

# Toward Safer Schools: Guidance Counselors' Experiences, Challenges, and Interventions in Handling Bullying Cases

Marianne P. Calipes, Lorraine Fudotan

Holy Name University, Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines – 6300

Email address: palomares.marianne@hnu.edu.ph

**Abstract**—Bullying remains a persistent concern in schools, affecting students' safety, well-being, and academic engagement. This study explored the experiences of guidance counselors in handling bullying cases in public and private secondary schools in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, for the school year 2025–2026. It aimed to examine how counselors manage bullying incidents, identify the challenges they encounter, determine the types of bullying commonly recorded, and describe the interventions and strategies they implement. A qualitative descriptive research design grounded in a constructivist paradigm was employed. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected guidance counselors and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis to identify patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. Findings revealed that counselors approach bullying case management as a structured yet relational process involving listening, verification, coordination, and follow-up support. Three key challenges emerged, including difficulty in establishing accurate accounts due to fear and nondisclosure, issues in stakeholder cooperation particularly with parents, and systemic limitations related to unclear policies and limited resources. Bullying was found to occur in multiple forms, with verbal and cyberbullying as the most commonly reported, followed by physical, social or relational, psychological, and sexual forms. In response, counselors implement multi-layered interventions that integrate preventive programs, direct counseling, monitoring, and restorative approaches that emphasize behavioral change and relationship repair. Collaborative practices involving parents, teachers, and administrators were identified as critical, although their effectiveness varies depending on the level of stakeholder engagement. The study highlights that effective bullying intervention extends beyond individual counselor effort and requires coherent school systems, clear procedures, and sustained institutional support.

**Keywords**— Bullying, guidance counselors, school intervention, qualitative research, reflexive thematic analysis, Philippines.

## I. INTRODUCTION

School violence and bullying remain serious concerns in every public school worldwide and continue to threaten learners' safety, well-being, and academic development (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). UNESCO (2020) reports that more than one in three students worldwide have experienced bullying, showing that many learners continue to face unsafe school environments. Bullying affects children far beyond the moment of victimization. Learners who are frequently bullied are far more likely to feel isolated in school, miss classes, perform poorly, and even leave formal education after secondary school (O'Higgins Norman et al, 2022). These consequences show that bullying is not merely a discipline

issue but a persistent educational and psychosocial problem that demands sustained school action.

In the Philippine basic education context, the problem has remained visible in both school reports and national assessment findings. The Department of Education (DepEd) recorded more than 170 bullying cases from November 24, 2023 to January 11, 2024, including 83 cases of physical bullying, 28 cases of verbal abuse, 27 cases of cyberbullying, and 40 cases categorized as bullying in general (Cabato, 2024). This pattern reflects the continuing presence of different forms of aggression in schools. The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment further revealed that one (1) in every three (3) Filipino students experienced bullying at least once a week, with the problem reported to be more common among boys and learners in public schools (Bautista, 2023). These figures place bullying among the pressing learner protection issues in DepEd schools.

In response to this concern, DepEd has put in place learner protection efforts intended to detect, report, and address bullying incidents in schools. One clear example is the use of the Learner Rights and Protection Office and its Telesafe helpline, through which bullying reports were received and documented (Cabato, 2024). This reporting mechanism reflects DepEd's continuing effort to protect learners and uphold a safe and conducive learning environment. Yet the persistence of bullying cases suggests that reporting systems alone do not fully resolve the problem. Schools still need stronger intervention practices, closer coordination among stakeholders, and more context-sensitive responses that move beyond documentation toward prevention and effective case handling.

Despite the seriousness of the issue, important gaps remain in the existing body of knowledge. Much of the available discussion highlights the prevalence of bullying and its harmful effects, yet fewer studies examine how bullying cases are actually handled within school settings, particularly from the perspective of guidance counselors who directly manage these concerns. A further methodological gap appears in the limited use of in-depth qualitative inquiry to capture the lived experiences, challenges, and intervention practices of school personnel handling bullying cases. In Tagbilaran City, this gap becomes more urgent because local school realities may differ across public and private institutions. Reports from a public secondary school, which had recorded nearly 100 bullying

cases as of December, suggest that the problem is substantial, yet no focused local study had comprehensively examined the dynamics of bullying case management and the interventions employed in these settings.

For this reason, the present study explored the experiences of guidance counselors in handling bullying cases, the challenges they encountered, the types of bullying commonly recorded in their schools, and the interventions and strategies they implemented in public and private schools in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, for the school year 2025 to 2026. Grounded in the need to support safer, more supportive learning environments, the study aimed to generate evidence to guide the development of an anti-bullying enhancement program. Through this effort, the study sought to provide practical input to strengthen school practices in bullying prevention, case response, and learner protection.

### *Theoretical Background*

Bullying in schools remains a complex issue that affects students' well-being, safety, and learning environment, shaped by interactions among individuals, relationships, and broader social contexts. The study draws on Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), and School Climate Theory (Dewey, 1916; Cohen), which together explain how bullying develops, is reinforced through observation and social interaction, and is influenced by the overall school environment (Stahel et al., 2025; Neal & Neal, 2020; Gini et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2021; Thapa et al., 2020; Wang & Degol, 2021). These perspectives highlight that bullying emerges from multiple interacting factors and that effective responses require coordinated efforts involving schools, families, and communities.

