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Research Article

TEACHERS' ANTI-BULLYING STRATEGIES IN KINDERGARTEN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Shirley B. Tual^{1*}, Grace G. Tizon¹, Rochelan Lumasag¹, Elsa B. Buenavidez¹, Cynthia S. Superable²

^{1*}Misamis University, Oroquieta City Philippines

²Misamis University, Ozamis City Philippines

ABSTRACT

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*Corresponding Author:

shirley.tual001@deped.gov.ph

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Anti-bullying initiatives in schools are essential for creating safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments where children can develop socially and emotionally. This study explored the effectiveness of teachers' anti-bullying strategies in preschool classrooms. Using a phenomenological research design, the study focused on 10 kindergarten teachers from public schools in the Aloran District, Division of Misamis Occidental, who were purposively chosen. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' Existential Analysis. There were five emerging themes in the study, namely: fostering a safe and nurturing classroom: teachers' embodied experiences of emotional responsiveness and physical engagement in anti-bullying strategies, navigating time with patience and persistence: teachers' temporal strategies in managing bullying incidents, fostering safe and nurturing learning spaces: teachers' engagement with physical and social environments in anti-bullying practices, fostering collaboration and nurturing connections: teachers relational engagement with children, parents, and colleagues in anti-bullying practices, fostering collaborative connections: navigating relationships with children, parents, and colleagues. Effective anti-bullying practices in early childhood rely on teachers' embodied and emotionally responsive presence, intentional use of time and space, and sustained, collaborative relationships with students and families. Schools and teacher education programs may provide sustained professional development that strengthens teachers' embodied, relational, time-sensitive, and collaborative skills.

Keywords: anti-bullying, collaboration, early childhood education, relational engagement, teacher practices

Introduction

Bullying has become an increasing problem in early childhood education, and research shows that these violent behaviors can begin as early as kindergarten (Fernandez et al., 2023; Katsapi, 2025). While most consider bullying with older children, kinder learners are capable of bullying-type acts like exclusion, name-calling, and aggression. In the kindergarten environment, bullying occurs in various forms: physical (pushing, hitting), verbal (teasing, name-calling), and relational (exclusion from play or activities) (Al-Ketbi et al., 2024; Saliu, 2024). Though such behaviors are at times downplayed as normal stages of development, they can be detrimental to a child's emotional and social growth. If left unchecked, initial bullying tendencies tend to escalate and become embedded in a child's social lifestyle, with long-term implications for academic and mental health (Bettencourt et al., 2023; Lidberg et al., 2023).

Teachers play a critical role in identifying and addressing kindergarten bullying behavior (Parris, 2025). Their awareness and ability to manage class dynamics are central to establishing a secure and welcoming learning environment. Some effective strategies typically employed include storytelling and singing, which teach children empathy and polite behavior, and modeling and rewarding appropriate behavior to promote prosocial behavior (Yanko et al., 2024). In addition, routine classroom procedures and norms minimize the settings where bullying may occur. Particularly, parental collaboration and implementation of strict school-wide anti-bullying protocols strengthen the efficacy of these initiatives by sending strong messages at school and home (Doss & Crawford, 2023). This is supported in the Philippine context by legal and policy instruments such as Republic Act No. 10157 or the Kindergarten Education Act, which provides for the all-around development of young learners, Republic Act No. 10627 or the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013, and DepEd Order No. 40, series of 2021, which mandates the institutionalization of child protection mechanisms and procedures in bullying incidents in schools.

Other studies have examined anti-bullying approaches in early childhood education and offer teachers lessons in best practices (Njelesani et al., 2025; Landers et al., 2025; Irsa et al., 2025). Research highlights the use of emotional literacy interventions, social skills training, and play-based interventions to prevent aggressive behavior (Fauzan & Sulaeman, 2024; Njelesani et al., 2025). The study indicates the practical implementation of early intervention and innovative teaching approaches, facilitating positive peer contact. Most studies are marred by flaws such as short observation periods, small sample sizes, and heavy reliance on qualitative studies, which are prone to failure in demonstrating effects over the long term (Rahmawati et al., 2024). Most studies are also context-specific and therefore cannot be generalized across different preschool programs.

