

# The Role of School Counselors in Preventing Bullying Against Visually Impaired Students in an Inclusive High School

Rizky Marulitua Sinaga, Nuraini, Rafael Lisinus Ginting  
Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

## ABSTRACT

Bullying remains a significant challenge in inclusive education, particularly for students with visual impairments who are more vulnerable to discrimination, social exclusion, and peer victimization. School counselors play a critical role in creating safe and supportive learning environments; however, their involvement in preventing bullying against visually impaired students has received limited scholarly attention. This study aimed to analyze the role of school counselors in preventing bullying against visually impaired students in an inclusive school setting at SMAN 2 Lubuk Pakam, Indonesia. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of counseling practices and bullying prevention efforts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis involving a school counselor, school administrators, visually impaired students, and regular students. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that school counselors performed several important roles, including providing emotional support, facilitating social interaction, and mediating conflicts involving visually impaired students. These interventions contributed to students' psychological well-being and social adjustment. However, bullying prevention efforts remained largely reactive, as counseling services were primarily implemented after incidents occurred rather than through structured preventive programs. The study also identified the absence of systematic disability-awareness initiatives, peer-support programs, and empowerment-based interventions designed to strengthen students' resilience and self-advocacy skills. The findings highlight the need for more comprehensive and sustainable bullying prevention strategies within inclusive schools. Strengthening school counselors' preventive roles through anti-bullying programs, disability awareness education, and collaborative support systems is essential for fostering inclusive, safe, and equitable educational environments for students with visual impairments.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received :1 March 2026

Accepted :06 May 2026

## KEYWORDS

*Bullying Prevention; School Counselors; Visual Impairment; Inclusive Education; School Counseling; Disability Awareness*

\* Corresponding Author: [shinagarizky@gmail.com](mailto:shinagarizky@gmail.com)

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Era Scientific Publisher (ERA).

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

## Introduction

Bullying remains a persistent and serious issue in educational settings worldwide. Defined as repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm or intimidate another individual physically, verbally, socially, or psychologically, bullying can have profound consequences for students' well-being and development (Prasetyo, 2011). Schools, which are expected to provide safe and supportive learning environments, are often the settings in which bullying occurs, making it a major concern for educators, parents, and policymakers.

In Indonesia, bullying continues to be one of the most frequently reported forms of student misconduct. Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) indicated that bullying accounted for a substantial proportion of complaints in the education sector, exceeding cases related to student violence, discrimination, and other violations. Similarly, previous studies have reported high rates of bullying among Indonesian adolescents, particularly in secondary schools, where verbal abuse, social exclusion, and physical aggression are common forms of victimization. International evidence further confirms the widespread nature of bullying, with studies indicating that between 8% and 38% of students worldwide have experienced bullying at some point during their school years (Kaess, 2018). These findings underscore bullying as a global educational and psychosocial challenge.

The consequences of bullying extend beyond immediate emotional distress and may negatively affect students' psychological well-being, academic performance, social relationships, and long-term development. Recognizing these risks, the Indonesian government has enacted several legal frameworks, including Law No. 23 of 2002 and Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection, to safeguard children from all forms of violence and discrimination. Nevertheless, bullying remains prevalent in many schools, particularly among vulnerable student populations.

The issue becomes even more complex when it involves students with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments. Visually impaired students often face additional challenges in navigating social interactions due to limitations in mobility, access to environmental information, and dependence on support from others. Within inclusive school settings, where students with disabilities learn alongside their non-disabled peers, differences in abilities and learning needs may contribute to unequal social relationships. Insufficient disability awareness, limited empathy, and negative stereotypes frequently increase the risk of bullying directed toward visually impaired students.

Bullying against visually impaired students is often subtle and difficult to detect. It may occur in the form of verbal ridicule, social exclusion, manipulation, or misuse of assistive devices such as white canes. Because of their visual limitations, victims may struggle to identify perpetrators or provide evidence of bullying incidents, particularly when such behaviors occur outside the direct supervision of teachers. As a result, bullying may remain hidden and unaddressed, increasing the likelihood of psychological consequences such as anxiety, reduced self-esteem, social withdrawal, decreased academic engagement, and school absenteeism.

