

Exploring Discrimination in School and Its Implications to Learning: Stories to Tell

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of discrimination and bullying among junior and senior high school students, focusing on their coping strategies and visions for a safe school environment. Ten (10) purposively selected participants took part in in-depth interviews, and the data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns. The findings revealed four major themes of lived experiences—verbal bullying, physical bullying, social exclusion, and discrimination based on identity—as well as four categories of coping strategies, namely emotional coping, cognitive coping, social support, and behavioral coping. Students also envisioned a bullying-free school defined by respect and equality, a safe and inclusive environment, supportive school policies, and the active role of teachers and authorities. The study emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive, safe, and supportive learning environments, underscoring the need for a collaborative, community-wide effort to transform school culture by promoting safety, respect, and inclusion, thereby ensuring that all learners can thrive.

Keywords

education, school bullying, discrimination, student coping mechanisms, phenomenology, safe school environment, Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying and discrimination still happen in schools all over the world. They are not just one-time acts of violence; they are deeply ingrained social processes that affect identity, connection, and learning. Students are physically, verbally, relationally, and symbolically harmed across a wide range of cultural and national settings, which lowers their self-worth and reinforces social orders (Ben-Ayed, 2023; Qamar & Farid, 2022; Schlüter et al., 2021). A person's condition, body image, gender identity, and cultural background can all affect their experiences, making them more vulnerable and likely to be left out (Link et al., 2024; Puhl & Lessard, 2020; Stańczykiewicz & Senczyzyn, 2024). Discrimination and bullying have adverse effects on students' emotional health and their desire to learn. They can cause stress, absences, low motivation, and long-term developmental problems (Cuevas et al., 2020; Zajda, 2021; Pistilli & Egler, 2023). Even though there are programs and rules in place around the world to stop bullying, it still happens. This shows how strongly power, dominance, and lack of moral engagement are ingrained in school cultures (Pratto et al., 1994; Hymel & Bonanno, 2014; Gaffney et al., 2021b).

Bullying and discrimination at school are most evident in the everyday interactions that happen in classrooms, halls, playgrounds, and online, where students try to find safety, acceptance, and visibility. Larger class sizes, competitive academic structures, and weak school climates have all been found to make bullying and abuse more common in both public and private schools (Garandean et al., 2019; Rafiq et al., 2022). Bullying, which is often based on looks, abilities, or perceived differences, makes students feel bad and leads them to avoid social situations (Alini et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023). Bullying based on relationships and identities, like body shaming, homophobic abuse, and being left out, also takes away students' sense of worth and belonging quietly (Elipe et al., 2021; Tanas et al., 2022). Teachers, school leaders, and parents all play important roles in making schools welcoming, but harmful behaviors often occur due to inconsistent responses and a lack of professional development (OECD, 2020; De Jesus Hernandez, 2025; Van Niejenhuis et al., 2019). Students in these situations have to deal with discrimination mostly on their own, using personal coping mechanisms that do not always work well (Nurhayati et al., 2025; Zamir & Zia, 2024,000).

There is a lot of research on how common, what kinds of, and what effects bullying has, but there is still a big hole in our knowledge of how students experience, understand, and deal with discrimination at school. Many studies focus on results, interventions, or statistical links, but fewer focus on students' words as they make sense of their own experiences (Galabo, 2019; Rendaje, 2021; Beñez, 2025). Some existing theories, like the Social Dominance Theory (Pratto et al., 1994; Pellegrini et al., 2007; Salmivalli, 2014), which says that bullying is a way to gain power and status, and the Cognitive and Moral Disengagement Theory (Bandura et al., 1960; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), both explain things well, but they do not always go far enough into real-life stories. There is also a lack of qualitative studies that look at how students imagine schools without bullying and discrimination, especially in specific local and cultural settings (Widiharto et al., 2020; Nurhayati et al., 2021). Because of this gap, we need a phenomenological method that really hears what students have to say and places those stories in the real world of school.

