

The Effectiveness of Role Playing Technique Group Counseling in Increasing the Empathy of Bullying Perpetrators in High School Students: Systematic Literature Review

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Article	Submission	Accepted	Published
History:	Sept 16 th , 2025	Oct 7 th , 2026	Oct 20 th , 2026

Abstract. Bullying in schools is a serious problem that continues to increase, especially in the Vocational High School (SMK) environment. The root of the problem is the low empathy of the perpetrator which encourages the repetition of aggressive behavior. Group counseling of role playing techniques is considered to be able to foster empathy through direct experience of playing the role of the victim, but the scattered empirical evidence needs to be synthesized systematically. This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with the PRISMA 2020 protocol to examine and synthesize evidence of the effectiveness of role playing technique group counseling in increasing the empathy of bullies. The search was conducted systematically on Google Scholar, Garuda Portal, and SINTA, covering 2019–2024 publications. Of the 47 articles identified, 9 primary research articles met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed narratively. The results showed that 8 out of 9 articles (88.9%) proved that role playing techniques were effective in reducing bullying and/or increasing student empathy. A dose of at least 3 sessions was proven to be a critical moderator of effectiveness. It was concluded that group counseling of role playing techniques was an effective intervention, but direct evidence in the context of vocational schools – especially on empathy variables – is still very limited and further research is needed.

Keywords: *bullying; empathy; group counseling; role playing; systematic literature review*

A.. INTRODUCTION

Bullying in schools is a phenomenon that is still rampant globally and continues to be a serious threat to the quality of education. UNICEF data (2020) noted that 41% of 15-year-old students in Indonesia have experienced bullying at least several times a month, making Indonesia one of the countries with the highest prevalence of bullying in Southeast Asia. This phenomenon not only causes deep trauma for victims, but also reflects character deficits in perpetrators who need comprehensive treatment through appropriate psychological interventions.

Rahayu and Permana (2019), through a descriptive study of 102 students, found that the perpetrator's low empathy is the main factor that encourages bullying behavior. This is reinforced by Salavera et al. (2021) who emphasize that bullies consistently show lower levels of empathy, especially in the affective component. Empathy, according to Davis (1983), is a multidimensional ability that includes perspective taking, fantasies, empathic concern, and personal pressure. When these dimensions are not developed, a teenager can commit bullying without feeling guilty.

The vocational school environment presents its own challenges. FSGI data (2023) shows that 10% of bullying cases in Indonesia occur in vocational schools (Melawati, 2024), with more complex social dynamics due to vocational orientation and work practice pressure. Annisa and Pratiwi (2022) who conducted direct research at SMK Negeri 2 Mojokerto City found that bullying in vocational schools includes verbal, physical, relational, and cyber forms that negatively impact the learning climate. Although this issue is significant, intervention research that focuses on improving the empathy of bullies at the vocational level is still very limited.

Group counseling with role playing techniques is considered promising to overcome this problem. Mulia, Wibowo, and Conia (2024) proved that this technique was able to significantly reduce bullying scores from 97.63 to 70.13 (Sig.=0.000). Dewi (2023) proved that experiential learning-based empathy training can increase empathy while reducing bullying (p=0.000). Although a number of individual studies have shown promising results, the findings are scattered across various journals with various design variations, subjects, and outcome sizes, making it difficult for practitioners and researchers to draw integrated, evidence-based conclusions. There is no Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that comprehensively summarizes, evaluates, and synthesizes all empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of role-playing technique group counseling in increasing the empathy of bullies, especially at the vocational level. The urgency of using SLR in this study lies in its ability to minimize selection bias through a systematic and transparent search protocol (PRISMA 2020), as well as produce more reliable conclusions than conventional

narrative reviews. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a synthesis of evidence that can be used as a basis for data-driven interventions in secondary schools, especially vocational schools.

B.. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Empathy is a multidimensional construct defined by Davis (1983) as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, including four components: perspective taking, fantasy (imagining oneself in someone else's situation), empathic concern (concern for the emotional state of others), and personal stress (sensitivity to personal stress). Hoffman (2000) added that empathy involves active cognitive processing that can be developed through structured learning.

