# Perceptions of Bullying in Inclusive Elementary Schools: The Role of Empathy, Social Support, and School Climate

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**ABSTRACT**: In inclusive school environments, students with special needs often face various challenges regarding both academic and psychosocial aspects. One serious issue frequently experienced by these students is bullying. In Indonesia, bullying is a serious issue with a steadily rising prevalence especially children with special needs. The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of empathy, social support, and school climate on perceptions of bullying in inclusive primary schools. The research sample was 122 fifth-grade students from 10 inclusive elementary schools in Magetan Regency, Indonesia. Data collection techniques used the Empathy Scale, Social Support Scale, School Climate Scale, Bullying Perception Scale. Data analysis techniques using quantitative methods with regression analysis technique. The results showed that empathy, social support, and school climate collectively and simultaneously contribute to students' perceptions of bullying in inclusive elementary schools. ($F=10.586$; $p<0.05$). The practical implication of this study's findings is that efforts to prevent bullying in inclusive elementary schools should not focus solely on imposing sanctions on perpetrators. This approach will enhance students' ability to recognize bullying behavior, foster empathy for victims, and build a school culture that rejects all forms of bullying.

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an educational system that provides equal opportunities for both typically developing students and students with special needs to receive a quality education, while offering a safe and comfortable environment for growth and development (Hornby, 2015). Students with special needs are those who possess physical, intellectual, emotional, or social disabilities, thereby requiring specialized educational services (Asri et al., 2024). Inclusive schools are settings where students with special needs learn alongside neurotypical students by upholding principles of equal rights and non-discrimination, while fostering a safe and welcoming school climate (Cahyono et al., 2024; Galevska & Pesic, 2018; Kurth et al., 2018).

In inclusive school environments, students with special needs often face various challenges regarding both academic and psychosocial aspects. One serious issue frequently experienced by these students is bullying. Bullying is a social phenomenon common in educational settings; it involves intentional aggressive behavior—whether verbal or non-verbal—carried out by an individual or a group with the aim of repeatedly harming others. Bullying leaves not only physical

wounds but also causes psychological trauma (Capper et al., 2020; Carrera et al., 2011; Mazzone et al., 2021; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Putri et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2017). It is experienced not only by neurotypical students but also by students with special needs (Annerbäck et al., 2014; Beckman et al., 2020; Chatzitheochari et al., 2016; Nowak et al., 2024; Rose et al., 2015a). Interviews with teachers revealed that bullying directed at students with special needs manifests as verbal taunts, mockery regarding physical impairments, exclusion from play, name-calling using inappropriate terms, and the making of jokes at their expense. These students often face challenges in adapting to academic demands and social interactions, alongside a lack of acceptance from their peers, rendering them vulnerable to becoming targets of bullying.

In Indonesia, bullying is a serious issue with a steadily rising prevalence. Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) for 2024 recorded 573 cases of violence in schools, with approximately 31% of these involving bullying (Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, 2025). Data published by KPAI indicates that 84% of students have experienced violence at school, 50% of children report having experienced bullying at school, 75% of students admit to having committed acts of violence at school, 40% of students aged 13–15 have experienced physical violence at the hands of peers, and 45% of male students and 22% of female students state that teachers or education personnel have been perpetrators of violence (KPAI, 2017). Furthermore, data from KPAI indicates that 67% of children with special needs in Indonesia have experienced various forms of bullying, ranging from verbal abuse to social exclusion (KPAI, 2022). The data shows that students with special needs face a risk of experiencing bullying that is two to three times higher than that of the general student population, resulting in 78% of victims exhibiting symptoms of severe anxiety and depression (Carter & Spencer, 2016).

Bullying has negative consequences that can affect individuals' academic, social, and psychological development (Rose et al., 2015b). Socially, victims of bullying tend to experience rejection, withdrawal, feelings of isolation, depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts (Berchiatti et al., 2022; Marlina et al., 2023), as well as difficulties with learning and social communication (Eilts & Koglin, 2022), and impacts on psychological well-being and academic activities (Murphy et al., 2022). In the long term, bullying can affect academic achievement and lead to a loss of a sense of security, a lack of self-confidence, low independence, and impaired mental well-being (Falla et al., 2021; Ručman & Šulc, 2025). This situation is exacerbated by a lack of public understanding and negative perceptions regarding students with special needs, leading to discriminatory treatment being viewed as acceptable (Amka et al., 2024; Marlina et al., 2019).