This study is based on phenomenology and aims to describe the real-life experiences of students who have been bullied or discriminated against, and to examine how these experiences affect their learning, how they cope with stress, and their goals. By focusing on student voices, the study shows that we should learn about bullying not just from rules or programs, but also from what students think about their daily struggles and acts of strength (Giorgi, 2012; Patton, 2002). These results are meant to help teachers, school leaders, and lawmakers by providing human-centered information that can help them be more inclusive, improve school climate, and make it easier to implement

empathy-based interventions (Abraczinskas et al., 2022; Cole, 2025; Lazaga, 2025). Finally, this study adds to a growing body of qualitative research that sees education not just as a place to learn, but also as a place where people live and learn, and where respect, voice, and belonging are important for everyone to do well (Cariaga, 2023; Cariaga, 2025).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to understand better the lived experiences of junior and senior high school students who had been subjected to bullying and discrimination. A phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore how individuals personally experience and make sense of significant events in their lives. Rather than measuring variables, this design focused on capturing students' thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of their experiences. To ensure participants' perspectives were authentically represented, the researcher consciously set aside personal assumptions and biases throughout the research process. In-depth interviews were conducted to provide students with the opportunity to share their stories openly. By examining similarities and differences across participants' narratives, the study developed a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the phenomenon.

Respondents of the Study

The participants of the study were ten (10) junior and senior high school students, selected through purposive sampling. This sampling method was used to intentionally include students who had direct experience with bullying and discrimination and could provide rich, relevant insights. The number of participants was deemed sufficient for a phenomenological study, as it enabled a detailed and careful examination of each individual's lived experience. Students were included if they were officially enrolled during the school year 2024–2025, had experienced bullying or discrimination, and belonged to vulnerable groups such as members of the LGBT community, persons with disabilities, or individuals identified as overweight or underweight. Potential participants were identified with the assistance of the school's guidance office and teachers. Only students who were willing to share their experiences and provide informed consent voluntarily were included. Students were excluded if they were not enrolled during the specified school year, had no experience of being bullied, or had only been involved as perpetrators. Individuals with close personal relationships with the researcher were also excluded to prevent bias. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, including emotional discomfort or personal concerns, without facing any negative consequences.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. This type of instrument allowed participants to freely express their experiences while still ensuring that the discussion remained focused on the study's objectives. The interview guide was designed to encourage participants to share detailed narratives and clarify their responses when necessary. The development of the interview questions was guided by a review of the relevant literature, including previous studies, scholarly articles, and theses on bullying, discrimination, and student vulnerability. The interview guide addressed three main research questions aligned with the study's purpose. To ensure the instrument's quality and appropriateness, it was validated by five experts, including four internal validators and one external validator with relevant academic and professional expertise. Their feedback was used to refine the questions and improve clarity and relevance.

Research Procedure

Before data collection began, the researcher obtained approval from the appropriate ethics review committee. With the permission and assistance of the school principal, formal requests were submitted to key school offices, including the Guidance Counselor, Registrar, Grade Level Coordinators, and the Gender and Development Office, to help identify potential participants from vulnerable groups. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting to ensure confidentiality and encourage honest sharing. While the interviews followed the prepared guide, participants were allowed to elaborate on their responses and share any additional details they considered important. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed carefully. The researcher maintained transparency throughout the process and ensured that no data were altered or misrepresented. Findings and conclusions were drawn solely from the collected and analyzed data.

Statistical Treatment

Because this study was qualitative, no statistical analysis was performed. Instead, the data were examined using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were carefully reviewed, coded, and grouped into meaningful categories. Emerging themes were identified based on recurring patterns and shared experiences among participants. This approach allowed the researcher to capture the depth and complexity of students' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Approval was obtained from the University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee (UMERC) prior to data collection. Participants' identities were protected through the use of codes, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Informed consent and assent were obtained after clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the possible risks and benefits. Participation was voluntary, and students were reminded that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were informed of potential emotional discomfort. They were allowed to skip questions they found distressing and were free to pause or stop the interview when needed. The researcher practiced empathy and active listening and ensured that interviews were conducted respectfully and safely. All data, including audio recordings and transcripts, was securely stored in password-protected, encrypted digital files in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Access to the data was limited solely to the researcher to ensure confidentiality and data security.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 This section of the paper presents the study's findings and discussion regarding the experiences faced by bullied students, their coping strategies, and their perspectives on a bullying-free school environment. The data gathered from the interviews was carefully analyzed to identify emerging themes, and the results are structured following the sequence of the research interview guide questions

Lived experiences of students regarding bullying and discrimination

Table 1 presents the key themes derived from students' lived experiences with bullying and discrimination. Through careful analysis and categorization of participant responses, four major themes were identified: verbal bullying, physical bullying, social exclusion, and discrimination based on identity

Table1. The Lived Experiences of Students regarding Bullying and Discrimination	
Emerging Themes	Core Ideas