Another contributing factor is the limited implementation of disability awareness programs within many inclusive schools. Misconceptions that portray visually impaired students as incapable or excessively dependent on others may reinforce discriminatory attitudes and behaviors among peers. Previous studies have demonstrated that inclusive educational interventions, collaborative learning activities, and empathy-building programs can significantly reduce prejudice and promote positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. Therefore, creating an inclusive school culture requires not only structural inclusion but also intentional efforts to foster acceptance, empathy, and mutual respect among all members of the school community.

Within this context, school counselors play a crucial role in preventing bullying and supporting students with visual impairments. Their responsibilities extend beyond traditional counseling services to include advocacy, mediation, prevention, and the promotion of positive school climates. School counselors are expected to identify early signs of bullying, provide emotional support to victims, facilitate constructive peer relationships, and collaborate with teachers and school leaders to develop anti-bullying initiatives. In inclusive education settings, counselors must also adapt their approaches to accommodate the specific needs of visually impaired students through accessible communication methods and individualized support strategies.

Furthermore, school counselors serve as agents of change in developing inclusive school cultures. Through disability-awareness programs, empathy-based learning activities, peer-support initiatives, and anti-bullying campaigns, counselors can contribute significantly to reducing discriminatory behaviors and strengthening social inclusion. Research has shown that schools that actively promote inclusive values tend to report lower levels of bullying and more positive peer interactions. Consequently, integrating anti-bullying education into school policies, classroom practices, and counseling programs represents an important strategy for protecting vulnerable students.

Despite the recognized importance of school counselors in inclusive education, limited research has specifically examined their role in preventing bullying against visually impaired students. Existing studies have largely focused on bullying among students with disabilities in general or on broader aspects of inclusive education, while empirical evidence concerning counselor-led bullying prevention strategies for visually impaired students remains scarce. This gap is particularly evident in Indonesian inclusive secondary schools, where contextual challenges may influence the implementation and effectiveness of counseling services.

The novelty of this study lies in its exploration of the preventive and supportive roles of school counselors in addressing bullying experienced by visually impaired students within an inclusive school setting. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine bullying prevalence or disability inclusion, this research focuses on how counselors intervene, support victims, facilitate social inclusion, and address challenges in preventing bullying among visually impaired students.

SMAN 2 Lubuk Pakam, an inclusive senior high school in Deli Serdang Regency, has enrolled students with visual impairments as part of its commitment to inclusive education. Preliminary observations conducted by the researcher indicated the presence of bullying behaviors, particularly verbal harassment directed toward visually impaired students. Furthermore, some incidents reportedly remained unreported because students doubted whether school counselors would

respond effectively. These circumstances highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the role of school counselors in creating safe and inclusive educational environments.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of school counselors in preventing bullying against visually impaired students at SMAN 2 Lubuk Pakam, identify the strategies employed, and examine the challenges encountered in implementing counseling services within an inclusive school setting.

## Method

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore and analyze the role of school counselors in preventing bullying against visually impaired students within an inclusive school setting. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and social interactions related to bullying prevention and counseling practices (Creswell, 2014). The descriptive qualitative design was considered appropriate for capturing the complexity of counseling interventions and the contextual factors influencing their implementation in inclusive education.

### Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at SMAN 2 Lubuk Pakam, an inclusive senior high school in Deli Serdang Regency, Indonesia, which enrolls students with visual impairments alongside their non-disabled peers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed relevant knowledge and direct experience related to the research topic.

The participants consisted of one school counselor, one vice principal responsible for student affairs, one visually impaired student, and several regular students who frequently interacted with the visually impaired student in the school environment. These participants were selected because they were directly involved in the implementation, experience, and observation of bullying prevention efforts within the school.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information regarding the counselor's roles, strategies, challenges, and experiences in preventing bullying against visually impaired students. Interviews with students and school administrators were conducted to gain multiple perspectives on bullying incidents, counseling interventions, and the overall inclusiveness of the school environment.

