

Perceptions on Bullying Incidents of Senior High School Students in selected Public School in Buhi, Camarines Sur: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT:

Bullying remains a persistent barrier to student safety, well-being, and academic success, yet few studies focus on the first-hand perspectives of learners to inform responsive interventions. This qualitative research explored how Senior High School students in selected public school in Buhi, Camarines Sur perceived bullying, its forms, root causes, impacts, existing school responses, and recommended solutions. Data were gathered through in-depth individual interviews with 12 purposively selected participants, and it was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that students define bullying as an intentional, repeated harmful act marked by power imbalance, encompassing physical, verbal, social, and increasingly pervasive cyberbullying forms. Participants attributed bullying to overlapping personal, social, and environmental factors, and emphasized its damaging effects on victims, witnesses, perpetrators, and the overall school climate. Most incidents go unreported due to fear of retaliation, stigma, and lack of trust in outcomes; existing school responses were viewed as inconsistent, slow, or only temporarily effective. Students advocated for clear, fairly enforced policies, confidential reporting channels, empathy-building activities, improved access to guidance services, and stronger home-school collaboration.

Keywords: Perceptions, Bullying, Bullying Incidents, Senior High School, Qualitative Study

Introduction

Bullying remains one of the most persistent and concerning issues affecting the well-being, safety, and academic performance of learners across all educational levels. It is broadly defined as unwanted, aggressive behaviour involving a real or perceived power imbalance, repeated or likely to be repeated over time (Gladden et al., 2014). It manifests in various forms like physical, verbal, social exclusion/relational aggression, and increasingly cyberbullying, amplified by the widespread use of social media and digital devices among adolescents (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020).

For Senior High School students in the Philippines, typically aged 15 to 18 years, this developmental stage brings identity formation, peer influence, and academic pressures, making them especially vulnerable to the negative effects of bullying; these impacts range from anxiety and low self-esteem to poor school engagement and even long-term mental health struggles (Department of Education [DepEd], 2013; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Laws such as Republic Act 10627 or the “Anti-Bullying Act of 2013” mandate all basic education institutions in the country to adopt policies and programs that prevent and address bullying. Yet

many existing measures are designed primarily from adult or administrative perspectives, often without fully accounting for how students themselves understand, interpret, or experience these incidents (Espinoza, 2019). Research shows that students' own perceptions, how they label behaviours, judge severity, decide whether to report, or view school responses are key factors in whether bullying persists or stops (Vaillancourt et al., 2010). Senior High School learners hold firsthand knowledge of classroom dynamics, unspoken peer norms, and online interactions; their voices are therefore essential to crafting solutions that actually work (Cohen et al., 2019). While quantitative studies measure prevalence and trends, fewer qualitative inquiries deeply explore the meanings students attach to bullying within their own school communities. This study aims to fill that gap by documenting the lived experiences and viewpoints of Senior High School students on how they recognize bullying, explain its root causes, describe its effects, evaluate current interventions, and propose better ways forward. Focusing their perspectives will yield insights to strengthen school policies, guidance programs, and support systems aligned with learners' realities and needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how Senior High School students perceive bullying, its forms, causes, effects, and how it is addressed and to gather their suggestions for better prevention and intervention. It seeks to focus students' perspectives to help schools create safer, more supportive learning spaces.

Significance of the Study

This study will be valuable to the following individuals and groups:

School Administrators and Teachers. Findings will give them clear understanding of how students actually see, experience, and interpret bullying. This helps them make better policies, consistent rules, and more effective programs that truly fit the learners' needs and follow Republic Act 10627 or the Anti-Bullying Act.

Students. As the main respondents, this study gives them a safe space to voice their thoughts and feelings. It helps them realize the harmful effects of bullying, build empathy toward others, and encourages them to speak up or seek help when needed.

Parents and Guardians. Results will help them become more aware of what happens inside and outside school, including online spaces. This guides them on how to better guide, support, and communicate with their children about respect and safety.

Guidance Counselors and School Personnel. Insights gathered will serve as basis for designing more relevant counselling, peer support, and awareness activities that address the real causes and effects of bullying from the students' point of view.

Department of Education (DepEd) and Policy Makers. Outputs can serve as reference in strengthening existing guidelines, programs, and measures to ensure safe, inclusive, and child-friendly learning environments nationwide.

Future Researchers. This work will serve as related literature and reference material for those planning to conduct similar studies, especially those focusing on student perspectives and school-based bullying concerns.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Bullying is defined as repeated, intentional aggressive behaviour involving an imbalance of power or strength (Gladden et al., 2014). In the Philippines, Republic Act 10627 or Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 expands this to include physical, verbal, social/relational, and cyberbullying, actions done through technology or social media (DepEd, 2013).

