



Enacting Teacher Professional Agency through Social Literacy for Bullying Prevention: An Instrumental Case Study in an Indonesian Primary School

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Submitted: July 29, 2026 Final Revised: Sept. 13, 2026 Accepted: September 21, 2026 Published: September 28, 2026 Keywords: Bullying Prevention; Primary Education; Social Literacy; Teacher Professional Agency.	Purpose: This study examined how teacher professional agency is enacted through social literacy practices in bullying prevention in a primary school. Methods: An instrumental qualitative case study was conducted in an Indonesian primary school involving 24 purposively selected participants: eight subject teachers, one homeroom teacher, one principal, eight students, and six parents. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, 18 observation sessions, and five school documents and analyzed thematically using manual coding. Findings: Teacher professional agency was enacted through six interconnected processes: professional motivation and values, recognition of bullying patterns, professional interpretation and judgment, selection of social literacy practices, preventive and responsive action, and monitoring and follow-up. Social literacy was reflected in empathy, perspective-taking, ethical communication, inclusive participation, and reflective dialogue. Teacher responses were also shaped by leadership, consistency among teachers, documentation practices, parent involvement, and supervision constraints. Research Implications: The findings imply that bullying prevention requires not only teachers' willingness to intervene but also professional judgment, socially responsive pedagogical practices, and organizational support for consistent follow-up. Originality: This study positions social literacy as a pedagogical pathway through which teacher professional agency is enacted in bullying prevention and proposes a context-dependent analytical framework rather than a tested causal model.
	
 	Doi: https://doi.org/10.61255/jupiter.v4i4.1723

INTRODUCTION

Primary school is an early social setting in which children learn to construct social identities, understand differences, and develop relationships with peers and adults. This process can be disrupted when social relationships at school are marked by bullying, defined as aggressive behavior that is repeated or has the potential to be repeated within a context of power imbalance. Bullying may take physical, verbal, and relational forms, including hitting, teasing, derogatory name-calling, rumor spreading, and social exclusion. In the Indonesian context, PISA 2022 indicated that 25% of girls and 30% of boys reported experiencing bullying at least several times a month, exceeding the OECD average. Although PISA assessed students aged approximately 15 years, these data indicate that bullying remains a systemic problem and that prevention should begin in primary school, when interaction patterns and peer-group norms are being formed (Mandira & Stoltz, 2021; OECD, 2023; van Aalst et al., 2024).

Bullying is not merely a disciplinary issue; it threatens student well-being and educational success. Victimization is associated with a weaker sense of school belonging, deteriorating peer relationships, greater loneliness, and reduced engagement in learning. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate that bullying victimization can lower academic achievement by undermining students' motivation, engagement, academic self-efficacy, and learning strategies (Burger et al., 2022; Mandira & Stoltz, 2021; Samara et al., 2021). These effects are particularly important in primary school because repeated social experiences can shape how children perceive themselves, their school, and interpersonal relationships. Bullying prevention should therefore be positioned as an integral component of teaching and school-climate development rather than merely as a response after an incident occurs.

Various school-based programs have been developed to reduce bullying. Meta-analyses indicate that anti-bullying programs generally reduce bullying perpetration and victimization, although effect sizes vary according to program design, school context, implementation quality, and program components (Gaffney et al., 2021; Tolmatcheff et al., 2024). These findings demonstrate that policies or modules do not automatically produce change. Prevention succeeds when school actors translate program goals into instructional routines, classroom management, responses to incidents, and relationships with students. Primary school teachers occupy a strategic position because the intensity of their interactions with students enables them to observe group dynamics, identify behavioral changes, and intervene before aggressive behavior develops into an established pattern.

Despite teachers' central position, knowledge remains limited regarding the factors that motivate teachers to take actual action. A systematic review of 75 studies on primary school teachers found that previous research focused mainly on knowledge, attitudes toward bullying, subjective norms, self-efficacy, likelihood of intervention, and selected strategies (Dawes et al., 2024; O'Brien et al., 2024; van Aalst et al., 2024). Subsequent research has shown that anti-bullying attitudes, assessments of incident severity, self-efficacy, internal attributions, and perceptions of leadership are associated with teachers' likelihood of intervening. Teachers also tend to be more prepared to address physical bullying than less visible verbal and relational bullying (Baraldsnes & Caravita, 2026; van Aalst et al., 2025). However, evidence concerning the relationship between self-efficacy, prevention strategies, and students' victimization experiences remains limited and mixed (Fischer et al., 2021; van Verseveld et al., 2021).

These limitations indicate the need to shift attention from whether teachers possess motivation, competence, or positive attitudes to how these capacities are enacted as professional action. Teacher professional agency is relevant because it positions teachers as actors who make meaningful choices, exercise pedagogical and ethical judgment, and modify practices within the opportunities and constraints of their work environment. Teachers' actions are shaped by experience, goals, professional identity, leadership, resources, and organizational culture. Brodie (2021), Lau et al. (2024), and Shavard (2022), distinguish between pedagogical agency in the classroom and relational agency within professional communities and emphasize the importance of supportive leadership and collegial environments. In this study, motivation is understood as the driving force and goal orientation, professionalism as the foundation of competence and ethical judgment, and performance as the observable enactment of both in preventive action.