The study is also grounded in Philippine legal and policy frameworks that mandate the protection of learners. Republic Act No. 10627 defines bullying and requires schools to implement interventions, supported by constitutional provisions that promote youth welfare. Additional safeguards are provided by Republic Act No. 7610, DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012, and Republic Act No. 10175, which extend protection to both physical and digital contexts. Mental health laws, including Republic Act No. 11036 and Republic Act No. 12080, further emphasize the integration of psychosocial support in schools, reinforcing the central role of guidance counselors in prevention, intervention, and the promotion of a safe school climate.

Guidance counselors serve as frontline professionals in addressing bullying, performing roles that combine intervention, prevention, and system coordination (Gaffney et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022; Daily et al., 2026). Their work is complex and emotionally demanding, requiring them to balance support and investigation while managing incomplete reports and sensitive cases (Arcuri, 2018; Longobardi et al., 2021). They provide counseling, coordinate with stakeholders, and address emerging forms of bullying, including relational and digital types (Espelage et al., 2021; Kwan et al., 2020). However, structural constraints such as heavy workloads and limited resources affect their capacity (Sink & Stroh, 2021). In Tagbilaran City, Bohol, counselors operate within policy-

driven systems while facing high caseloads, highlighting the need for strengthened programs and institutional support (Bohol Chronicle, 2019; DepEd, 2018; DepEd, 2025).

### *Challenges Encountered in Addressing Bullying Incidents*

Guidance counselors encounter several challenges that complicate the effective handling of bullying cases, particularly in establishing accurate accounts of incidents. Victims often hesitate to report due to fear of retaliation, shame, or lack of trust in school support systems, while perpetrators may deny involvement or minimize their actions (Longobardi et al., 2021). This reluctance and dishonesty result in incomplete or conflicting narratives, requiring counselors to reconstruct events using multiple sources such as peers, teachers, and parents. The process delays resolution and complicates intervention planning, demanding high levels of professional judgment, emotional intelligence, and ethical sensitivity (Longobardi et al., 2021).

Institutional constraints further intensify these challenges. Counselors frequently report heavy workloads and large student populations, which limit their capacity to provide sustained follow-up and individualized attention (Sink & Stroh, 2021). At the same time, unclear policies and inconsistent administrative support weaken the effectiveness of interventions, as counselors may operate without standardized procedures for managing bullying cases (UNESCO, 2022). The absence of clear role delineation among counselors, teachers, and administrators can also result in fragmented responses and reduced accountability, adding pressure to decision-making processes and contributing to role strain.

Moreover, institutional and systemic barriers continue to hinder effective intervention. Schools without clear anti-bullying policies often rely on informal or inconsistent approaches, resulting in varied responses and reduced accountability (Gaffney et al., 2021). In addition, constraints such as insufficient time, limited resources, and lack of structured support systems restrict counselors' ability to implement comprehensive interventions and monitoring mechanisms (UNESCO, 2022). These combined challenges highlight that addressing bullying requires not only individual competence but also strong institutional support and coordinated school-wide efforts.

### *Common Types of Bullying Recorded in Schools*

Bullying manifests in various forms in school settings, with verbal and relational bullying identified as the most prevalent. These forms include teasing, name-calling, social exclusion, and rumor-spreading, which are often dismissed as harmless interactions, making early detection difficult (Waasdorp et al., 2021). Because of their subtle and indirect nature, these behaviors frequently go unreported and may only become visible when they escalate into more serious conflicts.

Similar patterns are observed in Southeast Asian contexts, where indirect forms of bullying are often underreported due to cultural tendencies that emphasize social harmony and discourage open confrontation (Kwan et al., 2020). This tendency contributes to the normalization of certain bullying behaviors, particularly relational aggression, which further

complicates identification and intervention efforts. As a result, guidance counselors often rely on student disclosures to detect cases, yet underreporting limits their ability to respond promptly and effectively.

Moreover, bullying increasingly occurs in less visible forms, including those that extend into digital spaces. Subtle behaviors such as social exclusion and rumor-spreading may take place both offline and online, making them more difficult to monitor and address (Kwan et al., 2020). These evolving forms of bullying highlight the complexity of the issue and reinforce the need for more responsive and context-sensitive approaches within schools. Overall, the literature indicates that bullying is not only widespread but also manifests in forms that are often hidden, indirect, and socially normalized, which poses challenges for early detection and intervention.

#### *Implementation of Interventions and Strategies in Managing Bullying Cases*

Guidance counselors employ a range of interventions and strategies to address bullying, combining direct services, preventive education, and collaborative approaches. Individual counseling remains a primary intervention, focusing on emotional processing, rebuilding self-esteem, and developing coping strategies for victims (Espelage et al., 2021). Group counseling and peer support programs also provide safe spaces for students to share experiences and develop social skills. In addition, cognitive and expressive therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive restructuring and journaling, are used to support emotional recovery and resilience (Sink & Stroh, 2021).

