Journal of Education, Teaching, and Learning
Volume 10 Number 2 Year 2025. Page 462-473
p-ISSN: 2477-5924 e-ISSN: 2477-8478

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School-Based Character Education Implementation as a Preventive Strategy to Reduce Bullying Behavior at SMP Negeri 3 Sungai Ambawang

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Article Information:
Received May 25th, 2026
Revised July 1st, 2026
Accepted August 10th, 2026

Keywords: bullying, character education, bullying prevention, safe school

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Abstract
This study aims to describe the forms of bullying at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang, analyze the implementation of character education to prevent bullying, and identify the role of teachers and school policies in creating a safe learning environment. This research used a qualitative descriptive method. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation involving the principal, vice principal, teachers, and students selected through purposive sampling. The results showed that bullying still occurs in verbal, physical, and cyber forms. Its impacts include low self-confidence, fear, anxiety, emotional trauma, and decreased learning motivation. Character education was implemented through discipline, empathy, tolerance, responsibility, religious activities, teacher role modeling, and student guidance. Teachers play important roles as role models, mentors, mediators, and supervisors. However, obstacles remain, such as limited supervision, lack of systematic programs, and the assumption that bullying is only a joke. The study concludes that character education is effective in preventing bullying when applied consistently and involving all school members. Therefore, stronger anti-bullying policies, school-parent collaboration, and continuous evaluation are needed to create a safe and inclusive school environment.

How to cite: Hemafitria. (2025). School-Based Character Education Implementation as a Preventive Strategy to Reduce Bullying Behavior at SMP Negeri 3 Sungai Ambawang. *JETL (Journal of Education, Teaching and Learning), 10*(2), 462-473. doi: **http://dx.doi.org/10.26737/jetl.v10i2.9127**

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying in the school environment remains a serious issue in education because it directly affects students' psychological, social, and academic development. Schools, which should be safe spaces for learning, interacting, and building character, in some cases become places where intimidation, verbal violence, social exclusion, and digital abuse occur. Bullying is not merely joking among friends, but an aggressive act carried out intentionally, repeatedly, and involving an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. This condition causes victims to feel afraid, helpless, insecure, and even experience prolonged trauma. Various studies show that victims of bullying tend to experience decreased learning motivation, increased absenteeism, social anxiety, and mental health problems (Andi Muh Rezky AH et al., 2025).

Based on data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), the prevalence of bullying incidents in the education sector reached 1,567 cases. Among these cases, there were 76 incidents involving adolescents as victims of bullying and 12 incidents involving adolescents as perpetrators of bullying in schools. These findings indicate that bullying behavior is still occurring both globally and in Indonesia. Therefore, appropriate interventions and preventive efforts are needed to reduce and prevent bullying behavior in educational settings.

SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang, like many other schools, faces this challenge. Various forms of bullying, including verbal, physical, and social bullying, have been reported in the school environment. This phenomenon requires serious attention because it can hinder the development of character values such as empathy, tolerance, and responsibility, which are the core of character education.

According to Social Learning Theory proposed by Albert Bandura (1977), bullying behavior can be learned through observation and imitation of models, such as peers or even adults around students. This theory emphasizes that the social environment plays a major role in shaping individual behavior. In the school context, students who witness bullying without intervention tend to assume that such behavior is acceptable. Moral Development Theory proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) states that individual moral development progresses through several stages. In the early stages, students' actions tend to be based on direct consequences, such as rewards or punishments. When bullying is not firmly addressed, students may fail to understand the importance of moral values such as justice and respect for others.

A study by Christina Salmivalli (2014) found that peer involvement as defenders can significantly reduce bullying incidents, while a study by Gianluca Gini and Tiziana Pozzoli (2016) emphasized the important role of teachers in recognizing and addressing signs of bullying early. Similar findings by Catherine P. Bradshaw and Amy L. Sawyer (2017) revealed that school-based bullying prevention programs emphasizing character education are able to create a safer and more inclusive learning environment.