One vehicle for enacting such agency is social literacy practice. Social literacy is not treated as fully synonymous with social and emotional learning; rather, it is understood as the capacity to interpret social situations, understand others' perspectives, communicate ethically, cooperate, assess the consequences of actions, and resolve conflicts responsibly. It can be enacted through reflective dialogue, cooperative learning, analysis of social cases, perspective-taking, role-play, restorative communication, and the development of bystanders' courage to defend victims. Research in Indonesian primary schools indicates that social literacy can be developed through contextual discussion, participatory activities, collaborative projects, and guided reflection (Divecha & Brackett, 2020; Rosidah et al., 2026). Evidence on social-emotional learning also demonstrates improvements in skills, behavior, peer relationships, school safety, and academic achievement, although implementation quality is an important moderator (Cipriano et al., 2023; Longobardi et al., 2020; Trach et al., 2023).

Although research on bullying, teachers' roles, and social literacy continues to develop, these areas are often examined separately. Bullying studies have largely focused on program effectiveness, teacher attitudes, self-efficacy, and intervention intentions, while social-literacy research in primary education has mainly emphasized student competencies. In this study, teacher professional agency provides the conceptual framework connecting motivation, professionalism, and enacted performance. Motivation refers to teachers' commitment to student safety, professionalism to the knowledge and ethical judgment used in interpreting situations, and enacted performance to the observable actions through which these commitments and judgments are realized. These dimensions are therefore treated as interconnected expressions of professional agency rather than as separate variables (Brodie, 2021; Lau et al., 2024; Shavard, 2022).

Social literacy is distinguished from related concepts. It refers here to the capacity to understand social situations, recognize others' perspectives, communicate respectfully, participate inclusively, and consider the consequences of one's actions. SEL represents a broader framework for social and emotional development, while empathy and perspective-taking are specific capacities supporting social literacy. Restorative practice, in contrast, focuses on responding to harm and rebuilding relationships through dialogue and responsibility (Cipriano et al., 2023; Garandau et al., 2022; Parker & Bickmore, 2020).

Accordingly, the research gap is both contextual and process-oriented. The novelty of this study lies in examining how teacher professional agency is enacted through social literacy practices in everyday bullying prevention and how such enactment is shaped by school conditions. The study was guided by the following main research question: How

is teacher professional agency enacted through social literacy practices in bullying prevention in a primary school? Three sub-questions guided the analysis: (1) How do teachers recognize, interpret, and respond to bullying-related patterns in students' social interactions? (2) How are social literacy practices enacted within teachers' preventive and responsive actions? and (3) What individual, relational, and organizational conditions support or constrain teacher professional agency in bullying prevention?

A qualitative case study approach was required to uncover this process because teachers' actions cannot be understood solely through attitude scores or stated intentions. Observations of teaching and social interactions, interviews with teachers and school stakeholders, and document analysis enabled the study to compare stated commitments with enacted practices. The context of SDN 2 Baubau also enabled examination of how school culture, collegial relationships, leadership, student characteristics, and local resources shape the space available for teacher professional agency. Accordingly, this study aimed to analyze how teacher professional agency is enacted through social literacy practices in bullying prevention at SDN 2 Baubau by identifying teachers' pedagogical and relational actions, explaining the individual and contextual factors that support or constrain those actions, and formulating a framework for bullying-prevention practices relevant to primary schools. The thematic analysis and reporting procedures followed principles of transparency, coherence, and interpretive traceability in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024; Byrne, 2022; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Levitt et al., 2018).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design to examine how teacher professional agency was enacted through social literacy practices in bullying prevention. The design was selected because the study sought not only to describe practices within a single school but also to develop an analytical understanding of how teachers' professional orientations, judgments, pedagogical actions, and contextual conditions interacted in everyday bullying prevention.

The case was bounded by teacher practices at SDN 2 Baubau during April–May 2026, including classroom instruction, habituation activities, student interactions, responses to bullying-related incidents, and coordination among teachers, school leadership, students, and parents. The unit of analysis was teacher professional agency as reflected in professional motivation, interpretation and judgment, pedagogical action, and collaborative practices related to bullying prevention. Bullying was understood as verbal, physical, or relational aggressive behavior that was repeated or had the potential to be repeated within a relationship characterized by an imbalance of power.

SDN 2 Baubau is a public primary school located in Baubau, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. At the time of the study, the school served 639 students organized into 24 classes and employed 35 teachers. The school did not have a dedicated school counselor. Consequently, basic guidance, behavioral support, and responses to students' social concerns were distributed among subject teachers, homeroom teachers, and school leadership. This institutional context was particularly relevant because bullying prevention was embedded within routine teaching, classroom management, school rules, habituation activities, teacher collaboration, and communication with families rather than being handled by a specialized counseling unit.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved 24 participants consisting of eight subject teachers, one homeroom teacher, one principal, eight students in Grades IV–VI, and six parents or guardians. The eight subject teachers (G1–G8) taught different subjects, including Pancasila and Civic Education, Physical Education, Arts and Culture, Mathematics, and other subjects. This variation enabled the study to capture teacher professional agency across different instructional and student-interaction contexts. The homeroom teacher (GWK) was included because of their close involvement in classroom management and students' behavioral and social-interaction concerns. The principal, students, and parents provided complementary perspectives that enabled teacher accounts to be compared with leadership perspectives, student experiences, family perspectives, observations, and documentary evidence

Table 1. Composition of Research Participants

Group	Code	Number	Duration or scope	General characteristics
Subject teachers	G1–G8	8	30–45 minutes per participant	Teaching different subjects; 3–22 years of teaching experience
Principal	KS	1	45 minutes	Familiar with school policies and mechanisms for addressing student concerns

Group	Code	Number	Duration or scope	General characteristics
Homeroom teacher	GWK	1	45 minutes	Closely involved in classroom management and students' behavioral and social-interaction concerns
Students	S1–S8	8	20–30 minutes per participant	Grade IV–VI students; representing varied social experiences
Parents/guardians	O1–O6	6	30–45 minutes per participant	Parents of students in Grades IV–VI who had communicated with the school
Total		24		

Participants were selected through purposive sampling with attention to variation in professional role, teaching experience, subject area, grade level, gender, and involvement in students' social interactions. Teacher inclusion criteria were: having taught at the school for at least two years, being directly involved in teaching or classroom management, having experience addressing students' social-interaction concerns, and agreeing to participate in the study. Students were selected from Grades IV–VI based on their ability to communicate their experiences, variation in grade level and gender, and familiarity with peer interactions. Students were not publicly identified or recruited as victims or perpetrators of bullying in order to minimize labeling and potential stigma.