Verbal Bullying	Experiences of hurtful words and repeated name-calling that attack self-esteem and personal worth
	Mockery, derogatory remarks, and offensive jokes that undermine an individual's confidence
	Judgment, public humiliation, and verbal attacks that lower self-worth and social acceptance
Physical Bullying	Experiences of physical aggression and violent acts that cause distress and fear
	Unprovoked physical assaults that inflict pain, humiliation, and emotional trauma
	Intentional harm through damaging actions, including destruction of personal belongings
Social Exclusion	Social exclusion and deliberate isolation from group activities, reinforcing feelings of rejection
	Being ignored, isolated, or ostracized by peers, leading to emotional distress and loneliness
	Spreading false rumors and misleading narratives to damage one's reputation and social standing
Discrimination Based on Identity	Discrimination and bullying based on appearance, including body size, complexion, and perceived attractiveness
	Discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, reinforcing stigma and exclusion
	Socioeconomic discrimination leading to exclusion and belittlement based on financial status and family background

Verbal Bullying. The data presented in the table reveals the impact of verbal bullying on individuals, specifically focusing on the experiences of hurtful words, repeated name-calling, mockery, and public humiliation. Three themes emerged under verbal bullying: experiences of hurtful words and repeated name-calling that attack self-esteem and personal worth; mockery, derogatory remarks, and offensive jokes that undermine an individual's confidence; and judgment, public humiliation, and verbal attacks that lower self-worth and social acceptance. The participant shared that mockery was disguised as jokes. According to a participant, *Boshet daw ko, walay ambag sa mga activity, dili makatabang.* (They called me 'boshet,' saying I can't contribute to activities and can't help with anything). In addition, a participant (P2) expressed that, *...magjoke joke sila, "bala itom kaayo ka" kabalo ka nga joke pero maaapektuhan gihapon ka...* (They joke around and say, 'Wow, you are so dark,' but it still affects me.)

Participants also shared, *Mukatawa sila then muingon na... "Hoy buhi pa diay ka? Abi nakog gihaya na ka."* (P4) (They would laugh at me and say, 'Oh, you are still alive? I thought you were already laid to rest.') The findings presented highlight the damaging nature of verbal bullying. The participants' narratives reveal the emotional impact of hurtful words, mockery, and public humiliation. These experiences are consistent with the findings of Elipe et al. (2022), who noted that victims of verbal bullying often feel inferior, struggle to express themselves, and face social difficulties. Similarly, Herman et al. (2020) emphasize that verbal bullying is a rising concern among adolescents in junior high, where peer interactions are most intense. Verbal bullying, encompassing hurtful words, repeated name-calling, mockery, and public humiliation, significantly affects individuals by undermining self-esteem, weakening confidence, and reducing social acceptance, often occurring under the guise of jokes.

Physical Bullying. Participants shared various forms of physical bullying for this theme. Three core ideas emerged under physical bullying: experiences of physical aggression and violent acts that cause distress and fear; unprovoked physical assaults that inflict pain, humiliation, and emotional trauma; and intentional harm through damaging actions, including destruction of personal belongings. One participant said, *...gisipa ko, gisapa ko, gikuba... Gikubaag bangko while gaistorya ko sa atubangan.* (P1) (They kicked me, slapped me, and took my chair while I was speaking in front of the class.). Similarly, another participant recounted an unprovoked assault: *...gibira najud akong bubok... wala ko kabalo, gikalit ra niyag bira ang akoang bubok.* (P3) (They suddenly pulled my hair... it was so abrupt. Then they pulled again, out of nowhere.).

Further, one participant added, *Kanang sa bangko sir, ginatuklod ang akoang bangko og ginasulatan ang akoang bag og badwords.* (P6) (They pushed my desk and wrote bad words on my bag.). Physical bullying is one of the most visible forms of aggression in schools, involving actions like hitting, kicking, spitting, pushing, or damaging personal belongings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). It is often used to assert dominance, causing both physical and psychological harm. Kennedy (2020) emphasizes that such acts aim to intimidate through violence, while Cranage (2022) and Yosep (2022) report that high school students frequently experience this type of abuse, including being kicked by peers. These findings highlight the damaging and dehumanizing impact of physical bullying, which continues to be a serious issue among adolescents.

