



Principal Challenges in Addressing School Bullying Through Peer Empowerment Approaches in Elementary Schools

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Abstract: This study examines the challenges faced by school principals in implementing peer empowerment approaches to address bullying in elementary schools. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines. Twelve peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025 were selected from reputable databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, DOAJ, and Garuda. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring psychosocial barriers and leadership-related challenges in the implementation of peer-based anti-bullying programs. The findings reveal four dominant barriers: diffusion of responsibility, students' fear of becoming subsequent victims, pluralistic ignorance, and observers' limited knowledge of appropriate intervention strategies. Collectively, these factors contribute to a pattern of collective passivity that weakens students' capacity to function as active bystanders in bullying prevention. Furthermore, the effectiveness of peer empowerment programs is strongly contingent upon principals' leadership capacity to cultivate a safe, supportive, and prosocial school climate. This includes the implementation of witness protection mechanisms, the correction of erroneous social norms, the strengthening of moral courage literacy, and the provision of evidence-based intervention training.

Keywords: Bullying; Peer Empowerment; Active Bystanders; School Leadership; Elementary Education

Abstrak: Studi ini mengkaji tantangan yang dihadapi oleh kepala sekolah dalam menerapkan pendekatan pemberdayaan teman sebaya untuk mengatasi perundungan di sekolah dasar. Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis (SLR) dilakukan sesuai dengan pedoman PRISMA. Dua belas artikel yang telah direview oleh rekan sejawat yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2015 dan 2025 dipilih dari basis data terkemuka, termasuk Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, DOAJ, dan Garuda. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi hambatan psikososial yang berulang dan tantangan kepemimpinan dalam implementasi program anti-perundungan berbasis teman sebaya. Temuan menunjukkan empat hambatan dominan: penyebaran tanggung jawab, ketakutan siswa menjadi korban berikutnya, ketidaktahuan pluralistik, dan pengetahuan terbatas pengamat tentang strategi intervensi yang tepat. Secara kolektif, faktor-faktor ini berkontribusi pada pola pasivitas kolektif yang melemahkan kemampuan siswa untuk berfungsi sebagai penonton aktif dalam pencegahan perundungan. Selain itu, efektivitas program pemberdayaan teman sebaya sangat bergantung pada kapasitas kepemimpinan

kepala sekolah dalam menciptakan iklim sekolah yang aman, mendukung, dan pro-sosial. Hal ini meliputi implementasi mekanisme perlindungan saksi, koreksi norma sosial yang salah, penguatan literasi keberanian moral, dan penyediaan pelatihan intervensi berbasis bukti.

Kata kunci: *Perundungan; Pemberdayaan Sesama Siswa; Penonton Aktif; Kepemimpinan Sekolah; Pendidikan Dasar*

Introduction

Bullying in schools remains a critical global issue due to its pervasive impact on students' psychological well-being, social development, and academic achievement (Dharma et al., 2024; Abdillah, 2024). Beyond disrupting classroom learning, bullying undermines children's character formation and long-term emotional health, posing a significant barrier to school success across diverse national contexts (Nurjanah et al., 2025; Hairani & Putikadyanto, 2025; Yosep et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023; Murad, 2022).

Bullying is defined as intentional and repetitive physical or psychological aggression characterised by a power imbalance that limits victims' ability to defend themselves (Halim et al., 2022; Rilveria, 2023; Andrews et al., 2023; Green et al., 2025). Although historically trivialised as normative peer interaction, empirical evidence has firmly established bullying as a deliberate form of aggression with serious emotional and social consequences for victims (Mutiarra, 2023; Harmiasih et al., 2023). Bullying manifests in multiple forms, including direct physical and verbal aggression as well as indirect behaviours such as social exclusion, rumour spreading, and reputational harm (Emilda, 2022; Nurfaniza & Margaret, 2024; Musakif et al., 2024; Nisak, 2024; Asalnaije et al., 2024). Within school contexts, racial and sexual bullying are also prevalent, with severe implications in extreme cases (Firmansyah et al., 2024; Chairunnisa et al., 2025; Chasanah, 2022).

Extensive research demonstrates that bullying has far-reaching consequences for victims' mental health, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and chronic stress, while simultaneously reducing academic motivation and increasing the risk of school dropout (Ramadhani et al., 2025; Febrianti et al., 2024). Perpetrators are likewise at risk of adverse developmental outcomes, such as behavioural problems and later involvement in delinquent or criminal activities. Students who witness bullying often experience fear, insecurity, and impaired concentration, which collectively disrupt the learning environment.

