Didactica :
Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran
2026, 6(2), 102-113
https://doi.org/10.56393/didactica.v6i2.4968

Character Education Strategies for Bullying Prevention: A Case Study at State Junior High School 19 Malang

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Article History
Received : 22 October 2026;
Revised : 5 November 2026;
Accepted : 24 November 2026.

Keywords
Bullying Prevention;
Character Education;
Moral Internalization;
School Culture;
Student Behavior.

Abstract
Bullying in schools represents an educational problem that requires preventive approaches through the development of students' moral awareness, empathy, and social responsibility. This study aims to analyze character education strategies, observed changes in students' behavior, and challenges associated with their implementation in bullying prevention at State Junior High School 19 Malang. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving 12 participants comprising the school principal, guidance and counseling teachers, homeroom teachers, and students selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were collected through participatory observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation and analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings reveal that character education is implemented through four interconnected strategies: teacher role modeling, positive habituation, guided moral reflection, and active student participation. These strategies were accompanied by indications of emerging moral awareness, willingness to acknowledge inappropriate behavior, and readiness among some students to transition from passive bystanders to active defenders when encountering bullying. However, inconsistencies between moral values promoted at school and students' experiences within their families and communities were perceived by teachers as challenges to sustaining positive behavior. This study emphasizes the importance of character education as a continuous process of moral internalization through strengthening school culture, encouraging student participation, and fostering school–family collaboration to create safe, inclusive, and respectful educational environments.

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How to Cite : Mukhlis, G. N. A. F., Elpanusi, G., & Suriyanto, S. (2026). Character Education Strategies for Bullying Prevention: A Case Study at State Junior High School 19 Malang. *Didactica : Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran*, *6*(2), 102–113. https://doi.org/10.56393/didactica.v6i2.4968

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Introduction

Character education constitutes an essential component of the educational process, as schools are responsible not only for developing students' intellectual abilities but also for fostering moral awareness, social responsibility, empathy, and respect for others. The educational environment provides opportunities for students to internalize moral values through learning experiences, social interactions, and participation in collective activities. Character education should therefore be implemented through a holistic approach that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions into students' everyday experiences (Agustin & Ulfatun, 2024). The development of positive character requires consistent reinforcement through exemplary behavior, habituation, and self-reflection rather than merely the transmission of moral knowledge (Nasution, 2024). Schools also play an important role in establishing social norms that encourage mutual respect, responsible behavior, and constructive interpersonal relationships. The integration of moral values into school culture provides a foundation for developing students' ability to respond appropriately to social differences and interpersonal conflicts. Consequently, character education can serve as a preventive educational approach to addressing behavioral problems, particularly bullying, within the school environment.

Bullying remains a persistent problem in educational institutions that threatens students' psychological well-being, social development, and participation in learning activities. Bullying is characterized by intentional aggressive behavior, repetition, and an imbalance of power between perpetrators and victims, which may manifest through physical aggression, verbal harassment, and social exclusion (Olweus, 2013). In the Indonesian context, bullying among junior high school students remains a concern, particularly in relation to interpersonal relationships and the development of students' self-concept (Latif & Kurniawan, 2022). Similar concerns have emerged internationally, as research involving Chinese adolescents highlights the relationship between school climate, prosocial tendencies, and bullying behavior (Fu et al., 2024). The consequences of bullying extend beyond immediate interpersonal conflicts and may affect students' emotional security, self-confidence, and ability to establish healthy social relationships. School-based interventions are therefore necessary to address both bullying perpetration and victimization through comprehensive educational strategies (Gaffney et al., 2021). These circumstances emphasize the importance of preventive approaches that address the moral and social dimensions of students' behavior rather than relying exclusively on disciplinary sanctions.