Beyond direct counseling, counselors implement case management practices that involve coordination with parents, teachers, and school administrators. They facilitate mediation, monitor behavioral changes, and apply appropriate disciplinary measures when necessary, ensuring that interventions address both individual behavior and environmental factors (Waasdorp et al., 2021). This collaborative approach strengthens the consistency and effectiveness of school responses.

Program-based strategies further enhance intervention efforts. Schools establish peer counseling systems, anti-bullying task forces, and structured reporting mechanisms to promote accountability and increase reporting rates (Gaffney et al., 2021). These initiatives support a more organized and proactive approach to managing bullying cases. At the same time, effective interventions adopt a whole-school approach that integrates policy, education, and community involvement. Clear definitions of bullying, accessible reporting systems, and consistent enforcement of rules are identified as essential components of successful programs (UNESCO, 2022).

Preventive education also plays a critical role in reducing bullying incidents. Regular classroom guidance sessions, social-emotional learning programs, and awareness campaigns help students recognize bullying behaviors and develop empathy and conflict resolution skills (Espelage et al., 2021). Family and community engagement further strengthen intervention outcomes, as involving parents in awareness programs and case management improves communication and

reinforces positive behavior beyond the school setting (Kwan et al., 2020).

Recent studies highlight the importance of structured and context-based program implementation. Guidance counselors design and implement anti-bullying programs grounded in student needs assessments, reflecting the widespread presence of bullying across schools (Wati & Irman, 2024). They also utilize innovative approaches, such as social media-based educational materials, to address common forms of bullying, particularly verbal bullying among students (Pradana et al., 2025).

In addition, counselors collaborate with students, parents, and school personnel in implementing interventions, with evidence showing improved perceptions and responses following these efforts (Endriyani & Santoso, 2020). Despite these initiatives, the literature emphasizes that strengthening program structure, enhancing counselor training, and improving institutional support remain necessary to sustain effective and comprehensive anti-bullying interventions.

In essence, the reviewed literature consistently positions guidance counselors as central actors in addressing bullying through roles that include emotional support, case management, coordination, and prevention within school systems (Espelage et al., 2021; Gaffney et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Bullying is commonly described as verbal and relational, often subtle, underreported, and shaped by social and cultural dynamics that hinder early detection (Waasdorp et al., 2021; Kwan et al., 2020), while counselors respond through counseling, mediation, and whole-school strategies despite constraints such as conflicting narratives, heavy workloads, limited training, and weak institutional support (Longobardi et al., 2021; Sink & Stroh, 2021; Day et al., 2020).

Existing studies also highlight preventive and program-based approaches, yet these are often presented in general terms with limited grounding in practitioners' lived realities (Wati & Irman, 2024; Pradana et al., 2025). A clear gap emerges across three fronts. First, knowledge remains limited on how counselors interpret and navigate their experiences within specific local contexts, particularly in provincial Philippine settings such as Tagbilaran City, Bohol.

Second, the literature is dominated by quantitative and descriptive designs, with insufficient qualitative inquiry that captures the depth, complexity, and meaning-making processes involved in handling bullying cases. Third, prior studies tend to treat experiences, challenges, and interventions as separate strands rather than as an integrated basis for program development. These gaps warrant a qualitative study that foregrounds counselors' lived experiences and produces a context-sensitive foundation for a localized anti-bullying enhancement program.

## II. THE PROBLEM

### *Statement of the Problem*

This study explored the experiences of guidance counselors in handling bullying cases, the challenges they encounter, and the interventions they implement, to contribute to a safer and more supportive learning environment in public

and private schools in Tagbilaran City, Bohol for the school year 2025 – 2026.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What were the experiences of the participants in handling bullying cases in public and private schools in Tagbilaran City, Bohol?
2. What challenges did the participants encounter in addressing bullying cases?
3. What types of bullying were commonly recorded in the participants' schools?
4. How did the participants implement interventions and strategies in handling bullying cases?

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### *Design*

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive design grounded in a constructivist paradigm to examine guidance counselors' experiences in handling bullying cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sandelowski, 2000). This approach enabled the study to capture how counselors interpret, understand, and respond to bullying within their school contexts while preserving the depth and authenticity of their lived experiences.

#### *Environment and Participants*

The study was conducted in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, across eight (8) selected public and private secondary schools during the academic year 2024–2025, representing varied institutional contexts in terms of student population, resources, and program offerings. Eight full-time guidance counselors were purposively selected to ensure information-rich insights, with inclusion criteria requiring relevant academic preparation and at least one year of experience, while voluntary participation and withdrawal were upheld to maintain ethical standards.

#### *Instrument*

Data were gathered through validated semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed, context-based accounts of bullying cases, challenges, and interventions. The interview guide underwent expert validation to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives.