Social Exclusion. Social exclusion emerged as a significant theme in the participants' experiences, highlighting how deliberate isolation, being ignored, and false rumors contributed to their emotional distress and sense of rejection. A participant shared how he was intentionally left out, even when additional members were needed: *...ginabutang nako nila sa kilid pag group activity, diha ra ko sa likod, dili na ko nila apilon... Dili nalang daw ko apilon kay sobra na daw maskin kulang pa gud sila.* (P1) (They would not include me in the group activity even when they were short on members.) This statement highlights the pain of being isolated by peers, not because of a lack of necessity but as an intentional act of exclusion. Some participants described how they were ignored or isolated, leading to emotional distress and loneliness. Another participant claimed: *...inig mag dool ko sa ilaba kay wala ko nila ginatagad, ginastoryahan ko nila pag naa na... pag naa na sila sa akong likod, ginastoryahan ko nila...* (P3) (Whenever I approached them, they ignored me and talked behind my back.) Meanwhile, spreading false rumors and misleading narratives was another way in which social exclusion manifested, damaging the victim's reputation and social standing. A participant recounted: *...as officer po, ginabadlong nako sila... kanang ginabadlong gud, pero para sa akoo bida bida og sipip... Ginatsismis ko nila nga bida bida daw then naga sipip sa maestro.* (P5) (They spread rumors that I was a teacher's pet, even though I was just doing my job as a class officer.) Spreading false stories, like calling someone a "teacher's pet," is a harmful form of bullying. It is used to make the person look bad, question their actions, and push them away from their peers. As Bhattacharya and Singh (2025) explain, these false claims can damage a person's reputation, leading others to avoid them out of fear of being judged or bullied too. Wang and Chen (2024) found that school bullying weakens students' capacity to work effectively with their peers. Additionally, bullying through exclusion can be made worse by cultural and gender biases. When people lack equal opportunities to connect or participate, they can feel even more excluded (Long-mei Wang, 2023; Raja, 2023).

Discrimination based on identity. The students shared painful experiences of being judged and bullied not for their actions, but for who they are—their appearance, gender identity, or family's financial situation. These forms of discrimination contributed to a deep sense of exclusion,

shame, and emotional trauma, reinforcing social stigma and damaging their self-worth. Several participants reported being ridiculed for their physical features, including body size, complexion, and perceived attractiveness. These hurtful remarks left them feeling ashamed and isolated.

Participant 1 (P1) shared: *Tambok kaayo ko. Unya Itom daw kaayo, pangit pajug nawong. Makaguba daw og bangko kay dako daw kaayo, sobra na daw sa timbang.* (They said I was fat, ugly, and that I would break the chair because I was too heavy.) Meanwhile, students identifying as LGBTQ+ faced exclusion and offensive stereotypes that reinforced social stigma and denied them a safe space for self-expression. Participant 9 (P9) recalled: *...about sa akong identity, I'm gay ginapa feel nila sa akoo na ang mga gays are too fragiles dali ra kaayo nia mabully po.* (They called me 'gay' and said I was too fragile to fight back.) Bullying rooted in socioeconomic status was also a common theme, with participants expressing how poverty became a source of judgment and social exclusion. This form of discrimination often devalues students for factors beyond their control, further deepening feelings of inferiority and isolation. Participant 5 (P5) shared: *...pobre kaayo ang ilang panan aw sa amoa-kanang wala tanan. Muana po sila nga 'ah wala na sila, wala nay ayo ilang pamilya ginapasa pasa ra na siya kay pobre kaayo na sila.* (They said our family was nothing, just passing by because we were poor.) Recent research highlights the serious impact of bullying and discrimination on vulnerable youth, including LGBTQ+ students, those facing weight stigma, and those from low-income backgrounds. LGBTQ+ youth often experience bullying that leads to depression and anxiety (Stanczykiewicz & Senczyzyn, 2024), while 25–50% of teens face weight-based discrimination, worsening emotional health (Puhl & Lessard, 2020; Tanas et al., 2022). Body shaming, both online and offline, can result in ongoing psychological harm (Schlüter et al., 2023). Discrimination based on socioeconomic status also contributes to stress and poor health (Link et al., 2024). These forms of exclusion have lasting effects on young people's well-being, underscoring the need for inclusive and supportive school environments

Coping Strategies of Students in Dealing with Bullying and Discrimination-Related Experiences.

Table 2 below presents the emerging themes related to the Coping Strategies of Students in Dealing with Bullying and Discrimination Experiences. Participants' sentiments were carefully examined and categorized, resulting in four major themes: emotional coping, cognitive coping, social support, and behavioral coping.