Parents or guardians were selected because they had experience communicating with the school regarding their children's social or behavioral development. Although this criterion provided relevant information concerning school–family communication and follow-up, it may have privileged the perspectives of families who were already relatively engaged with the school. Parents with limited contact with teachers or school personnel may therefore have been underrepresented. This potential selection bias was considered when interpreting parent perspectives and when assessing the transferability of the findings.

The number of participants was not determined through statistical calculation. Data adequacy was evaluated in relation to the focused research aim, the bounded nature of the single case, participants' direct experience with the phenomenon, variation across professional and stakeholder roles, and the availability of complementary evidence from interviews, 18 observation sessions, and school documents. Data collection and preliminary analysis proceeded iteratively, with follow-up inquiries used when emerging interpretations required clarification. The final dataset was therefore considered sufficient to develop an in-depth analytical account of the case rather than to achieve statistical representativeness.

Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

The researchers served as the primary research instruments, supported by semi-structured interview guides, an observation guide, a document-review checklist, an audio recorder, field notes, and reflexive notes. Interviews with subject teachers explored their understanding of bullying, motivation to protect students, professional judgment, decision-making, intervention practices, social literacy activities, and perceived supporting and constraining conditions. The homeroom-teacher interview additionally explored classroom management, recurring patterns of student interaction, coordination with other teachers, and school–family follow-up. The principal interview focused on school policies, leadership, coordination, procedures for responding to recurring social concerns, and institutional support for teachers. Student interviews explored peer interactions, feelings of safety, reporting experiences, teachers' responses, and classroom activities related to empathy, perspective-taking, inclusion, and respectful communication. Parent interviews addressed school–family communication, children's behavioral responses, and follow-up after social problems.

Observations were conducted during classroom instruction, recess, habituation activities, group work, and situations involving teachers' responses to student interactions. Observed aspects included teacher communication, empathy development, perspective-taking, respect for differences, conflict management, social inclusion, student protection, and responses to possible bullying. Documentary data included school rules, lesson modules, habituation programs, relevant student-development documents, socialization materials, and anonymized incident records. Each observation session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. The observation guide was structured to record the interactional context, indications of verbal, physical, or relational bullying, teachers' immediate responses, and observable social-literacy practices, including empathy development, perspective-taking, ethical communication, social inclusion, conflict management, and student protection. Field notes documented relevant interaction sequences, teachers' actions, students' immediate responses, and contextual information required for subsequent interpretation.

Before data collection, the interview and observation guides underwent expert review by two academics, one with expertise in Educational Sciences and the other in Educational Psychology. The review focused on conceptual relevance, clarity, neutrality of wording, developmental appropriateness, sensitivity of bullying-related questions, and alignment between the instruments and the research objectives.

Based on the expert review, questions that initially addressed teachers' roles in general terms were reformulated to elicit professional judgment, decision-making, enacted practices, and teacher reflection. Bullying-related questions were refined to distinguish repeated bullying from ordinary peer conflict by considering repetition, power imbalance, patterns of targeting, and consequences for the students involved. Social literacy was operationalized into observable practices involving empathy, perspective-taking, ethical communication, social inclusion, and reflective dialogue. Leading questions were replaced with neutral and open-ended formulations, additional probing questions were introduced, and constructs that could not be directly observed were reformulated as behavioral indicators in the observation guide. Questions addressed to students were also simplified to ensure developmental appropriateness and psychological safety. The expert-review process was used to strengthen content relevance and clarity rather than as a psychometric validation procedure.

Research Procedures and Timeline

The study was conducted over eight weeks from April to May 2026. The initial stage included obtaining ethical approval and school permission, recruiting participants, establishing the case boundaries, and mapping relevant school practices and documents. Subsequent stages included initial interviews, repeated observations, document collection, and follow-up inquiries. Interviews with adult participants lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, whereas student interviews lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded after informed consent had been obtained and were transcribed verbatim. Eighteen observation sessions, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes, were conducted to capture recurring practices and variations across situations rather than relying on isolated incidents. Data collection and preliminary analysis were conducted concurrently so that emerging observations could inform subsequent inquiries.

Interviews and field observations were conducted by Authors 1 and 2. Author 1 has academic expertise in social education within primary school settings, whereas Author 2 specializes in educational and developmental psychology. These complementary disciplinary backgrounds enabled attention to both the pedagogical-social dimensions of teacher–student and peer interactions and the psychological-developmental dimensions of students' behavior, safety, and well-being. Neither interviewer had a prior personal or professional relationship with the school, teachers, students, or parents before the study.