#### *Research Procedure*

Data collection followed a systematic and ethical process, including approval, coordination with school authorities, and informed consent. Interviews were conducted in private settings, audio-recorded with permission, and supported by field notes, with data gathered until saturation was reached.

#### *Data Analysis & Rigor of the Study*

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving coding, categorization, and theme development grounded in participants' responses. Member checking was applied to validate interpretations and ensure alignment with participants' accounts.

Rigor was ensured through established qualitative criteria, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through

member checking, dependability through maintaining an audit trail of procedures, and confirmability through consistent reference to the original data, ensuring that findings remained grounded in participants' experiences.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

The study adhered to ethical standards to ensure participant protection and research integrity. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage, while informed consent emphasized voluntary participation and the right to withdraw, with care taken to minimize emotional discomfort during the research process.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results and findings of the study, which explored and described the experiences of guidance counselors in handling bullying cases in public and private secondary schools in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, for the school year 2025–2026. Specifically, it sought to examine how guidance counselors manage bullying incidents within their respective school contexts, the challenges they encounter in addressing such cases, the types of bullying commonly recorded, and the interventions and strategies they implement.

#### *Experiences of Guidance Counselors in Handling Bullying Cases*

Based on the participants' statements, three themes emerged: (1) navigating bullying cases through care, inquiry, and restoration; (2) carrying the emotional and ethical weight of intervention; and (3) working within varied and sometimes ambiguous school realities.

#### *Theme 1: Navigating Bullying Cases Through Care, Inquiry, and Restoration*

Participants described their experience handling bullying cases as a deliberate, multi-step process grounded in listening, verification, and a coordinated response. Their accounts show that intervention does not begin with judgment but with understanding. One participant emphasized, "I listen first before making any decision" (P3), while another explained the need to "gather information from teachers and students" (P3), indicating that inquiry and validation are central to their approach.

This suggests that counselors prioritize establishing a clear account of the incident before acting. Their work also involves collaboration with key stakeholders, as reflected in statements such as "I call the parents and talk to both parties" (P2) and "We conduct conferences to resolve the issue" (P2), showing that case handling is embedded within a broader network of school and family involvement.

Participants further described their role as extending beyond resolution toward care and restoration. They emphasized ensuring the safety and well-being of students after incidents, as seen in "We ensure that students are safe and supported after the incident" (P1) and "I also provide counseling sessions" (P4). Preventive practices also emerged as part of their experience, with one participant noting, "We conduct awareness campaigns... and ensure no retaliation happens" (P1). These responses indicate that counselors do not

view bullying cases as isolated events but as situations requiring continuous support and preventive action.

The theme is supported by the literature that positions guidance counselors as central figures in bullying case management through coordinated, supportive, and preventive actions. Espelage et al. (2021) explained that counselors address student aggression not only through direct intervention but also through emotional support and developmental guidance, which aligns with the participants' emphasis on listening, counseling, and follow-up.

In the same vein, Gaffney et al. (2021) noted that effective anti-bullying responses involve structured intervention components, including coordinated school action and reporting mechanisms. UNESCO (2022) likewise emphasized that bullying prevention and response are strongest when embedded in whole-school systems that integrate protection, reporting, and student support. These studies support the present theme by showing that bullying case handling is not merely disciplinary but also restorative and relational.

### *Theme 2. Carrying the Emotional and Ethical Weight of Intervention*

Participants experienced bullying case management as emotionally demanding and ethically complex. They expressed empathy and concern for students, particularly victims, as reflected in the statement, "I feel sad for the victim" (P5). At the same time, they emphasized the need to regulate their emotions in order to maintain fairness and professionalism. One participant stated, "But I need to stay fair" (P5), indicating an awareness of the need to balance emotional involvement with objectivity. This reveals that counselors actively manage their emotional responses while ensuring that their actions remain just and unbiased.

Participants also described feelings of pressure and uncertainty, particularly in situations involving potential harm. One counselor noted, "Sometimes I feel worried especially when it becomes physical" (P6), while another added, "It can become serious if not handled properly" (P6). These responses reflect the weight of responsibility they carry in preventing escalation and ensuring appropriate intervention. Their experiences suggest that handling bullying cases involves navigating emotionally charged situations while making careful and ethical decisions.

The finding is substantiated by studies showing that bullying intervention places counselors in emotionally demanding and ethically sensitive positions. Longobardi et al. (2021) observed that bullying cases often involve hesitation, conflicting accounts, and relational strain, which require careful judgment from school personnel. This supports the participants' accounts of needing to remain fair while dealing with emotionally charged situations.

Similarly, Sink and Stroh (2021) found that counselors' work is often constrained by heavy workloads and limited time, conditions that heighten professional pressure and complicate case handling. UNESCO (2022) further explained that weak institutional support and unclear procedures may intensify the burden on school personnel responding to bullying.