Numerous studies indicate that children with special needs frequently experience bullying in inclusive schools. The vulnerability of these students to bullying stems from the differences and limitations they possess compared to their typically developing peers—encompassing cognitive, emotional, social, and physical aspects (Kurnia et al., 2024; Mahfudzoh et al., 2025; Cindy et al., 2026). Therefore, components to prevent bullying are necessary, particularly in inclusive schools. Weber (2014) identifies four factors that can lead an individual to engage in bullying: individual, family, environmental, and peer-related factors.

One individual factor that can influence the occurrence of bullying is empathy. Empathy plays a crucial role in reducing bullying behavior; the higher an individual's capacity for empathy, the lower their engagement in bullying behavior (Leleang et al., 2021). Empathy is the ability to sense another person's emotional state, feel sympathy, attempt to resolve problems, and view situations from another person's perspective. Empathy comprises two components: the cognitive and the affective. The cognitive component is based on the ability to view, imagine, and consider a situation from another person's perspective. The affective component is characterized by experiencing emotions that mirror the emotional experiences of others (Firmansyah, 2022). In inclusive schools, students with high levels of empathy tend to find it easier to respect differences and accept peers with special needs.

Beyond individual factors, social support plays a crucial role in every student's social life. One form of social support available at school is teacher support, which is vital for preventing bullying. Teachers act as facilitators, supervisors, and role models for social behavior within the school environment. Positive teacher-student relationships can enhance a sense of safety, reinforce anti-bullying norms, and encourage students to stand up for victims of bullying. Various studies indicate that teacher support is a significant protective factor in preventing bullying at school. Teachers who provide attention, protection, and fair responses to conflicts between students can lower the risk of victimization and reduce student involvement in bullying behavior. Teacher support encompasses emotional support—such as affection, appreciation, advice, and information—that helps victims engage in positive behavior. Mucherah et al., (2018) found that teacher defending and a positive school climate are associated with lower perceptions of bullying among secondary school students. Similar findings were reported by Sulkowski & Simmons (2018), who demonstrated that positive teacher-student relationships can protect students from peer victimization. Furthermore, Flaspohler et al., (2009) emphasize that teacher support can mitigate the negative impact of bullying on students' quality of life. Research by Ningsih et al., (2025) indicates that social support from teachers and a supportive school climate play a significant role in curbing bullying tendencies within schools.

Bullying can also be influenced by the school climate. When schools create a supportive, safe, and inclusive environment, students tend to feel more at ease. This fosters an atmosphere where students feel safe, valued, respected, and supported—collectively known as the school climate. School climate is also a component of the quality of school life. Research indicates that schools with a positive climate experience lower rates of bullying compared to those with a negative climate. This is because the school environment encourages students to feel closer to the school, form healthy friendships, and develop greater empathy for one another. Consequently, this environment can help students reduce various forms of bullying, whether verbal or physical (Agoestina, 2023; Harefa & Rozali, 2020; Ideswal et al., 2020).

### Rationale of the Study

This research is important to conduct as an effort to explore the factors that influence perceptions of bullying that is rampant among students, especially in inclusive elementary schools. The findings are expected to serve as a basis for schools to determine interventions aimed at reducing bullying behavior, especially involving students with special needs.

### Study Aim and Hypothesis

While school bullying has been extensively studied, there is limited research focusing on bullying within inclusive schools—particularly inclusive primary schools—in Indonesia. So, this study aims to investigate the influence of empathy, social support, and school climate on perceptions of bullying in inclusive primary schools. The hypothesis is that empathy, social support, and school climate influence the perception of bullying among students with special needs in inclusive primary schools.