These consequences are particularly pronounced during the elementary school years, a critical developmental period in which children form social identities and internalise behavioural norms (Purwulan, 2024). Negative bullying experiences at this stage are associated with long-term psychological distress, somatic complaints, academic decline, and school avoidance. Moreover, bullying in elementary schools is embedded in complex peer dynamics shaped by family relationships, individual coping capacities, peer support, and broader social contexts (Wu et al., 2022).

Longitudinal and cross-national research indicates that involvement in bullying is dynamic rather than static, with children transitioning between roles as victims, perpetrators, perpetrator victims, or uninvolved peers over time (Mandira & Stoltz, 2021). Developmental trajectories reveal a shift from predominantly physical bullying in lower grades to verbal, relational, and eventually cyber forms as children's social competencies and interaction contexts evolve. These findings highlight the importance of conceptualising bullying as a continually evolving developmental process rather than a single behavioural incident.

From an institutional perspective, school climate plays a decisive role in shaping bullying prevalence. Hostile school climates characterised by weak supervision and limited peer support are consistently associated with higher rates of bullying, whereas supportive and well regulated environments function as protective factors (Álvarez García et al., 2015). Qualitative evidence further illustrates how socioeconomic conditions and daily interaction patterns influence students' vulnerability to bullying and its psychosocial consequences (Listiani et al., 2023).

Despite extensive scholarship on the forms, impacts, and developmental dynamics of bullying, limited empirical attention has been given to how school principals address the challenges of implementing peer empowerment approaches as a management strategy. Existing studies largely describe bullying phenomena without critically examining leadership practices or the operationalisation of peer based interventions in elementary school settings. Addressing this gap, the present study offers a systematic analysis of the challenges principals face in implementing peer empowerment strategies to manage bullying in elementary schools.

Method

1. Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review approach to comprehensively examine existing research on bullying in elementary schools, with particular attention to peer empowerment approaches and the leadership role of school principals in their implementation. The use of an SLR was appropriate because it enables the systematic identification, critical evaluation, and synthesis of empirical and conceptual evidence, thereby facilitating the development of an integrated understanding of implementation challenges at the elementary school level.

The review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses guidelines. The PRISMA framework consists of four sequential stages, namely identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Adherence to this framework ensured that the literature search and selection procedures were conducted in a systematic, transparent, and replicable manner.

2. Data Sources and Search Strategy

Relevant literature was retrieved from a range of international and national academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, DOAJ, and Garuda. These databases were selected due to their strong coverage of research in education, educational psychology, and school leadership.

The literature search was conducted using a structured combination of keywords representing the core variables of the study. The search string included terms related to bullying in elementary schools, peer empowerment or peer support, and school leadership, formulated as follows: ("school bullying" OR "bullying in elementary school") AND ("peer empowerment" OR "peer support" OR "peer-based anti-bullying program") AND ("school leadership" OR "principal leadership"). This strategy was designed to identify studies that explicitly addressed the intersection between bullying, peer-based interventions, and leadership roles within school settings.

To ensure relevance and currency, the search was limited to publications from 2015 to 2025. Eligible documents included peer reviewed journal articles and accredited conference proceedings published in Indonesian or English. The scope of the review was restricted to elementary education contexts to ensure alignment with the objectives and focus of the study.

3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure both relevance and methodological quality of the selected studies. Studies were included if they explicitly addressed bullying in elementary schools, peer-based intervention programs, or the leadership role of school principals in bullying prevention. Eligible publications were scholarly articles published in reputable or indexed journals and employed clearly defined qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods designs with empirical or conceptual findings. Only studies with accessible full-text versions were considered. Studies were excluded if they focused on educational levels outside elementary school, addressed topics unrelated to bullying, peer-based programs, or principal leadership, or were non-academic publications such as editorials, opinion pieces, or grey literature. Articles without clear methodological descriptions, without substantive findings, duplicate publications, or those not available in full text were also excluded.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