Table 2. Coping Strategies of Students in Dealing with Bullying and Discrimination Related Experiences

Emerging Themes	Core Ideas
Emotional Coping	Suppressing emotional reactions by ignoring the bullies to avoid conflict escalation
	Practicing self-acceptance and self-care to build feeling of confidence despite bullying experiences
	Using positive thinking to maintain a feeling of sense of self-worth and resilience
Cognitive Coping	Refocusing energy on academic performance as a way to prove worth and distract from bullying
	Engaging in hobbies and interests to divert attention from bullying and manage stress
	Using internal reflection and self-motivation to cope with negative experiences
Social Support	Seeking emotional support from close friends and family for encouragement and reassurance
	Talking to teachers or authorities to address bullying when it becomes unbearable
	Finding comfort in peer support groups where similar experiences are shared
Behavioral Coping	Avoiding bullies and changing environments to minimize exposure to bullying
	Standing up for oneself through direct confrontation or passive resistance
	Practicing relaxation techniques like listening to music and engaging in personal hobbies

Emotional Coping. Participants often turned to emotional coping mechanisms to navigate the pain and discomfort brought about by bullying and discriminatory behaviors. These responses highlight their internal efforts to remain resilient and protect themselves from further harm. One of the immediate strategies reported was the conscious choice to ignore bullies in order to prevent further conflict or escalation.

Participant 1 (P1) shared: *Ginapasagdan rapod nako sila. Inig musulod ko sa room, dili na ko mutan aw sa ilaba, muderetso rakog lingkod kay inig mutan aw paka, tutukan pakag maayo.* (I just ignore them. When I enter the room, I do not even look at them; I just go straight to my seat.)

He added: *Kung wala sila nagbully, dili pod nako mabag o akong sarili. Nagligo ko og maayo, nagatry kog papayat pero dili man makaya oi, lami man kaayo ikaon.* (I started taking better care of myself, like making sure I bathe properly. I even tried to lose weight, but it is so hard.)

Similar statement was also shared, *Kanang ano, babala nag unsa ilang tingon, kuintento nako sa kung unsang gibatang sa Ginoo sa akoo... sa akong lawas, sa akong nawong. Ingon ani naman jud ko, dawat naman pod nako akoang sarili.* (P3) (I just think that no matter what they say, I am content with what God has given me – my body, my face. I have accepted myself for who I am.) P9 expressed: *...ginaconsider nako to nga mga statement nila about sa akoo as motivation sa akong self aron ma prove nako sila na mali ilang mga gina ingon sa akoo.* (P9) (...I also consider their statements about me as motivation to prove them wrong.) Emotional coping mechanisms help individuals manage the effects of bullying. Suppressing emotional reactions, such as ignoring bullies, can be a conscious strategy to avoid conflict and distress (Galabo & Aton, 2019). Positive emotion regulation also plays a key role—Hein et al. (2018) found it reduces negative feelings and encourages prosocial behavior, supporting healthier responses to bullying. Self-acceptance and self-care further strengthen resilience. Riegel et al. (2024) emphasize that self-care lowers stress and improves mental health, often more effectively than coping strategies alone. Building self-worth through these practices can protect individuals from the psychological harm caused by bullying.

Cognitive Coping. Cognitive coping strategies emerged as significant mechanisms through which participants managed their experiences of bullying and discrimination. These strategies involved shifting cognitive focus toward productive activities, such as academics and hobbies, and cultivating internal motivation, which provided emotional regulation and psychological resilience. One notable coping approach was redirecting attention to academic performance.

Participant P1 shared: *Nitaas noon akong grades kay gina pasagdsan nalang man nako sila. Skwela man akong giadto dri dili man away. Mas nagfocus nalang ko sa akong pagskwela kay sa tagdon sila.* (P1) (My grades even improved because I just started ignoring them. I came here to study, not to fight.) Engaging in personal interests and routines also served as a distraction from the psychological burden of bullying.

P3 described a strategy of staying mentally occupied: *Naga ano nalang ko like naga tan aw ko og mga movies sa room og magbasa basa ko sa akong notebook, usabay ginahuman nako akong mga kulang sa assignment, ginapabuhat ni teacher, gina buhat nalang nako.* (I keep myself busy by watching movies, reading, or doing assignments so I won't think about the bullying.)

Additionally, some participant utilized internal reflection and self-driven goals to convert negative experiences into motivation.

P9 expressed: *Nag focus nalang pod ko sa playing volleyball po which I aim to be a better player po, then gina consider nako to nga mga statement nila about sa akoa as motivation sa akong self aron ma prove nako sila na mali ilang mga gina ingon sa akoa.* (I focus on playing volleyball, aiming to be a better player. I also consider their statements about me as motivation to prove them wrong.)

