Bullying in Preschools: Prevention through Character Education from an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Prevention of bullying in preschool requires an approach that is appropriate to early childhood development. This study aims to analyze teachers' efforts in preventing bullying through character education in early childhood from an Islamic perspective. A holistic multiple-case design (single unit of analysis) was used as the research design. Data were collected through observations, interviews with one principal and one experienced teacher, and an in-depth analysis of 21 reputable international scientific articles from several countries (United Kingdom, United States, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Switzerland, Korea, Greece, and Sweden). Observations were conducted over twelve days on the teacher's learning process, and in-depth interviews were carried out with the same teacher and the principal. All data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative data analysis model Miles & Huberman. The results show that teachers' efforts in preventing bullying through character education in early childhood from an Islamic perspective are implemented through: (i) providing continuous understanding, good advice, and avoiding discrimination among peers; (ii) demonstrating positive attitudes; (iii) fostering empathy in children; and (iv) maintaining continuous communication between teachers and parents to jointly guide the children. These findings are consistent with behaviorist, constructivist, humanistic, and Islamic perspectives, all of which emphasize the importance of environmental support and direct experience in character building, which in turn has implications for preventing bullying in early childhood. The findings of this study can be used as one of the primary approaches for preventing bullying in early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying at school is a significant issue, in early childhood, commonly referred to as preschool, bullying is often considered normal by teachers, parents, and the surrounding environment (Douvlos, 2019; Maghfiroh & Sugito, 2021; Vlachou et al., 2011). According to Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, childrenlearn by observing and imitating the behavior of others (Rigby, 2024). Aggressive behavior can appear as early as twelve months of age. By the age of five, children begin to develop a sense of moral responsibility and the ability to distinguish between ethically

sense of moral responsibility and the ability to distinguish between ethically acceptable and unacceptable motives (Bashatah & Al-fifi, 2023; Douvlos, 2019; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Tomasello, 2020; Vlachou et al., 2011).

Bullying in early childhood typically takes the form of excluding a child from groups and games, calling a child unpleasant names such as "no father," hitting a child repeatedly over an extended period, stabbing with a pencil, or hitting with objects (Freeman, 2014; Nikolaou & Markogiannakis, 2017; Saracho, 2017; Saleh & Ishizaka, 2020; McGoey et al., 2023). The understanding of bullying in early childhood is widely adopted by researchers, following Olweus's definition. Olweus explains that bullying involves negative actions where someone intentionally causes or attempts to cause injury or discomfort to another person through physical contact, words, or other means, such as obscene gestures or intentional exclusion from a group (Vlachou et al., 2011; Saracho, 2017; Douvlos, 2019; Ey et al., 2019; Rigby, 2024). According to Olweus, bullying has four criteria: (1) it is an aggressive and harmful act, (2) it is carried out repeatedly, (3) it involves an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim, and (4) it occurs when the victim is unable to defend themselves (Breivik & Olweus, 2015). Other perspectives also identify several forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, relational, cyber, and sexual (Levine & Tamburrino, 2014; Damri et al., 2020).

The underlying factors of bullying include family, peers, and schools (Connell et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2022). Bullying behavior often originates from troubled families, where children observe conflicts and replicate such behaviors with their peers. In the peer and school context, bullying may occur due to lack of safety, absence of trusted adults, and negative peer dynamics. Poor relationships with classmates also increase the risk of relational and sexual bullying (Damri et al., 2020). Data from 6,910 vulnerable children aged three to six in kindergartens across Vantaa show that 7.1% of children bully others, 3.3% are bullied, and 2.2% are identified as victims (Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012).

Bullying hinders children's ability to actualize themselves, as it prevents them from feeling safe and comfortable. Victims often feel intimidated, inferior, and worthless, experience difficulty concentrating on their studies, and face challenges in socializing with their environment. Consequently, bullying negatively affects class attendance, academic achievement, and increases the risk of dropout (Chu et al., 2019). To prevent bullying in early childhood, schools are encouraged to collaborate with families and community services, implement socio-emotional learning programs, promote classroom activities that foster acceptance of diversity, and carry out prevention initiatives such as developing materials, conducting teacher training, and enhancing children's empathy (Nikolaou & Markogiannakis, 2017).