Previous studies show that character education plays an important role in preventing and overcoming bullying behavior in schools. Yusuf and Rahmawati (2021) found that the implementation of character values such as empathy, responsibility, discipline, and tolerance can reduce bullying tendencies among junior high school students. Likewise, Christina Salmivalli (2014) emphasized that peer involvement as defenders of victims is highly effective in reducing bullying when supported by a positive school culture. In addition, research by Susan M. Swearer, Dorothy L. Espelage, and Scott A. Napolitano (2018) showed that successful bullying prevention programs

generally integrate character education, teacher role modeling, firm school policies, and parental involvement. These findings indicate that bullying cannot be addressed through sanctions alone, but requires a preventive approach through continuous character building. Therefore, this study strengthens previous findings by focusing on the implementation of character education as an effort to prevent bullying at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang.

Novelty of this study lies in its focus on the implementation of character education as a comprehensive strategy to prevent bullying at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang. Unlike previous studies that generally examine bullying from disciplinary or psychological perspectives, this research integrates the strengthening of character values such as empathy, tolerance, responsibility, discipline, and respect as the main preventive approach. This study is also unique because it analyzes various forms of bullying simultaneously, including verbal bullying, physical bullying, and cyberbullying, within one school context. In addition, the research highlights the strategic role of teachers not only as educators, but also as moral role models, mentors, conflict mediators, and supervisors in creating a positive school culture. Another important contribution is the collaborative approach involving schools, teachers, students, and parents in building a safe, inclusive, and child-friendly learning environment. Therefore, this study offers a new model of bullying prevention through the integration of character education, teacher intervention, school policy, and school culture development in a sustainable manner.

SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang faces this challenge. Various forms of bullying, including verbal, physical, and social bullying, have been reported in the school environment. Based on preliminary observations, there are still behaviors such as mocking among students, giving degrading nicknames, pushing or disturbing friends during break time, and excluding certain students from social groups. In addition, the growing use of social media among students has also created the potential for cyberbullying in the form of negative comments, spreading rumors, and insults through online chat groups. This phenomenon requires serious attention because it can hinder the development of character values such as empathy, tolerance, and responsibility, which are the core of character education.

Other conditions found at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang show that some students still consider teasing or humiliating friends as ordinary jokes, so bullying behavior is often not recognized as harmful actions. On the other hand, victims of bullying tend to remain silent because they are afraid of retaliation from perpetrators or worry about being considered weak by their peers. Teachers hold a strategic position in implementing character education in schools. Teachers are not only providers of academic material, but also moral role models, facilitators of attitude formation, conflict mediators, and drivers of a healthy school culture. When teachers are able to integrate the values of empathy, discipline, tolerance, and responsibility into learning activities and daily interactions, the chances of bullying can be significantly reduced (Nurhayati & Faring Gusti Mahesa, 2024).

Based on the description above, this study is important to examine how character education is implemented as an effort to prevent bullying at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang. This research is expected to provide a clear picture of the forms of implementation that have been carried out, the obstacles encountered, and strategies to strengthen character education in order to create a safe, comfortable, and inclusive school environment for all students.

METHODS

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p-ISSN: 2477-5924 e-ISSN: 2477-8478

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of students, teachers, and other parties related to the forms of bullying occurring at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang. The descriptive method was used to systematically and factually explain the phenomenon of bullying in the context of character education.

According to John W. Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on the in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena through the perspectives of participants. This study aims to understand the meanings, experiences, and views of participants holistically. Creswell also emphasizes the importance of using flexible and open strategies in data collection, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, to capture various aspects of the phenomenon being studied.

The descriptive method, as explained by Creswell, is used to present research findings systematically and provide a detailed description of phenomena based on the collected data. In the context of this study, this method helped the researcher understand and describe the forms of bullying occurring at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang in depth. The study was conducted at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang. The research participants included the Principal, Vice Principal for Curriculum Affairs, five teachers, and ten students, who were selected using purposive sampling technique. Participants were chosen based on their direct involvement or knowledge regarding bullying in the school environment.