These cognitive coping strategies reflect participants' ability to transform negative experiences into productive actions. Redirecting attention toward academics or hobbies helps individuals regain control and build resilience. Excelling in school affirms self-worth (Rendaje, 2021), while engaging in activities like sports reduces stress and encourages teamwork (Benítez et al., 2021). Internal reflection and self-awareness also play crucial roles in fostering growth and emotional resilience in the face of external challenges (London et al., 2023). Additionally, Cubero (2022) emphasized that personal qualities such as self-discipline, motivation, and adaptability significantly influence academic performance, reinforcing the role of positive coping strategies in educational success. Together, these strategies form a strong foundation for coping and well-being.

Social Support. Social support played a crucial role in how participants navigated and coped with experiences of bullying and discrimination. Several participants described seeking emotional comfort from close friends and family members. These interactions allowed them to express their feelings freely and receive validation. As Participant P3 shared: *...kanang nibilak then gisumbong nako sa akong kuya, mao to naghatag siya og advise, usabay gina ingnan pod nako ang close friends nga kanang unsa akong problems sa ingon ato.* (P3) (I cry and then I tell my brother about it. He gives me advice. Sometimes, I also talk to my close friends about my problems.) In other cases, participants reached out to school authorities when the bullying became overwhelming, particularly when they held formal roles that gave them the authority to act. Participant P5 noted: *Ginagamit po nako ang akoang pagka officer sa room, magtug an ko kay ma'am aron si ma'am na ang mustorya sa ilaba aron dili na nila buhaton.* (P5) (I used my role as a class officer. I would report it to the teacher so she could talk to them and stop it.) Additionally, peer support groups provided a space where participants could share their experiences and find solace in collective understanding. Participant P4 expressed how meaningful this form of support was, especially when communication with parents felt difficult: *...naga share ko sa akong mga barkada, makabilak jud ko kay masakitan man ko. Dili lang nako ingon sa akong parents kay mabadlok ko mungon sa ilaba.* (P4) (I share with my friends, and I end up crying because it hurts. I don't tell my parents because I'm scared to talk to them about it.) These findings highlight the vital role of supportive social networks in helping students cope with bullying. Strong relationships with family, peers, and institutions foster resilience and emotional well-being. Support from friends, family, and trusted adults helps adolescents manage stress and regulate emotions (Herd et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Peer support groups further enhance emotional skills and mental health (Pavarini et al., 2023), showing the broad benefits of a connected, empathetic support system.

Behavioral Coping. Participants employed various behavioral strategies to manage the effects of bullying and discrimination. A common approach was avoidance, in which students distanced themselves physically and socially from individuals who were causing them harm. This strategy was often used to reduce exposure to hostile situations and maintain a sense of safety. As Participant P4 shared: *Dili nalag ko mutapad sa ilaba aron malayo ko. Mutapad nalang ko sa uban nga kanang masabtan ko.* (I try not to stay near them, so I move away. I stay with others who understand me better.) This response suggests an intentional shift in environment to seek out safer and more supportive peer interactions. Some participants, however, chose to confront the behavior directly, either through assertive dialogue or passive resistance. Rather than remain silent, these individuals challenged the comments or actions directed at them. Participant P2 explained: *Kung usabay, gina avoid nako, pero since dili man jud maavoid nga joke, ako na naga confront sa ilaba, gina ask nako sila nganong ing ana.* (P2) (Sometimes, I try to avoid it, but since it is hard to avoid jokes, I confront them and ask why they are doing that.) Another strategy was the use of personal hobbies and relaxation techniques to manage emotional stress. Music and solitary activities offered a calming refuge and a way to regain a sense of control. Participant P8 said: *Kaning maminaw jud kog music aron marelax, gina prove nako sa ilaba na kaya man pod nako akong sarili og siguro mag bag-o.* (I listen to music to relax. I try to prove to them that I can be strong and maybe even change.) Behavioral coping strategies, both avoidant and assertive, demonstrate students' agency in responding to bullying while preserving their emotional well-being. Avoidance and environmental changes can reduce exposure and prevent escalation (Widiharto et al., 2020), while assertive responses offer a constructive alternative to aggression or passivity. Engaging in hobbies or relaxation techniques, such as music, also supports stress reduction and fosters psychological resilience (Pikel, 2024).

Students' Vision of a Bullying-Free and Discrimination-Free School

Table 3 below presents the emerging themes on the students' vision of a bullying-free and discrimination-free school. Participants' sentiments were carefully examined and categorized, resulting in four major themes: respect and equality, a safe and inclusive environment, supportive school policies, and the role of teachers and authorities.