## METHODS

### Design

This study is a quantitative research project employing a causal-comparative design (Emzir, 2021; Nurhayati, 2025), aiming to determine the influence of empathy, social support, and school climate on perceptions of bullying in inclusive schools. The research design is described as follows:

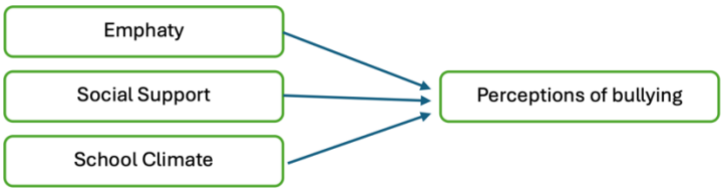



**Figure 1.** Quantitative research with a causal-comparative design

**Participants**

The population of this study consisted of all students across 42 inclusive elementary schools in Magetan Regency. The research subjects were selected using cluster random sampling, resulting in a sample of 122 fifth-grade students from 10 inclusive elementary schools. Furthermore, student characteristics are described in the table below.

Table 1. Characteristics of study respondents

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Woman | 86 | 70.49% |
| | Men | 36 | 29.51% |
| Types of Special | a. Slow leaner | 98 | 80.33% |
| Needs Students | b. Learning difficulties | 18 | 14.75 |
| | c. ADHD | 6 | 4.92% |

**Instruments**

Data collection employed psychological scales, specifically the empathy scale, teacher support scale, school climate scale, and bullying perception scale. To measure empathy, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis (1980)—translated by the researcher—was used. The empathy scale consists of 28 items covering four aspects: Perspective Taking (PT, Fantasy (FS), Empathic Concern (EC), and Personal Distress (PD). The Cronbach's alpha are .862 Respondents were asked to provide answers using a four-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The social support scale consists of 11 items (α=.796) (Panzeri et al., 2022). Respondents were asked to respond to each statement using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The school climate scale was developed by Sembiring & Tarigan (2023) and has been adapted. This scale measures the level of school climate through relevant questions (α=.814). It comprises 12 items with four response options, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The bullying perception scale used in this study was modified from a measure developed by Jenkins et al. (2022). Modifications were made to align the scale with the context of students' perceptions of bullying in inclusive schools. The scale consists of 20 items (α=.642)using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

**Data Analysis**

Prior to their use for data collection, the validity and reliability of the four instruments were assessed. The validity testing encompassed both construct validity and empirical validity. The results of the construct validity analysis indicated that, overall, the empathy, social support, school climate, and bullying perception scales met the requirements for use as measurement tools, as they aligned with the underlying theoretical constructs and dimensions. Reliability testing using the Cronbach's Alpha formula yielded reliability coefficients of 0.862 for the empathy scale, 0.796

for the social support scale, 0.814 for the school climate scale, and 0.642 for the bullying perception scale. This indicates that all four research instruments are reliable.

Data analysis encompasses various aspects, including descriptive analysis, classical assumption testing, and inferential analysis. The purpose of descriptive analysis is to facilitate the interpretation of statistical data derived from statistical calculations. Classical assumption tests include tests for normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity. To test the hypotheses, the data were analyzed inferentially using multiple regression. In testing the effect of the intervening variable, the causal relationships between variables were calculated using regression analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### *Data Description*

The description of the research data is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Data Description

| | | Statistics | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Empathy | Social Support | School Climate | Perceptions of bullying |
| N | Valid | 122 | 122 | 122 | 122 |
| | Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Mean | | 86,37 | 32,15 | 35,70 | 64,06 |
| Median | | 88,00 | 32,00 | 35,50 | 64,00 |
| Mode | | 79[a] | 33 | 36 | 59[a] |
| Std. Deviation | | 9,661 | 4,061 | 4,723 | 6,975 |
| Variance | | 93,326 | 16,490 | 22,309 | 48,650 |
| Minimum | | 66 | 24 | 26 | 49 |
| Maximum | | 106 | 42 | 46 | 78 |
| Sum | | 10537 | 3922 | 4356 | 7815 |

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Prior to the hypothesis testing analysis, all assumption tests were conducted, and their requirements were met. Normality was confirmed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z test ($p > 0.05$), and linearity was verified for each variable. Multicollinearity was assessed based on tolerance values > 10 and VIF values below 10, indicating that none of the variables exhibited signs of multicollinearity.

