The dynamics of bullying in Islamic Boarding Schools: an analysis of the causal factors and their impacts

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Abstract

This research investigates the causes, impacts, and prevention strategies of bullying in Islamic boarding schools through a literature review approach. Factors such as strict hierarchical structures, a culture of violence, lack of effective supervision, and delayed interventions have been identified as the main causes of bullying. The impacts on students include psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, as well as social issues like isolation and difficulties in social interactions. Academic impacts include a decrease in motivation and learning performance. To address this issue, the study suggests a holistic approach in the Islamic education curriculum that encompasses character and moral formation, as well as the implementation of strict policies and awareness training for staff and administrators of boarding schools. The ultimate goal is to shape students with strong morality and the ability to make positive contributions to society.

Keywords:
Bullying Prevention; Islamic Education; Islamic Boarding School

Abstrak

Bullying di pondok pesantren merupakan isu serius yang memengaruhi siswa secara signifikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penyebab, dampak, dan strategi pencegahan bullying melalui tinjauan pustaka dengan pendekatan deskriptif terhadap literatur yang relevan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa penyebab utama bullying di pondok pesantren meliputi struktur hierarki yang ketat, budaya kekerasan internal, lemahnya pengawasan, dan intervensi yang terlambat. Dampak yang ditimbulkan mencakup gangguan psikologis seperti depresi, kecemasan, rendahnya rasa percaya diri, isolasi sosial, kesulitan dalam interaksi, serta penurunan motivasi dan prestasi akademik. Pendekatan holistik yang menekankan pembentukan karakter dan moralitas dalam pendidikan Islam merupakan salah satu strategi yang dapat digunakan. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya langkah komprehensif dalam mencegah bullying guna mendukung praktik pendidikan Islam yang lebih baik dan membentuk generasi siswa yang bermoral kuat serta berkontribusi positif bagi masyarakat.

Keywords:
Pencegahan Bullying; Pendidikan Islam; Pondok Pesantren

Introduction

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), as traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, play a crucial role in shaping the character and morals of students (Anggraeni & Maharani, 2024; Wijaya & Nurchamidah, 2024). However, behind their positive image, an often overlooked issue persists: bullying. Bullying in pesantren can have serious implications for the psychological and social development of students. A recent bullying case in a pesantren that gained widespread attention on social media illustrates the lack of awareness and effective prevention mechanisms in these institutions (Fadilah et al., 2023).

Bullying is defined as repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm or intimidate others. In the context of pesantren, bullying can take various forms, including physical, verbal, social, and even cyberbullying. The strict hierarchical structures, the potential internalization of a culture of violence, and inadequate supervision and intervention from management are among the factors triggering bullying incidents (Chandra, 2020; Evers & Korff, 2002; Taufiqurrohman & Fanreza, 2023).

Previous research has shown that bullying in educational settings, including pesantren, can lead to long-term detrimental effects on victims. These include psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as social problems like isolation and difficulties in forming healthy interpersonal relationships (Fahmi et al., 2024; Hamidah, 2020; Rahmania et al., 2022).

However, specific studies focusing on bullying within pesantren remain limited. While research on bullying in public schools is relatively extensive, discussions that contextualize bullying within the unique dynamics of pesantren—characterized by religious values, strong hierarchies, and distinct social structures—are less common (Apiyah & Suharsiwi, 2021; Chandra, 2020). This article aims to fill that gap by analyzing the causal factors and impacts of bullying in pesantren comprehensively.

Studies on bullying prevention in general educational contexts highlight the importance of supportive school environments and systematic interventions (Banurea et al., 2024; Sholeh, 2023). For instance, interventions that improve awareness, involve staff training, and establish clear policies can significantly reduce bullying incidents. Conversely, research on pesantren often emphasizes moral and religious education while paying limited attention to bullying (Chandra, 2020; Sholeh, 2023).

This article contributes original insights by examining bullying in pesantren through psychological, social, and educational lenses. Unlike previous research that tends to focus on public schools or strictly on educational aspects of Islamic institutions, this study offers a holistic analysis of the factors triggering bullying in pesantren and its subsequent impacts on students.