### *Theme 3. Working Within Varied and Sometimes Ambiguous School Realities*

Participants' experiences were shaped by the varied and context-dependent nature of bullying cases in their schools. They described encountering a wide range of incidents, from minor interpersonal conflicts to more serious forms of bullying. One participant stated, "We also encounter cyberbullying and physical fights" (P8), indicating exposure to diverse and complex cases. However, many participants also noted that many reported incidents involve less severe behaviors, as reflected in "Most cases are just teasing or misunderstandings" (P7). This suggests that counselors frequently deal with situations that fall along a spectrum of severity.

A recurring aspect of their experience involves interpreting the nature of reported cases. Participants pointed out that not all incidents clearly qualify as bullying, as seen in the statement, "Students sometimes think everything is bullying" (P7). This highlights the need for careful assessment and judgment. In addition, participants acknowledged that their responses are influenced by the specific context of their schools, with one noting, "It depends on the situation and the school" (P8). These accounts indicate that counselors operate within varied institutional environments that shape how cases are understood and managed.

Interestingly, studies show that bullying in schools often appears in diverse, subtle, and context-dependent forms, making interpretation a necessary part of intervention. Waasdorp et al. (2021) identified verbal and relational bullying as common but often less visible forms of aggression, which supports the participants' accounts of teasing, misunderstandings, and socially embedded behaviors.

Kwan et al. (2020) further explained that indirect and digital forms of bullying are frequently underreported and difficult to detect, reinforcing the participants' experiences with cyberbullying and ambiguous cases. UNESCO (2022) also noted that school climate, reporting culture, and institutional systems shape how bullying is recognized and addressed. These studies support the finding that counselors work within school realities where bullying varies in form and severity, and where distinguishing bullying from ordinary peer conflict requires contextual judgment.

In essence, the findings reveal that guidance counselors' experiences in handling bullying cases are best understood as a context-bound, relational, and interpretive practice rather than a fixed or purely procedural task. Counselors do not simply respond to incidents; they actively construct meaning through listening, verifying, and coordinating, while simultaneously providing care and support to those involved. Their work reflects a restorative orientation, in which the goal extends beyond resolving the incident to ensuring student safety, emotional recovery, and preventing further harm.

At the same time, these experiences are shaped by the interplay of emotional labor, ethical judgment, and contextual variability. Counselors continuously balance empathy with fairness, manage uncertainty and potential risks, and interpret cases within environments where the definition and severity of bullying are not always clear. This indicates that bullying case

management is not uniform but is influenced by school context, student behavior, and institutional systems. Overall, the findings suggest that effective handling of bullying requires not only procedural competence but also strong interpersonal sensitivity, reflective judgment, and adaptive decision-making within complex school realities.

### *Challenges Encountered by Guidance Counselors in Addressing Bullying Cases*

The reflexive thematic analysis generated three interrelated themes which capture the challenges encountered by guidance counselors in addressing bullying cases: barriers in establishing truth and evidence, challenges in stakeholder cooperation and response, and systemic and structural limitations in school-based intervention.

#### *Theme 1. Barriers in Establishing Truth and Evidence.*

Participants consistently described challenges in establishing accurate accounts of bullying incidents due to fear, silence, and insufficient evidence. Several counselors reported that students often withhold information because they are afraid to speak, resulting in limited or unreliable data. One participant explained that there is “silence from the involved parties... because of fear” (P1), while another noted that “students are hesitant also to report” (P2), indicating that disclosure itself is a major barrier.

The problem is further compounded by the absence of witnesses and the difficulty of obtaining concrete proof, especially in cases where harmful actions are minimized as jokes. As one participant stated, “they would say it is just a joke... but we do not know its impact” (P4). In digital contexts, the issue becomes more complex, as cyberbullying often involves anonymous accounts, making it difficult to identify perpetrators even when screenshots are available (P5). These accounts show that counselors frequently operate in situations where evidence is incomplete, contested, or difficult to verify.

This finding suggests that bullying intervention is constrained not only by the presence of incidents but by the difficulty of establishing credible and actionable truth. Longobardi et al. (2021) explained that bullying cases often involve conflicting narratives and hesitation among students, which complicates the process of reconstructing events and making informed decisions.

Similarly, Kwan et al. (2020) highlighted that cyberbullying introduces additional challenges due to anonymity and limited traceability, making evidence collection more difficult. These studies support the present finding by showing that the challenge of addressing bullying lies not only in responding to behavior but in navigating uncertainty, validating experiences, and making judgments in the absence of clear and complete information.

#### *Theme 2. Challenges in Stakeholder Cooperation and Response*

Participants emphasized that stakeholder cooperation plays a critical role in the handling of bullying cases, yet it also presents significant challenges. A recurring issue involves parental denial and resistance, which complicate intervention efforts. One participant reported that parents often insist that

“their child is not like that at home” (P4), while another described parents as “overly protective” (P6), suggesting that some parents reject or minimize reports of bullying. In addition, participants noted that parents may prolong conflicts even after students have moved on, as reflected in the statement that “learners have already moved on, but their parents continue to hold on to the issue” (P8).

Lack of support from families, particularly in cases involving dysfunctional backgrounds (P1), further weakens intervention efforts. At the same time, participants acknowledged that strong cooperation from teachers and administrators significantly improves outcomes, with one noting that “the cooperation from the administration is a big help” (P3) and another emphasizing that collaboration is “the most important key” (P6). These accounts show that stakeholder dynamics can either facilitate or hinder the resolution of bullying cases.