The researchers nevertheless recognized that their disciplinary backgrounds could influence what they attended to during fieldwork and how teacher practices were interpreted. Reflexive notes were therefore maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document initial assumptions, reactions to interviews and observations, methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, and plausible alternative explanations. Particular attention was given to avoiding the assumption that every teacher intervention represented effective or socially literate practice. Contradictory and negative cases, including teacher actions that stopped problematic behavior but appeared to reduce subsequent student participation, were retained and examined rather than excluded from the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically through manual coding using a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning. Professional agency, professional motivation, professional judgment, enacted teacher practice, social literacy, and bullying prevention served as sensitizing concepts rather than fixed analytical categories. At the same time, inductive analysis remained open to patterns emerging from participant accounts, observations, and documents that were not anticipated by the initial conceptual framework. Manual coding does not reduce analytical quality as long as the relationships among data, codes, categories, themes, and interpretations are documented systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Analysis proceeded through several stages. First, interview transcripts, observation notes, field notes, and documentary materials were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the dataset and case context. Second, meaningful data segments were assigned initial descriptive or interpretive codes, including motivation to protect students, normalization of teasing, repeated targeting, reporting barriers, professional judgment, direct intervention, empathy development, perspective-taking, principal support, parental collaboration, and documentation constraints. Third, codes with related meanings were grouped into broader analytical categories. Fourth, the categories were examined across participant groups and data sources and developed into candidate themes. Finally, relationships

among the themes were synthesized into an analytical process model of teacher professional agency in bullying prevention.

Authors 3 and 4 were responsible for preparing the interview transcripts and conducting the initial coding. Authors 1 and 2 subsequently examined the coded dataset, developed the broader analytical categories, and approved the final thematic structure. When differences in coding or interpretation occurred, the researchers discussed the alternative interpretations and jointly re-examined the relevant interview transcripts, observation notes, and associated contextual information. Coding decisions were finalized through discussion and consensus after returning to the source material. This collaborative process aimed to develop a shared and contextually grounded interpretation rather than to obtain numerical coder agreement. A structured coding worksheet recorded the data source, participant or observation code, data excerpt, initial code, analytical category, interpretive note, and emerging theme. This procedure provided an explicit analytical trail from the source data to the final thematic interpretation. Accordingly, no statistical inter-rater reliability coefficient was calculated; analytical rigor was pursued through collaborative discussion, re-examination of the source data, reflexive consideration of alternative interpretations, and consensus on the final coding and thematic structure.

A cross-source comparison matrix was used to examine convergence, divergence, and complementarity among subject-teacher interviews, the homeroom-teacher account, student accounts, parent perspectives, the principal interview, observations, and documents. This process was particularly important for comparing teachers' stated professional commitments with observed practices and for retaining evidence that challenged dominant interpretations.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation, method triangulation, repeated observations, negative-case analysis, clarification of factual information with participants, reflexive documentation, and an audit trail. Source triangulation involved comparing perspectives from subject teachers, the homeroom teacher, the principal, students, and parents. Method triangulation involved comparing interview data with observations and documentary evidence.

Data that differed from or contradicted dominant patterns were retained to test the boundaries of emerging interpretations. The audit trail documented participant-selection decisions, data-collection procedures, coding decisions, category development, theme refinement, and the development of the analytical model. Reflexive records were used to examine potential researcher assumptions and alternative explanations.

Clarification with participants was limited to factual information, event sequences, or intended meanings when necessary; participants were not asked to validate the researchers' entire thematic interpretation. Transferability was supported through contextual description of the school, including its 639 students, 24 classes, 35 teachers, absence of a dedicated school counselor, participant roles, and institutional arrangements surrounding student behavioral and social concerns. The study therefore does not claim statistical generalizability. Instead, sufficient contextual information is provided to enable readers to judge the potential relevance of the findings to comparable primary school contexts. Reporting was informed by relevant COREQ principles, particularly those concerning researcher characteristics and reflexivity, participant selection, data collection, analytical procedures, and presentation of findings (Eldh et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2018; Yeo & Han, 2025).

Ethical Considerations and Methodological Limitations

The study received approval from the ethics committee of Universitas Muhammadiyah Buton, approval number B/934/UMB.3.2/PTh.01.04/2026, as well as permission from the school. Adult participants provided written informed consent, whereas student participation required parent or guardian consent and child assent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could decline to answer particular questions. Participant identities were replaced with codes, and identifying information was excluded from transcripts, field notes, and reported quotations.

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study examined a single instrumental case and was not designed for statistical generalization. Second, purposive recruitment of parents who had previously communicated with the school may have resulted in greater representation of relatively engaged families and underrepresentation of families with limited school contact. Third, teacher interviews were potentially affected by social-desirability tendencies because participants discussed professionally sensitive practices. Repeated observations, student and parent perspectives, documentary evidence, and negative-case analysis were used to reduce reliance on teacher self-report. Fourth, the presence of researchers during observation may have temporarily influenced teacher or student behavior, although repeated observation sessions were used to reduce reliance on isolated performances. Fifth, because the school did not employ a dedicated school counselor, the findings reflect a context in which bullying prevention and basic guidance functions were distributed among subject teachers, a homeroom teacher, and school leadership; this contextual characteristic should be considered when assessing transferability. Finally, the qualitative

case study design cannot establish that social literacy practices causally reduced bullying because no comparison group or pre- and post-intervention measurement was used. The findings instead provide a context-dependent analytical account of how teacher professional agency and social literacy practices were enacted within one primary school.

RESULTS

The manual thematic analysis generated four principal themes explaining teacher professional agency in bullying prevention through social literacy practices. The first theme captured recurring verbal and relational bullying patterns that were normalized as joking in several accounts within the case. The second theme explained the transformation of motivation to protect students into professional judgment and action. The third theme showed that social literacy was enacted through empathy development, perspective-taking, ethical communication, inclusive learning, and reflective dialogue. The fourth theme revealed that teacher professional agency was strengthened by leadership and collaboration but constrained by non-standardized procedures, limited supervision, and suboptimal school-family follow-up. The relationships among these themes formed a process model of teacher professional agency shaped not only by individual capacity but also by the school's social and organizational conditions.