#### *Hypothetical Testing*

Table 3. Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of Estimate | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .461a | .212 | .192 | 6.270 | .000 |

Table 4. ANOVA

| Model | Sum of Square | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 1248.317 | 3 | 416.106 | 10.586 | 0.000a |
| Residual | 4638.281 | 118 | 39.307 | | |
| Total | 5886.598 | 121 | | | |

Table 5. Partial Hypothesis Test

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. | Collinearity Statistics | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | Tolerance | VIF |
| 1 | (Constant) | 27.166 | 6.624 | | 4.101 | .000 | | |
| | Empathy | .151 | .062 | .209 | 2.421 | .017 | .898 | 1.114 |
| | Social Support | .429 | .147 | .250 | 2.924 | 0.004 | .913 | 1.095 |
| | School Climate | .282 | .129 | .191 | 2.184 | .031 | .874 | 1.114 |

Based on the results of the ANOVA test, the F value is 10.586 with a significance probability of 0.000 ($p<0.05$) so it can be concluded that empathy, social support, and social climate together have a significant influence on the perception of bullying in inclusive elementary schools. Based on the results of the partial hypothesis test for each variable, it shows: (1) the results of the partial influence test for the self-confidence variable obtained a t count of 5.131 with a significance of 0.000 ($p<0.05$) so it can be concluded that self-confidence has a positive and significant influence on the ability to speak; (2) The results of the partial influence test of the self-efficacy variable obtained a tcount of 4.637 with a significance of 0.000 ($p<0.05$), so it is concluded that self-efficacy has a positive and significant influence on perceptions of bullying; and (3) The results of the partial influence test of the anxiety variable obtained a t count of -3.570 with a significance of 0.000 ($p<0.05$), so it is concluded that anxiety has a positive and significant influence on perceptions of bullying.

Furthermore, the model summary table indicates a coefficient of determination ($R^2$) of 0.212. This implies that the three independent variables exert a 21.2% influence on the dependent variable, while the remaining 78.8% is influenced by other variables not examined in this study.

**Discussion**

The research results indicate that empathy, social support, and school climate collectively and simultaneously contribute to students' perceptions of bullying in inclusive elementary schools. These findings suggest that higher levels of student empathy, stronger social support, and a more positive perceived school climate lead to better student perceptions regarding bullying behavior. This is supported by Mandasari (2020), who found that empathy among regular students and the school climate influence bullying behavior directed at students with special needs in inclusive schools. It is further explained that fostering perspective-taking skills in general education students helps reduce bullying directed at students with special needs; as these students become more oriented toward the well-being of others rather than self-interest or selfishness, a spirit of helpfulness is cultivated, prompting them to intervene if they witness bullying against students with special needs—thereby helping to prevent the recurrence of such bullying.

The research findings indicate that empathy partially influences students' perceptions of bullying in inclusive schools. Empathy is a psychological factor that plays a crucial role in shaping how students perceive bullying. Students with high levels of empathy are able to understand the emotional states of others; consequently, they are less likely to engage in actions that harm their peers, particularly students with special needs. The ability to put themselves in the victim's shoes makes students more sensitive to the negative impact of bullying and more inclined to offer assistance when witnessing such acts. These research findings align with meta-analytic results indicating that empathy—both affective and cognitive—is positively associated with bystander defending and negatively associated with involvement in bullying (Berchiatti et al., 2022; van Noorden et al., 2015). The findings also support research by Garandeau et al., (2016), which

demonstrates that teacher interventions aimed at eliciting empathy in bullies can increase their intention to cease bullying behavior. Thus, fostering empathy serves not only as a protective factor for victims but also as a preventive strategy to reduce students' tendencies to engage in bullying.

In addition to empathy, social support contributes significantly to perceptions of bullying. Social support from teachers, peers, and family fosters a sense of safety, acceptance, and being valued among students. In the context of inclusive schools, social support is crucial, as students with special needs often face a higher risk of being bullied. When students feel supported by the school environment, they are more likely to report incidents of bullying, seek assistance, and develop more adaptive coping mechanisms. Research by Mischel & Kitsantas (2020) indicates that the perception of social support is closely linked to students' perceptions regarding the prevalence of bullying and the quality of the school climate. Students who perceive high levels of social support also demonstrate better coping abilities when facing bullying. Furthermore, students often turn to peers for support; positive support helps counter bullying behavior, whereas negative support is detrimental to students. The consequences can be severe for students in inclusive schools, as they are particularly vulnerable to bullying stemming from the differences and limitations—across cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains—that distinguish students with special needs from their typically developing peers (Kurnia et al., 2024; Mahfudzoh et al., 2025; Cindy et al., 2026). Consequently, the diversity of special needs gives rise to psychological impacts on victims of bullying (Anggarini & Ningsih, 2020; Hasanah & Raharjo, 2016).

