



## Bullying: how university students experience bullying in their classrooms

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### Abstract

The current qualitative study aims to study bullying experiences among university students. The researchers interviewed six university students. Following a conceptual framework from Olweus [1] and Muluk et al. [2], the researchers transcribe the interviews and code the data following thematic analysis. Three themes emerged; I am not a rotten dog, I am not a joker, and I don't understand why teachers bully me. The result shows that bullying has remained in higher education. All participants revealed that they experience bullying, especially in the classroom. Social/emotional bullying has become the most frequent type of bullying, and it has the power to disrupt the students' motivation to learn in the classroom. The study implies that the teacher's classroom management can play a critical role in decreasing the number of bullying. Therefore, the teachers must play a teaching role and a consultant for the students to listen to the students toward bullying.

**Keywords:** bullying, a motivation to learn, and an experience among university students

### 1. Introduction

This research identifies a perception among university students toward bullying. Bullying can be defined in various ways and has been considered an old phenomenon worldwide. Bullying refers to using force, coercion, teasing or hurtful threats, abuse, aggressive domination, or intimidation [1][3][4]. The behavior is often repeated and habitual. An essential pre-requisite is the perception (by the bully or others) of an imbalance of physical or social power. This imbalance distinguishes bullying from conflict. Bullying is a subcategory of aggressive behaviour characterized by hostile intent, power imbalance, and repetition over a while. Bullying is the activity of repeated, aggressive behaviour intended to hurt another person physically, mentally, or emotionally [5].

For several years, bullying among students has been a severe school issue. Several studies have revealed that at least 5 per cent of the students in primary and secondary schools are bullied weekly or more often [6]. Likewise, around 5 per cent of the students bully others that frequently. The number of victims among girls is nearly as high as among boys, but far more boys than girls intimidate others. Apart

from those who are constantly bullied and those who intimidate others regularly, many more students are involved in bullying on an occasional basis [1][6][7][8][9]. Not surprisingly, bullying can have various effects on students, both mentally and physically. Bullying can be done alone or in groups, known as mobbing, in which the bully may have one or more followers eager to assist the lead bully or support the bully by offering positive feedback, such as laughing, cheering, or clapping their hands. Consequently, victims may not be able to protect themselves from aggressive actions.

Many teachers and linguists worldwide have paid attention to the effects of bullying among primary and secondary school students. The Swedish-Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus studied bullying in elementary and lower secondary schools. Several 130,000 students were included in his survey. Based on the results, more than 15% of the students frequently bullied others. Likewise, 9% of the students became victims or bully-victims. Some 5% of the students were involved in the most severe form of bullying problems (as bullies, victims, or bully/victims), occurring about once a week or more frequently. Another study from Olweus [9] almost revealed the same result as the previous study. However, the prevalence rate of bullying has increased, and the percentage of students involved in the most severe form of bullying [7] has increased by 65%. Bullying has been a severe problem that has continuously remained and cannot be solved concretely [9].

In Thailand, bullying has been given attention by researchers and teachers. One study by Laeheem, Kuning, McNeil, and Besag [10] investigated bullying among primary school students in the Pattani district of southern Thailand. They found that 32.9% of students used to bully other children. In their study, the classroom was the place where bullying took place. They bullied others by parodying their parents' names. Moreover, the researchers revealed that gender played a significant role in bullying. Boys were found more frequently than girls. Another study by Laeheem, Kuning, and McNeil [11] revealed that bullying could be more common in public schools than in private schools, and the most frequent form of bullying was parodying others' parents' names. However, physical abuse was not significant in either study. Boys were generally found in physical aggression and bullying compared with girls.

A mixed-method study by Sokantat et al. [12] studied the relationships between Thai culture and bullying in secondary school. The researchers interviewed 15 samples involving 5 samples which were parents, teachers, school principals and academics and collected a survey from 400 secondary school students. The research found that all aspects of school bullying had positive correlations (verbal, social, physical, and cyberbullying). If one aspect increased, another correlative aspect also increased. According to the results, all types of bullying were related to traditional and cyberbullying. The Thai cultural basis partly influenced bullying practices among Thai learners, which lacked awareness that bullying was merely considered greeting and joking. The researchers suggested that it was necessary to provide knowledge to students at this age so that they would acknowledge bullying behaviors and the possible impacts of bullying and create a school's safety culture, and establish a center for especially receiving a report of bullying in school. Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the experience of bullying among university students. The current study attempts to identify bullying experiences among university students to fill the gap. The present study highlights their bullying experiences and how bullying affects their learning in the classroom.



The research questions of the current study are, therefore:

- How do the university students experience bullies in the classroom?
- How do university students manage themselves from bullying?

## 2. Literature review

Olweus and Limber [13] defines bullying as recurrent harassment between individuals of the same age in which a power imbalance makes it difficult for the victims to defend themselves. It is also consistent with Thornberg et al. (2012)'s definition. Thornberg et al. [14] define bullying as repetitive aggression and violence directed at weaker targets during interactions with the bully or bullies. According to both definitions, bullying can have short- and long-term effects on victims, including physical, emotional, and social problems [7][9] as further concerned about the effects of bullying, stating that frequent bullying persists into maturity and frequently leads to an increased risk of depression and other mental health issues.

