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The Role of Character Education in Preventing Bullying Behaviour in Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract

This study discusses the negative impact of bullying in pesantren on the psychological and academic well-being of students, as well as the high number of students who drop out due to bullying. This research aims to: (1) identify bullying behaviour in Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum Ketanggungan Brebes, (2) explain the implementation of character education in bullying prevention, and (3) know the factors that support and hinder character education efforts in bullying prevention. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, data were collected through observations, interviews with administrators, ustaz and santri, and documentation studies of character education policies. The results showed that bullying behaviour in this pesantren includes physical, verbal, and social behaviour. Character education is implemented through various methods such as example, habituation, advice, reward and punishment, and learning. Supporting factors for bullying prevention include effective communication between parents and santri, choosing good friends, positive attitudes, and self-confidence. On the other hand, barriers come from the limitations of teachers, students, supervisors, and the pesantren environment. Although character education has been implemented, challenges such as lack of effective supervision and understanding of character education among santri and administrators still need to be overcome to achieve more optimal results. The study emphasizes the critical role of character education in creating a safer and more inclusive educational environment. It highlights the potential for these approaches to be adapted and replicated in similar educational settings to prevent bullying, improve student well-being, and foster a culture of respect and empathy.

Keywords: Character Education; Behaviour; Bullying

Introduction

Indonesia is the fifth largest Muslim country in the world. That is what makes Islamic education develop rapidly in Indonesia. Islamic education appears in various kinds of institutions that almost exist in every big city and even in the regions, one of which is pesantren. (Oktari & Kosasih, 2019). However, while many previous studies have discussed the benefits of Islamic education, there is a lack of research specifically examining the role of character education in preventing bullying within pesantren environments. This indicates a research gap that this study aims to address.

Bullying is a behavioural problem that is currently prevalent among adolescents. This behaviour can affect the learning, socialization, and mental health of both perpetrators and victims (Yuhbaba, 2019). Although several studies have explored the impacts of bullying in general, there is

limited research comparing the prevalence and types of bullying in pesantren with other educational institutions. Such comparisons are essential to understanding the unique context of pesantren.

Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum Ketanggungan Brebes Regency is one of the Islamic religious-based educational institutions that aims to educate students to have noble morals and adequate religious knowledge. However, based on the data collected by the boarding school management in 2023, there is a problem that is quite alarming. Out of a total of 236 students studying in the boarding school, there are 33 students, or about 14% who drop out before completing their education. This number is quite high and should be of particular concern to the boarding school administration (Eko Saputra, interview, December 01, 2023). After conducting interviews with administrators and several students who dropped out of the boarding school, it was found that the main problem that caused them to decide to leave the boarding school was bullying.

In 2023, the KPAI recorded 3800 cases of bullying in educational settings in Indonesia. This number increased from 2022, when it reached 501 cases (KPAI, 2023). Bullying is a form of aggressive behaviour that is intentionally and repeatedly perpetrated by a person or group of people against other weaker people to hurt or oppress the victim (Zakiyah et al., 2017). Bullying is a form of violent behaviour where there is psychological or physical coercion of a person or group of people who are "weaker" by a person or group of people. The perpetrator of bullying, commonly referred to as the bully, can be a person or group of people who perceive themselves as having the power to do anything to their victims. The victim also feels weak, helpless, and constantly threatened by the bully (Zakiyah et al., 2017). This behaviour is certainly very dangerous if allowed to continue and will become a serious and ongoing problem if not addressed.

There are many ways to deal with bullying, including character education. Character in Islam is known as morality. Character itself is a trait that has been embedded in the soul, with morals a person will spontaneously easily emit attitudes, actions, and behaviour. Character education is an education that in essence students are directed to behave, act, and behave praiseworthy towards fellow human beings and God developed and accustomed through learning, which in the end will be embedded in a student and show his characteristics in acting, speaking and responding to something (Roby & Muhid, 2022). It is because of this that a person's character can think back to tyrannical behaviour.

Several previous studies relevant to this research are as follows: Siti Nurjanah's research (2021) examined the strategies and efforts of Pondok Pesantren Al-Hikmah Benda in instilling character values to prevent bullying. This study focused on exploring the supporting factors for implementing character education in bullying prevention within the pesantren environment. The findings revealed that character education at the pesantren was implemented through various activities, such as integrating character values into learning, habitual religious practices and sunnah, role modelling by teachers (*ustadz*) and administrators, and enforcing strict rules. This approach proved effective in reducing bullying behaviour, as positive values such as noble character, tolerance, and mutual respect were ingrained in the students (Santri).