One of these contributions to the discipline is that of Rahmawati et al. (2024), who examined measures kindergarten teachers took to reduce bullying. In the study, the authors identified several interventions, including storytelling, music, parental involvement, and the imposition of school rules, all aimed at building character and reducing deviance among young children. The study emphasized teacher-parent collaboration and advocated character education early on as a foundation strategy. While the study had several thoughtful conclusions, it also had several flaws: it relied on just a week of data from a single kindergarten location and used primarily qualitative data. These dimensions limit the ability to draw broader or longer-term conclusions about the effectiveness of the identified strategies.

The restrictions in Rahmawati et al.'s (2024) study underscore the need for more comprehensive studies that evaluate teachers' long-term anti-bullying efforts across a broader array of contexts. While their findings offer valuable points of departure, the lack of longitudinal evidence and greater contextual variability leaves a knowledge gap regarding the long-term impact of these interventions. In addition, their reliance on teacher-reported data suggests that future studies need to include the perspectives of parents and children. Closing these gaps is essential to ensuring effective, responsive, evidence-based practices across different preschool settings. Therefore, this study proposes a case study approach to scrutinize how teachers inevitably apply anti-bullying techniques in practice, quantify their longitudinal impacts, and consider multiple viewpoints to better understand their overall effectiveness.

This study explored and evaluated the efficacy of teachers' anti-bullying techniques in a kindergarten setting to address gaps identified in previous research. By employing a case study design, the research is positioned to systematically and rigorously assess both the implementation and the effects of teacher-

implemented interventions. Unlike other studies, this research was conducted over a more extended period and involved a variety of data sources, including teacher interviews and parent ratings. The research examined how the strategies affect children's conduct, peer relationships, and classroom atmosphere. Ultimately, it aimed to contribute to more effective and transferable anti-bullying measures in early childhood education, upholding the spirit of RA 10157, RA 10627, and DepEd Order No. 40, series of 2021, in creating safe and caring kindergarten environments.

Methods

This study utilized a phenomenological research design guided by Moustakas' Existential Analysis to explore kindergarten teachers' lived experiences in implementing anti-bullying strategies in public kindergarten classrooms in the Aloran District, Division of Misamis Occidental. Ten kindergarten teachers who met specific inclusion criteria participated in in-depth interviews using a validated interview guide that captured their experiences with strategies such as storytelling, songs, behavior modeling, and parental involvement. Data were gathered ethically, with institutional permissions, informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Analysis followed the structured phases of epoche, horizontalization, thematic clustering, textural and structural descriptions, and textural-structural synthesis to uncover the essence of teachers' experiences. This rigorous process enabled an in-depth understanding of how teachers made sense of their roles, navigated contextual influences, and fostered safe and nurturing classroom environments to address bullying behaviors in early childhood settings.

Results and Discussions

Four emerging themes were found in the study, namely: fostering a safe and nurturing classroom: teachers' embodied experiences of emotional responsiveness and physical engagement in anti-bullying strategies, navigating time with patience and persistence: teachers' temporal strategies in managing bullying incidents, fostering safe and nurturing learning spaces: teachers' engagement with physical and social environments in anti-bullying practices, fostering collaboration and nurturing connections: teachers relational engagement with children, parents, and colleagues in anti-bullying practices, fostering collaborative connections: navigating relationships with children, parents, and colleagues.

Theme 1: Fostering a Safe and Nurturing Classroom: Teachers' Embodied Experiences of Emotional Responsiveness and Physical Engagement