Table 3. Students' Vision of a Bullying-Free and Discrimination-Free School

Emerging Themes	Core Ideas
Respect and Equality	All students deserve equal respect and dignity.
	A friendly and supportive school atmosphere.
	A learning environment free from favoritism and discrimination.
Safe and Inclusive Environment	A school where students feel safe and protected.
	An inclusive culture where all students can participate freely.
	A welcoming space that embraces diversity.
Supportive School Policies	Strict enforcement of anti-bullying policies.
	Programs and symposiums to educate on bullying.
	Safe spaces and reporting mechanisms for students.

Role of Teachers and Authorities	Teachers should be role models and treat students fairly.
	Authorities must intervene and take corrective actions.
	Teachers should monitor and support vulnerable students.

Respect and Equality. A recurring theme in the responses was the desire for equal treatment and respect for all, regardless of background, social status, or identity. This perspective emphasizes the significance of dignity and non-discrimination as essential values in educational environments. Participants shared their aspirations for a school environment that promotes respect, equality, and inclusivity. A school environment founded on respect, equality, and a supportive atmosphere is essential for promoting student well-being, preventing bullying, and achieving academic success (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Gordon & Selekman, 2019). Teachers play a crucial role in fostering this, actively eliminating academic inequality by treating all students equally and providing them with support. This is vital as favoritism negatively impacts the learning environment and student performance (Rafiq, Afzal, & Kamran, 2022), underscoring the need for classrooms free from discrimination. Supporting this view, Cubero and Villocino (2023) emphasized that a positive school climate significantly enhances student engagement and academic motivation, which in turn strengthens academic self-efficacy among learners. As expressed by Participant P9: *Everyone should be treated right po and equal, maskin pag unsa imong status sa imong kinabuhay po, imong gender identity...* (Everyone should be treated right and equal, regardless of your status in life or your gender identity.) Another key finding was the aspiration for a supportive and friendly school atmosphere, free from abuse and exclusion. Participant P2 envisioned: *...siguro kanang sa school, murag kanang madescibe nako ang school na walay bully kay kanang ga respect sila sa isat isa, friendly lang anag tanan like walay abuse nga nahitabo...* (P2) (A school where everyone respects each other, everyone is friendly, and no abuse happens.) Students also highlighted the importance of teachers being fair and treating everyone equally. They felt this helps prevent favoritism and social divisions. Participant P1 stated: *Ang teacher nga pantay pantay na pagtrato... dapat ang teacher pantay pantay ang ilahang trato sa amoa... nga walay taas, walay mubo...dapat pantay tanan.*(P1) (The teacher should treat everyone equally... there should be no favoritism, and no one should be treated better or worse than others.) In sum, the students' vision for a bullying-free and discrimination-free school is clear: it is a place defined by mutual respect, inclusivity, and fairness, where all learners are given equal opportunities to grow without fear of judgment or exclusion.

Safe and Inclusive Environment. The aspiration for a secure and inclusive educational environment—one that actively promotes a sense of belonging, emotional security, and respect for all members of the school community—was a dominant theme that emerged from the narratives of the participants. Several participants articulated a desire for schools where every learner—regardless of background or prior experiences—is welcomed and supported. As Participant P6 shared: *...ang usa ka skwelahn, gusto nako nga e-welcome nila ang tanan, friendly sila tanan, tapos kanang suportive sila sa akoo, akong mga friends, mga teachers mga buitan... pati tong mga naga bully.*(P6) (A school should welcome everyone. All students should be friendly, the teachers and even the bullies should treat everyone well.) Participants also emphasized the value of inclusive participation, particularly in group activities, as a means of reinforcing unity and shared purpose. Participant P1 noted: *Dapat mag... magkauban kauban na sa activity.. Kanang sa mga kuan dapat dili na mag away away kay pareha rami studyante, pareha rapod nagskwela tanan.* (Students should be together in activities. There should be no fighting because we are all students attending school.) Furthermore, the vision for a safe school was closely tied to respect for individual differences and the rejection of bullying in all forms. Participant P10 expressed this sentiment: *Kanang ang tanan studyante kay ginatagaan og respeto og kanang gina ... (silence).. gina promote ang dili bullying.*(P10) (A school where all the students are treated with respect, and where bullying is not promoted.) In conclusion, participants envisioned an educational environment grounded in equity, empathy, and emotional safety. A safe, inclusive school climate—characterized by positive teacher-student relationships and respect for diversity—protects against bullying and supports student well-being (Iotti et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Achieving this requires student involvement in shaping the school culture and engaging in open peer discussions on bullying, thereby fostering both personal growth and community responsibility (Abraczinskas et al., 2022; Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2021).