Several key points will be discussed. First, we will consider the hierarchical structures in pesantren that create power imbalances, potentially leading to intimidation and violence by senior students against their juniors (Taufiqurrohman & Fanreza, 2023). Second, we will examine the culture of violence in some institutions, where harsh disciplinary measures intended to build character may result in harmful actions. Third, the lack of effective supervision and intervention will be analyzed, highlighting how limited resources and large student populations make bullying difficult to detect and address. Fourth, the article will delve into the psychological and social impacts of bullying on students, including mental health issues and challenges in interpersonal relationships (Fahmi et al., 2024; Hamidah, 2020; Rahmania et al., 2022). Fifth, it will present practical prevention and intervention recommendations, including education and training programs, improved supervision, counseling approaches, anti-bullying policies, and the strengthening of positive Islamic values to foster a safe and conducive learning environment (Gunawan, 2023; Sholeh, 2023).

Methods

This study employs a literature review approach to examine the dynamics of bullying in Islamic boarding schools, focusing on causes and impacts. A literature review was chosen to synthesize findings from various published sources without direct field data collection, allowing for a comprehensive understanding (Evers & Korff, 2002; Zeid as cited in Fahmi et al., 2024).

Data collection involved searching for relevant literature in books, academic journals, research reports, and credible online sources. Keywords included "bullying in pesantren," "hierarchical structure of pesantren," "culture of violence in pesantren," "bullying supervision and intervention," and "bullying impacts on students." Searches were conducted through databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest, as well as university digital libraries.

Sources comprised secondary literature, both print and digital, including previous research on bullying in educational contexts, especially in pesantren, and on related aspects such as psychological and social impacts and prevention strategies. This study also reviewed anti-bullying policies from various institutions to identify best practices applicable to pesantren.

The data are qualitative, consisting of descriptions, analyses, and interpretations of bullying in pesantren. Data analysis involved content analysis, identifying main themes and subthemes, and synthesizing findings to produce comprehensive conclusions. Relevant information was categorized based on pre-determined themes and then compared and integrated to identify common patterns and ensure reliability and validity.

By utilizing a literature review method, this study can provide in-depth insights into the dynamics of bullying in pesantren and offer evidence-based recommendations for prevention and intervention. These findings are expected to guide policy development and practical actions in Islamic boarding schools and inform future research.

Results

This study aims to identify the factors causing bullying in pesantren, explore its negative impacts on students, and provide practical recommendations for the prevention and handling of bullying. Based on the literature review conducted, the findings of this research can be summarized as follows:

Factors Causing Bullying

Hierarchical Structure in Pesantren

The hierarchical structure in pesantren is one of the main characteristics distinguishing these institutions from other educational establishments. This structure assigns students different positions and responsibilities based on factors such as age, length of study, and academic or religious achievements. While the hierarchical structure is intended to foster discipline and order, research indicates that the resulting power imbalance is frequently misused for bullying behaviors.

Within the pesantren setting, senior students hold higher positions and greater authority than junior students. They possess the right to manage, discipline, and assign tasks to those below them. According to social theory, such power imbalances can create dynamics wherein individuals with more power dominate and control those with less (Evers & Korff, 2002). Research by Taufiqurrohman and Fanreza (2023) supports this, demonstrating that senior students often feel entitled to discipline their juniors, and in some instances, this perceived right can escalate into bullying.

The power imbalance embedded in the hierarchical structure often leads senior students to oppress and intimidate their juniors. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of distributive injustice theory, which suggests that the unfair distribution of power engenders dissatisfaction and aggressive behavior (Suharko, 2024). Correspondingly, Putri et al. (2020) noted that in pesantren environments, senior students who perceive themselves as superior tend to exert that dominance through bullying. Moreover, Dafiq et al. (2024) found that such power imbalances constitute a major contributing factor to bullying in educational settings.

Culture of Violence
A culture of violence in some pesantren emerges as part of an educational method intended to shape strong and disciplined characters in students. Although the initial goal may be positive, its implementation often leads to harmful forms of violence. Research has shown that harsh disciplinary approaches can evolve into bullying behaviors with negative consequences for students. For example, Cornell (2020) found that when violence is legalized within a disciplinary framework, it frequently transforms into bullying.

When violence is legitimized as a disciplinary practice, the boundary between educational punishment and bullying becomes blurred. Senior students or pesantren administrators, who are granted the authority to enforce discipline, may misuse their power. As a result, what begins as sanctioned discipline can escalate into bullying behavior. This pattern is consistent with theories of aggressive behavior, which assert that individuals who are authorized to use violence tend to extend its use beyond acceptable limits (Duryat, 2021).