Data were collected through several techniques. In-depth interviews were conducted with students and teachers to understand their experiences and perspectives regarding bullying and its implications for character education. Direct observation was carried out by the researcher in the school environment to identify bullying behavior and students' social interactions. Documentation was used to obtain additional data from school documents, such as reports of bullying cases and related policies. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques based on the steps proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved familiarization with the data through interview transcripts and observation notes, coding the data to identify major themes, organizing themes relevant to the research focus, and interpreting the findings within the context of related theories and literature. To ensure data validity, source triangulation (interviews, observations, and documentation) and method triangulation were applied. In addition, member checking was conducted by asking participants to confirm the interview results and research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

a. Forms of Bullying

Based on the research findings, bullying occurring at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang takes various forms, ranging from verbal, physical, to psychological bullying. Each type of bullying has different impacts on the victims, both directly and indirectly. The following are the forms of bullying identified in this study:

Verbal Bullying

This form of bullying involves hurtful words, such as mocking, insulting, or giving degrading nicknames. Examples include students being ridiculed because of their physical

appearance or dialect. Such behavior is often carried out in front of many other students in order to embarrass the victim.

According to participant Rn, "I am often mocked by my friends because of my body shape. They give me nicknames that make me feel insecure." Similarly, participant Am stated, "Some friends like to make fun of my accent when I speak, and it makes me feel uncomfortable." Verbal bullying is often ignored because it is considered "just joking," yet its impact can damage the victim's self-confidence in the long term. Several students reported having experienced or witnessed verbal bullying, such as mockery, insults, or degrading nicknames.

Mrs. Wartini stated, "I once heard of a case where students called their friends by rude or insulting nicknames, for example using animal names to mock them. Although it may seem trivial, it can hurt the person concerned." This condition was also supported by Mrs. Elya, who stated that verbal bullying is often found in the form of ridicule toward students' physical appearance, such as mocking someone for being too thin or overweight. This can greatly affect a child's self-confidence. Victims often feel inferior and lose confidence. Some students reported that perpetrators frequently do not realize the emotional impact of their words. Verbal bullying is often difficult to detect because perpetrators try to hide their behavior outside the supervision of teachers. Teachers also mentioned that teasing among students is sometimes considered "a joke," even though it may leave psychological effects.

Physical Bullying

This behavior involves physical actions that hurt or harm the victim, such as hitting, pushing, or pulling hair. In several cases, physical bullying occurs in places with limited teacher supervision, such as toilets or the back yard of the school. This type of bullying not only causes physical injury but also psychological trauma to the victim.

According to participant Dn, "Sometimes there are friends who like to push me or trip my legs while I am walking in the school corridor. At first, I thought they were only joking, but it happened repeatedly, and it felt very uncomfortable." Similarly, participant AT stated, "Some friends often pull my shirt collar or damage my school belongings, such as dropping my bag or tearing my books. I feel that this is done intentionally to embarrass me."

Acts of damaging personal belongings such as bags and books, as well as physical treatment like pulling shirt collars, are forms of physical harassment that combine humiliation and attempts to shame the victim in front of others. These actions aim to weaken the victim's self-confidence and dignity, and are often carried out in front of peers to show the perpetrator's dominance.

Mr. Yazid stated, "I often find students reporting that they were hit on the head by their friends, supposedly as a joke. However, the blow can make the victim feel humiliated and hurt, even to the point of crying." Hitting someone on the head is often considered a joke by the perpetrator. However, this act not only causes physical pain but also hurts the victim's self-esteem, especially because the head is a sensitive and symbolic part of the body. According to Mr. Adi Rianto, tripping someone's feet is a form of physical bullying aimed at humiliating the victim in a public space. Its main impact is shame, which is often more lasting than the physical pain itself.

This condition can cause effects that are not limited to physical injuries, which may heal within a few days. Psychological wounds are often deeper and longer lasting. Victims of physical bullying frequently feel embarrassed because they are humiliated in front of their friends, especially when the incident is witnessed by many people. The fear caused by the possibility of repeated actions can make victims anxious when they are around the perpetrator or in certain areas of the school environment.