Ahmad Fauzi's research in 2020 also focused on character education to prevent bullying, but with a more specific aim of identifying bullying behaviour and the supporting factors for character education at Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum. His findings revealed that several effective strategies were used to instill positive values in students, such as providing lessons on moral character (*akhlak*), habituating Islamic practices, role modelling by clerics (*kyai*) and teachers, strict supervision by

administrators, and implementing sanctions for rule violations. These strategies effectively instilled positive character traits, reducing bullying incidents within the pesantren.

Meanwhile, Lailatul Munawaroh's research (2019) highlighted the importance of character education in preventing and addressing bullying at Pondok Pesantren Putri Al-Munawwir Krupyak Yogyakarta. Using a qualitative approach with methods including observation, interviews, and document analysis, the study found that character education was manifested through the teaching of moral and Sufi texts, extracurricular activities that foster positive values, strict rules and sanctions, and counselling for both perpetrators and victims of bullying. This approach not only minimized bullying behaviour but also shaped students with commendable character traits.

Overall, these three studies demonstrate that character education plays a significant role in preventing bullying in pesantren environments. Despite having different focuses and methods, each study concluded that strengthening students' character through various approaches can create a more positive and bullying-free environment.

This research is important to conduct in order to explore the role of character education at Bustanul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Brebes Regency in an effort to combat bullying. By examining in depth the strategies, methods and challenges in implementing character education, it is hoped that this research can provide recommendations and effective solutions to create a safe, conducive and bullying-free pesantren environment.

Method

This research uses a case study with a qualitative approach to examine character education in preventing bullying at Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum in Brebes, Central Java. The case study was chosen to explore this issue in the specific context of the pesantren, while the qualitative approach helps to understand the deeper meaning of the phenomenon.

The study involved 1 pesantren leaders, 5 caregivers, 3 teachers, and 10 students. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with leaders, caregivers, and students to gain insights into character education and bullying prevention. Observations focused on character education activities and social interactions. Documentation included analysing policies, curricula, records of bullying cases, and student activity journals. Data were categorized into primary data (interviews and observations) and secondary data (documents and literature). Data analysis involves reducing the data to highlight relevant points, presenting it in charts or descriptions, and drawing conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Bullying Behaviour at Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum Ketanggungan Brebes

Researchers have several findings regarding bullying behaviour at Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum and revealed several important aspects related to the prevalence, types and impact of bullying. Field observations, student interviews, and document analysis show that bullying behaviour in this boarding school includes physical, verbal, and social abuse.

1. Physical bullying

Direct observations at the pesantren showed some instances of physical violence, though not frequently. These actions included pushing, hair-pulling, head-pressing, stepping on or pulling

clothing, and touching feet. Some senior santri also often ask younger or new santri to do certain tasks.

In an interview, a 12-year-old santri shared that he had been physically harmed by a senior santri for being considered disobedient, which included hair-pulling (Santri A, Interview, August 27, 2024). This incident caused fear in the santri. Another santri shared a similar experience when she first joined, where a senior threw her school bag, making her afraid and hesitant to report it (Santri B, 11 years old, Interview, August 28, 2024).

These interviews show that physical violence and pressure from senior santri are common, especially during the initiation of new santri. Many students are afraid to report these actions due to fear of retaliation. This highlights the need for the pesantren to take effective action to ensure a safe and supportive environment for all students.

2. Non-physical bullying

a. Verbal Bullying

Verbal bullying is known to be the most common form. Direct observations revealed a variety of verbal bullying behaviours, including calling friends by their parent's names, and giving derogatory nicknames such as "calf," "fat," "cungkring," "stingy," "black," and "humpy." There are also verbal threats or intimidation, such as "If you report to the administrator, watch out!" while making a fist, and mocking friends' mistakes with laughter or harsh words such as "moron," "goblog," and "dongo. (Santri C: 11 years old, interview, August 27, 2024).

In an interview, one of the santri revealed that he was often the target of ridicule regarding his appearance and physique. Complaints from santri indicate that this verbal bullying often takes the form of demeaning and insulting comments, which ultimately affect their self-esteem and mental well-being.

b. Social Bullying

At Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum, social differences between students often lead to bullying. From interviews with pesantren administrators, it was found that new students or those who come from different areas are often the targets of bullying. One of the administrators said that students from the two majority tribes in this pesantren, namely Sundanese and Javanese, often make fun of each other (Santri D: 14 years old, interview, August 27, 2024).