Lack of Supervision and Intervention
The lack of effective supervision and intervention in pesantren is a major factor contributing to the increase of undetected and poorly managed bullying cases (Arif et al.,2024). This issue often arises due to large student populations and limited resources. With a substantial number of students, providing individual supervision poses significant challenges. Additionally, constraints such as insufficient staffing and limited facilities hinder the implementation of effective oversight strategies.

Inadequate supervision enables bullying incidents to occur without the administrators' awareness, increasing the likelihood that victims will feel unsafe and unprotected. Ineffective detection and response further contribute to an environment in which bullying behavior can persist and even intensify over time. Thompson & Catley (2021) emphasize that unreported and poorly handled bullying cases emerge as a direct consequence of insufficient supervision mechanisms.

This lack of oversight not only impedes the identification of bullying cases but also perpetuates an environment that is neither safe nor supportive for students. Without adequate supervision, pesantren fail to fulfill their responsibility to protect and ensure the security of all students—an outcome that contradicts fundamental educational principles emphasizing the importance of a secure, nurturing setting for personal growth and development.

Negative Impact of Bullying on Students
Psychological Impact
Bullying in pesantren can have severe psychological effects on victims. Research indicates that victims often experience various mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem. These psychological impacts are significant and demand special attention. According to Sumitro et al (2023), victims in pesantren experience higher stress levels compared to students who have not encountered bullying.

Further supporting these findings, Rahmania et al (2022) show that children and adolescents who fall victim to bullying have a greater risk of experiencing anxiety disorders compared to their peers who are not bullied. Factors like social isolation and lack of peer support exacerbate this condition. Fahmi et al. (2024) reveal that stress caused by bullying can affect the nervous and hormonal systems, ultimately influencing an individual's long-term health. This underscores the importance of early intervention to mitigate these negative effects.

Low self-esteem is another frequent psychological consequence of bullying. Such experiences can damage victims' self-image, making them feel worthless and lacking confidence. Research by Mahira and Yuliana (2023) indicates that bullying leaves deep scars on self-esteem, persisting into adulthood. Hamdidah (2020) found that bullying victims in pesantren have lower

confidence levels compared to other students, leading them to withdraw from social activities and feel incapable of competing or participating actively in their educational environment.

Social Impact

Bullying in pesantren also has profound social consequences. Victims often struggle to form healthy interpersonal relationships. Social isolation is common, as bullied students tend to withdraw due to feeling unsafe and fearing repeated negative treatment. Arfah and Wantini (2023) found that bullying victims in pesantren frequently feel excluded from their peer groups. Inability to participate in social activities and feelings of not being accepted can lead to loneliness and a sense of worthlessness.

Research by Putri (2022) aligns with these findings, showing that the social impact of bullying can extend into the future, impeding victims' ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships. Difficulty in trusting others and the development of defensive attitudes further complicate social interactions. Evans, & Vaandering (2022) indicate that victims often struggle to form and maintain positive relationships, fearing rejection and avoiding meaningful social engagement.

The social consequences of bullying can persist long after the bullying itself has ended. Negative experiences may be carried into adulthood, affecting personal and professional relationships. Simanjuntak (2024) confirms that the social impact of childhood bullying continues into adulthood, influencing interpersonal relationship quality and overall social well-being. Victims may become more vulnerable to mental health issues like depression and anxiety, exacerbating their difficulties in forming healthy social connections.

Academic Impact

Bullying in pesantren also negatively affects students' academic performance. Victims frequently experience a decline in learning motivation and lowered academic achievement due to emotional and psychological disturbances. Candrawati and Setyawan (2023) report a significant decrease in learning motivation among bullying victims, who are more likely to miss classes, neglect assignments, and exhibit indifference toward lessons.

Susanto et al. (2024) confirm that bullying disrupts the teaching and learning process, reducing victims' concentration and motivation. When students feel unsafe and stressed, their mental energy is consumed by avoiding intimidation rather than focusing on understanding the material. Declining motivation directly correlates with poor academic performance. Bu'ulolo et al. (2022) found that bullying victims suffer a notable drop in grades across multiple subjects, while Sukri (2020) shows that these victims are more likely to have worse academic outcomes compared to non-bullied peers.

Emotional and psychological disturbances, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, significantly impact victims' academic performance. Susanto et al. (2024) highlight that such emotional issues have long-term effects on academic success. Victims struggle to manage stress and emotions, hindering their capacity to learn and absorb information. To address this academic impact, pesantren must adopt comprehensive intervention strategies that involve the entire school community, helping victims recover academically and achieve their full potential in a safe and supportive environment.

