openly share feelings about bullying incidents, discuss solutions, and listen to each other’s perspectives.” Another student participant stated, “I feel safer when I can explain what happened, and I notice that my classmates are more careful and considerate afterward.” These insights demonstrate that restorative practices actively involve the school community in conflict resolution. The researcher interprets these findings as indicating that open dialogue and group engagement not only prevent repeated bullying but also enhance trust and communication among peers. Students develop a sense of ownership over their behavior, understand the impact of their actions, and contribute to a positive classroom culture. The approach transforms reactive responses to bullying into proactive, relationship-focused strategies, reinforcing a school climate where mutual respect, accountability, and social-emotional learning are central.

Observations revealed that bullying incidents often occur in informal settings such as playgrounds, hallways, and during group activities, frequently involving verbal teasing or social exclusion. Mediated discussions and restorative circles were consistently applied after such incidents, allowing students to reflect, express emotions, and develop joint solutions. The researcher interprets these observations as confirming the effectiveness of structured restorative interventions in reducing aggressive behavior and promoting harmonious interactions. Patterns in the data indicate that bullying decreases when students are actively engaged in dialogue, empathy-building exercises, and collaborative problem-solving, and when educators consistently facilitate reflection and accountability. Overall, the restorative approach establishes a predictable, supportive environment where students understand the consequences of harmful actions, victims feel heard, and perpetrators take responsibility, creating a sustainable framework for a child-friendly, bully-free school climate.

Transforming School Climate through Restorative Approaches

In this study, the effectiveness of the restorative approach is operationally defined as the measurable impact of restorative practices on students’ behavior, attitudes, and social-emotional development within the school environment. The approach involves structured dialogue sessions, mediation, and restorative circles that encourage students to reflect on their actions, understand the consequences of bullying, and collaboratively restore relationships. Operational indicators include increased empathy, heightened awareness of behavioral impacts among perpetrators, reduced

repeat cases of bullying, and the development of social values such as responsibility, cooperation, and mutual respect. Effectiveness is assessed through systematic observation of student interactions, behavioral changes over time, and the establishment of a safer and more inclusive learning environment. The restorative approach aims not only to prevent the recurrence of bullying but also to empower students to actively participate in fostering a supportive and harmonious school climate.

Table 1. Observations on the Implementation of the Restorative Approach

Observation	Indicator
Students involved in conflicts demonstrate greater empathy after participating in restorative dialogue sessions	Increased empathy among students
Perpetrators recognize the impact of their actions, and victims feel acknowledged	Awareness of perpetrators regarding the impact of their behavior
Frequency of repeated bullying incidents decreases after reconciliation sessions	Reduction in repeated bullying incidents
Students demonstrate stronger social values, including responsibility, cooperation, and empathy	Formation of students' character

The data indicate that the restorative approach effectively changes students' behavior and attitudes. Empathy among students increased as they became more able to understand their peers' feelings and perspectives. Perpetrators demonstrated greater awareness of the consequences of their actions, which corresponded with a noticeable reduction in repeated bullying incidents. The overall development of students' character, reflected in heightened responsibility, cooperation, and empathy, shows that restorative practices foster social-emotional learning and peer connectedness. Observations confirmed that structured dialogue and mediation provided students with opportunities to express their experiences, listen to others, and collaboratively generate solutions. Restating these findings, the restorative approach simultaneously reduces aggression, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and promotes a safe and inclusive school environment, illustrating that behavioral improvements are not only immediate but also sustained over time.

The pattern emerging from the data shows a positive correlation between students' participation in restorative activities and behavioral outcomes. Higher levels of engagement in dialogue sessions and restorative circles are consistently associated with increased empathy, stronger awareness of personal responsibility, and improved social cooperation. Repeated bullying incidents decline as students internalize the values emphasized in the restorative process, and classroom interactions become more collaborative and supportive. Overall, the restorative approach creates a predictable framework in which students feel heard and valued, allowing them to reflect on their behavior, repair relationships, and contribute to a harmonious school climate. This pattern demonstrates that when implemented systematically, restorative practices foster sustainable changes in social-emotional competence and behavioral regulation, ultimately supporting a child-friendly, bully-free learning environment.