The impact of bullying is very significant, with reports showing that victimized santri experiences various problems such as anxiety and decreased motivation to learn (Manager A, interview, August 25, 2024). This anxiety contributes to reduced resilience in the pesantren, even to the point of leaving the pesantren. Observations and interviews also revealed that some new santri experienced fear, anxiety, and decreased academic performance. Although there are character education programs and conflict resolution training to deal with this, their implementation is still considered less than optimal.

Implementation of Character Education in Preventing Bullying Behaviour

The process of implementing character education in preventing bullying behaviour is seen by researchers based on direct observation in the field, responses at the interview stage and document analysis. The results found by researchers are as follows:

1. Exemplary Method

The study shows that the exemplary method is a key approach in implementing character education at Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum Ketanggungan Brebes to prevent bullying. This method involves pesantren caretakers, teachers, and administrators setting good examples for students in daily behaviour. By demonstrating positive attitudes, respect, and kindness, they aim to be role models for younger students to follow.

Teachers actively show good character values like patience, honesty, and care, creating a positive environment that discourages bullying. Direct observations show that the pesantren environment supports character education well, with administrators showing concern for students and respectful interactions among students, especially with caregivers and teachers. However, some administrators still show indifference, which could worsen bullying situations, as students should feel safe and comfortable.

The results of the interview with the management of security section B revealed that preventing bullying is one of the main focuses of character education. The school admits that exemplary methods and strict supervision are key in maintaining a healthy environment for the santri: "We always try to be a good example, because we believe that the santri will imitate what they see every day." (Security Administrator, Interview, August 25, 2024).

Overall, the results of interviews and observations show that exemplary methods and supervision are important factors in preventing bullying at the Bustanul Ulum Islamic Boarding School. In addition, the emphasis on character values such as mutual respect, mutual assistance and brotherhood is strengthened through a systematic daily approach.

2. Habituation Method

a. Routine Mutual Cooperation Activities (*Ro'an*)

One method used at Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum Ketanggungan, Brebes, to prevent bullying is through routine mutual cooperation activities called *Ro'an*. This activity, held weekly, aims to instill values of togetherness, cooperation, and social responsibility among students.

During *Ro'an*, all students work together to clean the pesantren environment, including the dormitory, classrooms, and yard. Each group of students is assigned a specific task to complete together. In addition to cleanliness, *Ro'an* teaches students to care for their surroundings and fosters a sense of unity, regardless of status or background.

An administrator stated, "Students are taught to work together in positive activities. We believe the interactions during *Ro'an* strengthen social bonds and reduce differences that can lead to bullying. Each student has an equal role, creating a sense of equality and solidarity" (Islamic Boarding School Administrator, Interview, August 25, 2024). Furthermore, supervision from ustaz and caregivers during *Ro'an* helps guide students, especially those who might behave aggressively, through positive interactions and learning in the cooperative setting.

b. Guidance Activities Every Saturday Night

Another habituation method is guidance activities every Saturday night. This guidance activity is one form of habituation activity carried out at the Bustanul Ulum Islamic Boarding School every Saturday night. This activity involves all students and is specifically for guiding the management. Based on the results of observations, guidance activities are carried

out in a solemn atmosphere but full of togetherness. The students sit together and listen to the material presented. This activity does not only focus on teaching religious material, but also instils the values of patience, perseverance, and discipline in learning.



Figure 1. Guidance activities every Saturday night

Interviews with administrators confirmed that guidance activities have a positive impact on shaping students' character, especially in discipline and mutual respect. Ustadz A said, "This guidance activity is not just about understanding the book, but also about teaching students to listen, be patient, and support each other in learning" (Ustadz A, Interview, August 28, 2024). He also mentioned that these activities are effective in preventing bullying. Through intensive interaction in group learning, students learn to respect and support one another, minimizing the potential for conflict or negative behaviour.

3. Advice Method

In the pesantren environment, advice is one of the main ways for caregivers and ustadz to shape the morals and personalities of students. Emphasis is given on the importance of moral values, such as mutual respect, mutual assistance, and maintaining brotherhood. The implementation of the advice method carried out at the Bustanul Ulum Islamic boarding school is as follows:

a. Oral Advice Through Recitation

As a result of direct observation, recitation in Islamic boarding schools is carried out routinely every time after fardu prayers. Moments where ustadz and caregivers give direct advice to students. In each recitation, the material presented by the ustadz is always linked to Islamic teachings. Especially in moral studies, it is always linked to exemplary stories from previous people such as the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Apart from that, advice on recitation is also packaged in simple and easy-to-understand language, so that students from various levels of education can receive moral messages well.