Character education offers a relevant framework for bullying prevention by encouraging students to understand, internalize, and demonstrate moral values in their daily interactions. A holistic approach to character education requires the integration of moral understanding, emotional awareness, and behavioral practices within the educational environment (Agustin & Ulfatun, 2024). Exemplary behavior demonstrated by teachers provides students with observable models of respectful communication, empathy, and constructive conflict resolution (Nasution, 2024). Habituation reinforces these values through repeated participation in positive activities that encourage students to develop responsible behavioral patterns. Guided moral reflection complements habituation by providing opportunities for students to evaluate their actions, recognize the consequences of their behavior, and consider alternative responses to

interpersonal conflicts. The integration of social-emotional learning into bullying prevention also emphasizes the importance of emotional awareness, interpersonal competence, and responsible decision-making (Espelage et al., 2024). Furthermore, value-based educational activities can provide meaningful opportunities for students to develop awareness of the importance of respecting others and preventing harmful behavior (Putra et al., 2024). Accordingly, character education should be understood as a continuous process of moral internalization that supports the development of anti-bullying attitudes and behavior.

The implementation of character education in bullying prevention also requires a supportive school culture and the active involvement of the entire school community. Teachers occupy a strategic position in establishing behavioral expectations because their attitudes, communication patterns, and responses to interpersonal conflicts provide examples for students (Nasution, 2024). Teachers' perceptions of anti-bullying education may also influence how prevention programs are understood and implemented within educational institutions (Nurdianawati et al., 2025). Beyond the role of educators, peer relationships represent an important dimension of bullying prevention because students may participate in bullying situations as perpetrators, victims, passive witnesses (*bystanders*), or active defenders (*upstanders*). The development of social-emotional competence can encourage students to recognize harmful behavior and respond to bullying situations through constructive social actions (Espelage et al., 2024). School-based prevention programs that incorporate student participation, social skills development, and adult supervision provide opportunities to strengthen collective responsibility for preventing bullying (Gaffney et al., 2021). However, the sustainability of positive behavior also needs to be understood in relation to family relationships and the broader social environment, which may reinforce or challenge the moral values developed at school (Latif & Kurniawan, 2022; Bowes et al., 2019). Bullying prevention therefore requires an educational ecosystem that promotes consistency between moral instruction, interpersonal practices, and students' social experiences.

Previous studies have examined character education and bullying prevention from several complementary perspectives. Agustin and Ulfatun (2024) emphasized the importance of holistic character education through the integration of moral values into institutional policies, learning activities, and school programs. Nasution (2024) highlighted exemplary behavior, habituation, and self-reflection as important components of students' character development. Gaffney et al. (2021) examined the effectiveness of school-based bullying prevention programs, while Espelage et al. (2024) addressed the integration of social-emotional learning into bullying prevention practices. Putra et al. (2024) explored value-based educational approaches to bullying prevention, whereas Nurdianawati et al. (2025) focused on teachers' perceptions of anti-bullying education. Other studies have examined the relationship between family environments, parental attachment, and students' behavioral development in relation to bullying (Bowes et al., 2019; Latif & Kurniawan, 2022). Although these studies provide complementary insights, the literature reviewed in this study leaves room for a more integrated understanding of how character education strategies are implemented in everyday school practices, how students respond to these strategies, and what challenges influence the continuity of moral internalization. This research gap provides a basis for examining character

education and bullying prevention as interconnected educational processes within a specific school context.