No.	Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1	Topic relevance	Studies explicitly addressing bullying in elementary schools, peer based intervention programs, or the role of school principals' leadership in bullying prevention	Studies conducted outside the elementary school context such as junior or senior high schools, higher education, or non formal education; topics unrelated to bullying, peer based programs, or principal leadership
2	Publication type and source	Peer reviewed scholarly articles published in reputable or indexed journals such as Scopus, SINTA, or equivalent	Non academic publications including editorials, opinion pieces, news articles, commentaries, or grey literature
3	Research design and findings	Studies employing clearly defined qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods designs and reporting empirical or conceptual findings	Studies without clear methodological descriptions, without substantive findings, or limited to abstracts only
4	Accessibility and uniqueness	Articles with accessible and complete full text versions	Duplicate publications or articles without full text access
5	Language and publication period	Articles published in Indonesian or English between 2015 and 2025	Articles published in other languages or outside the specified publication period

4. Literature Selection Process

The literature selection followed the PRISMA procedure to ensure methodological transparency. During the identification stage, 72 records were retrieved from the selected databases and research registers. After the removal of duplicate records, 50 articles remained for initial screening. In the screening stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed, resulting in 38 articles deemed potentially relevant, while 12 were excluded due to misalignment with the research focus. Full-text assessment was then conducted for 26 articles during the eligibility stage. Fourteen articles were excluded at this stage because of irrelevant topics, publication year constraints, or limited access to full-text versions. Ultimately, 12 articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis. The overall selection process is illustrated in a PRISMA flow diagram.