Figure 2. Activities of Giving Advice During Recitation

b. Written Advice Via Notice Board

In addition to verbal advice, written advice is also given at this Islamic boarding school, as evidenced by the presence of a notice board in front of the students' rooms containing some information and written advice. One of the messages seen on the notice board is an invitation not to bully/stop bullying. This is relevant to prevent bullying that may occur among students. Observation results show that students often read this notice board when passing through the area, and without realizing it, this written advice becomes a kind of "silent reminder" for them to continue to maintain their behaviour, especially when they are about to or are bullying. Thus, written advice through the notice board plays an important role as an additional element in character education at the Islamic boarding school. Not only is it a medium of information, but also a means of strengthening moral messages conveyed through verbal advice. The combination of verbal and written advice creates a conducive environment, where students are more aware of their moral responsibilities and are motivated to maintain harmony within the Islamic boarding school community.

In addition to verbal advice, written advice is also given at the pesantren through a notice board in front of the students' rooms. One of the messages displayed is an invitation to stop bullying. This helps prevent bullying among students. Observations show that students often read the notice board as they pass by, and without realizing it, the written message acts as a "silent reminder" to maintain good behaviour, especially when they are tempted to bully. Thus, the notice board plays an important role in character education by reinforcing moral messages and supporting verbal advice. The combination of both helps create an environment where students are more aware of their moral responsibilities and motivated to maintain harmony within the pesantren.



Figure 4. Written Advice Through the Information Board

4. Reward and Punishment Method

At Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum Ketanggungan in Brebes, character education includes a reporting and action system to prevent and address bullying. The system allows students to report incidents without fear of retaliation from the perpetrators. An administrator explained, "We've collaborated with the formal school to place a complaint box in a strategic location so students can report bullying easily, without fear of intimidation" (Islamic Boarding School Administrator, Interview, August 25, 2024).

The reporting team includes pesantren security and school counselling teachers. If an incident occurs at the pesantren, security handles it, while school counsellors handle incidents at the school. According to Pesantren security, when a report comes in, the first step is to warn the perpetrator, followed by punishments like cleaning the prayer room or toilets for repeat offenses. If the behaviour continues, the students' parents are called. This system is a preventive effort to create an anti-bullying culture, though consistency in handling cases is essential.

5. Learning Methods

At Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum, character education begins with studying moral books. These books, used in every class from elementary school to madrasah grade four, aim to instill good moral and ethical values. The books studied include *Akhlakulil Banin* (Juz 1-3), *Ta'limul Muta'alim*, *Tasyirul Kholaq*, and *Riyadhus Sholihin* for the administrators.

Each book has a specific purpose related to moral development. For example, *Akhlakulil Banin* covers values like honesty, discipline, and responsibility, which are important for preventing bullying. By understanding and applying these values, students can build healthier social interactions. The head of the pesantren, Kyai Haji Salim Asmu'i, said, "We always remind students of the importance of morals, and studying classical books is an effective way to do this. These books teach good manners and morals according to Islamic teachings. We believe that instilling good morals will keep us away from bad behaviour" (KH. Salim Asmui, Interview, August 24, 2024).

Based on observations, the learning process starts with students reading the book aloud. After reading, the ustadz asks students to interpret what they read, then provides additional explanations to help students understand how the teachings relate to their daily lives, including how to avoid bullying.



Figure 5. Learning Activities in Class

As far as the researcher's observation, the learning of the Books of Morals at the Bustanul Ulum Islamic Boarding School is still limited to theories delivered to students, not yet conducting interactive and practical guidance activities every Saturday night that strengthen students' understanding of the importance of morals such as class discussions, etc.

Supporting and inhibiting factors of character education in preventing bullying behaviour

Character education is an important part of bullying prevention efforts, especially in Islamic boarding schools that prioritize moral and religious values. At the Bustanul Ulum Ketanggungan Brebes Islamic Boarding School, character education is implemented with various approaches to prevent bullying behaviour among students. Several factors support the effectiveness of character education

in suppressing the potential for bullying behaviour, but there are also inhibiting factors that need to be addressed.

1. Supporting Factors

a. Communication between Parents and Students

The "sambangan" activity, a monthly visit by parents to the Islamic boarding school, plays an important role in character education to prevent bullying. It provides a platform for communication between the pesantren, students, and parents. During *Sambangan*, parents strengthen their emotional bonds with their children, monitor their behaviour, discuss values to instill, and learn how they can help prevent negative behaviours like bullying.