Bullying in Students' Social Interactions: Between Visible Behavior and Normalization

The coded material revealed recurring patterns of teasing or name-calling, normalization as joking, social exclusion, reporting barriers, and physical bullying. These coding patterns highlighted difficulties in determining when teasing, joking, or ordinary peer conflict had developed into bullying. The normalization of aggressive behavior was reflected in teachers' initial tendency to interpret teasing as a sign of closeness among students. One teacher explained:

"At first, we thought they were only joking because they often played together. However, after several days, the child who was called by that nickname began sitting alone and no longer wanted to join the group" (G3).

The teacher's interpretation changed after recognizing repetition and changes in the targeted student's social participation. Sitting alone and withdrawing from the group provided additional indications that the name-calling was no longer an equal or reciprocal interaction. Teachers therefore considered not only the form of behavior but also repetition, patterns of targeting, power imbalance, and its effects on student participation

Relational bullying was particularly difficult to identify. One teacher stated:

"When someone hits another student, it is usually noticed quickly. What is difficult is when a child is deliberately excluded from play or repeatedly left out of a group. Sometimes, we only learn about it after the child reports it" (G6).

This account was supported by an observation during a Grade V group activity. One student was not selected for a group on two occasions before the teacher reorganized the groups and assigned a role to each student. The incident demonstrated how exclusion could occur through apparently routine group decisions and how teacher intervention could alter an exclusionary interaction.

Students also encountered barriers to reporting bullying. One student stated:

"I was afraid to tell anyone because my friends would say that I was a tattletale" (S5).

During a recess observation, another student was called by a nickname referring to a physical characteristic three times. The student remained silent and moved away, while the teacher did not observe the incident because attention was directed toward other students. The student's silence therefore did not necessarily indicate acceptance of the behavior.

Parent data revealed a similar pattern. One child did not immediately disclose being called an unwanted name but initially showed reluctance to attend school. Across these data sources, recognition of bullying depended not only on directly observed behavior but also on repeated patterns, changes in participation, student reporting, and communication between school and family.

From Protective Motivation to Teachers' Professional Action

Within this theme, data revealed recurring connections among teachers' motivation to protect students, professional responsibility, situational assessment, and intervention practices. The pattern indicated that teachers' actions were associated with both concern for student safety and their interpretation of particular situations.

One teacher connected a sense of safety with students' readiness to learn:

"For me, children need to feel safe first. If they come to school feeling afraid, it will be difficult for them to absorb any lesson. Therefore, when a report is made, it needs to be heard and should not immediately be treated as a minor issue" (G2).

Safety was therefore treated as part of teachers' pedagogical responsibility rather than as an issue separate from teaching. Protective motivation, however, did not automatically determine how teachers responded. Teachers also used situational judgment to distinguish bullying from ordinary peer disputes:

"Not every argument is immediately called bullying. We usually consider whether the incident is repeated, who is consistently targeted, and whether that child is able to defend themselves" (G4).

The teacher identified repetition, consistent targeting, and unequal capacity for self-defense as important considerations when deciding whether an interaction required intervention. Professional judgment was also visible in observation. After an incident of teasing, a teacher separated the students involved, listened to their accounts individually, and asked the student who had teased a peer to explain the effects of their words. The response combined immediate intervention with reflection on the consequences of the behavior.

A contrasting case was also observed. In one session, a teacher loudly reprimanded a student who had teased a peer in front of the class. The teasing stopped, but the student lowered their head and did not participate for the remainder of the lesson. This negative case showed that an intervention could stop problematic behavior while simultaneously producing an unintended effect on student participation.

Differences in approaches were also evident among teachers:

"Teachers sometimes view a problem differently. Some believe it must be addressed immediately, while others feel that children can resolve it themselves" (G8).

The data therefore showed variation in how teachers interpreted intervention thresholds and determined when adult involvement was necessary.

Social Literacy as a Pedagogical Practice for Bullying Prevention

The coded material revealed several recurring social-literacy practices, including empathy development, ethical communication, perspective-taking, cooperative learning, reflective or restorative dialogue, and efforts to strengthen bystander support.

Perspective-taking was clearly illustrated actions in teachers' actions. One teacher explained:

"I do not immediately ask the child to apologize. First, I ask, 'How would you feel if someone called you that every day?' Only afterward do we discuss what needs to be put right" (G7).

The interaction encouraged the student to consider the experience of the targeted peer before discussing responsibility and possible repair.

Perspective-taking was also incorporated into classroom learning. During a Grade IV lesson, a teacher presented a story about an excluded student and asked students to consider the situation from different viewpoints. One student recalled:

"We were once asked to imagine what it would feel like not to be included in a group. After that, we were asked to write what should be done so that everyone could participate" (S7).

The correspondence between observation and student accounts showed that these practices were used not only after problematic incidents but also within instructional activities. Ethical communication was another recurring practice. During one observation, a teacher reminded students of a classroom agreement to use one another's proper names and avoid nicknames that caused discomfort or embarrassment. Social literacy was also enacted through cooperative learning. When a student was repeatedly excluded from group formation, the teacher reorganized the groups and assigned each student a role, creating a more inclusive structure for participation.

One teacher summarized this approach:

"It is not enough simply to prohibit children from teasing. Teachers need to understand why it continues to happen and who is repeatedly targeted, and then teach students how to interact without hurting their peers" (G5).

Taken together, the data showed that teachers used empathy, perspective-taking, ethical communication, inclusive participation, and reflective dialogue as part of both preventive and responsive classroom practices.

Contextual Supports and Constraints on Teacher Professional Agency

The fourth theme showed that teacher action was embedded within broader school conditions. The coded material revealed recurring patterns concerning principal support, parent collaboration, non-standardized procedures, limited counseling support, and supervision constraints.