Post-pandemic studies note that online bullying persists widely because it can happen anytime, spreads quickly, and leaves permanent digital traces (Buguina & Buguina, 2023; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Verbal teasing, body-shaming, exclusion, and spreading rumors remain the most common forms observed in secondary schools (Alipasa & Alipasa, 2025).

Legal and Policy Framework DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012 and RA 10627 oblige schools to adopt anti-bullying policies, response mechanisms, and prevention programs. However, recent analyses show that while awareness is high, consistent enforcement and student-centered support remain challenges (Herrin, 2025; Nacua, 2025). Students often perceive rules as existing “on paper only” if responses are slow or unfair (Mao & Jia, 2026).

Impact and Reporting Behaviour Exposure to bullying correlates with anxiety, low self-esteem, school absenteeism, and lower academic performance (WHO, 2021; Engel, 2023). Yet 30–40 % of students never report incidents—chief barriers are fear of retaliation, doubt about help, or being labelled a “snitch” (Alipasa & Alipasa, 2025; Boulton et al., 2017; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). Students prefer anonymous channels and safe, private ways to seek help (Maranan et al., 2025; World Café, 2026).

Alipasa & Alipasa (2025) – Phenomenological study of Filipino Grades 9–12 learners revealed four themes: living in fear, silenced voices, coping struggles, and seeking safe spaces. Institutional support was viewed as inconsistent; students relied mostly on peers and family. While Calderon et al. (2025) surveyed 216 SHS learners; found students recognized bullying types well but rated school management approaches only “moderately effective.” Income level influenced how they perceived severity; age/gender did not.

In the study of Buguina & Buguina (2023) – Post-pandemic study of Grade 12 students; cyberbullying through social media was widespread. Friends were the main support; students called for better digital literacy and parent-school collaboration.

Nacua (2025) in his Qualitative work in rural schools; bullying stemmed from differences in appearance, wealth, or ability. Weak enforcement and lack of counselling deepened harm; learners wanted more empathy-driven interventions.

Herrin (2025), PIDS policy note; bullying strongly predicts dropout-risk and poor grades. Laws exist but need better implementation,

funding, and mental-health integration. International Studies. While Mao & Jia (2026) studied Large-scale mixed-methods study found out that students often feel institutions minimize emotional/social harm, leading to a cycle of “seek help, disappointment, and stop trying”.

In the study of Wachs et al. (2024), Teacher interventions varied widely; when students saw adults ignore or trivialize bullying, incidents increased and trust fell sharply. According to Patchin & Hinduja (2020), Cyberbullying leaves deeper emotional scars; victims often withdraw socially. Anonymity online emboldens aggressors and delays reporting.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a Qualitative Phenomenological Research Design. It focuses on understanding the lived experiences, views, and meanings Senior High School students attach to bullying incidents. This approach is appropriate because it explores how and why students perceive bullying in certain ways, rather than just measuring numbers or statistics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants of the Study

The respondents are 12 officially enrolled Senior High School students from different academic strands and grade levels in one of the public school in Buhi, Camarines Sur. They were selected using purposive sampling. Participants included were those who have experienced, witnessed, or have knowledge of bullying incidents. Their identities will remain confidential.

Research Instrument

The primary tool used is a Semi-Structured Interview Guide. It contains open-ended questions aligned with the study’s objectives allowing participants to answer freely and in detail. Questions cover: definition of bullying, perceived causes, effects, school responses, and recommendations. The guide will be validated by research experts and teachers to ensure clarity and suitability.

Data Gathering Procedure

1. Request for Approval: Send formal letter to school principal/authorities to ask permission to conduct the study.
2. Informed Consent: Explain the purpose and risks; secure written consent from students and permission from parents/guardians.
3. Conduct of Interviews: Hold one-on-one interviews in a private, quiet place; record with permission; take notes.
4. Transcription: Convert recorded answers into written text word-for-word.
5. Analysis: Group answers into themes and patterns.

Data Analysis

Data will be analysed using Thematic Analysis following these steps: Familiarization with data, Coding, Generating themes, Reviewing themes, Defining and Naming themes, and Final interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Trustworthiness is ensured through member checking and proper documentation.

Ethical Considerations

Voluntary participation: Students may withdraw anytime.

Anonymity & Confidentiality: Real names will not be used; data kept private.

Non-maleficence: Questions will not cause distress; support resources will be provided if needed.

Beneficence: Findings will help improve school safety.

Results and Findings of the Study

Data were gathered from twelve Senior High School students through individual interviews. The responses were analysed and grouped into five distinct themes, which are discussed below:

Theme 1: Understanding and Definition of Bullying

Participants consistently defined bullying as an intentional act of causing harm, occurring repeatedly, and characterized by an imbalance of

power or strength between those involved. They clearly distinguished bullying from ordinary disagreements or playful teasing, noting that the intent to hurt and the ability of one party to dominate the other set it apart. Students identified several observable forms: verbal abuse such as name-calling and insults; physical actions like pushing or damaging personal belongings; social tactics including exclusion and spreading rumors; and cyberbullying carried out through social media and messaging apps. Notably, participants emphasized that online bullying feels more pervasive and damaging because harmful content spreads rapidly, remains accessible indefinitely, and invades personal spaces even outside school hours.