Creating a Child-Friendly School through Restorative Interventions

In this study, the creation of a child-friendly school through restorative interventions is operationally defined as the systematic application of restorative practices that foster a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment. The sub-finding focuses on how mediation, restorative dialogues, and collaborative problem-solving sessions empower students, reduce bullying, and enhance social-emotional development. Key indicators include students' sense of safety, mutual respect among peers, active participation in resolving conflicts, and improved classroom climate. Operational success is measured by observing how students interact, their responses to conflict resolution activities, and the overall atmosphere of cooperation and inclusivity. This sub-finding captures both the process and outcomes of restorative interventions as essential components in establishing a child-friendly school, ensuring that students feel valued, heard, and supported in both academic and social contexts.

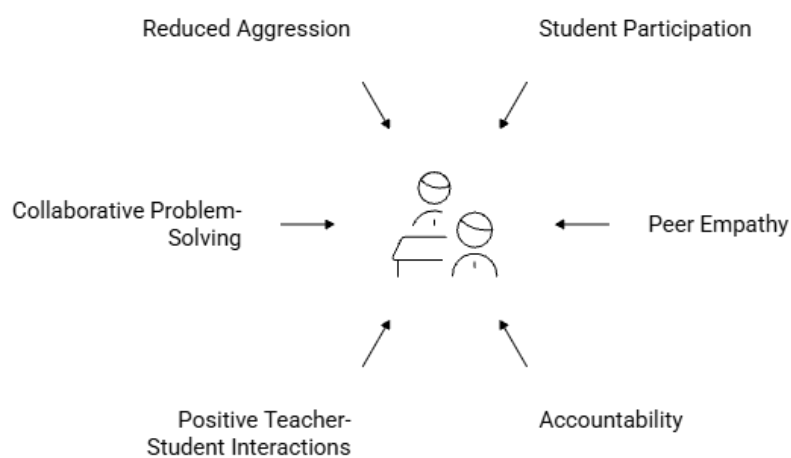


Figure 1. Manifestations of Child-Friendly School Practices

The observations demonstrate that restorative interventions directly contribute to creating a child-friendly environment. Students involved in dialogues and mediations display greater empathy and understanding toward peers, while reductions in aggressive behavior indicate increased accountability. The researcher interprets these findings as evidence that structured restorative practices strengthen interpersonal relationships and enhance emotional safety. Restating the data: engaging students in decision-making, collaborative problem-solving, and open communication not only addresses individual conflicts but also reinforces a broader culture of respect and inclusion. By consistently applying restorative principles, the school environment becomes more predictable, supportive, and conducive to learning, where students feel empowered to express themselves, resolve disagreements constructively, and develop essential social-emotional competencies.

A clear pattern emerges from the data: schools that integrate restorative interventions systematically show higher levels of student participation, enhanced empathy, and improved peer relationships. Conflicts are addressed through structured dialogue rather than punitive measures, leading to fewer recurring bullying incidents and a stronger sense of belonging among students. The presence of teacher facilitation, consistent guidance, and observable engagement in restorative practices creates an environment where students internalize cooperative values and social responsibility. Overall, the data indicate that the child-friendly school climate is both a product and a

reinforcement of restorative practices, suggesting that sustained implementation leads to long-term improvements in social cohesion, emotional safety, and student empowerment within the educational setting.

Discussion

The implementation of the restorative approach at SD Islam Addasuqi has shown considerable success, but it also encountered challenges that were addressed through strategic actions. One of the primary efforts to strengthen the approach's effectiveness was teacher training, which is essential for equipping educators with the skills needed to handle bullying cases. Research by Hina (2024) indicates that many Indonesian teachers still cannot respond appropriately to bullying incidents. The study's findings align with Andriyani and Sain (2025), who emphasize that training teachers to identify and address bullying can significantly reduce its frequency in schools. At SD Islam Addasuqi, the training has empowered teachers to engage in restorative practices more effectively, reducing misunderstandings and facilitating more successful interventions. However, the implementation of these practices was initially met with resistance, particularly because both students and teachers did not fully understand the concept of restorative justice, as the principal noted in the interview.

