

The Role of Peer Support in Bullying Behaviour among High School Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: Bullying in secondary schools is not only a behavioral problem but also a social and educational issue because it can weaken students' sense of safety, belonging, responsibility, and respect for others. This systematic literature review (SLR) examines the role of peer support in bullying behaviour among secondary-school students and distinguishes peer support from peer conformity, peer interaction, and friendship environment. It also examines how peer-led prevention can be connected to civic education and the development of civic dispositions. The review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) reporting framework. Searches were conducted in SINTA, DOAJ, ERIC, and Scopus using predefined Boolean combinations and a publication window of 2015–2026. The screening record used in the manuscript reports 142 identified records, 54 duplicates removed, 88 records screened, 42 full-text reports assessed, and 10 studies included in the qualitative synthesis. The included evidence comprises cross-sectional and correlational studies, qualitative case studies, and one large longitudinal study. Overall, positive peer support is associated with lower bullying involvement and better psychosocial outcomes, whereas peer conformity and negative peer environments can be associated with greater exposure to bullying-related behaviour. Importantly, longitudinal evidence shows that friendship and social support do not necessarily prevent later bullying victimization, indicating that the protective role of peer support should not be overstated as a direct causal effect. Peer-led prevention can nevertheless create opportunities for students to practice empathy, respect, responsibility, inclusion, and participation. The review concludes that schools should treat peer relationships as a social mechanism whose effects depend on the norms, quality, and direction of peer influence, while integrating peer-based prevention with whole-school policy and civic education.

Keywords: Peer Support; Bullying Behaviour; Peer Conformity; Friendship Environment; Civic Disposition; Civic Education; PRISMA 2020; Systematic Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is commonly understood as repeated aggressive behaviour (Olweus, 1993) involving a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the target. In school settings, bullying may be physical, verbal, relational, or digital. Its consequences are not limited to the immediate incident because bullying can affect students' psychological well-being, school engagement, peer relationships, and sense of belonging. For that reason, bullying should be understood as a social and educational problem rather than only an individual disciplinary violation.

The relevance of bullying to civic education is particularly important. Schools are social communities in which students learn not only formal knowledge but also ways of relating to others. Civic dispositions include orientations such as empathy, respect, responsibility, participation, and concern for the common good. Recent civic-education research in Indonesia similarly identifies responsibility, participation, politeness, empathy, and patience as dimensions of civic disposition. These dispositions are developed through repeated social experiences, so a school climate marked by intimidation and exclusion can undermine the values that civic education seeks to cultivate (Mazid et al., 2026).

Adolescence is also a period in which peer relationships become increasingly influential. Peer groups can provide emotional support, information, assistance, validation, and a sense of belonging. House's framework (House, 1981) distinguishes emotional, esteem, instrumental, and informational forms of social support. In school contexts, positive peer support can help students cope with social stress and maintain adaptive functioning. However, the same peer context can transmit harmful norms when acceptance depends on aggression, exclusion, or conformity.

A major conceptual problem in previous discussions is that different peer constructs are sometimes treated as interchangeable. They are not. Peer support refers to assistance or resources perceived as available from peers. Peer conformity refers to adjustment of attitudes or behaviour to group

expectations. Peer interaction concerns the frequency and quality of social exchanges. Friendship environment refers to the broader social context, including the norms and climate that characterize a peer group. Distinguishing these constructs is necessary because each represents a different pathway through which peers may influence bullying.

Empirical findings also suggest that the direction of peer influence is not uniform. Nihayati et al. (2025) found a negative association between peer support and bullying behaviour among adolescents, while Sulfemi and Yasita (2020) reported a significant relationship between peer social support and bullying behaviour among high-school students. In contrast, Meltani et al. (2025) found a positive relationship between peer conformity and bullying behaviour. Wulandari et al. (2024) likewise found a significant association between peer environment and bullying among vocational high-school adolescents. These findings support a dual-process interpretation: supportive relationships may be protective, whereas harmful group norms may increase risk.

At the same time, the protective interpretation needs to be treated cautiously. A large longitudinal study by Cheng et al. (2025), using three annual waves and 26,458 adolescents in Greater Manchester, found that higher friendship and social support did not protect against later bullying victimization, although they were associated with lower internalizing symptoms in some pathways. This evidence is important because it challenges a simple assumption that having supportive friends automatically prevents subsequent bullying. Peer support may instead provide compensatory or coping benefits without directly changing the occurrence of victimization.