Prevention and Handling of Bullying

Education and Training

Education and training are crucial in preventing bullying in pesantren. Implementing programs for students and staff about the dangers of bullying and prevention strategies is an effective measure. Anti-bullying education programs raise awareness and help participants understand various forms of bullying and their long-term impacts (Noboru et al., 2021). With increased knowledge, students and staff can recognize bullying signs and comprehend the importance of prevention.

In addition to raising awareness, education and training focus on practical skills for prevention. Training on intervention strategies, effective communication, and mediation techniques helps staff better handle bullying cases. Students learn to support their bullied peers and report incidents. Sholeh (2023) emphasizes that such preventive skill training is a crucial component of effective anti-bullying programs.

Anti-bullying education and training also foster a positive and inclusive school culture. By promoting empathy, cooperation, and respect, pesantren can create supportive environments where all students feel valued. Thursina et al. (2023) note that a positive, inclusive school atmosphere is vital for preventing bullying. Involving the entire school community in building a positive culture ensures that bullying incidents are minimized and students can learn in a safe, supportive environment.

Enhanced Supervision

Enhanced supervision is another effective method for preventing and managing bullying in pesantren. Improved supervision ensures thorough monitoring of dormitories, classrooms, fields, and other gathering places. Adinda et al. (2024) suggest that effective supervision in schools significantly reduces bullying, as it enables early detection of problematic behaviors. Involving the entire community in supervision efforts is crucial. Teachers, staff, and students can participate in daily monitoring. Establishing a safe, anonymous reporting system encourages students to report bullying without fear. Implementing an effective supervision program requires careful planning, with supervision teams conducting routine patrols and responding promptly to reports. Sanctions for perpetrators and psychological support for victims send a clear message that bullying is not tolerated(Hambali, Rafni, Arianto, & …, 2023).

Counseling Approach

A counseling approach is effective in addressing bullying. Counseling services for both victims and perpetrators offer emotional support, aid recovery, and prevent recurrence. Gaffney et al. (2021) indicate that counseling-focused programs for perpetrators reduce bullying frequency and increase empathy toward victims.Counseling helps victims cope with trauma, low self-esteem, and emotional disturbances. Trained counselors assist them in developing healthy coping strategies and regaining confidence. Counseling also reshapes perpetrators' behavior by helping them understand the harm caused and learn emotion management and empathy skills. Nurida (2018) supports this, showing that a comprehensive counseling approach reduces bullying and improves perpetrators' social relationships.

Implementing counseling programs involves providing trained counselors and creating supportive environments where students feel safe seeking help without stigma or punishment. Integrating counseling into the curriculum and holding regular sessions offers continuous support (Sholeh, 2023). By prioritizing emotional and psychological support, pesantren demonstrate their commitment to maintaining a safe and conducive learning environment, aligning with Damanik's (2024) emphasis on the importance of such support.

Anti-Bullying Policy

Consistent sanctions prevent repeated offenses and ensure justice. Policies should also incorporate ongoing prevention programs, such as awareness campaigns, discussions, and activities promoting empathy and cooperation. Gunawan (2023) shows that schools with strict anti-bullying policies experience a significant decrease in bullying incidents, as clear guidelines simplify prevention and response efforts.

Robust anti-bullying policies increase students' sense of security and improve the school climate. Students feel safer and more comfortable when they perceive administrative commitment to their protection. Effective policies reduce bullying and contribute to an inclusive, supportive learning environment, demonstrating pesantren's dedication to student welfare.

Strengthening Positive Values

Pesantren, as Islamic educational institutions, hold great potential for character building and moral development by reinforcing positive values like compassion, respect, and empathy. These values can be integrated into curricula, extracurricular activities, and daily routines. Setiawan et al. (2024) demonstrate that consistently teaching positive values cultivates empathy and tolerance. Religious lectures, group discussions, and collective prayers reinforce these values, encouraging students to apply them in daily life(Ramli et al., 2024).

When values like compassion and respect are consistently reinforced, bullying significantly decreases. These values help students develop empathy and ethical behavior, forming a solid foundation of character. Consequently, strengthening positive values not only prevents bullying but also supports holistic personal development. By integrating Islamic values into every aspect of education, pesantren can create a safe, inclusive, and conducive environment for student learning and moral growth.