Another challenge highlighted in the study was the limited time and resources, which often hindered the consistent implementation of restorative sessions. The busy school schedule was cited as a significant obstacle, making it difficult to dedicate sufficient time to regular restorative practices (Herlina, 2024; Khoiroh et al., 2024). This issue resonates with the literature on school-based interventions, which suggests that time constraints in schools frequently undermine the effectiveness of such programs (Jali, 2025). Despite these challenges, the restorative approach has continued to show promising results, including reductions in repeated bullying incidents and increases in students' social awareness. The restorative process, which includes dialogues, mediation, and restorative circles, not only helps resolve conflicts but also fosters an environment of empathy, responsibility, and cooperation, thereby improving student relationships.

The study also revealed the importance of parental involvement in supporting restorative practices. While the restorative approach at SD Islam Addasuqi has been largely successful, the role of parents in reinforcing these values at home is critical. As Widiyarsari & Zahro (2024) noted, parents play a vital role in shaping children's behavior and reinforcing positive character traits. Parents are the first educators and serve as role models, influencing how children interact with others. However, many parents in Indonesia lack awareness about the importance of emotional support and role modeling in preventing bullying (Aziz, 2025; D. F. Putri, 2023). This gap can lead to children lacking empathy and, in some cases, becoming perpetrators of bullying themselves. To address this, SD Islam Addasuqi plans to strengthen its partnership with parents in the upcoming academic year, aiming to integrate restorative principles more deeply into students' home environments.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study contribute to understanding restorative justice in educational contexts by highlighting its dual impact on behavioral and moral development. The integration of structured restorative practices with Islamic values provides evidence that conflict resolution is most effective when it addresses both social-emotional and ethical dimensions. This reinforces existing theories of social-emotional learning, which posit that empathy, responsibility, and cooperative

skills are essential for positive peer interactions, while also expanding them by demonstrating that spiritual and cultural frameworks can strengthen these outcomes. The study illustrates that restorative interventions are not only mechanisms for reducing bullying but also theoretical models for fostering holistic character development, emphasizing that emotional, social, and moral learning are interconnected in shaping prosocial student behavior.

In practice, the study underscores the need to combine school-based interventions with community and family engagement to achieve sustainable outcomes. Teacher training, structured dialogues, and mediation sessions must be complemented by active parental involvement and reinforcement at home to ensure consistency in students' experiences across environments. The findings suggest that schools should develop comprehensive programs that integrate restorative practices into daily routines, provide ongoing professional development for teachers, and involve parents as partners in character education. Additionally, incorporating culturally and religiously relevant values, such as *islah*, *ukhuwah*, and *taubat*, enhances the acceptability and effectiveness of these practices. These practical implications indicate that restorative approaches can be successfully operationalized in schools when they are holistic, context-sensitive, and supported by the entire educational community, ultimately fostering a safe, child-friendly, and morally grounded learning environment.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the restorative approach is highly effective in reducing bullying incidents and fostering a safer, more inclusive school environment at SD Islam Addasuqi. By emphasizing dialogue and relationship restoration rather than punishment, the approach encourages students to reflect on the impact of their behavior, take responsibility, and develop key values such as empathy, commitment, and cooperation. The findings highlight that restorative practices not only reduce bullying but also improve social relationships between students, teachers, and parents, leading to a more harmonious school atmosphere. Additionally, the integration of Islamic values, such as forgiveness and brotherhood, further strengthens the restorative approach, contributing to students' moral development and creating a child-friendly school environment.

Despite its success, the research has some limitations. The study focuses on a single school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Challenges such as a lack of understanding about restorative principles, limited resources, and communication barriers were identified as obstacles to the full implementation of the approach. Future research should address these challenges and explore ways to enhance teacher training and involve parents more effectively in restorative practices. Further studies could also expand the research to include multiple schools to assess the long-term impact and scalability of restorative practices in diverse educational settings. Overall, the study demonstrates that the restorative approach is a promising solution for creating bullying-free schools and fostering positive social values among students.

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