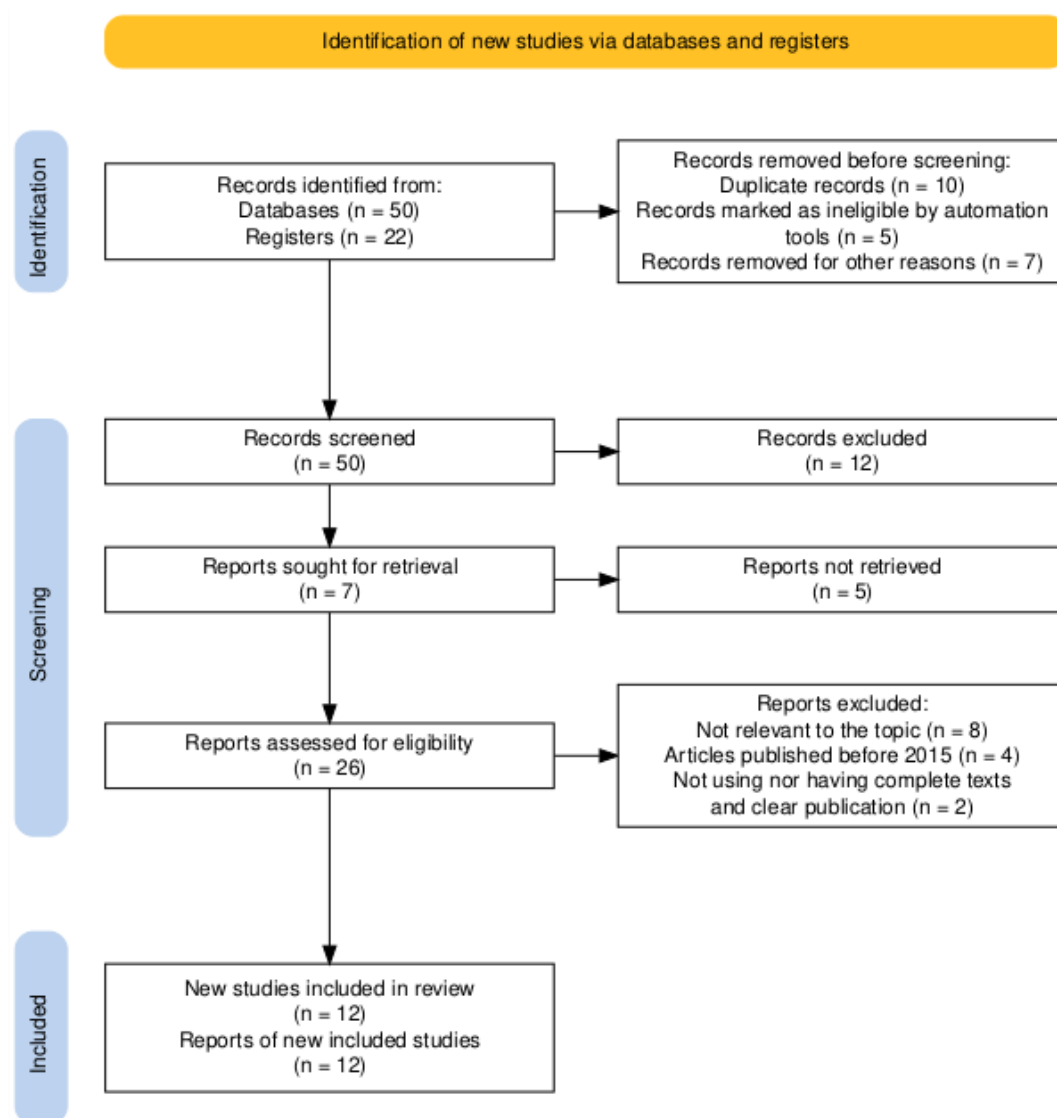


Figure 1: Flow of Article Selection with Prisma

5. Recapitulation of Selected Articles

The final sample consisted of 12 studies that met the inclusion criteria and formed the analytical basis of this review. These studies were evaluated in terms of their relevance to the elementary school context, methodological rigor, and alignment with the study's focus on bullying and peer empowerment approaches. Of the included studies, eight employed qualitative designs and four used quantitative approaches. All articles were published within the past ten years in reputable national or international journals, indicating that research on bullying, peer empowerment, and leadership in elementary schools remains a dynamic and evolving field.

Table 2. Summary of Analyzed Research Articles

No.	Author(s)	Year	Journal	Main Focus	Method
1	Abdillah	2024	EDUCARE	Impacts and prevention of bullying	Qualitative
2	Abdul Ghofur et al.	2022	Macedonian Journal of Medical Sciences	Impact of bullying on victims	Quantitative

3	Andrews et al.	2023	International Journal of Bullying Prevention	Bullying and power relations	Qualitative
4	Mandira & Stoltz	2021	International Journal of Educational Research	Risk and protective factors of bullying	Qualitative
5	Husky et al.	2022	Journal of Affective Disorders	Bullying involvement and mental health	Quantitative
6	Wu et al.	2023	Journal of Interpersonal Violence	Patterns of bullying victimization	Quantitative
7	Listiani et al.	2024	Jurnal Riset Rumpun Ilmu Pendidikan	Students' bullying behavior	Qualitative
8	Nurfaniza & Margaret	2024	Ranah Research	Experiences of bullying victims	Qualitative
9	Dharma et al.	2024	Buletin Edukasi Indonesia	Impact of bullying on student participation	Qualitative
10	Gea et al.	2024	JiIP	Teachers' roles in addressing bullying	Qualitative
11	Sargent & Newman	2021	Review of General Psychology	Pluralistic ignorance (bystander behavior)	Qualitative
12	Zhang et al.	2023	Psychology in the Schools	Students' attitudes toward bullying	Quantitative

Based on the summary results, the articles analyzed comprised eight qualitative and 4 quantitative studies. All articles were published within the last ten years and were from reputable national and international journals, indicating that the study of bullying in elementary schools and student social dynamics, including the role of peers and school actors, is a relevant and evolving issue. Based on the summary results, the analyzed articles were studies that used qualitative and quantitative approaches and were published within the last ten years. This demonstrates that the study of bullying, peer empowerment, and elementary school leadership is a continually evolving and relevant issue in educational research

6. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved several stages, beginning with familiarisation through repeated reading of all included articles. This was followed by open coding to identify meaningful units related to forms of bullying, peer roles, and principal leadership. Codes were then organised into broader conceptual categories, from which key themes were generated, including leadership challenges, barriers to implementing peer empowerment programs, and student social dynamics. Finally, a thematic synthesis was conducted to develop an integrated conceptual understanding of the reviewed literature.

7. Data Validity

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed an audit trail by systematically documenting each stage of the literature search and selection process. In addition, source triangulation was applied by comparing findings across studies with different methodological approaches and contextual settings.

8. Research Outputs

This study produced three primary outputs. First, a systematic thematic mapping presented in tabular form that identifies dominant themes and key challenges in implementing peer empowerment approaches to address bullying in elementary schools. Second, a conceptual synthesis outlining the relationships

between principal leadership, student social dynamics, and the effectiveness of peer-based interventions. Third, a conceptual framework that positions the school principal as a strategic actor in orchestrating peer empowerment initiatives to prevent and address bullying in elementary school contexts.

Result and Discussion

1. Result

Based on a thematic analysis of selected literature, this study identified several key challenges that influence the effectiveness of a peer empowerment approach in addressing bullying in elementary schools. To clarify the interrelationships among these challenges, the study's results were synthesized into a conceptual framework. Figure 2 presents a conceptual framework of the key challenges in addressing bullying in elementary schools through a peer empowerment approach.