Based on previous research, bullying in early childhood can be prevented in several ways: (1) the Bernese Program: Be-Prox (Komac et al., 2013); (2) the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) (Douvlos, 2019; McGoey et al., 2023); (3) Second Step: A Bullying Prevention Program for children aged 4–14 (Saracho, 2017); and (4) character education (Bashatah & Al-fifi, 2023; Betawi, 2020; Chan, 2020; Diana et al., 2021; Donohoe, 2020; Freeman, 2014; Gunther et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2006; Lee, 2016; Lee, 2013; Levine & Tamburrino, 2014; McGoey et al., 2023; Nikolaou & Markogiannakis, 2017; Saleh & Ishizaka, 2020; Salehuddin et al., 2025; Tsai et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2015; Wee & Lee, 2020; Winterbottom & Schmidt, 2022; Mutiara, 2023). These approaches have been shown to be effective in preventing bullying in schools. Several scholars further argue that character education and social skills training are key components in preventing bullying (Cantu & Chen,

2021; Gini et al., 2007; McKenzie, 2005). Preventing bullying through character education requires the collaboration of families and schools to strengthen prosocial behavior and reduce antisocial tendencies among students (Burkhart et al., 2013; Top et al., 2017).

In Islam, character education must also be grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith, which serve as primary references for parents and teachers in designing Islamic education for children (Agustin et al., 2020; AL Zbon & Smadi, 2017). The prohibition of bullying is explicitly stated in QS Al-Hujurat [49]:11, which provides a clear and accurate warning from God. Making fun of, mocking, or insulting others is unworthy of believers, as true believers recognize their own shortcomings and do not dwell on the flaws of others. In contrast, those who focus excessively on others' faults fail to acknowledge their own (Al-Mahalli & As-Suyuti, 2017; Hamka, 1990; Katsir, 2024). Previous research on bullying prevention is summarized in Figure 1.
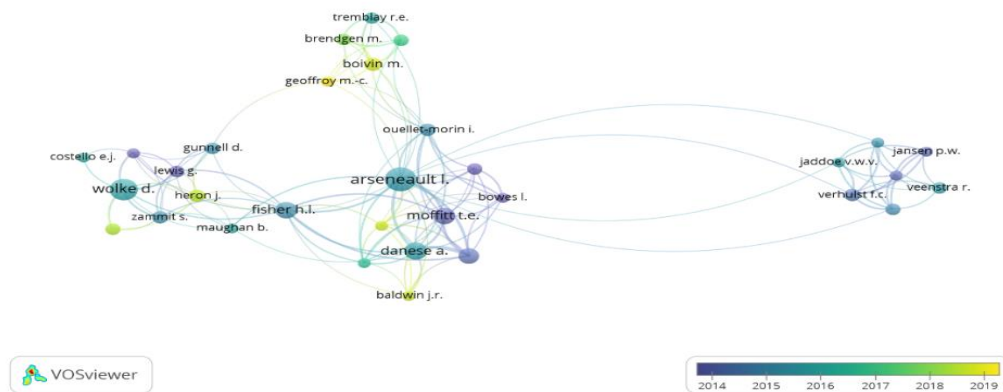
Fig 2. Researchers of bullying

Some of the researchers presented in Figure 1, such as Baldwin et al (2019); Brendgen et al (2014); Houtepen et al (2020); Stern et al (2018), discussed the relationship between bullying and children's mental health, the long-term impact of bullying, the causal factors of bullying, its association with physical health problems, and preventive interventions.

Based on the Scopus database, previous studies employed several keywords related to bullying in preschool and early childhood contexts. The keywords most frequently used by recent researchers are illustrated in Figure 2.
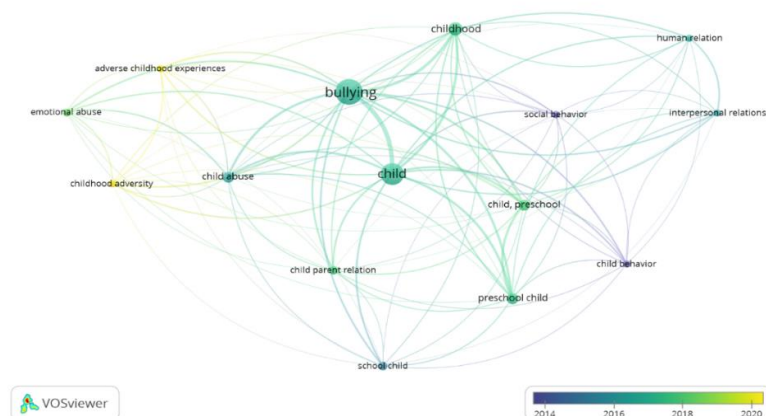

Fig 3. Several keywords referring to bullying in preschool by researchers (Scopus database)

Based on the Scopus database accessed on March 3, 2023, at 11:30 WIB, 545 studies on early childhood bullying in various countries were identified. Among them, 21 studies

specifically examined the prevention of early childhood bullying through character education (Bashatah & Al-fifi, 2023; Betawi, 2020; Chan, 2020; Diana et al., 2021; Donohoe, 2020; Freeman, 2014; Gunther et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2006; A. Lee, 2016; Lee, 2013; Levine & Tamburrino, 2014; McGoey et al., 2023; Mutiara, 2023; Nikolaou & Markogiannakis, 2017; Saleh & Ishizaka, 2020; Salehuddin et al., 2025; Tsai et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2015; Wee & Lee, 2020; Winterbottom & Schmidt, 2022).