Discussion

Bullying stemming from this hierarchical structure can manifest in various forms—physical, verbal, and social. Senior students may employ physical violence, assign excessive workloads, or use insults and ridicule to undermine the dignity of their juniors. These patterns align with social dominance theory, which posits that individuals or groups with greater power maintain their position through aggressive actions against weaker groups. Additional studies corroborate that strict and unequal hierarchies frequently give rise to bullying behaviors (Pratama et al., 2023).

Although hierarchical structures aim to instill discipline and responsibility, research demonstrates that, without adequate supervision and intervention, they can facilitate bullying. Consequently, pesantren must evaluate and reconsider their hierarchical implementations. An approach that is more equitable and balanced, coupled with effective oversight and timely intervention, can help minimize abuses of power and prevent bullying. Although harsh disciplinary approaches aim to cultivate strong character, research has shown that they are more harmful than beneficial. Violence-based methods not only fail to achieve their educational objectives but also create an unhealthy and unsafe environment for students.

The culture of violence in some pesantren, often justified as an educational method to instill discipline and strength, has drawn significant attention due to its unintended consequences. While the initial intention may be to foster resilience and strong character, the implementation of such practices frequently results in harmful outcomes for students. Research highlights that harsh disciplinary measures, rather than building character, can lead to bullying behaviors and create a toxic educational environment.

Unreported and mismanaged bullying cases resulting from insufficient supervision highlight a glaring gap in student protection and care. Such conditions can increase students' feelings of insecurity and anxiety, disrupt the learning process, and potentially hinder their moral and character development. Moreover, inadequate supervision may normalize or condone bullying behavior by omission. Without clear, consistent sanctions from pesantren administrators, perpetrators may feel emboldened to continue their actions, further harming victims and fostering injustice in an educational environment that should be grounded in moral and ethical values.

Pesantren possess a moral and ethical obligation to safeguard students' well-being. In a religious educational context, values such as empathy, justice, and compassion must be manifested through concrete measures, including vigilant supervision and proactive bullying prevention strategies. From an ethical standpoint, the necessity for effective supervision and appropriate intervention cannot be overlooked. Pesantren must commit to establishing a safe, supportive, and comprehensive environment for every student (Anggraeni, Muzayyanah, & Irfanullah, 2023). Bullying cases should be directly addressed and simultaneously approached through preventive and ongoing interventions to ensure the overall welfare and moral development of all learners.

Bullying in pesantren is not merely an individual problem but also an institutional issue that requires serious attention. The psychological harm experienced by victims can disrupt their development and hinder their academic and social success. As educational institutions grounded in religious values, pesantren have a moral responsibility to protect and support their students. Bullying in pesantren has far-reaching consequences, affecting students psychologically, socially, and academically. The harmful effects extend beyond immediate experiences, influencing victims' well-being and personal development into adulthood. Understanding these impacts is critical for pesantren to adopt strategies that foster a safe and inclusive learning environment (Noboru et al., 2021; Mahira & Yuliana, 2023; Evans & Vaandering,2022).

Sustaining anti-bullying programs involves integrating them into the curriculum and daily activities. Regular training sessions, developing relevant educational materials, and forming dedicated anti-bullying teams or committees for monitoring and evaluation help maintain program effectiveness. Steiss (2019) underscore the importance of continuous evaluation and adjustments to meet evolving needs and situations. These measures ensure that prevention efforts remain effective and relevant.

Conclusion

This study examines the causes and impacts of bullying in pesantrens and offers valuable insights into the dynamics involved. Key contributing factors include rigid hierarchical structures, a pervasive culture of violence, inadequate supervision and delayed intervention, as well as the profound psychological and social consequences experienced by victims. Psychological effects such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem are direct outcomes of bullying, while social impacts include isolation and difficulties in fostering healthy interactions. Academically, bullying undermines students' learning achievements by diminishing motivation and focus.

In the context of advancing Islamic education, understanding these factors is essential for developing holistic educational approaches. By integrating this knowledge, Islamic educational institutions can design curricula that prioritize both academic excellence and the cultivation of character and moral values. A comprehensive approach to Islamic education involves proactive prevention and intervention strategies to address bullying, alongside reinforcing core Islamic principles such as compassion, respect, and empathy. These measures not only foster a safe and inclusive learning environment but also help nurture students into morally grounded and empathetic individuals.

The findings of this study not only shed light on the dynamics of bullying within pesantrens but also provide actionable guidance for improving Islamic educational practices. By addressing this critical issue, pesantrens can contribute to the development of morally and ethically sound generations that positively impact society.

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