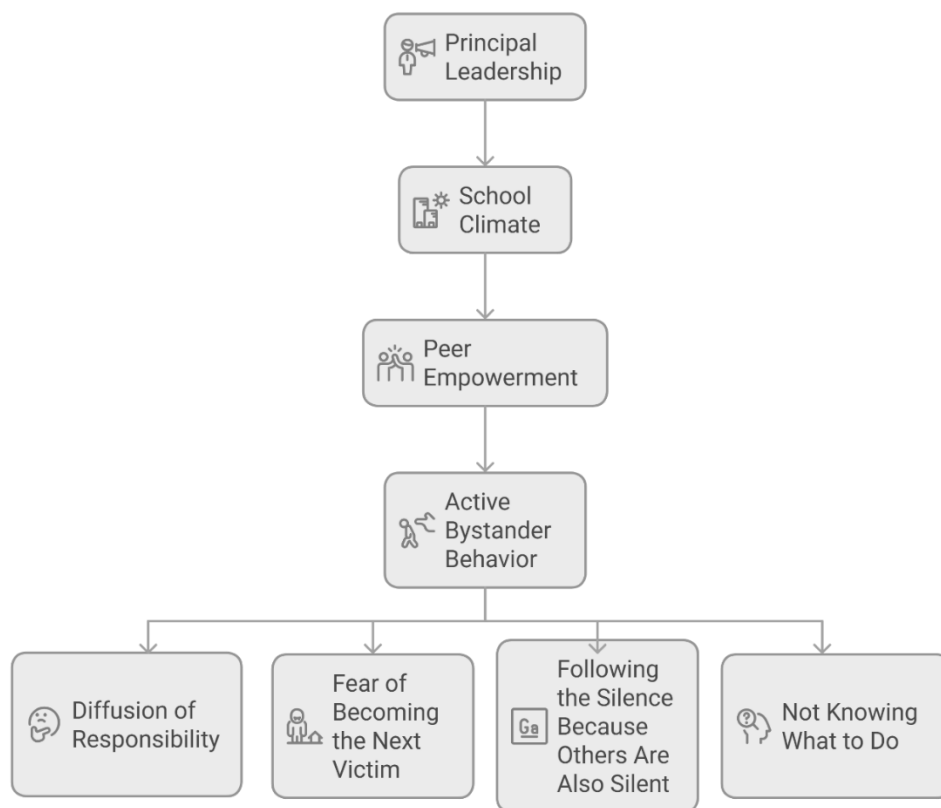


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Key Challenges in Addressing Bullying in Schools Through an Empowerment Approach Peers in Elementary Schools

This framework synthesizes findings from a systematic literature review and illustrates four interrelated psychosocial barriers, diffusion of responsibility, fear of becoming the next victim, pluralistic ignorance, and lack of intervention knowledge, that collectively generate a pattern of collective passivity among students. The model positions school principal leadership as a central mediating force in disrupting this passivity through the cultivation of a safe school climate, the correction of misperceived social norms, the strengthening of moral courage, and the provision of structured and evidence-based peer intervention mechanisms.

a. Diffusion of Responsibility

Diffusion of responsibility is generally defined as a condition in which an individual feels less personal responsibility for an action when acting as part of a group rather than alone (Cooper, 2024). This phenomenon, also known as displacement of responsibility, occurs when an individual believes they are not solely responsible because they perceive other group members as having contributed. As a result, the perceived burden of responsibility is reduced, and individuals may tend to shift the blame or shift it onto others for harmful actions (Mascia et al., 2021).

The phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility among students occurs when many students witness a bullying incident, but each assumes that someone else will take action. As the perception that responsibility is distributed within the group becomes stronger, the individual's tendency to act decreases significantly. As a result, no student feels a personal obligation to respond, even though they recognise that the victim needs help.

In the elementary school context, this situation is further complicated because bullying often occurs in public or semi-public areas such as corridors, courtyards, or cafeterias, where students are often present. The presence of numerous witnesses actually reinforces the belief that intervention is someone else's job. This paradox results in collective inactivity: the more crowded a place is, the less likely an individual is to feel compelled to act. Many children end up thinking, "Someone will help," and their personal motivation to intervene drastically decreases.