The link between empathy deficit and bullying behavior is consistently documented. Jolliffe and Farrington (2011) found that low affective empathy correlates significantly with involvement in aggressive behavior. Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) emphasize that bullies experience multiple deficits – affective and cognitive empathy – that allow for the repetition of behaviors without moral barriers. These findings were updated by Zych et al. (2019) who through a meta-analysis of 36 studies confirmed that low empathy is a consistent predictor of bullying across cultures and age groups. Gini et al. (2020) further found that interventions that directly increase cognitive empathy have been shown to be effective in reducing bullying with medium to large effect sizes. Interventions that directly target empathy deficits are the most targeted strategies.

Group counseling offers a unique advantage through therapeutic factors identified by Yalom and Leszcz (2005): altruism, universality, and interpersonal learning that together support the development of empathy. Role playing techniques in this context are rooted in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning, which states that the most effective learning occurs through cycles: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This cycle makes role playing not only change behavior, but also reshape the perpetrator's cognitive-emotional schema as a whole.

C.. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design with the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021) which includes four stages: identification, screening, feasibility assessment, and inclusion. Literature searches were conducted on three databases: Google Scholar, Garuda Portal, and SINTA. The selection of these three databases is based on the consideration that the majority of scientific publications on Guidance and Counseling in Indonesia are indexed on these three platforms: Google Scholar provides broad coverage of national and international journals in Indonesian and English; The Garuda portal is the official repository of the Ministry of Education and Culture that indexes all Indonesian accredited scientific journals; while SINTA (Science and Technology Index) is a national journal ranking system that is the main reference for the quality of Indonesian scientific publications. Given that the research topic focuses on the practice of group counseling in Indonesian secondary schools, the three databases were considered the most relevant and representative to reach the available literature. The search was conducted by a combination of keywords ("group counseling" OR "group guidance") AND ("role playing" OR "role playing") AND ("empathy" OR "bullying") AND ("student" OR "high school"), publication range 2019–2024.

Inclusion criteria include: (1) articles of reputable national or international scientific journals; (2) discussing group counseling and/or role playing techniques as interventions; (3) measuring empathy and/or bullying behavior as an output variable; (4) subjects of middle-level students (junior high, high school, or vocational school); and (5) published between 2019–2024. The three-level coverage was chosen because the restriction only on vocational schools does not meet the minimum number of SLR articles. Literature review articles, full texts are not accessible, or real duplicates are excluded.

The selection process took place in stages as illustrated in Figure 1. Of the 47 articles identified, 9 duplicates were removed (38 remaining). Title and abstract screening excluded 16 articles (remaining 22). Full-text assessment excluded 13 articles,

resulting in 9 primary research articles. Methodological quality was assessed using the CASP CRITERIA (CASP-UK, 2022) with a score of 0–6, and all articles were analyzed using narrative synthesis.