This theme demonstrates that classroom safety and nurturance are primarily enacted through teachers' embodied presence and emotional responsiveness rather than through formal policies alone. Teachers' posture, proximity, eye contact, tone of voice, and calm physical engagement function as immediate relational signals that communicate care, authority, and protection, shaping learners' felt sense of safety, inclusion, and trust. When children feel emotionally secure, they are more willing to participate, build friendships, and express themselves confidently. Viewed through Moustakas' (1994) concept of the lived body, these findings highlight how meaning, care, and moral responsibility are communicated through bodily awareness and intuitive action. Empirical studies affirm that teachers' non-verbal communication, affective presence, and relational competence play a crucial role in shaping positive classroom climates and reducing bullying behaviors (Kumpulainen et al., 2020; Zembylas, 2021; Gaffney et al., 2021; Thornberg et al., 2022; Yoon & Bauman, 2021; Wachs et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Navigating Time with Patience and Persistence: Teachers' Temporal Strategies in Managing Bullying Incidents

This theme reveals that effective bullying management is a gradual, time-sensitive process that requires teachers' patience, repetition, and sustained engagement rather than one-time interventions. Teachers described revisiting incidents, providing repeated guidance, and offering individualized follow-up to support learners' gradual internalization of empathy, self-regulation, and pro-social behavior. Through Moustakas' (1994) concept of lived time, teachers' experiences illustrate how past incidents inform present responses while future expectations shape ongoing persistence. Behavioral change unfolds through carefully paced interventions that

respect children's developmental readiness. Supporting literature confirms that timely, repeated, and sustained teacher engagement leads to reduced victimization, improved peer relationships, and stronger perceptions of fairness and safety among students (Salmivalli et al., 2020; Espelage et al., 2021; Hong & Espelage, 2022).

Theme 3: Fostering Safe and Nurturing Learning Spaces: Teachers' Engagement with Physical and Social Environments

This theme underscores that teacher actively construct classroom safety by intentionally shaping both physical and social environments. Strategic seating arrangements, movement patterns, supervision, and facilitation of inclusive peer interactions transform the classroom into a lived space where learners feel respected, supported, and emotionally secure. Anchored in Moustakas' (1994) concept of lived space, the findings show that classrooms are experienced relationally and emotionally rather than as neutral settings. Teachers' deliberate environmental engagement fosters participation, cooperation, and positive peer relationships. Empirical evidence indicates that well-structured physical spaces, combined with proactive social management, reduce bullying behaviors and strengthen students' sense of belonging and safety (Cornell et al., 2020; Olweus & Limber, 2020; Hong & Espelage, 2022).

Theme 4: Fostering Collaborative Connections: Teachers' Relational Engagement with Children, Parents, and Colleagues

This theme highlights that anti-bullying practices are fundamentally relational and strengthened through sustained collaboration with children, parents, and colleagues. Teachers' empathetic engagement with learners builds trust and social-emotional competence, while consistent communication with parents reinforces lessons on kindness and empathy beyond the classroom. Collaboration among colleagues supports shared strategies and a cohesive school climate. Through Moustakas' (1994) concept of lived relations, these experiences illustrate how safety and inclusion are co-constructed through intersubjective connections and shared responsibility. Empirical studies affirm that strong teacher–student relationships, parental involvement, and collegial collaboration are associated with reduced bullying, improved peer relations, and more positive school climates (Wachs et al., 2020; Wang & Chen, 2023; Lin & Huang, 2024; Grama et al., 2024; Scholz et al., 2025).

Conclusions

The findings indicate that effective anti-bullying practices in early childhood education are fundamentally relational, embodied, and sustained over time, as teachers' emotional responsiveness, physical presence, and intentional shaping of classroom spaces are crucial for fostering safe, inclusive, and nurturing learning environments. These practices require continuous, time-sensitive engagement to support children's gradual social and emotional development. They are most successful when reinforced through strong, empathetic relationships and shared responsibility among teachers, families, and school staff across home, classroom, and school contexts.

Recommendations

The recommendations emphasize the need for sustained professional development that strengthens teachers embodied relational skills, emotion regulation, empathy, and non-verbal communication, alongside training in scaffolded and time-sensitive anti-bullying interventions that support children's pro-social development. They highlight the importance of equipping teachers to design supportive classroom environments, manage positive social interactions, and foster strong home–school–colleague collaboration through structured communication and shared responsibility. Additionally, the recommendations point to future research exploring the long-term impact of these professional development initiatives on the sustainability and effectiveness of anti-bullying practices in early childhood education.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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