### 2.1. Effects of bullying

Every student can experience and be affected by bullying, including those who are bullied, those who bully, and those who observe bullying. Bullying has numerous adverse outcomes, including mental health effects, substance abuse, and suicide. Speaking with children to determine whether bullying or another issue is a problem is essential. Furthermore, it negatively impacts the students' opportunity to study safely at school [15]. It means that when the school or classroom becomes unsafe for the students, it will likely worsen their motivation to learn or participate in school [15]. According to Maynard and Joseph [16], there is a correlation between victims of bullying and academic achievement. Many bullied students fail to concentrate on their academic responsibility due to their fear of being bullied.

### 2.2. Types of bullying

Bullying can be divided into many types, such as verbal, physical, social, and emotional. From the Olweus (1996)' study, physical bullying occurs more frequently among primary and secondary boys than girls. Moreover, the most common bullying is verbal bullying. This type of bullying can be found in up to 70% of students [2][17]. Verbal bullying involves racist slurs, name-calling, sexually abusive remarks, and belittling. The frequency rate of this type of bullying is one-third of all. Another type of bullying is social-relational bullying involving ignoring, isolating, group excluding and hostile body language. Social and emotional bullying is the most undetectable, while physical bullying is the most detectable. Social and emotional bullying is mostly found among girls, while physical bullying is mostly among boys [18][20][21].

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Research design

In the current study, the researchers adapt semi-structured interviews to identify the bullying experiences in one public university located in the middle part of Thailand.

### 3.2. Participants

All six participants were recruited voluntarily to join the semi-structured interview. All of the participants agreed to join the study, and the researchers identified the study's objectives and how to protect the participants from any risk after participating in the study. Pseudonyms replace all their actual names, and they can withdraw from the study if they feel uncomfortable. The qualifications of the participants are in the following table.

**Table 1.** The qualifications of the participants

Name	Gender	Faculty	Year of education
A	woman	Humanity and social science	4 <sup>th</sup> year
B	man	Humanity and social science	4 <sup>th</sup> year
C	woman	Faculty of Education	4 <sup>th</sup> year
D	man	School of management	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
E	Not specify	School of management	3 <sup>rd</sup> year
F	woman	School of management	3 <sup>rd</sup> year

### 3.3. Data collection

To collect the data, an interview technique was used. The researchers prepare a set of interview questions and allow all students to explain further their bullying experiences. The interview was arranged in Thai to allow the participants to express their feelings precisely. This is crucial to ensure their experiences are correctly articulated. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. All participants can fully express their feelings during this interview following the semi-structured interview technique. The semi-structured interview allows participants to express their opinions toward the investigating issue. It also allows the researchers to gain insightful data from the participants.

### 3.4. Data analysis

After transcription, the data were coded based on themes that emerged from the interviews. The relevant information is then classified by categorizing the data into specific group categories, followed by thematic analysis [19]. Similar emerging themes were categorized and then utilized to synthesize interview data. The following table will be an example of transcript data and its theme.

**Table 2.** The example of the theme and transcript quotation

Theme	Transcript quotation
I am a rotten dog	"Nobody talks to me because I have a problem with the head of the gangster, and they exclude me from doing any activity in the class. I feel so depressed."



#### 4. Findings

After transcribing data, the researchers read and re-read all data to get familiar with it. The researchers found 3 themes; I am not a rotten dog, I am not a joker, I am a victim of the teacher.

##### 4.1. I am not a rotten dog

From the transcribed data, the researchers found that all participants, A, B, C, D, E, and F, shared their painful experiences of excluding out from the group. Participant A revealed that

"Nobody talks to me because I have a problem with the head of the gangster, and they exclude me from doing any activity in the class. I feel so depressed. I cannot do anything because they all leave me behind and treat me like a shadow. When the teachers ordered the group work in the class, they grouped with their friends and left me in the corner. I have no group, and I am alone. That's why I always hate to work in the group."

From the above quotation, Participant C also shares their experience of excluding from the group when the teachers order a group project.

"I am always scared when the teacher orders a group project because I am an introverted person. I don't want to gossip or talk about drama. I just want to stay with myself. I quite keep quiet in class and have not many friends. I feel so hesitant when I need to talk to them and ask to group with them. It is very hard for me to do that. They always talk about Korean artists or dramas that I don't like it. It makes me don't like the class, and I don't want to study that class anymore."

All four participants revealed that social/emotional bullying could occur when they are not welcomed or have individual acceptance from their peers, particularly working in a group. The result from the study is consistent with the study from Rowan [18]. Girls can be more found in social/ emotional bullying rather than boys. However, this type of bullying has high power for victims. It directly worsens the motivation of learning of the participants. Participants E and F almost shared their feeling "I don't want to study anymore when the teacher asks us to group because I know I have no group. They must say their group is full, and it makes me so hurt".