This phenomenon poses a significant obstacle for principals in promoting the effectiveness of peer empowerment programs. This diffusion of responsibility directly reduces students' potential to act as active bystanders. It undermines the primary goal of peer empowerment: fostering a school culture that positions students as agents with a significant role in maintaining social security. Without a sense of personal responsibility, moral courage, and prosocial initiative, it is challenging to develop in students (Mukti et al., 2025). To address this passive dynamic, principals need to design specific strategies that encourage the internalisation of individual responsibility. These efforts can include moral courage training, the establishment of anti-bullying agents with clear, structured roles, and the development of easily accessible, secure reporting systems. With these steps, students can feel that their contributions have meaning, and they no longer see themselves as just part of the crowd.

b. Fear of Becoming the Next Victim

Fear in humans is a protective mechanism that serves as a warning system when potential danger is present (Fernando & Aprilia, 2024). Fear makes a person more alert, cautious, and able to avoid threatening situations (Sany, 2022). In the context of bullying, students' fear of becoming the next victim arises because they perceive the perpetrator as having social power and the lack of explicit guarantees of protection within the school environment. This situation encourages students to choose to remain silent, avoid, or not defend their bullied peers in order to maintain their own safety.

Students' fear of becoming the next victim also presents a significant challenge in implementing a peer empowerment approach in schools. Many observers choose not to get involved, realising that the perpetrator could redirect their aggression toward anyone who attempts to defend the victim. This fear relates not only to physical threats but also to social risks, such as loss of peer support, disruption of peer relationships, or a decline in their social standing within the school community. For elementary school students, the need to feel safe often outweighs the moral urge to help. Even though they understand that bullying is harmful, the courage to act is often hampered by the fear that intervention could trigger retaliation.

from the perpetrator. This fear of consequences whether real or imagined creates a strong psychological barrier and weakens students' inclination to act as active bystanders.

This situation poses a significant challenge to the success of peer empowerment programs. Approaches that rely on active student participation to prevent and stop bullying are hampered when fear overpowers prosocial behaviour. Instead of taking courageous action, students focus more on self-protection. As a result, peer-based anti-bullying initiatives are less effective and fail to create the desired behavioural changes. This situation requires school principals to develop strategies to minimise students' fear. These efforts can include implementing a clear witness protection system (Hilmi et al., 2022), increasing supervision in vulnerable areas (Gea et al., 2024), providing a safe and confidential reporting channel, and strengthening education on moral courage (Widyantari, 2025). Furthermore, establishing a school culture that normalises prosocial behaviour and ensures the safety of students who dare to report or provide assistance is a crucial step toward ensuring that fear no longer hinders peer empowerment efforts.

c. Following the Silence Because Others Are Also Silent

The phenomenon of following the silence because others are also silent, also known as pluralistic ignorance, is a psychosocial dynamic that plays a significant role in perpetuating bullying practices in elementary schools. Pluralistic ignorance is a situation in which individuals in a group mistakenly assume that others hold views or attitudes different from their own, when in fact they share the same opinion. Perceiving themselves as "in the minority," people tend to follow suit and conform to this mistaken perception. As a result, they go along with something they actually disagree with, not because they agree, but because they assume others support them (Sargent & Newman, 2021).

In bullying situations, students in the vicinity often observe each other to see how their peers react. When most bystanders do not actively respond, this collective indifference is often interpreted as a sign that the bullying incident is not serious or does not require intervention. Beneath this uniform silence, many students actually understand that bullying is wrong and can be harmful to the victim. However, this moral response is often suppressed because they assume that other students do not share their views. The mistaken belief that "others think this is normal" encourages students to conform to the perceived dominant group's norms—that is, to be passive. This effort to conform is usually undertaken to avoid social risks, such as being perceived as overly sensitive, overreacting, or acting inconsistently with group expectations.

In elementary school, students feel greater pressure to be accepted by peers because their social identities are still forming. This situation increases the likelihood of a mismatch between personal beliefs (which reject bullying) and public behaviour (which appears to condone it). This mismatch creates a cycle of inaction: when one observer fails to act, others interpret this as an appropriate response, so passivity becomes a collective norm that indirectly perpetuates bullying. This phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance poses a significant challenge to peer-based intervention programs. Misperceptions about group attitudes and values often hamper prevention efforts that rely on students' courage to react prosocially. Without specific interventions to correct the perception that peers "do not care," students will continue to be trapped in a pattern of following the silent majority that is actually false.