Peer-led prevention is therefore relevant as a mechanism for changing group norms, not merely as an additional source of emotional support. Studies of buddy and peer-participation approaches indicate that students can contribute to early detection, support for victims, positive modelling, reporting, and reinforcement of anti-bullying norms. From a civic-education perspective, these activities create opportunities for students to practice responsibility, empathy, respect, tolerance, inclusion, and participation in an authentic school community. Research on civic education and bullying also emphasizes that preventing bullying requires the cultivation of civic virtues rather than punishment alone (Wahyudi et al., 2025).

The present review therefore seeks to synthesize the available empirical evidence while maintaining clear conceptual boundaries among peer support, peer conformity, peer interaction, and friendship environment. It also examines how peer-led prevention can be connected to civic education without claiming that peer programs alone can eliminate bullying.

Based on the identified gap, the review addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How does peer support operate as a protective factor or risk-related influence in relation to bullying behaviour among secondary-school students, and how do peer conformity, peer interaction, and friendship environment shape this relationship?

RQ2: How can peer-led bullying-prevention approaches be connected to civic education to strengthen civic dispositions and supportive school norms?

METHODS

This study used a systematic literature review design and followed PRISMA 2020 as the reporting framework. PRISMA 2020 provides a 27-item reporting checklist and revised flow diagrams intended to improve transparency in reporting why a review was conducted, how studies were identified and selected, and how the evidence was synthesized (Page et al., 2021).

Search strategy and information sources. The search window reported in the manuscript was August 1–15, 2026. Four databases were used: SINTA, DOAJ, ERIC, and Scopus. The database choice was intended to combine Indonesian indexed literature with established international education and multidisciplinary databases. The following search strings were used or adapted to the syntax of each database:

Tabel 1. Sumber Data

Database	Search date	Search string	Records identified
SINTA	1–15 Aug 2026	("peer support" OR "dukungan teman sebaya" OR "dukungan sosial teman sebaya") AND (bullying OR "perilaku bullying" OR perundungan) AND (remaja OR siswa OR SMA OR SMP)	58
DOAJ	1–15 Aug 2026	("peer support" OR "peer social support" OR "peer relationships") AND (bullying OR "bullying behavior" OR cyberbullying) AND (adolescent* OR "secondary school" OR "high school")	44
ERIC	1–15 Aug 2026	("peer support" OR "peer social support" OR "peer relationships") AND ("school bullying" OR bullying) AND (adolescent* OR "secondary school students")	24
Scopus	1–15 Aug 2026	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("peer support" OR "peer social support" OR "peer relationships") AND (bullying OR "bullying behavior") AND (adolescen* OR "secondary school" OR "high school"))	16