This finding indicates that bullying intervention is inherently relational and dependent on the alignment of key stakeholders. UNESCO (2022) emphasized that effective anti-bullying responses require coordinated action among school personnel, parents, and the wider school community, reinforcing the importance of collaboration observed in the present study.

Similarly, Gaffney et al. (2021) found that whole-school approaches that involve multiple stakeholders are more effective in addressing bullying and sustaining intervention outcomes. These studies support the finding that cooperation is not merely supportive but essential, while lack of cooperation introduces delays, resistance, and incomplete intervention, ultimately affecting the well-being of students.

#### *Theme 3. Systemic and Structural Limitations in School-Based Intervention*

Participants identified several systemic and structural constraints that hinder effective bullying intervention, particularly in relation to policies, resources, and institutional processes. Many reported confusion and inconsistency in policy implementation, with one participant noting that teachers are sometimes unsure of “what to follow and steps to take” (P3), and another pointing out the absence of “fixed steps” and clearly assigned disciplinary roles (P4). Concerns were also raised about the lack of formalized or approved guidelines, creating uncertainty and vulnerability in decision-making (P3).

In addition, participants highlighted resource limitations, including a shortage of trained personnel and high counselor-to-student ratios. One participant described the “lack of helping professionals... considering the volume of students” (P1), while another emphasized the difficulty of managing cases as the only counselor assigned to a large group of students (P5). Gaps were also noted in training and preventive programs for stakeholders, as well as in awareness and understanding of bullying concepts (P5; P8). These responses show that challenges are not only situational but embedded in broader institutional conditions.

This finding suggests that the effectiveness of bullying intervention is shaped by the structural capacity of the school system. Sink and Stroh (2021) highlighted that counselors’

ability to provide effective services is often constrained by workload, limited resources, and role expectations, which aligns with the participants’ experiences of manpower shortages and excessive responsibilities.

UNESCO (2022) further emphasized that unclear policies, insufficient training, and weak institutional support systems hinder the implementation of comprehensive anti-bullying programs. These studies support the present finding by showing that challenges in addressing bullying are not solely individual but systemic, requiring stronger policy frameworks, adequate resources, and sustained institutional support to enable effective intervention.

*Types of Bullying Recorded in the Participants’ Schools*

Table 1 presents the condensed categorization of the types of bullying recorded in the participants’ schools, based on the analysis of their responses. The classification reflects the recurring forms of bullying identified across participants, highlighting variations in manifestation, frequency, and impact within the school context.

TABLE 1. Condensed Categorization of Types of Bullying Recorded

Type of Bullying	Description Based on Data	Participants Mentioning
1. Verbal Bullying	Name-calling, teasing, offensive language	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
2. Cyberbullying	Social media, chats, screenshots, online ridicule	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
3. Physical Bullying	Hitting, punching, physical aggression	P1, P2, P5, P6
4. Social/Relational Bullying	Exclusion, emotional harm, peer conflict	P1, P3, P5, P8
5. Psychological Bullying	Emotional distress, withdrawal, mental impact	P1, P7
6. Sexual Bullying	Gender-related inappropriate behavior	P1

*Verbal Bullying.* Verbal bullying emerged as the most frequently reported form across participants, characterized by name-calling, teasing, and offensive language embedded in everyday interactions. Participants consistently described this as a common and often normalized behavior among students.

One participant noted the prevalence of “common name calling... verbal type” (P2), while another emphasized that it is “usually done through name calling and teasing” (P6). In several cases, these behaviors extended beyond casual interaction and resulted in emotional harm, as seen when a student became discouraged from attending school due to repeated verbal attacks (P7). Another participant observed that many incidents involve “teasing or misunderstandings among peers” (P8), indicating that such behaviors are often minimized despite their potential impact. These accounts suggest that verbal bullying is both pervasive and subtly embedded in peer dynamics.

In the literature, Waasdorp et al. (2021) identified verbal bullying as one of the most prevalent forms of peer aggression, often normalized within social interactions despite its harmful consequences. UNESCO (2022) similarly noted that teasing and name-calling are widespread yet frequently underestimated forms of bullying that can significantly affect

students’ emotional well-being and engagement in school. These perspectives reinforce the present findings by showing that verbal bullying, though often perceived as minor, carries meaningful psychological and social implications.

*Cyberbullying.* Cyberbullying was identified as a prominent and increasingly visible form of bullying, closely linked to students’ engagement with digital platforms. Participants described incidents involving social media, group chats, and the circulation of screenshots used to ridicule peers. One participant explained that conversations are “screenshot then making fun” (P3), while another emphasized that “the most noticeable rise has been in cyberbullying” (P5). These behaviors often occur in private or less observable spaces, making them more difficult to detect and regulate compared to face-to-face interactions. Although some participants reported a limited number of cases, the consistent recognition of cyberbullying across responses underscores its growing presence within the school environment.