Therefore, principals need to understand and address pluralistic ignorance as a crucial step in building a safe school environment. Student empowerment programs

should be designed to help them recognize that most peers act to stop bullying, while also providing support. Hence, they feel safe and able to act when they witness bullying incidents. To strengthen this understanding, principals need to convey data-based information, such as survey results, case studies, and authentic student voices, that demonstrate that the majority of the school community does not support bullying. This kind of education effectively shifts the mindset that "silence means consent" and emphasizes that the lack of a desire to speak up is often rooted in misinterpreting others' attitudes.

d. Not Knowing What to Do

One critical obstacle to implementing peer empowerment strategies to combat bullying in schools is the lack of knowledge and practical skills among bystanders to intervene safely and effectively. While most students desire to help victims, they are often unsure about the appropriate course of action. This uncertainty includes questions such as whether to report to a teacher, approach the victim for support, or confront the perpetrator directly.

This uncertainty often arises from a lack of systematic training in safe intervention techniques. Without adequate understanding, potential defenders feel confused, vulnerable, and unprepared to act without risking escalation or harming themselves. Studies have shown that, despite students' strong prosocial intentions, the lack of structured guidance and skills-building programs leads them to choose passivity rather than potentially ineffective or harmful actions.

This phenomenon illustrates a clear gap between good intentions and actual ability to act. Students want to help, but limited knowledge makes them afraid of worsening the victim's condition, opening new conflicts, or escalating the perpetrator's aggression. Consequently, this unpreparedness reinforces bystander passivity and ultimately hinders the success of anti-bullying programs that rely on active peer participation. To address this barrier, school principals need to implement student empowerment-based interventions, complemented by systematic and targeted education on evidence-based intervention techniques. Schools should provide examples of safe actions, skills training through simulations, and clear protocols for intervention steps (Runesi et al., 2025). Through this approach, students gain not only knowledge but also confidence and practical competence, enabling their prosocial intentions to develop into proactive, practical bystander actions that directly contribute to preventing and ending bullying.

Table 3. Summary of Key Findings

Main Theme	Brief Explanation	Impact on Peer Empowerment Interventions	Principals' Solutions/Strategies
1. Diffusion of Responsibility	Students feel that "someone else will act," so they do not perceive it as their obligation to help the victim.	Passive bystanders; difficulty in fostering active bystanders.	a. Appoint anti-bullying agents. b. Establish clear and accessible reporting systems.
2. Fear of Becoming the Next Victim	Students worry about retaliation from perpetrators or losing social status if they help the victim.	Helping intentions are inhibited, weakening peer-based interventions.	a. Witness protection mechanisms. b. Increased supervision in high-risk areas. c. Confidential reporting channels.

			d. • Moral courage education.
3. Following the Silence (Pluralistic Ignorance)	Students mistakenly assume that their peers consider bullying acceptable, whereas in reality most disapprove of it.	Collective silence creates false norms that reinforce bullying behavior.	a. Disseminate survey results showing that the majority reject bullying. b. Data-driven anti-bullying education.
4. Not Knowing What to Do	Bystanders are confused: whether to report, help, or confront the perpetrator; they lack intervention skills.	Prosocial intentions do not translate into concrete actions.	Evidence-based peer intervention training.

Discussion

This discussion interprets the findings by positioning peer empowerment in elementary schools not merely as a student centred intervention, but as a leadership mediated process shaped by school climate, social norms, and institutional protection structures. The four challenges identified in this study, diffusion of responsibility, fear of becoming the next victim, pluralistic ignorance, and limited knowledge of intervention strategies, collectively explain why students who cognitively reject bullying often remain behaviourally inactive. Rather than reflecting individual deficits in empathy or moral awareness, these patterns of passivity indicate the presence of broader social psychological dynamics that are either reinforced or disrupted by school leadership practices. Consequently, the effectiveness of peer empowerment initiatives depends largely on the capacity of school principals to act as social architects who shape normative expectations, ensure psychological safety, and provide clear structural pathways for prosocial intervention.

The findings of this study confirm that the effectiveness of the peer empowerment approach in addressing bullying in elementary schools is not solely determined by students' moral intentions but is heavily influenced by the social-psychological dynamics at work in group interactions. Four key challenges diffusion of responsibility, fear of becoming the next victim, pluralistic ignorance, and lack of knowledge about intervention strategies are interrelated and form a pattern of collective passivity that undermines students' role as active bystanders. This pattern reinforces the view that bullying is a social phenomenon indirectly legitimised by group norms and the school's institutional climate, rather than simply individual deviant behaviour (Andrews et al., 2023; Mandira & Stoltz, 2021).

The phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility identified in this study aligns with the bystander effect, in which an individual's personal responsibility decreases as the number of witnesses increases (Cooper, 2024). In the elementary school context, this mechanism is reinforced by students limited moral and social development, making it easier for them to assume that others, whether peers or teachers, will take action. These findings are consistent with the study by Mascia et al. (2021), which showed that a low sense of personal responsibility correlates with increased passivity in situations of social violence, including bullying. Without a clear role structure, peer empowerment approaches tend to fail to activate students' collective moral courage (Mukti et al., 2025). Furthermore, students' fear of becoming the next victim reflects a psychologically rational but socially maladaptive social risk appraisal process. This fear arises when students perceive that bullies wield social power and face few consequences (Zhang et al., 2023). Research by Husky et al. (2022) across various

European countries showed that students who perceived their schools as failing to provide adequate social protection tended to avoid intervening, despite having empathy for victims. These findings confirm that prosocial courage in children is highly dependent on the perception of safety fostered by school leadership (Gea et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance further reinforces collective passivity. Students often misinterpret the silence of peers as a sign that bullying is acceptable, even though they individually reject the behaviour. This dynamic has been widely discussed in social psychology studies as a mechanism for the formation of pseudo-norms that perpetuate deviant behaviour (Sargent & Newman, 2021). In the elementary school context, the need for peer acceptance leads students to choose passive conformity over taking social risks by acting out. This finding aligns with Zhang et al. (2023), who showed that group norm pressure significantly influences students' attitudes and responses to bullying in Asian contexts.

In addition to normative and affective factors, this study also identified limited intervention competency as a significant barrier. Many students lack knowledge of safe and effective actions when witnessing bullying, preventing prosocial intentions from developing into actual behaviour. This condition can be explained by low perceived behavioural control, which, according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, is a key prerequisite for action (Runesi et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with previous research emphasising that peer-based anti-bullying programs are only effective when accompanied by concrete, evidence-based intervention training (Mandira & Stoltz, 2021).

Compared with previous studies, this research demonstrates thematic similarities in identifying psychosocial factors inhibiting bystander interventions but offers a significant difference in analytical focus. Most previous research positions students as the primary agents of change, whereas this study's results confirm that the success of peer empowerment is primarily determined by the principal's leadership capacity to manage social norms, foster a sense of safety, and structure student roles. Thus, students' failure to act cannot be understood simply as a deficit of empathy or moral courage, but as a reflection of weak institutional orchestration (Álvarez-García et al., 2015; Gea et al., 2024).

International comparisons suggest that this phenomenon is cross-cultural. Studies in the United States and Europe found similar patterns, where diffusion of responsibility and social fear undermined the effectiveness of peer intervention programs when schools lacked witness protection and structural legitimacy for action (Husky et al., 2022). In East Asia, group conformity pressures were even stronger, leading students to wait for explicit signals from school authorities before acting (Zhang et al., 2023). These cross-national findings confirm that the challenge of peer empowerment is not solely a cultural issue, but rather a matter of leadership and school climate.

Overall, this study makes a conceptual contribution by confirming that the success of a peer empowerment approach to addressing bullying in elementary schools depends heavily on the principal's role as a social architect. The principal's role is to shape social norms, ensure a sense of security, and enhance students' moral capacity and practical competence. Without leadership that consciously intervenes in these social-psychological dynamics, peer empowerment risks becoming a normative discourse with no impact on actual practices in the school environment.

Conclusion

This research shows that the successful implementation of a peer empowerment approach to addressing bullying in elementary schools is heavily influenced by the complex psychosocial dynamics among students. Four key challenges diffusion of responsibility, fear of becoming the next victim, pluralistic ignorance, and lack of knowledge about appropriate actions create a pattern of collective passivity that undermines students' role as active bystanders. Although most students morally reject bullying, social pressure, fear, and a lack of intervention skills lead them to choose silence and disengagement.

These findings emphasise that peer empowerment cannot succeed simply by providing general knowledge about bullying; it must be accompanied by a systematic, structured school leadership strategy that fosters moral courage and a sense of security among students. Principals play a central role in creating a supportive school climate by strengthening witness protection, providing safe reporting channels, correcting misperceptions, and providing evidence-based intervention training. With this comprehensive approach, students can experience increased competence, self-confidence, and a sense of personal responsibility, enabling them to participate in efforts to prevent and stop bullying actively. This research provides a conceptual basis for the idea that peer empowerment can be effective only if schools build a social culture that encourages prosocial actions, collective courage, and emotional security for all school members.

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