Non-participant observations were carried out to examine interactions among students, observe counseling activities, and identify bullying prevention practices implemented within the school setting. In addition, relevant documents, including school regulations, counseling program reports, and anti-bullying policies, were reviewed to support and enrich the findings.

### Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data condensation stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were systematically reviewed, coded, and categorized according to the research objectives. The data were then organized into thematic displays to facilitate interpretation and identify emerging patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified throughout the analysis process to ensure the credibility and consistency of the findings.

### Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, source triangulation and method triangulation were employed by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Member checking was also conducted by sharing summaries of interview findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. These procedures helped strengthen the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings.

## Result and Discussion

### Results

#### **School Counselors as Emotional Support Providers**

The findings revealed that school counselors primarily functioned as providers of emotional support for visually impaired students who experienced bullying. Individual counseling sessions were conducted when students reported incidents of verbal teasing, social exclusion, or other forms of negative treatment from their peers. Through these sessions, counselors encouraged students to express their feelings, discuss their experiences, and develop emotional coping mechanisms.

One participant stated:

“When I felt uncomfortable because some classmates made jokes about my condition, the counselor listened to me and helped me feel calmer.”

Observational data further indicated that counseling sessions created a safe environment where visually impaired students felt acknowledged and supported. This emotional support contributed to reducing feelings of anxiety and isolation following bullying experiences.

#### **School Counselors as Social Facilitators**

The findings also demonstrated that school counselors served as social facilitators by encouraging positive interactions between visually impaired students and their peers. In several situations, counselors were observed assisting visually impaired students in participating in group activities and classroom discussions. Counselors also provided informal guidance to regular students to foster empathy and respectful behavior toward students with disabilities.

However, these facilitation efforts were generally situational rather than systematic. No structured peer-support program or disability-awareness initiative was found during the study period.

#### **School Counselors as Mediators**

Another important role identified was mediation. When conflicts or misunderstandings occurred between visually impaired students and their peers, counselors occasionally acted as mediators to facilitate communication and resolve interpersonal tensions. Through informal discussions, counselors attempted to clarify misunderstandings and promote mutual understanding among students.

Nevertheless, mediation practices were implemented only when incidents were reported and did not constitute a formal component of the school's bullying prevention strategy.

#### **Limitations of Current Bullying Prevention Practices**

Although school counselors provided valuable support, the findings indicate that bullying prevention efforts remained largely reactive. Counseling interventions were generally initiated after bullying incidents had occurred rather than through proactive prevention programs. Furthermore, visually impaired students had not received systematic training in assertiveness, self-advocacy, or social coping skills that could help them respond more independently to bullying situations.

As a result, students continued to rely heavily on counselor intervention whenever social difficulties emerged.

### Discussion

The findings highlight the important role of school counselors in supporting visually impaired students who experience bullying within inclusive school settings. The provision of emotional support through individual counseling demonstrates that counselors function as protective agents who help students cope with the psychological consequences of bullying. This finding is consistent with Swearer and Hymel's perspective that supportive relationships with school professionals can reduce the negative impact of bullying and strengthen students' psychological well-being.

The results also support the principles of Inclusive Education Theory, which emphasizes that schools should provide equitable opportunities and supportive environments for all learners regardless of their abilities. In this study, counselors contributed to inclusive practices by facilitating participation and promoting positive social interactions between visually impaired students and their peers. However, the absence of structured inclusion programs suggests that these efforts remain dependent on individual counselor initiatives rather than institutionalized school policies.

From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, the challenges experienced by visually impaired students cannot be understood solely as consequences of visual impairment itself. Rather,

they arise from environmental and social barriers, including negative stereotypes, limited disability awareness, and exclusionary peer behaviors. The findings indicate that bullying is often rooted in misconceptions about disability rather than in the students' impairments. Therefore, effective bullying prevention requires changes not only in individual behavior but also in school culture and peer attitudes.

The findings further reveal that counselors primarily function in reactive capacities, providing interventions after bullying incidents occur. While such interventions are valuable, they do not fully align with contemporary school counseling frameworks, which emphasize preventive and developmental approaches. According to the ASCA National Model, school counselors should implement comprehensive prevention programs that promote social-emotional learning, empathy development, peer support, and positive school climates. The limited implementation of these preventive strategies in the present study suggests an area requiring significant improvement.