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p-ISSN: 2477-5924 e-ISSN: 2477-8478

Physical bullying can damage the victim's self-confidence. Victims may feel powerless to defend themselves, leading to feelings of inferiority and social isolation. In some cases, continuous bullying can cause emotional trauma that affects academic performance and mental well-being, such as anxiety, depression, or unwillingness to attend school.

Ultimately, physical bullying at school is a serious problem that requires the attention of teachers, parents, and school authorities. In addition to providing support for victims, educational efforts for all students are needed to create a safe and respectful environment.

Cyberbullying

In the digital era, bullying also occurs through social media or messaging applications. Several students reported receiving threatening messages, negative comments, or memes created to embarrass them. Cyberbullying is often more difficult to control because it occurs outside school hours, yet its impact remains significant on the victim's well-being.

According to participant Fn, "Some friends in social media groups often comment on my photos with rude words such as 'ugly' or 'tacky.' I feel ashamed and want to leave the group, but I am afraid they will talk worse about me." Negative comments on social media can damage the victim's self-esteem, especially when made publicly in a group. Victims feel pressured because the humiliation is visible to many people, creating shame and insecurity in their digital social environment.

ER also stated, "I often receive threatening messages from unknown numbers. The messages make me afraid, and I cannot even sleep well because I worry the threats are real." Threatening messages create intense fear for victims, even when the threats are never carried out. This shows how digital intimidation can affect victims' mental health, such as anxiety and insomnia.

Teachers revealed that cases of cyberbullying have begun to emerge, especially through social media groups. According to Mrs. Ari Ernawati, "I once handled a student who received threatening messages on social media. The perpetrator threatened to hit the student if he reported a certain incident to the teacher. The student became very afraid and even did not want to speak in class." These threatening messages through social media are a form of intimidation that creates fear of physical harm. The impact can be seen in changes in the student's behavior, becoming quiet and losing self-confidence. Such threats create a sense of insecurity, both physically and psychologically.

Cyberbullying can involve threats or intimidation carried out through digital platforms, but the effects are felt in the form of fear or physical anxiety in real life. It may take the form of threatening messages, spreading false rumors, or using media such as videos to frighten victims. The impacts are highly harmful, including fear, anxiety, and trauma that affect the victim's daily activities. Prevention efforts and timely intervention are needed to address this problem.

Table 1. Forms of Bullying Occurring at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang and Their Impacts on Victims

Type of Bullying	Forms of Behavior	Impacts on Victims
Verbal	• Mocking physical appearance (fat/thin), degrading nicknames, mocking speech accent • Calling others with animal names or	• Low self-esteem, loss of self-confidence, discomfort • Psychological harm, feelings of shame

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	rude words	
Physical	• Pushing, tripping, pulling shirt collars • Hitting the head, damaging belongings (bags, books)	• Physical pain, embarrassment in front of peers • Emotional trauma, fear
Cyberbullying	• Negative comments on social media (ugly, tacky) • Threatening messages through social media or unknown numbers	• Shame, withdrawal from the social environment • Anxiety, fear, sleep disturbances

The findings in Table 1 emphasize that bullying behavior at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang occurs in various forms and has real impacts on students' physical and psychological conditions. Verbal bullying, which is often considered a joke, actually causes shame, low self-esteem, and loss of self-confidence among victims. Physical bullying shows aggressive actions that not only cause pain but also create trauma and fear of being in the school environment. Meanwhile, cyberbullying has become a new form of violence with serious effects because it occurs through digital media and can continue outside school hours, causing victims to experience anxiety, emotional distress, and social withdrawal.

These data confirm that bullying is not a trivial issue, but a serious problem that can disrupt character development, mental health, and students' learning processes. Therefore, preventive measures are needed through character education, school supervision, and the involvement of teachers and parents in creating a safe and supportive educational environment.

b. Character Education Perspective on Bullying at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang

Character education aims to build moral and ethical values in students, including mutual respect, tolerance, and social responsibility. However, the research findings show the absence of a systematic approach. Teachers felt that there was no specific structured program to address bullying through character education. In addition, many students were unaware that certain actions, such as mocking and social exclusion, are forms of bullying that can harm others.