Based on observations, sambangan is crucial in preventing bullying. Parental involvement gives students a sense of security, knowing they are supported by both their families and the pesantren. Parents also receive education on anti-bullying, including recognizing signs of bullying, identifying victims and perpetrators, and effective communication at home. This support encourages students to open up about their feelings or problems, making them more likely to seek help when needed.

b. Be selective in choosing friends

The second supporting factor in preventing bullying behaviour is teaching to be selective in choosing friends. In the Islamic boarding school environment, friends have a big influence on the attitudes and behaviour of students. Based on interviews with students and administrators, students who choose friends who have positive behaviour tend to show good attitudes in everyday life and have a lower tendency to be involved in bullying. Friends who are disciplined, obey the rules, and respect others are good examples, so that students learn to appreciate differences and refrain from harmful behaviour.

c. Developing Positive Attitudes

Character education that focuses on developing positive attitudes is an important supporting factor in preventing bullying at the Bustanul Ulum Islamic Boarding School. Students who have empathy, mutual respect, and awareness of the impact of their actions on others tend to be more restrained from behaviour that hurts others. This positive attitude is fostered through character activities, such as sorogan (an individual learning method with a teacher), religious studies, and community service activities (*ro'an*). These activities help strengthen social relationships between students and reduce the potential for conflict that leads to bullying.

d. Self Confidence

Another supporting factor in character education is the development of self-confidence. Students who have a good level of self-confidence are better able to maintain their integrity and are not easily influenced to bully. Self-confidence also helps students to be more assertive when facing social pressure, so that they can reject invitations to behave negatively. One of the ustaz said that self-confidence also influences students to report bullying behaviour that they experience or witness, making them braver in protecting themselves and their friends from bad treatment.

2. Inhibiting Factors

a. The Role of Teachers or Ustadz

Although teachers and religious teachers play an important role in character education, this factor can also be an obstacle when the approach used is less effective. Interview results

showed that some students felt that teachers only gave punishment without deeply understanding the psychological impact of bullying. Punishment without education about the long-term impact of bad behaviour can make students only afraid of punishment, and not understand the underlying moral values. In addition, inconsistency among teachers in dealing with bullying is also a problem. Some teachers are firm and consistent, but some ignore minor incidents, so students feel confused or hesitant to report bullying cases.

b. Attitudes and Backgrounds of Students

The attitudes, family backgrounds, and social experiences of students also influence the success of character education. Some students who come from poor environments bring negative habits such as a lack of empathy and a tendency to behave aggressively. Some students who have personal problems, such as family conflicts or social pressure, tend to vent negative feelings by bullying. The influence of friends is also an obstacle, especially when students hang out more with friends who often break the rules. Some students are reluctant to report bullying because they are afraid of getting social pressure or being expelled from their circle of friends.

c. Security Supervision

The role of Islamic boarding school security supervisors is also an inhibiting factor. The limited number of supervisors makes it difficult to effectively supervise all student activities. Several supervisors admitted that their number is not comparable to the number of students who must be supervised, especially at certain times such as break time. Lack of training for supervisors in handling bullying cases is also an obstacle, so bullying cases are often not detected or are only handled after they become serious problems.

d. Islamic Boarding School Environment

The environmental factors of the Islamic boarding school itself are also an obstacle to character education to prevent bullying. The crowded dormitory space makes students have less privacy, so that suppressed emotions easily emerge and have the potential to cause conflict between individuals. Limited space also makes students feel like they do not have a comfortable place to calm down, and this can trigger negative behaviour. The hierarchy in Islamic boarding schools also has the potential to cause bullying when senior students feel they have authority over their juniors. This hierarchical culture functions to maintain order, but if not controlled, it can be misused to force juniors to do things they don't want.

Conclusion

The study shows that character education plays a key role in preventing bullying at Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum. Bullying at the pesantren includes physical bullying (hitting, hair-pulling, pushing), verbal bullying (teasing, insults, intimidation), and social bullying (exclusion, rumours). The impact is significant, with victims experiencing decreased motivation, anxiety, and discomfort, even leading some to leave, while perpetrators show decreased empathy and increased aggression.

Character education at the pesantren is implemented through various methods: role models, habituation, advice, rewards and punishments, and learning. The role model method, where ustaz serve as examples, is effective but limited in practice. Habituation and advice are important, though seniority weakens their effectiveness. Rewards and punishments help discipline students, but sometimes fail to deter bullying. The moral and ethics learning is mainly theoretical and less effective.

Supporting factors in character education include good communication between administrators, students, and parents, which helps identify and resolve bullying, as well as the pesantren's social environment based on religious values. However, challenges include limited understanding of character education, lack of curriculum integration, and low involvement of all pesantren components in monitoring student behaviour.

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