Supportive School Policies. Another salient theme that emerged from the data highlights students' strong desire for comprehensive and well-enforced school policies that actively deter bullying and discrimination. Participants emphasized the critical role of institutional support structures in safeguarding student well-being and promoting a culture of accountability and care. Participants expressed a need for the strict implementation of anti-bullying measures. As Participant P2 stated: *...pwede mag implement og mga anti-bullying policies nga nagapa secure sa mga kaatong bullyhonon na mga students na kanang protektahan sila no matter what...* (Schools should implement anti-bullying policies to ensure students who are bullied feel protected.) Additionally, participants advocated for educational interventions, such as programs and symposiums, to raise awareness and deepen understanding of bullying among the student body. As Participant P5 noted *Murag dili man ma stop sir, pero I think magkuan po sir, magtipon ang students sa gym then naay mag lecture po, naay mag explain about bullying po (symposium)...*(P5) (I don't think bullying can be completely stopped, but schools should have lectures and symposiums to educate students.) Furthermore, the establishment of safe spaces and confidential reporting mechanisms was viewed as essential to supporting students experiencing harassment. As Participant P8 shared: *If naa may mangbully, kanang ma feel namo na naa safe gihapon mi kay naa mi masumbungan... masumbungan nga walay kahadlok.*(P8) (There should be mechanisms like safe spaces where students can report bullying without fear.) In conclusion, participants advocate for a school environment that is both supportive and protective, ensuring safety through strict enforcement of rules, continuous education on bullying, and accessible, non-threatening reporting channels. These measures affirm students' rights to dignity and security while serving as effective deterrents. Effective strategies include implementing strong anti-bullying policies (Dangal & Singh, 2020), promoting empathy and providing safe spaces (Li et al., 2024), educating stakeholders, and fostering a school-wide culture of prevention and intervention (Gaffney et al., 2019).

Role of Teachers Authorities. Participants consistently highlighted the crucial role of teachers and school authorities in tackling bullying and discrimination in schools. A central theme was the expectation that teachers act as role models by promoting values that support a respectful and child-friendly school environment. Participant P2 articulated: *...sa mga teachers pod diary, they shoud be role model sa students kay naa man gay mga teachers na sila pay naga verbally abuse a mga students, siguro sa mga teachers, sila jud dapat tong mag magpakalat na ang school is a child friendly zone.* (Teachers should set an example and promote the idea that the school is a child-friendly zone.) Participants also emphasized the responsibility of teachers and school authorities to intervene and provide emotional support. Participant P1 stated: *Kanang ginaprotektahan mi sa tecahers. Dapat storyahan nila ang bata kung nganong nagabilak.* (There should be teachers protecting us. Teachers should talk to students if they see them crying.) Moreover, there was a clear call for more proactive monitoring of student interactions, especially in areas where bullying often goes unnoticed. As Participant P4 suggested: *Kanang e monitor ang mga classroom kung kinsa ang mga bullies aron ma settle ang sama sa akoo na problema.*(P4) (Teachers and staff should monitor students more closely to prevent bullying from happening in hidden spaces.)

Conclusion and Recommendations

The main point of this study is that bullying and discrimination still have a significant effect on students' mental health, self-esteem, and motivation to do well in school. The results show that students often have to deal with verbal abuse, ridicule, being left out of social groups, and discrimination based on their identity. These problems are usually caused by unequal power relations and are exacerbated by the way the classroom operates. Students demonstrated resilience by accepting themselves, changing their thinking, and asking others for help. In their stories, they most strongly asked teachers and school officials to react with understanding, fairness, and consistency. The students' comments show how important it is to have learning spaces where respect is actively modeled, where bad behavior is quickly addressed, and where vulnerable people are met with understanding rather than silence.

Based on these results, schools are told to make anti-bullying rules stronger and more consistent, along with clear ways for victims to report bullying and safety measures for them. Teachers should gain the skills they need to spot, stop, and address bullying sensitively and ethically through ongoing professional development. Guidance offices and support groups can further improve students' health and happiness by offering additional counseling services, peer-support programs, and ways for parents and schools to work together. Future research could build on this one by using mixed or longitudinal designs, bigger and more diverse groups, and checking how well intervention programs work. To ensure that every student learns in a safe, respectful, and supportive environment, the whole school community must foster empathy, acceptance, and shared responsibility.

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