Bullying, whether physical, verbal, or cyber, has become a serious problem in educational environments, including at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang. This issue not only affects the physical and psychological condition of victims, but also reflects a failure in the process of character education that should be implemented in schools. In the context of character education, bullying contradicts the main goal of schools to develop moral values, empathy, and respect for others. According to Mrs. Yuliarni, "Character education is very important because it helps students understand values such as respect, tolerance, and responsibility. Through this approach, we hope to change students' mindsets so that they care more about others and reject all forms of violence."

Character education at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang needs to become a major focus in preventing bullying. It teaches students to take responsibility for their actions, respect differences, and develop caring and mutual respect. In this regard, bullying in schools can be viewed as a result of a lack of understanding of these values. For example, if a student commits physical violence such as hitting or kicking a friend, it indicates the student's inability to control emotions or a lack of empathy

toward others. On the other hand, students who become victims of bullying also need support to build self-confidence and to learn how to stand firm without feeling afraid or intimidated.

To create a safe and bullying-free environment at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang, active involvement from all parties is needed. According to Mrs. Wartini, "We use interactive and contextual learning methods. For example, we provide simulations in which students are asked to practice values such as cooperation and empathy. In addition, we often hold group discussions to encourage students to talk about their experiences and learn from one another."

Teachers, as agents of change, have an important role in shaping students' character. Teachers are not only responsible for teaching academic subjects, but also for instilling moral values through role modeling and daily interactions with students. Programs that encourage student cooperation, self-development activities, and more humane educational approaches are very important to implement.

Students at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang should also be empowered to become pioneers in creating a bullying-free school atmosphere. They can be encouraged to share experiences and discuss the importance of good character values, such as honesty, responsibility, and respect for differences. By creating discussion groups or activities that strengthen cooperation, students can learn more about the importance of respecting and caring for their peers.

c. Implementation of Bullying Prevention in Character Education

The research findings indicate that the implementation of character education plays a very important role as an effort to prevent bullying at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang. The bullying phenomena found in verbal, physical, social, and cyber forms show that there are still students who do not fully understand moral values such as empathy, tolerance, responsibility, and respect for others. This condition is in line with the opinion of Thomas Lickona (1991), who stated that deviant behavior in schools generally occurs when character values have not been consistently instilled in students. Character education not only functions to shape good behavior, but also becomes the foundation for creating a safe, comfortable, and civilized learning environment.

The involvement of various parties in the process of character education at school is the key to creating an environment that supports bullying prevention. Teachers, students, and parents must work together to build awareness of the importance of good character values such as tolerance, empathy, and honesty. Neneng Sri Lestari, et al (2026) emphasized the importance of this collaboration in creating an environment that supports character education in schools. If all parties are involved, efforts to build positive character among students can be achieved more effectively.

The active involvement of all related parties, including teachers, students, and parents, is essential in creating an environment that supports character education in schools. Prasetyo (2019) explained in his journal that strengthening character education in schools requires active support from various parties, especially parents and the surrounding community, who also play a role in creating a positive environment that supports students' character development. Furthermore, Prasetyo emphasized that the success of character education depends on cooperation between schools and families in instilling moral values from an early age.

Holistic Approach

Character education must be carried out through a holistic approach, which not only includes teaching theories about moral values but also their application in daily life. Thomas Lickona (1991), in his book, emphasized that to prevent bullying, character values must be taught

through real examples and direct practice so that students can experience their benefits in social interactions. This approach will be more effective if applied in routine school activities, such as group discussions, extracurricular programs, and activities involving direct social experiences.

The implementation of character education in schools needs to be integrated, not limited to certain subjects only. Character values should be included in learning activities, school culture, extracurricular programs, ceremonies, daily habits, and the social interactions of all school members. Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia (2017), through the Strengthening Character Education Program, emphasized that character building should be based on the harmonization of heart, feeling, thought, and physical development. Thus, character education is not merely theory, but becomes part of students' daily habits.