The principal encouraged collective responses to recurring problems:

“If a teacher sees a problem occurring repeatedly, it should not be kept to themselves. The incident needs to be documented and discussed together, and then we determine whether it can be handled by the classroom teacher or whether the parents need to be involved” (KS).

This orientation was also observed during a school–parent meeting in which the teacher and principal discussed a recurring incident and agreed on two weeks of monitoring. However, case documentation was not yet standardized. The homeroom teacher explained:

“The school already has rules prohibiting violence, but the format for recording cases is not standardized. Sometimes an incident is classified as a conflict, while at other times it is classified as a disciplinary violation” (GWK).

Documentary evidence supported this account. School rules prohibited violence and humiliation but did not differentiate specific forms of bullying. Student incident records documented conflict and violence without a standardized bullying-recording format. Teachers had also informally discussed recurring social exclusion involving a student, but no systematic written record of the pattern was identified.

Parent collaboration represented another contextual factor. One parent stated:

“When teachers and parents use the same approach, it is easier to guide the child. If a behavior is prohibited at school but treated as a joke at home, the child becomes confused” (O5).

At the same time, some parents reported limited information about whether a problem had stopped or continued after an initial school response, indicating a gap between communication about an incident and subsequent monitoring. Limited supervision constituted an additional constraint. Observations showed that teasing could occur while a teacher was attending to other students. Because the school did not have a dedicated school counselor, responses to students’ social and behavioral concerns were distributed among subject teachers, the homeroom teacher, and school leadership. These conditions influenced how consistently incidents could be identified, documented, addressed, and monitored.

A Model of Teacher Professional Agency in Bullying Prevention

The synthesis of the four themes produced a six-stage analytical process model consisting of: (1) professional motivation and values, (2) recognition of bullying patterns, (3) professional interpretation and judgment, (4) selection of social literacy practices, (5) preventive and responsive action, and (6) monitoring and follow-up. The stages were developed through connections among initial codes, analytical categories, representative evidence, and the four themes rather than being treated as separate findings imposed on the dataset. Table 2 presents the analytical trail supporting each component of the model.

Table 2. Evidence Structure Supporting the Model of Teacher Professional Agency in Bullying Prevention

Theme	Analytical Category / Key Codes	Representative Evidence	Model Component
From Protective to Teachers’ Professional Action in Bullying in Students’ Social Interactions	Student safety; professional responsibility; motivation to protect students Repetition; normalization as joking; repeated targeting; social exclusion; reporting barriers	G2 emphasized safety as a prerequisite for learning and the importance of taking student reports seriously G3 identified repeated name-calling after observing withdrawal; G6 described hidden exclusion; S5 described fear of being labeled a tattletale; recess observation showed	Professional Motivation and Values Recognition of Bullying Patterns

Theme	Analytical Category / Key Codes	Representative Evidence	Model Component
From Protective Motivation to Teachers' Professional Action	Severity assessment; repetition; power imbalance; capacity for self-defense; intervention threshold	repeated name-calling outside teacher awareness G4 distinguished bullying from ordinary conflict by considering repetition, consistent targeting, and ability to defend oneself	Professional Interpretation and Judgment
Social Literacy as a Pedagogical Practice	Empathy; perspective-taking; ethical communication; inclusive cooperation; reflective dialogue	G7 used perspective-taking before apology; S7 described imagining exclusion; observations documented class agreements and inclusive group arrangements	Selection of Social Literacy Practices
Protective Action and Social Literacy Practice	Direct intervention; reflective dialogue; restructuring groups; ethical communication; negative case	Observation documented separation and individual listening after teasing; group roles were reorganized to address exclusion; public reprimand stopped teasing but was followed by student withdrawal	Preventive and Responsive Action
Contextual Supports and Constraints	Documentation; principal support; parent collaboration; monitoring; follow-up	KS emphasized documentation and shared handling; GWK reported inconsistent case recording; O5 emphasized school-family consistency; school-parent meeting established two weeks of monitoring	Monitoring and Follow-Up
Cross-cutting contextual conditions	Leadership; consistency among teachers; documentation; parent involvement; counseling support; supervision	G8 reported different teacher responses; school documents showed inconsistent recording; observations showed supervision constraints; the school had no dedicated counselor	Contextual Conditions Surrounding the Six Stages

The matrix shows that the model does not represent a rigid sequence in which every case necessarily moves through all six stages in the same way. Rather, it summarizes recurring relationships identified across the four themes. Contextual conditions including school leadership, consistency among teachers, documentation practices, parent involvement, counseling support, and supervision capacity surrounded and influenced the enactment of the six stages.