SMP Negeri 19 Malang provides a relevant empirical context for examining the implementation of character education in bullying prevention. Preliminary interviews with guidance and counseling teachers indicated that, although physical bullying was relatively limited, verbal harassment, negative labeling, and social exclusion remained concerns within the school environment. These preliminary findings also indicated that some students tended to remain passive when witnessing bullying because of concerns about becoming involved or perceptions that such behavior constituted ordinary joking. In response to these challenges, the school has developed character education initiatives emphasizing teacher role modeling, positive habituation, moral reflection, and active student participation. Programs such as *Friday with Character* and *Anti-Bullying Ambassador* provide opportunities for students to reflect on their behavior, develop empathy, and practice constructive responses to bullying situations. These initiatives offer a context for exploring how moral values are translated into everyday social interactions and how students respond to educational efforts aimed at preventing bullying. The distinctive contribution of this study lies in its integrated examination of character education strategies, observed changes in students' roles and behavior, and challenges associated with sustaining moral values across different social environments. Rather than measuring program effectiveness through statistical comparisons, this study focuses on understanding the educational processes and contextual conditions underlying the implementation of character education for bullying prevention.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze character education strategies implemented at SMP Negeri 19 Malang in the context of bullying prevention. Specifically, the study examines the implementation of teacher role modeling, positive habituation, guided moral reflection, and active student participation in developing anti-bullying behavior. It also seeks to identify observed changes in students' moral awareness, interpersonal behavior, and responses to bullying situations, particularly the transition from passive witnesses to active defenders. Furthermore, this study explores challenges encountered by the school in sustaining character education, including the perceived influence of family relationships and students' broader social environments. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the understanding of character education as a contextual and continuous process that connects moral understanding, emotional awareness, and social behavior. Practically, the findings are expected to provide insights for teachers, school administrators, and other educational stakeholders in developing preventive strategies that emphasize empathy, respectful communication, and collective responsibility. Ultimately, this study positions character education as an integral component of educational efforts to establish a safe, respectful, inclusive, and supportive school environment.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth the implementation of character education strategies, observed changes in students' behavior, and challenges associated with bullying prevention within a specific educational context (Creswell, 2014). The study was conducted over three months at SMP Negeri 19 Malang, which was purposively selected because of its implementation of character education programs

emphasizing teacher role modeling, positive habituation, moral reflection, and active student participation in addressing bullying. The study involved 12 participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, comprising one school principal as a key informant, two guidance and counseling teachers, three homeroom teachers representing Grades VII, VIII, and IX, and six students, including two students who had experienced bullying, two who had engaged in bullying, and two who had witnessed bullying incidents (Sugiyono, 2019). Data were collected through participatory observations of students' social interactions during flag ceremonies, school breaks, and character education activities, semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately 30–60 minutes per participant, and documentation consisting of bullying incident records, photographs of moral reflection activities, students' reflective journals, and anti-bullying campaign materials. The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which involved three interconnected stages: data condensation through the selection, organization, and categorization of relevant information; data display through thematic narratives; and conclusion drawing and verification through the identification and examination of patterns, relationships, and meanings emerging from the empirical data. The analytical process focused on three interrelated dimensions, namely the implementation of character education strategies, observed changes in students' moral awareness and responses to bullying, and contextual challenges affecting the sustainability of character education. Data trustworthiness was established through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from school administrators, teachers, and students; methodological triangulation by examining the consistency of observations, interviews, and documentation; and member checking by reconfirming interview findings with participants to strengthen the credibility of the researchers' interpretations (Creswell, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings of this study indicate that character education at SMP Negeri 19 Malang is implemented through interconnected educational strategies emphasizing teacher role modeling, positive habituation, guided moral reflection, and active student participation in bullying prevention. Data obtained through interviews, observations, and supporting documentation revealed that these strategies were integrated into various school activities and interpersonal interactions. The school sought to address bullying-related behavior not only through disciplinary regulations but also through educational activities that encouraged students to recognize and reflect on their moral responsibilities. The implementation of character education involved teachers and students in developing respectful communication and constructive interpersonal relationships. During the three-month research period, observations indicated emerging changes in some students' willingness to acknowledge inappropriate behavior and respond to incidents of peer ridicule. However, teachers also identified challenges associated with the continuity of positive behavior outside the school environment. These findings illustrate the implementation of character education strategies, observed behavioral responses, and contextual challenges associated with bullying prevention.