The result of the current study may differ from the previous study by Coloroso [17] and Muluk et al. [2]. Physical bullying has become the most frequent type of bullying in the primary and secondary school. The current study found that social/ emotional bullying has mostly been found in all participants, and it has severe power on the student's motivation to learn.

##### 4.2. I am not a Joker

This theme related to how the participants feel depressed when they must present their work or pronounce and read any passage, particularly in the English language classroom. Participants A, B, C, D, and F shared their experiences with this theme. Participants A and F express that

"I feel super shit when the English language teacher calls me to read the passages, and some friends say that my accent is like I study from a rural school. I know my English is poor, but I don't want anyone to look down on me. I feel depressed when somebody tries to make me like a clown by clapping or laughing at me."

Almost all of the participants often share this type of emotional bullying, and it is mostly found in the English language classroom. Participant D expresses that "I don't want to learn English when the teacher asks me to read a passage because I know I must read it wrong, and my pronunciation is very Thai, and some friends will laugh at me because of my accent". This quotation reveals that the Thai accent has become a problem for him to learn English, and his peers mimicked his pronunciation. This result is consistent with Muluk et al. [2]. Emotional bullying has a direct effect on learning achievement among students. In their study, bullying plays a significant role in academic achievement; its percentage reaches 70.5 per cent. Even though emotional bullying cannot be detected, it has a critical power on students' motivation to learn, particularly in English Language classrooms.

However, Participant E gives a contradicting expression toward being mimicked that

"I used to be bullied, but I don't care who will laugh at my accent because I just came to learn, and I know I am not that good in English. Even though I come from a rural school, I want to learn more and more."

This quotation reveals that he can control himself even though he is bullied by his peers. This participant always focuses on his target, which can increase his self-esteem. It means that emotional bullying may not have a high effect if the students have high self-esteem, which protects them from emotional bullying.

#### 4.3. I don't understand why teachers bully me

This theme refers to how the participants feel depressed when their teachers say something bad to them in front of all students. Participants A, B, C, D, and F share the same experience about this type of bully that

"I don't understand why some teachers need to say something like, I am not that good in front of all students. It makes me feel depressed and ashamed about why I cannot do that. I know they have good attention, but it makes me sad, and I don't want to study with them anymore. It's kind of like they are bullying me with their well-intentioned hope."

This expression shows that many participants feel depressed and embarrassed when some teachers complain about them in front of the class, disrupting their motivation to learn in the course. This also supports by Participant F "I know I am not the top in the class, but I don't understand why some teachers need to ask which school I graduated from. It sounds like I am foolish that I don't know the answer." Almost all participants express the same opinion that they feel ashamed when some teachers pressure them to give a correct answer. Furthermore, this kind of emotional bullying can directly affect a student's trustworthiness toward the teacher. This is consistent with Muluk et al. (2021)'s study [2]. There is a significant relationship between teachers' class management and the number of bullying in the class. However, this type of emotional bullying may have no consistent with previous studies because it is occurred by the teachers who manage the class.



## Conclusion

From the data, the researchers found that bullying has played a critical role among university students, and it has a high effect on their motivation to learn in class. Emotional/ social bullying is the most frequent type of bullying that can be found among the participants. On the contrary, physical bullying is absent. Peers or classmates can cause emotional/social bullying, which the students cannot avoid interacting with their classmates. Teachers must also realize their teaching roles and the student's consultant to protect the students from bullying.

Moreover, teachers may be conscious of any signs from the students. Numerous warning indicators may indicate students are affected by bullying, either as a victim or as a perpetrator. Identifying the warning indicators is an essential first step in combating bullying. Not every student who is tormented or bullies others seeks assistance. It is essential to engage in conversation with students who exhibit indicators of being bullied or bullying others. These indicators may also indicate the presence of other issues or problems, such as depression or substance abuse. A conversation with the infant can help determine the source of the issue.

## Implication of the study

This current study was based on a qualitative research paradigm to emphasize the bullying experiences of university students. It also emphasizes that "classrooms must be a safe place" following the UN's two Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): well-being and quality education. An environment in the school is important for students; therefore, we must raise awareness of bullying in every sector, such as students, teachers, policymakers, and parents. Students should not ignore when they see their peers being bullied by others. Teachers should pay attention to bullying rather than ignore it. Establishing legislation against bullying will provide a strong movement against bullying because it can give bullying victims more confidence to protect themselves from bullying. Lastly, parents should take bullying seriously and listen to their children if bullying occurs. If the frequency of bullying becomes lower, we will have quality in education.

## Limitation of the study

The current study follows a qualitative research paradigm; however, the researchers do not involve the interrater reliability to enhance the validity of the findings. Therefore, further studies may involve such technic to increase the validity of the study. Further studies may involve more numbers of the participants or statical analysis to depict bullying among university students or other levels of education. EFL teachers may adapt this framework to emphasize how bullying affects students' motivation to learn in English language classrooms. It can build a strong knowledge about the relationship between bullying and motivation to learn the English language.

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