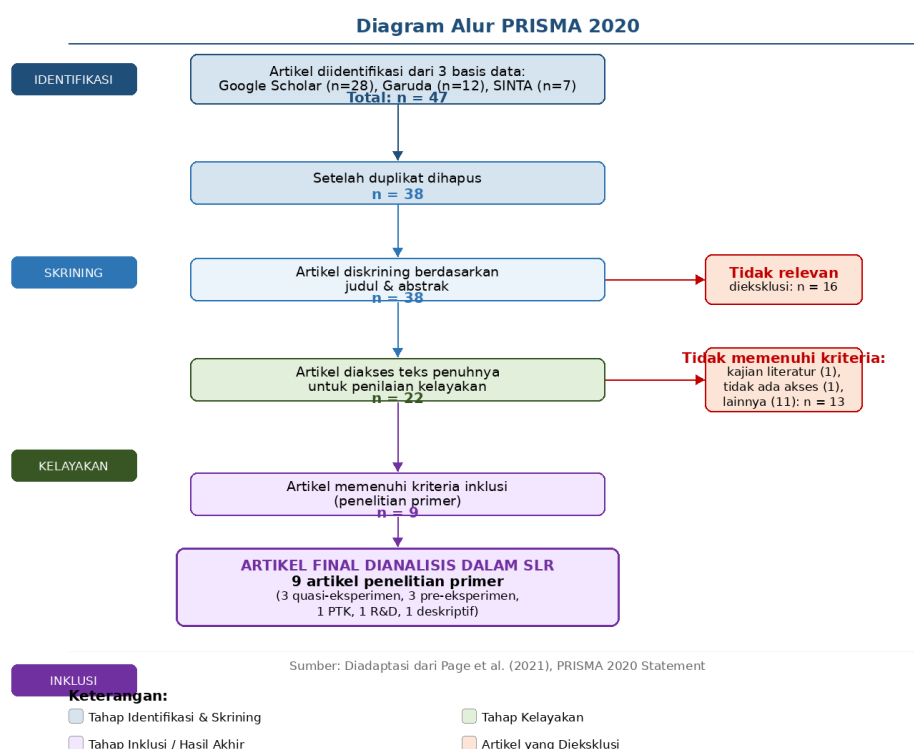


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flowchart: Article Identification, Screening, and Inclusion Process
Source: Adapted from Page et al. (2021)

D.. RESEARCH RESULTS

The final nine articles analysed were from the 2019–2024 range. In terms of design: three quasi-experiments with the control group (highest level of evidence, CASP 6/6), three pre-experiments (CASP 5/6), one PTK BK, one R&D, and one descriptive. Table 1 presents the CASP quality assessment and Table 2 summarizes all the articles analyzed.

Table 1. Article Quality Assessment with CASP Criteria

No.	Author & Year	RQ Clear	Precise Method	There are controls	Valid Analysis	Implications	Score /6
1	Mulia, Wibowo & Conia (2024)	1	1	1	1	1	6 – Height
2	Pangathousands & Lestari (2023)	1	1	1	1	1	6 – Height

No.	Author & Year	RQ Clear	Precise Method	There are controls	Valid Analysis	Implications	Score /6
3	Asro, Sugiharto & Awalya (2021)	1	1	1	1	1	6 – Height
4*	Annisa & Pratiwi (2022)	1	1	0	1	1	5 – Medium
5	Goddess (2023)	1	1	0	1	1	5 – Medium
6	Rahmawati et al. (2023)	1	1	0	1	1	5 – Medium
7	Rahayu & Permana (2019)	1	1	0	1	1	5 – Medium
8	Ristiyana et al. (2020)	1	1	0	1	1	5 – Medium
9	Zen dkk. (2020)	1	1	0	1	1	5 – Medium

* = the only research with a vocational school subject

Table 2. Summary of SLR Analysis Results

No.	Author & Year	Design	Subject	Variabel	Key Results
1	Mulia, Wibowo & Conia (2024)	Quasi-ex.	Students of Kls. VIII SMPN 10 Serang	Bullying behavior	The score decreased to 97.63→70.13. Sig.=0.000. Effectiveness was significant.
2	Pangathousands & Lestari (2023)	Quasi-ex.	Students of Kls. VIII Junior High School Neg. 2 Singaraja	Bullying tendencies	Strong effect size. Significant t-test. Role playing has a strong effect.
3	Asro et al. (2021)	Quasi-ex.	14 students of Kls. VIII SMPN 1 Isimu	Bullying behavior	Ex. M=18.71 vs control M=33.43. Wilcoxon sig. 5%.
4*	Annisa & Pratiwi (2022)	Pre-ex.	8 students of Kls. X Culinary 2, SMK Neg. 2 Mojokerto	Bullying behavior	Pretest M=89.00 → Posttest M=81.00. Z=-2.533, Asymp.Sig.=0.011 (p<0.05). H ₀ rejected. Effective. *ONLY VOCATIONAL SCHOOL SUBJECT*
5	Goddess (2023)	Pre-ex.	8 junior high school students aged 12–14 years, bullies	Empathy & bullying	Bullying: t=19,887, p=0.000. Empathy: t=-8,922, p=0.000. Significant.
6	Rahmawati et al. (2023)	R&D (ADDIE)	Junior High School Students	Verbal bullying & empathy	The guide is rated very good (validator). Field test: effective in preventing verbal bullying.
7	Rahayu & Permana (2019)	Descriptive	102 elementary school students (total sampling)	Empathy & bullying	Bullying 62.31%. Low empathy = the main factor of bullying.
8	Ristiyana et al. (2020)	PTK BK	Junior High School Students	Emotions & Impact of Bullying	Role playing overcomes the negative impact of bullying on students' emotions.
9	Zen et al. (2020)	Pre-ex.	28 students of Kls. VII Al Furqon Junior High School	Respect, empathy, assertiveness	Respect increased significantly; Empathy & assertiveness were not significant (1 session).