Teacher role modeling emerged as one of the strategies implemented by SMP Negeri 19 Malang to promote respectful interpersonal behavior. Teachers were expected to demonstrate

appropriate communication patterns when interacting with students and addressing behavioral problems. To support this strategy, the school organized a two-day nonviolent communication training program for teachers before the beginning of the new academic year. The training was intended to encourage educators to avoid communication practices involving sarcasm, humiliation, and verbal aggression when responding to students' misconduct. Teachers were encouraged to demonstrate constructive approaches to addressing interpersonal conflicts and correcting inappropriate behavior. Through this initiative, the school sought to establish consistency between the moral values communicated to students and the behavior demonstrated by educators. The available findings describe this institutional initiative as part of the school's character education strategy, although direct evidence of changes in teachers' communication practices remains limited.

Positive habituation and guided moral reflection were implemented through the school's *Friday with Character* program, which was conducted every Friday before students returned home. The program involved a 15-minute reflection session during which students were encouraged to examine their behavior and record their experiences in personal reflective journals. Students were asked to identify one positive action they had performed, one negative action they regretted, and one improvement plan for the following week. Observations conducted during the three-month research period indicated that some students increasingly acknowledged inappropriate behavior, including mocking and excluding their peers, without waiting for teachers to identify their misconduct. A guidance and counseling teacher described changes in students' participation in the reflective activities as follows:

> "Initially, many of them were originally written. But over time they began to be honest. There were students who wrote 'last week I used to call friends with body calls, I was embarrassed'. That's a big progress because he's self-conscious without me reprimanding." (Guidance and Counseling Teacher 1, interview, May 26, 2026).

The participant's account illustrates an emerging willingness among some students to recognize and acknowledge inappropriate behavior through guided reflection. These findings indicate that reflective journals provided opportunities for students to communicate their experiences, acknowledge mistakes, and formulate intentions to improve their interpersonal behavior.

Another finding concerns the involvement of students in bullying prevention through the school's *Anti-Bullying Ambassador* program. The program consisted of student cadre training and role-play activities addressing interpersonal conflicts, conducted across four meetings. These activities provided opportunities for participating students to practice constructive responses to situations involving ridicule and harmful peer interactions. At the beginning of the research period, observations indicated that students frequently remained silent or laughed when witnessing their peers being ridiculed. Such behavior reflected the presence of passive witnesses who did not actively intervene in harmful interpersonal situations. Through the ambassador program, participating students were encouraged to recognize inappropriate behavior and develop alternative responses when witnessing incidents involving their peers. The program represented an institutional effort to involve students directly in the school's bullying prevention activities.

An indication of active student involvement was identified during an observation conducted in the school canteen in the third month of the program. The observed incident involved a Grade VII student who was ridiculed because of his damaged shoes. Two students participating in the *Anti-Bullying Ambassador* program approached the students involved and attempted to interrupt the ridicule through verbal communication. The observation record documented their response as follows: "Eh, then he will be hurt, you know. Shoes are not the size of the person. Let's just play" (observation note, May 26, 2026). Following the intervention, the student responsible for the ridicule became silent and subsequently apologized. This incident illustrates an instance in which students actively responded to harmful peer behavior rather than remaining passive witnesses. Although the observation represents a specific incident, it provides empirical evidence of how participating students applied constructive communication in responding to peer ridicule.

Despite the implementation of various character education strategies, teachers identified challenges associated with students' family relationships and broader social environments. Interviews with guidance and counseling teachers indicated that some students who demonstrated positive behavior at school reportedly returned to aggressive communication patterns following weekends or extended school holidays. Teachers expressed concerns regarding students' exposure to communication practices outside school that differed from the moral values promoted through character education activities. These concerns were particularly evident in accounts describing discrepancies between students' behavior at school and their reported behavior within their communities. A Grade VIII homeroom teacher described one such situation involving a student participating in the school's anti-bullying initiative:

> "There are male students in grade VIII. At school she was very polite and became an anti-bullying ambassador. But one day we got a report from another parent that he was making fun of his neighbor in the neighborhood. It turned out that he was used to hearing his father speak rudely to his mother. So it's only natural that he thinks mocking is normal." (Grade VIII Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 26, 2026).