Theme 2: Perceived Causes and Contributing Factors

According to the participants, bullying arises from a combination of personal, social, and environmental circumstances. They observed that differences in physical appearance, clothing, financial status, academic ability, or personality are frequently used as grounds to target others. Students also believed that those who bully often do so to gain attention, appear powerful, or earn acceptance from peers. Many expressed the view that such behaviour may stem from the perpetrator's own struggles such as difficulties at home, lack of guidance, or low self-esteem. Additionally, participants noted that when supervision is limited or inappropriate behaviours are not corrected early, harmful actions tend to continue and become normalized within student groups.

Theme 3: Observed and Experienced Impacts of Bullying

Findings revealed that bullying negatively affects all members of the school community. For those directly targeted, students described emotional consequences such as persistent sadness, fear, anxiety, and loss of self-confidence, alongside academic effects including loss of focus, frequent absences, and declining grades. Witnesses also reported distress, feeling afraid, helpless, or guilty for not intervening. Even those who engage in bullying were seen as facing risks, as their actions

may lead to further behavioural problems or damaged relationships over time. In all accounts, bullying was viewed as something that creates an atmosphere of fear and insecurity rather than just a minor conflict between individuals.

Theme 4: Reporting Practices and Perceived School Responses

A key finding was that most bullying incidents remain undisclosed to adults. Participants explained they choose not to report due to fear of further mistreatment, concern about being labelled a tell-tale, or doubt that reporting will truly solve the problem. When incidents were brought to the attention of school authorities, students described responses as inconsistent sometimes helpful and supportive, but often slow, too lenient, or only temporarily effective. Several shared that even after intervention, the behaviour would resume after a short time, leading many to feel that existing measures are not fully reliable or consistently applied.

Theme 5: Students' Suggestions and Recommendations

Participants offered practical ideas aligned with their experiences to improve safety and well-being in school. They proposed having clear rules that are enforced equally for everyone, alongside fair and meaningful consequences. Students also highlighted the need for safe, private, or anonymous ways to report concerns without fear of being identified. They suggested regular activities that build respect, kindness, and empathy, as well as easier access to guidance counsellors and peer support groups. Furthermore, respondents emphasized that stronger partnership between schools and families would greatly help in preventing and addressing bullying more effectively.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that Senior High School students possess a clear and comprehensive understanding of bullying, recognizing its varied forms, power dynamics, and serious negative consequences. They perceive bullying as a complex issue rooted in personal struggles, social differences, and

environmental factors, rather than simple conflict or harmless teasing. Although laws such as Republic Act 10627 exist to protect learners, students' experiences show that current implementation, reporting channels, and support systems remain inconsistent and insufficiently responsive. Many choose to remain silent due to fear or lack of trust that help will be effective. Ultimately, learners are deeply concerned about school safety and are willing to share meaningful, practical ideas for improvement; their voices are vital yet still underutilized in shaping anti-bullying measures.

Recommendations

In line with the conclusions and the students' own suggestions, the following are proposed:

For School Administrators

1. Ensure full, consistent, and fair enforcement of existing anti-bullying policies; clarify rules and consequences to all learners and staff.
2. Establish safe, confidential, and anonymous reporting systems such as suggestion boxes, online forms, or designated personnel, and assure students of protection against retaliation.
3. Conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of anti-bullying measures to check if they truly meet students' needs.

For Teachers and Guidance Counsellors

1. Facilitate open discussions and activities that foster respect, empathy, and kindness, and clearly explain what constitutes bullying and why it is harmful.
2. Maintain an approachable and supportive atmosphere so students feel comfortable sharing concerns; provide timely counselling and intervention for all involved victims, aggressors, and witnesses.
3. Offer guidance to learners on healthy relationships, conflict resolution, and responsible use of social media.

For Parents and Guardians

1. Build open communication with children; regularly ask about their experiences at school and online.

2. Work closely with school authorities when concerns arise to ensure consistent guidance and support at home and in school.

3. Help children understand differences among people and teach them how to treat others with dignity.

For Students

1. Treat classmates with respect and kindness; avoid words or actions that may hurt others.

2. Speak up or seek help responsibly when witnessing bullying, and support peers who are

affected. 3. Make use of available school support systems instead of keeping harmful experiences to themselves.

For Future Researchers

1. Conduct similar studies covering more schools or different grade levels to broaden understanding of the issue.

2. Explore in greater depth the effectiveness of specific anti-bullying programs or interventions.

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