In addition to teachers, parental involvement is also an important factor. Many bullying behaviors are influenced by parenting styles, family environment, and communication habits at home. According to Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), child development is influenced by the closest environmental systems, especially family and school. If schools instill character values but families provide little support, the results will not be optimal. Therefore, synergy between teachers and parents is essential through regular communication, joint guidance, and supervision of students' behavioral development.

Firm School Policies

Schools must have clear and firm policies regarding the prevention and handling of bullying. These policies should include various preventive actions as well as clear sanctions for perpetrators of bullying. Peter K. Smith and Sonia Sharp (1994) explained that clear and firm policies can provide a sense of security for students and reduce the likelihood of bullying. Without well-structured policies, bullying behavior may be allowed to grow and spread among students. Therefore, these policies need the support of all parties in the school, including the principal, teachers, and other educational staff.

Clear and firm policies are very important in overcoming bullying. Rena Sylvia (2025**)** wrote in his journal that schools with clear anti-bullying policies are better able to create a sense of safety for students and prevent bullying. These policies should include clear rules regarding sanctions for perpetrators as well as proper procedures to protect victims. The enforcement of such policies is essential so that there is no tolerance for bullying behavior.

Monitoring and Evaluation

It is important for schools to conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of character education as well as the effectiveness of anti-bullying policies that have been applied. Richard I. Arends (2014) argued that continuous evaluation enables schools to assess the extent to which character education can reduce bullying behavior. Through this evaluation, schools can identify areas that need improvement and make adjustments to the strategies used in bullying prevention. This monitoring and evaluation process should involve all school components, including students, in order to create constructive feedback.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation are necessary steps to measure the effectiveness of character education in preventing bullying. Mujiburrahman et al., (2024) stated in their journal that regular evaluation of character education programs allows schools to assess the strengths and weaknesses in

program implementation. With proper evaluation, schools can improve and adjust policies as well as teaching methods to make them more effective.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that bullying cannot be solved through punishment alone, but requires a preventive and sustainable approach through character education. When values such as empathy, responsibility, tolerance, discipline, and respect for others are consistently instilled, the potential for bullying can be reduced. The implementation of character education at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang is expected to build a school culture that is safe, child-friendly, inclusive, and supportive of students' academic and social development optimally.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that bullying at SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang still occurs in various forms, namely verbal bullying, physical bullying, and cyberbullying. Verbal bullying appears through mockery, insults, and degrading nicknames, while physical bullying occurs in the form of pushing, hitting, tripping, and damaging friends' belongings. Cyberbullying is carried out through negative comments, threats, and insults on social media. All of these forms of bullying have serious impacts on victims, such as low self-confidence, fear, anxiety, emotional trauma, decreased learning motivation, and disrupted social relationships within the school environment. The phenomenon of bullying indicates that the implementation of character education at school has not been optimal. There are still students who do not fully understand the values of empathy, tolerance, responsibility, discipline, and respect for others. In addition, some bullying behaviors are still considered ordinary jokes, so they receive less serious attention. This condition emphasizes the need to strengthen character education in a systematic, planned, and sustainable manner as a preventive effort to reduce bullying behavior.

Teachers have a strategic role in preventing bullying through character education. Teachers function not only as providers of learning materials, but also as moral role models, mentors, conflict mediators, and drivers of a positive school culture. The implementation of character education needs to be carried out through the integration of character values in the learning process, daily habits, extracurricular activities, teacher role modeling, and stronger cooperation between schools and parents. Character education can be an effective solution in preventing bullying when implemented consistently and involving all members of the school community. Through strengthening moral values, building a safe school culture, enforcing firm anti-bullying policies, and continuous supervision, SMPN 3 Sungai Ambawang is expected to create a comfortable, inclusive learning environment that supports students' academic and social development.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Regarding this study, the author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Research concept and design were developed by Hemafitria. Data collection was carried out by Rohani. Data analysis and interpretation were conducted by Wahab. The manuscript was drafted by Hemafitria, while critical revisions related to important intellectual content were undertaken by Rohani. Qualitative analysis was performed by Wahab.

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