The participant's account illustrates the teacher's perception of inconsistencies between the behavioral expectations promoted at school and students' experiences outside the educational environment. However, information concerning the student's family interactions was obtained indirectly through the teacher's account and was not independently verified through interviews with family members.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that character education in the context of bullying prevention can be understood as an interconnected educational process involving moral understanding, emotional awareness, and interpersonal behavior. The strategies implemented at SMP Negeri 19 Malang reflect an institutional effort to integrate moral values into everyday educational experiences rather than limiting character development to formal instruction or disciplinary regulations. This finding is consistent with Agustin and Ulfatun (2024), who emphasized that holistic character education requires the integration of moral values into institutional policies,

learning activities, extracurricular programs, and collaboration with parents. Similarly, Nasution (2024) identified exemplary behavior, habituation, and self-reflection as important components of students' character development. The combination of these strategies provides opportunities for students to encounter moral values through observation, repeated practice, and personal reflection. In the context of bullying prevention, such educational experiences may support students' understanding of respectful communication, empathy, and responsibility toward others. Accordingly, character education should be positioned as a continuous educational process that connects moral instruction with students' everyday social experiences.

Teacher role modeling represents an important mechanism through which moral values can be communicated and reinforced within the educational environment. The implementation of nonviolent communication training at SMP Negeri 19 Malang reflects an institutional recognition that educators' communication patterns may influence students' understanding of appropriate interpersonal behavior. Nasution (2024) emphasized that students develop character through observing and imitating the behavior demonstrated by adults within their educational environment. This perspective suggests that teachers' responses to interpersonal conflicts may provide observable examples of how disagreements and behavioral problems can be addressed without resorting to humiliation or verbal aggression. Nurdianawati et al. (2025) similarly highlighted the relevance of teachers' perceptions of anti-bullying education to the implementation of character development initiatives. Consistency between the moral values communicated by teachers and their everyday behavior is therefore important because contradictory practices may weaken the educational messages conveyed to students. Nevertheless, the findings concerning teacher training primarily describe an institutional strategy and its educational rationale rather than establish direct evidence of its effectiveness in changing teachers' or students' behavior.

The implementation of positive habituation and guided moral reflection highlights the importance of connecting moral values with students' personal experiences. Through the *Friday with Character* program, students were provided with recurring opportunities to examine their actions, recognize behavior that may have harmed others, and formulate intentions for improvement. Agustin and Ulfatun (2024) emphasized that the integration of character education into routine school activities provides opportunities for students to engage continuously with moral values. Nasution (2024) further identified self-reflection as an important component of character development because it encourages students to examine their behavior and develop moral awareness. The willingness of some students to acknowledge inappropriate behavior through reflective journals suggests an emerging process of connecting moral understanding with personal responsibility. This interpretation is also consistent with the educational orientation of social-emotional learning, which emphasizes emotional awareness, empathy, and responsible interpersonal behavior in bullying prevention (Espelage et al., 2024). However, the observed willingness to acknowledge mistakes should not be interpreted as evidence of permanent character transformation because the research did not examine the long-term sustainability of these behavioral responses.

Active student participation through the *Anti-Bullying Ambassador* program provides insight into the relationship between character education and the development of social responsibility within peer groups. The observed intervention by student ambassadors illustrates

how moral awareness may be expressed through practical responses to harmful interpersonal behavior. Rather than remaining passive witnesses, the participating students attempted to interrupt ridicule, recognize its potential emotional consequences, and redirect the interaction toward a more constructive activity. This finding is consistent with Espelage et al. (2024), who emphasized the relevance of social-emotional learning and constructive interpersonal responses in bullying prevention. Gaffney et al. (2021) also highlighted the importance of comprehensive school-based programs in addressing bullying perpetration and victimization. Furthermore, Putra et al. (2024) discussed the relevance of value-based educational initiatives in developing awareness and respectful interpersonal behavior. From the perspective of character education, the transition from *bystander* to *upstander* can be interpreted as an expression of moral awareness accompanied by a willingness to act, although the available evidence remains insufficient to establish a general or sustained behavioral transformation among participating students (Gultom, 2025; Indawati, et al., 2025).