Research using the general keywords "bullying" and "character education" has been conducted in several countries, including the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, South Africa, Australia, Taiwan, Turkey, China, Belgium, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, France, Ireland, Switzerland, Greece, and Indonesia. These studies discuss various themes, such as the relationship between bullying and social-emotional development, synthetic character, empathy, literature, and moral education. In Indonesia, four studies explored the relationship between bullying and character education (Diana et al., 2021; Naini et al., 2021; Saleh & Ishizaka, 2020; Salsabila et al., 2020). Of these, two specifically examined the link between bullying and character education in early childhood, as shown in Figure 3.
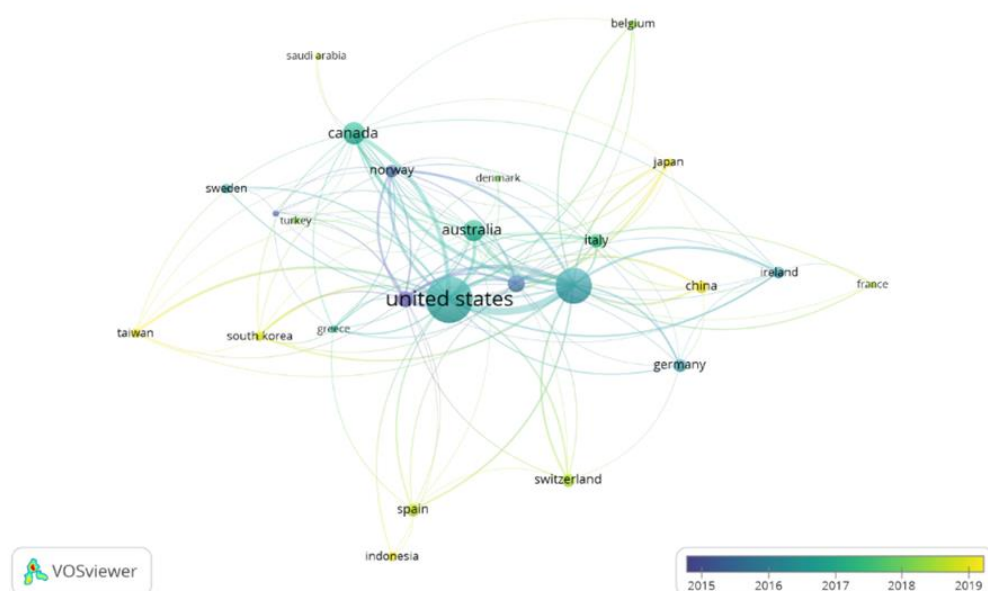
Fig 3. Research in several countries with keywords "bullying" and "character education."

However, previous studies did not address the prevention of bullying in preschool through character education from an Islamic perspective. According to Ibnu Sina, as cited in Tercan & Nurysheva (2022), character education in the Islamic tradition is one of the most effective approaches for preventing bullying among preschool-aged children. Ibnu Sina further emphasized that character education, from an Islamic perspective, helps individuals become good citizens while promoting both physical and mental well-being.

This research contributes to the scientific development of early childhood education by focusing on the prevention of bullying through character education within an Islamic framework. Therefore, the present study explores and analyzes teachers' efforts to prevent bullying in preschool through character education grounded in Islamic values.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research method using a multiple-case design (holistic – single unit of analysis) (Connell et al., 2016; Kaputra et al., 2022; Muswara & Zalnur, 2019; Zen et al., 2022). In qualitative research, data are collected in natural settings where participants experience the phenomenon under study, rather than in laboratory environments (Cresswell, 2016; Engkizar et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2024). Data collection techniques included interviews, observations, and document analysis. The data obtained were analyzed using the interactive qualitative data analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman (Daniel & Harland, 2018; E. Engkizar et al., 2024; Kara, 2023).