Another important finding concerns the lack of empowerment-oriented interventions for visually impaired students. Consistent with the arguments of Rose and Espelage, anti-bullying efforts should extend beyond incident management and focus on strengthening students' self-advocacy skills, resilience, and social competence. The absence of systematic training in these areas may explain why students continue to depend heavily on counselor intervention when encountering social difficulties.

The novelty of this study lies in its examination of school counselors' roles in protecting visually impaired students from bullying within an Indonesian inclusive school context. While previous studies have largely focused on bullying prevalence or inclusive education practices, this study provides empirical evidence regarding how counselors function as emotional supporters, facilitators, and mediators in addressing bullying experienced by visually impaired students. The findings therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of counseling practices within inclusive schools and highlight the need for more proactive and sustainable bullying prevention programs. Overall, the findings suggest that school counselors play an essential role in supporting visually impaired students. However, their effectiveness could be enhanced through the development of structured anti-bullying programs, disability-awareness initiatives, peer-support systems, and empowerment-based interventions that strengthen students' capacity to navigate social challenges independently.

## Conclusion

This study examined the role of school counselors in preventing bullying against visually impaired students within an inclusive school setting at SMAN 2 Lubuk Pakam. The findings indicate that school counselors play an important role in providing emotional support, facilitating social interaction, and mediating conflicts involving visually impaired students. Through individual counseling and situational interventions, counselors help students cope with the psychological consequences of bullying and maintain their participation in academic and social activities.

However, the study also revealed that bullying prevention efforts remain largely reactive rather than preventive. Counseling interventions are generally implemented after bullying incidents occur, while systematic programs aimed at developing students' social competence, self-advocacy skills, resilience, and bullying awareness are still limited. Furthermore, the absence of structured disability-awareness initiatives and peer-support programs reduces the effectiveness of long-term bullying prevention efforts within the school environment.

The findings highlight the need for school counselors to expand their roles beyond case management and emotional support toward more comprehensive preventive approaches. Developing structured anti-bullying programs, promoting disability awareness, strengthening peer-support networks, and empowering visually impaired students through social and coping skills training are essential strategies for creating safer and more inclusive educational environments. In addition, stronger collaboration among counselors, teachers, school administrators, parents, and students is necessary to establish a sustainable culture of inclusion and respect.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education and school counseling by providing empirical evidence regarding the challenges and opportunities associated with bullying prevention for visually impaired students. Future research is recommended to involve

multiple inclusive schools, a larger number of participants, and diverse disability groups to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of effective counseling practices and bullying prevention strategies in inclusive educational settings.

Ultimately, effective bullying prevention requires a shift from reactive intervention toward proactive and school-wide prevention strategies that foster inclusion, empathy, and equal participation for all students, including those with visual impairments.

## References

- Aluedse, O. (2016). Bullying in schools: A form of child abuse in schools. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 30(1), 37–49.
- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2011). *Index for inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools* (3rd ed.). Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE).
- Capuzzi, D., & Gross, D. R. (2016). *Counseling and guidance: Theory and practice*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Corey, G. (2017). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy* (10th ed.). Boston: Cengage Learning.
- Gibson, R. L., & Mitchell, M. H. (2011). *Introduction to counseling and guidance* (7th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
- Gladding, S. T. (2000). *Counseling: A comprehensive profession* (4th ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Gysbers, N. C., & Henderson, P. (2012). *Developing and managing your school guidance program* (5th ed.). American Counseling Association.
- Hendricks, E. A., & Tanga, P. T. (2019). Effects of bullying on the psychological functioning of victims. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, 31(1), 1–17.
- Idsoe, T., Vaillancourt, T., Dyregrov, A., Hagen, K. A., Ogden, T., & Nærde, A. (2021). Bullying victimization and trauma. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 11, 480353.
- Santrock, J. W. (2018). *Life-span development* (17th ed.). McGraw-Hill.