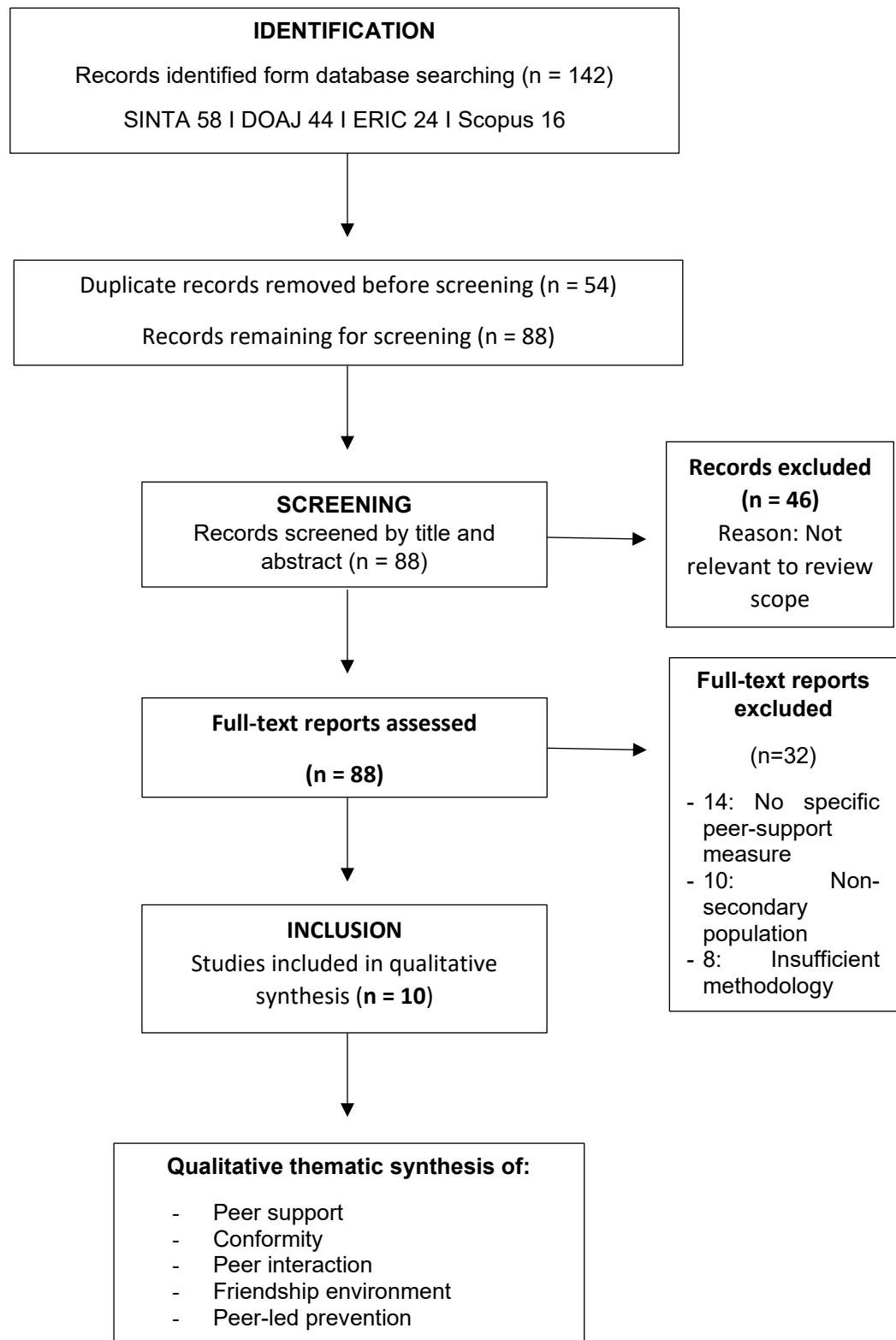
Eligibility criteria. Studies were included when they (1) were empirical peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly proceedings; (2) were published from 2015 through 2026; (3) involved secondary-school students or adolescents in the approximate 12–18-year range; (4) examined peer support, peer conformity, peer interaction, friendship/peer environment, or peer-led bullying prevention; (5) addressed bullying behaviour, bullying victimization, or a closely related psychosocial/prevention outcome; and (6) provided sufficient methodological information and accessible full text.

Studies were excluded when they were opinion pieces, blogs, magazine items, duplicate records, studies focused exclusively on primary-school or adult populations, studies unrelated to peer influence or bullying, or reports without sufficient methodological information. The inclusion criteria were applied consistently to the title/abstract stage and then to full-text assessment.

Selection process. The numerical screening record used in the current manuscript was: 142 records identified (SINTA 58, DOAJ 44, ERIC 24, Scopus 16); 54 duplicates removed, leaving 88 records for title/abstract screening; 46 records excluded at screening; 42 full-text reports assessed; and 32 full-text reports excluded, comprising 14 without a specific peer-support measure, 10 involving non-secondary populations, and 8 lacking sufficiently rigorous methodology. Ten studies were retained for qualitative synthesis.

Data extraction and synthesis. For each included study, the review matrix recorded author/year, setting, design, sample, peer construct, bullying-related outcome, principal finding, and methodological limitation. The synthesis was narrative and thematic because the studies differed substantially in design, measures, samples, and outcomes. No pooled effect size was calculated. Cross-study comparison focused on whether peer influence operated through support, group norms, social interaction, friendship context, or peer-led prevention.

Methodological limitations were explicitly considered during synthesis. Cross-sectional and correlational studies can identify associations but cannot establish temporal direction or causality. Qualitative case studies provide contextual explanations but are not designed for statistical generalization. Studies using related outcomes such as resilience or psychological well-being were treated as indirect evidence rather than direct evidence that peer support changes bullying. This distinction prevents overstatement of the findings.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. BULLYING

Study characteristics and critical comparison

The ten included studies represent different peer-related pathways. The evidence is therefore interpreted by construct rather than treating all peer variables as one homogeneous predictor.