The challenges identified by teachers concerning students' family relationships and broader social environments highlight the importance of understanding character education within a supportive educational ecosystem. Although schools provide structured opportunities for students to develop moral awareness and respectful interpersonal behavior, students also encounter behavioral models and social expectations within their families and communities. Latif and Kurniawan (2022) examined the relationship between parental attachment, self-concept, and bullying behavior among junior high school students, indicating the relevance of family-related experiences to students' interpersonal development. Similarly, Bowes et al. (2019) discussed the role of family environments in children's emotional and behavioral responses to bullying. These perspectives suggest that the sustainability of character education may be influenced by the consistency between moral values promoted within schools and those encountered in students' broader social environments. Collaboration between schools and parents therefore represents a potential strategy for reinforcing respectful communication, empathy, and behavioral responsibility beyond the educational environment. Nevertheless, because parents were not systematically involved as research participants, the findings concerning family-related challenges should be interpreted as perceptions reported by school personnel rather than verified evidence of causal relationships between family environments and bullying behavior.

Taken together, the findings contribute to the understanding of character education as a contextual and continuous educational process that integrates teacher role modeling, positive habituation, guided moral reflection, and active student participation in bullying prevention. The observed willingness of some students to acknowledge inappropriate behavior and intervene in incidents of peer ridicule illustrates how moral values may begin to be expressed through everyday social interactions. The distinctive contribution of this study lies in its integrated examination of institutional character education practices, emerging behavioral responses, and perceived contextual challenges within a junior high school environment. Practically, the findings suggest that schools may benefit from developing character education initiatives that combine respectful communication, reflective activities, student involvement, and collaboration with families (Tasane, et al., 2024; Rafifah, et al., 2024). However, the three-month research period, the absence of systematic parental participation, and the limited

presentation of students' direct accounts restrict conclusions regarding the sustainability and overall effectiveness of the implemented strategies. The qualitative case study design also does not provide a basis for establishing causal relationships or determining reductions in bullying frequency through statistical comparisons. Future research should therefore consider longitudinal approaches, systematic involvement of parents, and more comprehensive documentation of students' experiences to deepen understanding of the contribution of character education to bullying prevention.

Conclusion

This study concludes that character education strategies implemented at SMP Negeri 19 Malang in the context of bullying prevention encompass four interconnected components: teacher role modeling, positive habituation, guided moral reflection, and active student participation. Teacher role modeling provides students with examples of respectful communication and constructive interpersonal behavior, while positive habituation and guided moral reflection encourage students to recognize inappropriate actions, develop moral awareness, and assume responsibility for their behavior. Active student participation through the *Anti-Bullying Ambassador* program illustrates emerging behavioral responses, particularly the willingness of some students to move from passive witnesses (*bystanders*) to active defenders (*upstanders*) when encountering harmful peer interactions. However, teachers identified perceived inconsistencies between the moral values promoted at school and students' experiences within their families and broader social environments as challenges to sustaining positive behavior. The contribution of this study lies in its contextual understanding of character education as a continuous educational process that connects moral internalization, empathy, social responsibility, and anti-bullying behavior. These findings highlight the importance of developing a supportive school culture that integrates exemplary behavior, reflective practices, student engagement, and collaboration with parents. Schools are therefore encouraged to strengthen comprehensive character education programs that promote collective responsibility for creating safe, respectful, and inclusive educational environments. Considering the limited research duration and the absence of systematic parental participation, future studies should employ longitudinal approaches and involve broader educational stakeholders to examine the sustainability of students' behavioral changes and the contribution of character education to bullying prevention.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang for its institutional support and facilitation throughout the research and publication process. The support provided by the university has contributed significantly to the successful completion of this study and the preparation of this manuscript.

Authors' Note

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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