The results of this study also indicate that school climate significantly influences perceptions of bullying. A positive school climate is characterized by harmonious interpersonal relationships, a sense of safety, respect for diversity, open communication, and consistent rule enforcement. Such a school environment allows students to feel comfortable learning and interacting without the fear of falling victim to bullying. School personnel—ranging from leadership and teachers to educational staff—must serve as a source of protection for students who experience acts of violence. However, the issue is that not all students are willing or brave enough to report acts of violence. Therefore, schools need to emphasize that students are required to report and speak up if they experience violence or bullying. Research by Acosta et al., (2019) found that a positive perception of the school climate is associated with lower rates of reported physical, verbal, emotional, and cyberbullying. Furthermore, a positive school climate enhances student engagement with the school, peer relationships, and assertiveness skills, ultimately reducing bullying behavior.

The results of the coefficient of determination analysis indicate that empathy, social support, and school climate contribute 21.2% to students' perceptions of bullying in inclusive elementary schools. This implies that 78.8% of the variance in students' perceptions of bullying is influenced by other factors not examined in this study. According to Lestari (2016), numerous factors contribute to the occurrence of bullying, including personality, family dynamics, peers, and mass media. Salsabila et al. (2024) state that a lack of family harmony can lead to bullying. Furthermore, stress, aggression, and excessive hostility can result in conflict and poor conflict resolution, leading children to observe and imitate such behaviors.

**Implications**

This study offers significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the findings reinforce Social Ecological Theory, which posits that bullying behavior is influenced by the interaction of individual factors, social relationships, and the school environment. Empathy represents the individual factor, social support reflects the quality of interpersonal relationships, and school climate constitutes the environmental factor that shapes school norms and culture. The interaction of these three factors shapes students' perceptions of bullying and determines how they respond to bullying situations within the school.

The practical implication of this study's findings is that efforts to prevent bullying in inclusive elementary schools should not focus solely on imposing sanctions on perpetrators. Schools need to design comprehensive bullying prevention programs by fostering student empathy, enhancing social support from teachers, peers, and parents, and creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive school climate. This approach will enhance students' ability to recognize bullying behavior, foster empathy for victims, and build a school culture that rejects all forms of bullying.

**Limitations and Further Research**

This study examines only three predictor variables—empathy, social support, and school climate—even though perceptions of bullying are also influenced by various other factors, such as teacher support, parental involvement, emotion regulation, self-control, moral disengagement, bystander efficacy, individual characteristics, and school policies regarding bullying management. Consequently, there remains a possibility that other variables have not been accounted for in the research model. Furthermore, this study has not distinguished between respondent characteristics based on student status—specifically, regular students versus students with special needs—or the specific types of special needs the students have. Yet, these characteristics have the potential to influence perceptions of bullying within inclusive school environments. Therefore, suggestions for future research include employing longitudinal or experimental designs to allow for a more comprehensive explanation of the causal relationships between variables. Future studies could also incorporate additional variables—such as teacher support, parental involvement, resilience, emotion regulation, self-efficacy, moral disengagement, or school policies—as mediators or moderators. Furthermore, future research is advised to expand the sample scope across various regions and educational levels, as well as to compare perceptions of bullying between regular students and students with special needs, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of bullying dynamics in inclusive schools.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that: (1) empathy has a significant effect on students' perceptions of bullying in inclusive schools, (2) social support has a significant effect on students' perceptions of bullying in inclusive schools, and (3) school climate has a significant effect on students' perceptions of bullying in inclusive schools. In light of these conclusions, it is recommended that school teachers and counselors develop school-based bullying prevention programs by fostering empathy, enhancing social support from teachers, peers, and parents, and cultivating a school climate that is safe, inclusive, and respectful of diversity. Schools should also integrate character education and social-emotional learning into the school culture.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

DNA, AS, BDP, EP, and YPNA agree the final version of this article.

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