The subjects of this study were experienced teachers, as the research specifically aimed to analyze teachers' efforts in preventing bullying. A detailed description of data sources, data collection techniques, and the number of data sources is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sources, data collection techniques, and data sources

Source	Data Collection Technique		Data source
Subject	Observation Interview	- Teacher - Principal - Teacher	1 teacher 1 principal 1 same teacher
	Total		1 teacher & 1 principal
Document	International Journal	- Scopus Database	21 articles
	Total		21 articles

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interviews, observations, and documentation revealed four main efforts by teachers to prevent bullying through character education in early childhood: i) providing continuous moral guidance and avoiding discrimination among peers, ii) modeling a positive attitude, iii) fostering empathy in children, and iv) maintaining consistent communication with parents to support children's development. These findings indicate that bullying can be mitigated through character education in early childhood. Nevertheless, the active involvement of families remains essential to strengthen prosocial behavior within the school environment and to reduce students' antisocial tendencies, as illustrated in Figure 4.
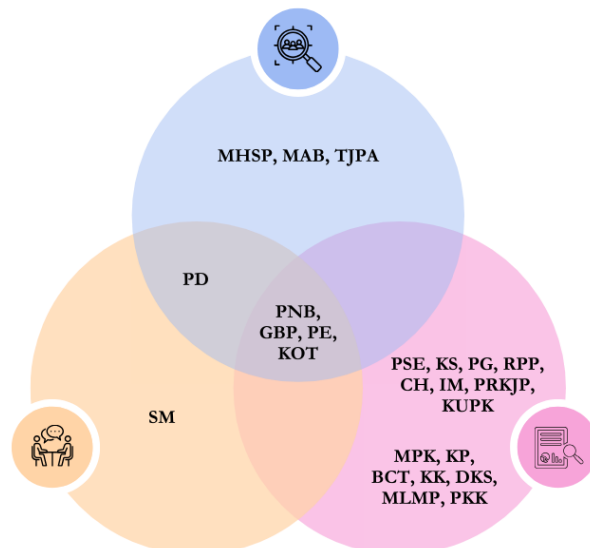
Fig 4. Triangulation of research data

Table 2. Description triangulation of research data

TJPA : Questions and answers related to learning religious knowledge	PSE: Implementation of socio-emotional learning programs
KOT : Continuous communication between teachers and parents to consistently guide children together	PNB : Providing continuous understanding and good advice, and not discriminating between friends
PD : Punishment/fine of Rp2,000.00 – 5,000.00	KS : Peer counseling
MHSP : Reading *hijaiyah* letters or short surahs	PE : Developing empathy in children
PG : Teacher training	GBP : Teachers demonstrating a positive attitude
SM : Forgiving each other	IM : I-Message
RPP : Learning implementation plan	CH: Daily check-in
KUPK: Class activities for acceptance of diversity	PRK: Conflict resolution program
JP : Peace journaling	BCT : Storytelling
MPK : Inviting community experts	KP : Experiential activities
PKK : Habituation of politeness and concern	KK : Collaborative activities
DKS : Discussion	MLMP : Building a positive moral environment

Continuously providing understanding, good advice, and not discriminating between friends, as found in this study, is a form of tolerance and mutual respect that can create harmony and peace (Tillman, 2017; Zakso et al., 2021). Understanding emotions will promote positive socio-emotional development, such as effective emotion regulation, social competence, moral sensitivity, and consideration of the needs of others, and prevent the emergence of internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. The diversity of culture, ethnicity, religion, and race in Indonesia makes tolerance very important to create a harmonious and peaceful life. A tolerant spirit and soul will be able to accept each of these differences, including the way a person interacts, a person's clothes, rituals, and physical appearance (Sufanti et al., 2021; Zakso et al., 2021). Instilling tolerance from an early age by teachers makes the next generation develop a high tolerance attitude, considering that everyone has diverse differences; understanding that everyone is unique and different will make it easier to respect differences and treat others well. Respecting differences and tolerance for diversity always develop empathy in children (Pitaloka et al., 2021). Teaching positive values, such as respecting differences, treating others well, and speaking politely, can help prevent bullying (Lee, 2013; Winterbottom & Schmidt, 2022). In contrast, someone with intolerance will easily engage in intimidation (Polanin & Vera, 2013).