Teacher Professional Agency in Bullying Prevention

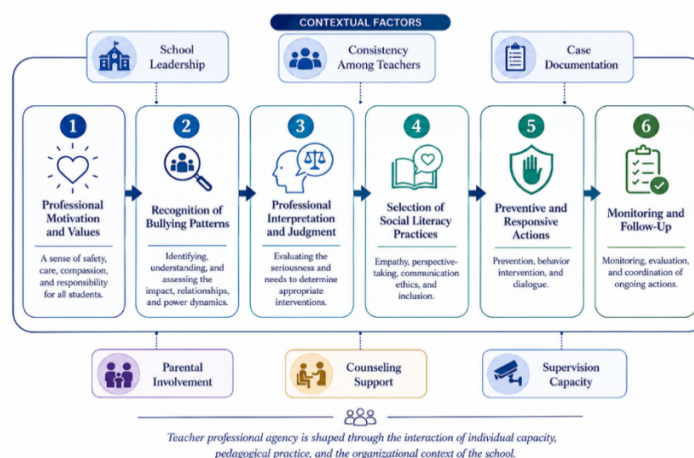


Figure 1. Model of Teacher Professional Agency in Bullying Prevention

DISCUSSION

Normalization of Bullying and Identification Challenges

This finding is consistent with the systematic review by [Mandira and Stoltz \(2021\)](#), which showed that primary school students' involvement in bullying develops through interactions among individual characteristics, peer relationships, family, and school climate. Their review identified school climate as an important risk or protective factor. [van Aalst et al. \(2024\)](#) similarly showed that teachers' capacity to identify and respond to bullying is influenced by knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, subjective norms, and assessments of incident severity. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that the normalization of teasing is connected to how teachers and students interpret joking, friendship closeness, and victims' responses, which are not always visible. The findings are also consistent with studies identifying teacher responses, teacher-student relationships, empathy, and classroom norms as important elements in bullying dynamics and victim-defending behavior ([Burger et al., 2022](#); [Longobardi et al., 2020](#); [Trach et al., 2023](#)).

The reporting barrier also reveals an important limit to teacher professional agency. S5's fear of being labeled a "tattletale," together with the observed incident of repeated name-calling outside the teacher's awareness, indicates that teachers cannot act on situations that remain socially concealed. Professional agency therefore depends not only on teachers' willingness to intervene but also on classroom conditions that make reporting safe and problematic interactions visible. This finding is consistent with [Yoo et al. \(2025\)](#), who emphasize the socially regulated nature of bullying. Teacher agency therefore depends partly on whether classroom and peer-group conditions make problems visible and reporting socially safe.

Teacher professional agency therefore begins with the ability to interpret bullying as a relational pattern rather than merely as a visible incident of aggression. Teachers need to attend to who is repeatedly targeted, how the group supports the behavior, whether the student is able to defend themselves, and what changes occur in the student's social and academic participation. Failure to recognize these dimensions may allow verbal and relational bullying to persist under the label of joking or ordinary conflict.

Motivation, Professional Judgment, and Teacher Professional Agency

These findings relate to [Fischer et al. \(2021\)](#), who found that teacher self-efficacy is generally associated with readiness or frequency of intervention, although evidence concerning the relationship between self-efficacy, strategy selection, and students' victimization experiences remains mixed. [van Aalst et al. \(2024\)](#) also showed that anti-bullying attitudes, assessments of incident severity, attributions, and teachers' perceptions of the school context are associated with the likelihood of intervention. The present study adds a process dimension by showing that protective motivation must first be translated through situational interpretation and professional judgment before becoming observable action. Meta-analytic evidence on teacher attitudes similarly indicates that anti-bullying orientations are associated with several forms of intervention, but attitudes alone are insufficient without relevant skills and a supportive school environment ([Dawes et al., 2024](#); [O'Brien et al., 2024](#)).

The negative case involving public reprimand further qualifies this interpretation. Although the teacher's action immediately stopped the teasing, the reprimanded student subsequently withdrew from classroom participation. This suggests that the enactment of professional agency should not automatically be equated with effective or pedagogically appropriate action. Professional agency involves the capacity to act, but the quality of that action remains dependent on professional judgment and its consequences for students.

The concept of professional agency helps explain the relationship among teacher motivation, professionalism, and performance. Agency is not simply an individual characteristic; it is enacted when teachers make decisions, develop practices, and use environmental resources to achieve professional goals. [Lau et al. \(2024\)](#) found that teacher agency is shaped by collegial communities, school leadership, access to resources, and the availability of professional time and space. In the present study, motivation represented an orientation toward protecting students, professionalism was reflected in the quality of judgment, and performance was evident in preventive, responsive, and follow-up actions that were actually implemented. The importance of professional learning communities and teacher collaboration is also supported by [Brodie \(2021\)](#) and [Shavard \(2022\)](#).

Social Literacy as a Pedagogical Pathway

[Cipriano et al. \(2023\)](#) meta-analysis, which included 424 studies and more than 575,000 students, showed that universal social-emotional learning interventions were associated with improvements in skills, attitudes, behavior, peer relationships, school safety and climate, school functioning, and academic achievement. However, outcomes were influenced by differences in program content, context, intervention characteristics, and implementation quality. These findings support the importance of empathy, perspective-taking, and ethical communication, while the present study

adds that these practices depend on teachers' agency in connecting them with concrete social situations. A bioecological perspective also positions social-emotional learning as part of a systemic effort to improve school climate, relationships, and engagement (Divecha & Brackett, 2020). Garandeau et al. (2022) likewise reported effects of anti-bullying programs on strengthening affective and cognitive empathy.

Post-incident dialogue was also closely aligned with restorative approaches. Moran et al. (2024) showed that relationships, changes in attitudes, policy support, teacher experience, and school leadership are important elements in implementing restorative practices. Based on the present data, reflective dialogue has greater potential when it not only asks students to acknowledge wrongdoing but also helps them understand its effects, repair relationships, and agree on changes. Restorative practices should, however, avoid forcing meetings or apologies when the victim's safety and comfort have not been secured. Other evidence indicates that restorative dialogue requires teacher professional learning, implementation support, and safe classroom spaces for dialogue (Parker & Bickmore, 2020; Weber & Vereenoghe, 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that social literacy provided a pedagogical pathway through which teachers translated professional judgment into preventive and responsive action. Professional agency became visible when teachers transformed teasing, exclusion, group conflict, and derogatory language into opportunities to develop empathy, ethical communication, inclusion, and social responsibility. Social literacy was therefore not an additional program separated from instruction, but a way for teachers to design interactions and establish classroom norms.