* = the only research with a vocational school subject

Overall, 8 out of 9 articles (88.9%) reported a significant positive impact on students' bullying behavior and/or empathy through role-playing techniques. The only exception was Zen et al. (2020) who found no significant improvement in empathy due to a very short dose of intervention – only one session.

E.. DISCUSSION

Consistency and Mechanism of Effectiveness.

The most striking finding of this SLR was the consistency of the results. The three quasi-experiments with the control group—which had the highest level of evidence—all reported a significant decrease in bullying. Mulia, Wibowo, and Conia (2024) found a dramatic decrease from 97.63 to 70.13 (Sig.=0.000); Asro, Sugiharto, and Awalya (2021) found significant differences between the experimental (M=18.71) and control (M=33.43) groups; Pangathousands and Lestari (2023) reported a strong and practically meaningful effect size. The main mechanism is perspective taking—when the perpetrator plays the role of the victim, he or she feels firsthand the suffering that he or she is not normally aware of. Dewi (2023) proves this most directly: empathy interventions produce an increase in empathy ($t=-8,922$, $p=0.000$) as well as a decrease in bullying ($t=19,887$, $p=0.000$) simultaneously, confirming empathy as an active mechanism of change.

Intervention Dose as a Critical Moderator.

The only exception in this SLR—Zen et al. (2020)—provides a crucial lesson. The study used only one training session, and the result was that empathy did not improve significantly. Compare it with other studies that used 3–8 sessions and reported significant results. Annisa and Pratiwi (2022) with 3 sessions successfully reduced bullying behavior (Pretest M=89.00 → Posttest M=81.00; $Z=-2.533$, $p=0.011$); Research with 8 sessions consistently provided greater changes. Empathetic changes require repetition and time for the experience to settle into a new consciousness. For practitioners, this is a concrete guideline: a minimum dose of 3 sessions must be met in order for the role playing intervention to produce measurable and meaningful empathic changes.

Research Gap at the Vocational Level.

The most important finding of this SLR is the lack of research in vocational schools. Of the 9 articles, only Annisa and Pratiwi (2022) used the subject of vocational school students—even that did not measure empathy as a bound variable. Specific questions about the effectiveness of role playing to increase the empathy of bullies in vocational

schools have not been answered. Vocational schools have unique characteristics: vocational orientation, pressure of work practices, and social dynamics that are different from high schools. FSGI data (2023) shows that 10% of bullying cases occur in vocational schools (Melawati, 2024), but research attention to this level is still very minimal. This is an urgency for further research that cannot be postponed.

F.. CONCLUSION

Based on the Systematic Literature Review of 9 primary research articles (2019–2024), this study draws three conclusions. First, role-playing technique group counseling was proven to be effective in reducing bullying behavior of high school students with an 88.9% success rate, supported by three high-quality quasi-experiments (CASP 6/6). Second, empathy-based interventions were shown to simultaneously increase empathy and decrease bullying, confirming that empathy is an active mechanism of change that can be intervened. Third, the intervention dose is a critical moderator a minimum of 3 sessions are needed for meaningful change to occur.

Theoretically, this study identifies a significant research gap: there have been no studies that specifically measure the empathy of bullies as a variable bound to vocational school subjects. The researcher then needs to design a quasi-experiment with vocational school subjects, a control group pretest-posttest design, and standardized empathy instruments. Practically, BK teachers in vocational schools are advised to implement role playing technique group counseling for at least 3–6 sessions, make empathy an evaluation variable, and develop contextual modules with vocational characteristics of vocational vocational schools.

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