Study	Design / sample	Peer construct	Main finding	Critical interpretation
Nihayati, Agustin, & Qona'ah (2025)	Cross-sectional correlational; n=162, Grade XI SMA	Peer support	Peer support was negatively related to bullying ($p < .001$; $r = -.394$).	Directly relevant, but cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation.
Sulfemi & Yasita (2020)	Cross-sectional quantitative; n=86, SMA	Peer social support	Significant relationship between peer social support and bullying.	Useful direct evidence; direction of influence remains uncertain.
Fatimah & Torro (2023)	Quantitative correlational; n=138	Peer interaction	Peer interaction was examined in relation to bullying behaviour.	Shows that interaction is broader than support; quality of interaction matters.
Meltani, Fitria, & Sefriani (2025)	Correlational; population 93 Grade XI students	Peer conformity	Peer conformity was positively related to bullying ($r = .401$).	Supports group-norm pathway; not equivalent to peer support.
Wulandari, Nelwati, & Dayati (2024)	Cross-sectional analytic; n=355 SMK students	Peer environment	Peer environment was significantly associated with bullying ($p = .002$).	Directly addresses friendship/peer environment; multiple predictors mean peer effect is contextual.
Adhha (2024)	Correlational; n=87 bullying victims	Peer social support and resilience	Peer support was positively associated with resilience ($p = .007$).	Indirect evidence: outcome is resilience, not bullying frequency.
Wigati et al. (2024)	Quantitative correlational; n=78 secondary students	Peer social support and well-being	Peer support was associated with psychological well-being ($r = .543$, $p < .01$).	Supports a psychosocial protective pathway but does not test bullying directly.
Rosalina et al. (2024)	Qualitative approach; buddy-program study	Peer support / buddy program	Peer support and collaboration among students, teachers, and parents were emphasized in anti-bullying implementation.	Context-rich intervention evidence; findings are not statistically generalizable.
Julfiati & Nugroho (2025)	Qualitative case study; SMAN 9 Bogor	Peer prevention role	Peers contributed to early detection, psychological support, positive modelling, reporting, and norm enforcement.	Supports peer participation as a prevention mechanism, not proof of program effectiveness.
Cheng et al. (2025)	Longitudinal RI-CLPM; N=26,458 adolescents, 176 schools	Friendship and social support	Friendship/social support did not protect against later bullying victimization, although some mental-health benefits were observed.	Important contrasting evidence; stronger temporal design challenges a simple protective-causality claim.

A. Peer Support as a Potential Protective Resource (RQ1)

The strongest direct evidence in the Indonesian studies points toward a protective association between positive peer support and bullying-related outcomes. Nihayati et al. (2025) reported a negative correlation between peer support and bullying behaviour among 162 Grade XI students. Sulfemi and Yasita (2020) likewise identified a significant relationship between peer social support and bullying among high-school students. Together, these studies suggest that students who experience supportive peer relationships may be less likely to be involved in bullying. However, both studies are cross-sectional, so the evidence supports association rather than causal protection.

B. Peer Support Does Not Automatically Prevent Bullying

The review deliberately avoids the stronger claim that peer support automatically prevents bullying. Cheng et al. (2025) provides the clearest contrasting evidence. Using three annual waves and a random-intercept cross-lagged panel model, the study found that higher friendship and social support did not protect adolescents against later bullying victimization, although these relationships were linked to reduced internalizing symptoms in some pathways. This finding changes the interpretation of peer support: its most defensible role may be to provide coping, belonging, and psychosocial resources, while the direct occurrence of bullying may depend on additional mechanisms such as group norms, school climate, power relations, and perpetrator behaviour.

C. Peer Conformity as a Risk-Related Mechanism

Meltani et al. (2025) found a positive relationship between peer conformity and bullying behaviour among Grade XI students. This finding is conceptually different from the protective evidence on peer support. Conformity describes alignment with group expectations; therefore, the effect depends on what the group considers acceptable. When a peer group rewards aggression, ridicule, exclusion, or domination, conformity may facilitate bullying. Conversely, conformity to prosocial norms can support cooperation and anti-bullying behaviour. The relevant educational target is therefore not conformity itself but the normative direction of the peer group.

D. Peer Interaction and Friendship Environment Are Distinct Constructs

Fatimah and Torro (2023) examined peer interaction in relation to bullying, while Wulandari et al. (2024) examined the peer environment together with family and school factors. These studies show why peer interaction and friendship environment should not be collapsed into peer support. Interaction refers to the social process of communicating and responding to one another; friendship environment refers to the broader context in which norms, status relations, and expectations develop. A student can interact frequently with peers without receiving meaningful support, and a supportive friendship may exist inside a wider group that still tolerates exclusion. This distinction improves the conceptual precision of the review.