The Ecology of Agency: Contextual Supports and Constraints

These findings align with the concept of professional agency, which emphasizes the interaction between individual capacity and the opportunities provided by the work environment. Lau et al. (2024) found that collegial communities, school leadership, access to resources, and available time and space shape teacher agency. In the present context, teachers may possess motivation and skills, but actions become difficult to sustain when case definitions differ, documentation is inconsistent, supervision is limited, or follow-up communication is unstructured. Program-implementation studies likewise show that teacher and school characteristics, implementation quality, and procedural consistency influence the use of anti-bullying components (Baraldsnes & Caravita, 2026; Tolmatcheff et al., 2024).

Differences in teachers' responses provide a further boundary condition for the model. The contrasting views reported by G8, between immediate teacher intervention and allowing students to resolve problems independently indicate that professional agency was not enacted uniformly across the school. Individual judgment remained important, but without sufficiently shared criteria for recognizing bullying and determining intervention thresholds, professional responses could become inconsistent. Agency was therefore both individual and organizational: teachers exercised judgment personally, while the consistency of that judgment depended partly on shared school understandings and procedures.

The meta-analysis by Gaffney et al. (2021) showed that school-based anti-bullying programs generally reduce perpetration and victimization, although effect sizes vary by program and implementation context. These findings support the argument that formal rules or programs are insufficient. Prevention effectiveness depends on how policy is translated into teacher practices, documentation, coordination, social learning, and relationships with families. Programs that develop social-emotional learning, bystander responses, and staff capacity also demonstrate the importance of contextual adaptation and implementation quality (Li & Hesketh, 2026; Siddiqui & Schultze-Krumbholz, 2026).

Teacher professional agency is therefore ecological. The capacity to act is shaped by leadership that creates space for consultation, a teacher community with relatively shared understandings, usable procedures, family involvement, and monitoring mechanisms. Professional development focused only on one-time individual training risks being unsustainable unless accompanied by improvements to the school system.

Contribution and Implications

The process is not rigidly linear. Teachers may return to interpretation after obtaining new information or change their strategy when an initial action does not produce improvement. All stages are also influenced by leadership, consistency among teachers, documentation, parent involvement, Guidance and Counseling services, and the scope of supervision. The model is therefore not presented as a tested causal relationship but as an analytical process framework explaining how professional agency is enacted in the case-study context.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies not in treating motivation, professionalism, and performance as new components of professional agency, but in providing a process-oriented account of how professional purposes and judgment were translated into observable bullying-prevention practices through social literacy within a specific school ecology. Social literacy provided an interpretive pedagogical pathway through which professional purposes and

judgment were translated into observable practices. Van Aalst et al. (2024) also showed that research on primary school teachers' characteristics and behavior remains dominated by studies examining particular components of identification and intervention. The findings are consistent with scholarship emphasizing that teacher action should be understood as an interaction among attitudes, self-efficacy, situational judgment, implementation quality, and school support (Dawes et al., 2024; Fischer et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2024; Tolmatcheff et al., 2024).

In practical terms, the model indicates that primary teacher education should develop three interconnected capacities. First, diagnostic capacity is needed to recognize repetition, power relations, social consequences, and less visible forms of bullying. Second, pedagogical capacity is required to integrate empathy, perspective-taking, ethical communication, and cooperation into instruction. Third, collaborative capacity is needed to document incidents, consult school leaders, involve families, and monitor case development.

Implications for Guidance and Counseling include the need for basic services addressing empathy, assertive communication, respect for differences, and bystander behavior; early-identification mechanisms; and clear consultation and referral procedures. In primary schools without a dedicated school counselor, subject and homeroom teachers may perform basic developmental-guidance and prevention functions. However, complex or recurring cases, or those that cause psychological harm, require support from personnel with Guidance and Counseling competencies or other professional services.

Overall, the findings show that bullying prevention depends on more than teacher concern or the existence of school rules. Prevention becomes more meaningful when teachers can recognize relational patterns, exercise professional judgment, integrate social literacy into instruction, and work within a school system that supports documentation and follow-up. Teacher professional agency is therefore a process that brings together individual capacities, pedagogical practices, and organizational conditions to create a safe and inclusive primary school environment.

CONCLUSION

This instrumental case study shows that teacher professional agency in bullying prevention was enacted through professional motivation, recognition of bullying patterns, situational judgment, social literacy practices, responsive action, and follow-up within a specific primary school context. The findings suggest that such agency was shaped not only by teachers' individual capacities but also by leadership, teacher consistency, documentation, parent involvement, and supervision. The study proposes a context-dependent analytical framework rather than a tested causal model, with social literacy serving as a pedagogical pathway through which professional judgment was translated into socially responsive practices. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening bullying recognition, documentation, and school-family follow-up. Further studies across different schools and social contexts are needed to examine the transferability and further development of the framework.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge Universitas Muhammadiyah Buton and its Institute for Research and Community Service for their institutional and administrative support throughout the research process. The authors also extend their sincere appreciation to the principal, teachers, educational staff, students, and parents of SDN 2 Baubau for their cooperation, valuable information, and willingness to participate in this study. Their support in facilitating access to the research setting, data collection, school documents, and field activities was essential to the completion of this research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Ks, MU: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, and data analysis. **An:** Data curation, resources, visualization, and project administration. **As:** Supervision, validation, and critical review. **Ks:** Writing, original draft. **MU, An, As:** Writing, review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors used ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, during the preparation of this manuscript for language refinement, translation into American English, structural organization, and editorial review. The tool was not used to collect or generate research data, create participant quotations, determine codes or themes, or independently formulate the study findings and conclusions. All AI-assisted content was thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and content of the publication.

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