Parallel observations are found in the work of Kwan et al. (2020), who explained that cyberbullying has increased with the widespread use of digital communication, where anonymity and rapid content sharing intensify its effects. UNESCO (2022) further highlighted that cyberbullying presents distinct challenges due to its occurrence beyond school boundaries and its persistence over time. Taken together, these studies align with the present findings, indicating that cyberbullying represents an evolving dimension of peer aggression that requires adaptive monitoring and intervention strategies.

*Physical Bullying.* Physical bullying was reported as present but less frequent compared to other forms, involving direct acts such as hitting, punching, and other forms of bodily harm. Participants described these incidents as serious and often requiring immediate response due to their visible and potentially harmful nature. One participant referred to “punching, slapping, or hitting” (P2), while others noted minimal or no cases in their respective contexts (P7), suggesting variation across schools. Despite its lower frequency, physical bullying remains significant because of its direct impact on student safety and its potential to escalate quickly.

Consistent with these observations, Espelage et al. (2021) noted that physical bullying, although less prevalent than verbal or relational forms, tends to be more severe and demands urgent intervention. UNESCO (2022) likewise emphasized that physical aggression poses immediate risks to student safety and requires prompt and structured responses. These perspectives complement the present findings by underscoring that physical bullying, while less common, carries heightened consequences that necessitate decisive action.

*Social/Relational Bullying.* Social or relational bullying was identified as a form involving exclusion, peer conflict, and emotional harm within social interactions. Participants described behaviors such as exclusion and relational tension that affect students’ sense of belonging. One participant referred to “emotional/social bullying” (P3), while another mentioned “social exclusions” related to identity factors (P1).

These behaviors are often subtle and less visible than physical aggression, which makes them more difficult to detect but no less impactful. Their occurrence within everyday peer interactions suggests that they may persist unnoticed unless actively addressed.

Supporting this pattern, Waasdorp et al. (2021) explained that relational bullying, including exclusion and rumor-spreading, is common yet often overlooked due to its less observable nature. Gaffney et al. (2021) further argued that such forms of bullying can have lasting effects on students' relationships and emotional well-being. These accounts resonate with the present findings, highlighting the need to recognize and address relational aggression as a significant component of school bullying.

**Psychological Bullying.** Psychological bullying emerged in the data through its impact on students' emotional and mental well-being. Participants described cases where bullying resulted in distress, withdrawal, and reduced participation in school activities. One participant recounted a situation where a student with depression was bullied and became "discouraged from entering to the school" (P7), illustrating the profound effect of such experiences. Unlike more visible forms, psychological bullying often develops through repeated interactions that gradually affect a student's mental state, making it less immediately noticeable but deeply consequential.

This observation corresponds with UNESCO (2022), which highlighted that bullying can lead to serious psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and school avoidance. Espelage et al. (2021) likewise documented strong associations between bullying victimization and adverse mental health outcomes among students. These insights reinforce the present findings by demonstrating that the impact of bullying extends beyond observable actions to include significant emotional and psychological consequences.

**Sexual Bullying.** Sexual bullying was identified as a less frequently reported but important form of bullying involving inappropriate or gender-related behaviors. One participant explicitly included "sexual" bullying among the types encountered (P1), indicating awareness of behaviors that may compromise students' dignity and safety. Although not widely discussed across participants, its presence suggests that such incidents exist within the school context and require attention despite their lower visibility.

Related discussions in the literature emphasize that sexual and gender-based bullying constitute critical forms of school violence. UNESCO (2022) identified these behaviors as harmful practices that can disproportionately affect vulnerable students, while Espelage et al. (2021) noted that sexual harassment and gender-based bullying are significant dimensions of peer aggression that warrant targeted intervention. These perspectives align with the present findings, underscoring that even less frequently reported forms of bullying demand careful recognition and appropriate response.

### *Interventions and Strategies Implemented in Handling Bullying Cases*

#### *Theme 1. Implementing Multi-Layered Preventive and Responsive Interventions*

Participants described their interventions as a combination of preventive and responsive strategies embedded within school programs and case-based practices. Preventive efforts include peer education, awareness campaigns, homeroom guidance, and values formation activities that aim to shape students' attitudes and behavior. One participant highlighted "peer counselling program, peace keeping symposium and awareness activities" (P1), while others emphasized "bullying awareness talk," "life skills seminar," and "values formation" (P2).

Schools also integrate structured initiatives such as mental health programs and homeroom guidance sessions conducted regularly (P7), which promote empathy, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making. These accounts show that prevention is not a one-time activity, but a continuous process integrated into school routines and student development programs.

Alongside preventive efforts, participants implement responsive strategies that address specific bullying incidents. These include one-on-one counseling, behavioral monitoring, documentation, and disciplinary coordination. One participant noted the use of "counselling one on one, behavioural monitoring log" (P2), while another described the use of "clear protocols for reporting and investigating bullying incidents" (P5).