E. Indirect Protective Outcomes: Resilience and Psychological Well-being

Adhha (2024) found a positive association between peer social support and resilience among bullying victims, while Wigati et al. (2024) found a positive association between peer social support and psychological well-being among secondary students. These findings strengthen the argument that supportive peers may buffer the psychosocial consequences of difficult school experiences. Nevertheless, they are indirect evidence for RQ1 because the dependent outcomes are resilience and well-being rather than bullying behaviour itself. The review therefore treats these studies as evidence for a protective psychosocial pathway, not as direct evidence of reduced bullying incidence.

F. Peer-Led Prevention as a Change in Group Norms (RQ2)

Rosalina et al. (2024) and Julfiati and Nugroho (2025) provide qualitative evidence that peers can participate in prevention through support, early detection, positive modelling, reporting, and reinforcement of anti-bullying norms. These findings are important because bullying frequently occurs within peer contexts in which bystanders and friends can influence whether aggression is ignored, rewarded, or challenged. A peer-led approach should not transfer responsibility for safeguarding entirely to students; rather, students can be trained and supported to recognize harmful behaviour, assist peers, and refer cases to adults.

G. Connecting Peer Prevention to Civic Education

The civic-education relevance of the review is not simply that bullying is a social problem. The stronger connection is that peer-led prevention creates a setting in which civic dispositions are practiced. Students practice responsibility when they respond appropriately to harmful conduct; empathy when they recognize another student's vulnerability; respect and tolerance when they reject humiliation and exclusion; participation when they contribute to school norms; and inclusion when they prevent peers from being socially isolated. Recent Indonesian research on civic disposition identifies responsibility,

participation, politeness, empathy, and patience as important dimensions, while research on civic education and bullying argues that civic virtues such as responsibility, empathy, and respect are relevant to bullying prevention (Mazid et al., 2026; Wahyudi et al., 2025).

H. Cross-Study Comparison and Contradictory Evidence

The studies do not support a single linear model in which 'more peer support = less bullying' under all circumstances. Direct Indonesian cross-sectional studies generally report protective or significant associations, whereas the large longitudinal Cheng et al. (2025) study did not find that friendship and social support protected against later victimization. The discrepancy can be explained partly by differences in design, measurement, population, and outcome. Cross-sectional studies measure variables at one time and may reflect selection effects or reverse directionality; longitudinal models are better positioned to examine temporal ordering. The evidence therefore supports a conditional model: peer relationships can provide psychosocial protection, but the direct effect on bullying depends on the norms and power dynamics of the peer and school environment.

I. Methodological Limitations of the Evidence Base

Several limitations recur across the reviewed studies. First, many studies are correlational or cross-sectional, which limits causal claims. Second, samples are often drawn from one school or one locality, limiting generalizability. Third, peer support, conformity, interaction, and environment are operationalized with different instruments, making direct numerical comparison difficult. Fourth, some studies examine outcomes adjacent to bullying, such as resilience or psychological well-being, rather than bullying itself. Fifth, qualitative studies provide rich contextual evidence but cannot establish population-level effectiveness. These limitations justify the narrative synthesis and the cautious wording used throughout this review.

J. Practical Implications for Schools

Schools should avoid relying on a single peer-support activity. A stronger approach combines a positive peer-support system, explicit teaching about harmful group pressure, student participation in anti-bullying norms, clear reporting channels, teacher and counselor supervision, and follow-up for both targets and perpetrators. In civic education, bullying-prevention activities can be embedded in case discussions, deliberative dialogue, cooperative projects, peer-mediation practice, reflection on fairness and responsibility, and class agreements that translate civic values into everyday conduct. Peer-led programs should function as part of a whole-school safeguarding system, not as a substitute for adult responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review shows that peer relationships have a dual and conditional role in bullying among secondary-school students. Positive peer support is associated with lower bullying behaviour in several cross-sectional studies and is also associated with resilience and psychological well-being. However, these associations should not be interpreted as proof that peer support directly prevents bullying. Peer conformity, peer interaction, and friendship environment represent distinct mechanisms. Conformity can amplify harmful group norms; interaction provides the everyday social mechanism through which behaviours are reinforced; and friendship environment provides the broader context in which belonging, status, and group expectations develop. The contrasting longitudinal evidence further demonstrates that friendship and social support do not necessarily protect against future bullying victimization. For civic education, the most useful implication is to treat the peer group as a practical social environment for developing civic dispositions. Peer-led prevention can provide authentic opportunities to practice empathy, respect, responsibility, tolerance, inclusion, and participation, while school adults remain responsible for safeguarding, formal intervention, and accountability. Future studies should prioritize longitudinal and intervention designs, clearer construct definitions, standardized outcome measures, and stronger evaluation of peer-led anti-bullying programs.

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