Teachers are always expected to be positive. According to Olweus, teachers are key agents of change and are considered targets of bullying preventive interventions (Baraldsnes, 2020; Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Yoon et al., 2016). Teachers have an essential role in preventing bullying at school. They can model positive behavior to prevent bullying and create a safe and inclusive environment in classrooms and schools (Saleh & Ishizaka, 2020). When teachers can create a positive classroom climate, it makes students feel safe and comfortable in class. This reduces the possibility of them feeling alienated or isolated, which can be a contributing factor to bullying. When students feel valued and recognized as essential individuals in the classroom, they are more likely to respect and value their friends, encourage positive interactions between students, and minimize the possibility of conflict or detrimental

behavior (Wang & Degol, 2016). In addition, a positive classroom climate can provide opportunities to develop social and emotional skills, such as empathy, cooperation, and tolerance (Montero-Carretero et al., 2021). It can help students to better understand the feelings of their friends and improve relationships between students (Heron, 2020).

One of the efforts is constantly developing empathy in children. Strengthening empathy is essential to understanding other people's feelings, problems, or suffering (Syafrimen et al., 2017). Developing empathy effectively prevents bullying (Lee et al., 2018). Empathy can prevent bullying by developing the ability to understand the feelings and perspectives of others. In the context of bullying, someone with good empathy can understand how harmful behavior can affect victims, respond more positively, and strengthen social relationships (Gini et al., 2007; Mayberry & Espelage, 2007; Muñoz et al., 2011). Developing empathy can also help avoid prejudice and hatred towards different people, as they are often significant triggers of bullying (Oktavia et al., 2023; Putri et al., 2024). When we are friendly, treat others with respect, and care about people's feelings and views, we can strengthen social relationships and build trust, which prevents conflict and strengthens cooperation between individuals (Gasser & Keller, 2009).

Another effort is continuous communication between teachers and parents to guide children together consistently. Parents and teachers must work together to prevent bullying because both play a critical role in children's lives. Parents are the primary source of support and guidance for children at home, while teachers are the primary source of support and guidance for children at school. When parents and teachers work together, they can create a safe and supportive environment for children (Bashatah & Al-fifi, 2023; Nikolaou & Markogiannakis, 2017). When parents and teachers collaborate to prevent bullying, they can help children develop social and emotional skills that are important for coping with difficult social situations and avoiding bullying. Engaging parents in school-based bullying prevention programs can increase the likelihood that parents will notify the school when their child is being bullied, allowing the school to act appropriately. Secondly, parents can address bullying-related issues effectively at home. Parental involvement is associated with decreased bullying (Axford et al., 2015).

Appropriate character education, as described in the findings of this study, can prevent bullying in early childhood education (Agustin et al., 2020; Bashatah & Al-fifi, 2023; Betawi, 2020; Donohoe, 2020; Freeman, 2014; Gunther et al., 2015; G. L. Lee, 2013; Levine & Tamburrino, 2014; Mutiara, 2023; Nikolaou & Markogiannakis, 2017; Rahayu et al., 2020; Saleh & Ishizaka, 2020; Salehuddin et al., 2025). The three main psychological theories (behaviorist, constructivist, and humanistic) emphasize the importance of a supportive environment and direct experience in the formation of positive character according to individual needs (Akhigbe, 2019; Guey et al., 2010; Muhajirah, 2020). Character education in children, such as love, kindness, empathy, respect for themselves and others, and forgiveness, is an important area of study. Such moral codes, along with social intelligence, constitute human virtues, "interpersonal strengths that involve caring for and befriending others" (Chan, 2020; Haslip et al., 2019; Imroatun et al., 2021; A. Lee, 2016; Mulyadi, 2020; Saptatiningsih & Permana, 2019; Vuorinen et al., 2021; Watini, 2020; Winterbottom & Schmidt, 2022). Character education is important because it can help students behave properly and adopt a tolerant and inclusive view of the reality of a pluralistic society in terms of culture, ethnicity, race, and religion (Suri & Chandra, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Character education is an alternative for preventing bullying in preschool or early childhood education. Through teaching and learning activities that promote character building by instilling universal core values from an early age, good habits are developed, and children's character is shaped from the beginning. In line with the behaviorist, constructivist, and humanistic theories, the three main psychological perspectives emphasize the importance of a supportive environment and direct experience in forming positive character according to individual needs. To implement character education in daily life, every educational institution, especially schools, should cultivate good habits by offering moral education, character education, or ethics education.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contribution

Majdy Kasheem: Writing-Preparation of original manuscript, **Nurul Setiana:** Conceptualization, Methodology, **Mariam R. Arpentieva:** Visualization, Improve Content, **Petr V. Menshikov:** Data accuracy, Improve Language.

AI Statement

The data and language usage in this article have been validated and verified by English language experts and no AI-generated sentences are included in this article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that this research was conducted without any conflict of interest in the research.

Ethical Clearance

The place or location studied has agreed to conduct research and is willing if the results of this study are published.

Publisher'sand Journal's Note

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