Such layered approaches indicate that schools respond to bullying through both proactive and reactive measures. This aligns with Gaffney et al. (2021), who emphasized that effective anti-bullying interventions combine preventive education with structured response systems. UNESCO (2022) likewise highlighted that whole-school approaches integrating awareness, monitoring, and support mechanisms are more effective in addressing bullying. These perspectives support the present findings by showing that comprehensive intervention requires a balance of prevention and direct response.

#### *Theme 2. Enacting Collaborative and Restorative Approaches to Case Management*

Participants emphasized that effective intervention is achieved through collaboration among stakeholders, particularly parents, teachers, and school administrators. Parent-teacher conferences were frequently identified as a key strategy, enabling shared responsibility in monitoring student behavior. One participant explained that such conferences allow parents to "monitor at home" (P2), while another observed that after conferences, "we don't have any more cases or any bad happenings" (P3), suggesting that dialogue-based intervention can reduce recurrence. Participants also described coordinated processes involving school personnel and parents during investigations and resolution, indicating that bullying cases are addressed through collective action rather than isolated efforts.

In addition to collaboration, participants highlighted a restorative orientation that focuses on behavioral change, reconciliation, and student development. One participant stated that schools "consider rehabilitative approach more than

being punitive” (P6), while another emphasized the effectiveness of “talking to them one-on-one” (P4), reflecting the importance of relational engagement. Preventive guidance sessions and open discussions about empathy and respect (P8) further reinforce this approach.

This aligns with Espelage et al. (2021), who noted that restorative and relationship-based interventions are more effective in promoting long-term behavioral change among students. UNESCO (2022) similarly emphasized that approaches centered on dialogue, empathy, and reconciliation contribute to safer and more supportive school environments. These findings indicate that intervention is most effective when it prioritizes relationships, shared responsibility, and student growth.

### Theme 3. Strengthening Capacity and Resources for Effective Intervention

Participants identified the need for additional resources, training, and institutional support to enhance their capacity to address bullying effectively. A major concern involves limited professional development opportunities, particularly in emerging areas such as cyberbullying and updated policy implementation. One participant emphasized the need for “seminar/workshops... in cyber technology” (P1), while another highlighted the importance of training related to the “revised anti-bullying law” (P3). These responses suggest that counselors require updated knowledge and skills to respond effectively to evolving forms of bullying. In addition, participants pointed to the absence of clear procedural guides in handling specific cases (P4), which creates uncertainty in decision-making.

Resource constraints also emerged as a significant challenge, particularly in relation to staffing and support systems. Participants noted the need for “additional staff to support counseling” and access to mental health professionals (P5), as well as financial support to sustain programs (P1). Others emphasized the importance of training stakeholders and strengthening preventive programs (P8).

These findings indicate that effective intervention depends not only on individual effort but also on institutional capacity. Sink and Stroh (2021) observed that counselors’ effectiveness is often limited by workload and insufficient resources, while UNESCO (2022) emphasized that strong policy frameworks, training, and support systems are essential for sustaining anti-bullying efforts. These perspectives support the present findings by showing that capacity building and resource allocation are critical in ensuring consistent and effective intervention.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on the salient findings, this study concludes that: Handling bullying in schools is not a simple task but a complex process that requires careful judgment, empathy, and coordination. Guidance counselors do more than follow procedures; they interpret situations where students are hesitant to speak, facts are unclear, and behaviors are often misunderstood or minimized. They work within conditions where truth is not always easy to establish and where decisions carry emotional and ethical weight. The findings

also show that intervention depends not only on the counselor but on how well parents, teachers, and school leaders work together. When cooperation is weak or policies are unclear, responses become delayed or inconsistent. The presence of different forms of bullying, especially those that are subtle or occur online, further makes identification and response more difficult.

Counselors address these challenges by using a mix of prevention, direct support, and restorative approaches that focus on behavior change and relationship repair. However, their efforts are often limited by lack of training, insufficient staff, and weak support systems. This gap between what is expected and what is available points to the need for stronger school systems that provide clear procedures, shared responsibility, and continuous capacity building. The study suggests that bullying should not be seen as a problem of individual students alone but as a school-wide concern shaped by policies, relationships, and resources. Addressing it requires organized, consistent, and well-supported efforts that protect learners and promote a safer school environment.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following is hereby recommended:

1. Public and private schools in Tagbilaran City should establish clear, consistent, and well-communicated protocols for reporting, investigating, and resolving bullying cases to reduce ambiguity and ensure timely and fair responses.
2. Schools should implement structured mechanisms that actively involve parents, teachers, and administrators in bullying prevention and case management to ensure coordinated and sustained intervention.
3. Regular training should be provided on emerging forms of bullying, particularly cyberbullying, as well as on legal frameworks, case handling procedures, and mental health support to improve professional competence.
4. Schools should strengthen values formation, social-emotional learning, and restorative practices to promote empathy, accountability, and positive relationships among students, reducing the likelihood of bullying incidents.
5. Future research should focus on creating and validating a contextualized instrument that measures the effectiveness of bullying intervention practices, challenges, and support systems, which can serve as a basis for evidence-based program development and continuous improvement.

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