

From Empathy to Intimidation: A Study on Bullying Among School Counselors

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1306000487>

Received: 18 March 2026; Accepted: 23 March 2026; Published: 20 July 2026

ABSTRACT

School counseling is fundamentally an empathy-dependent profession; however, workplace bullying creates a significant ethical paradox where professionals trained to foster psychological safety find themselves in environments defined by intimidation. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of workplace bullying among school counselors in the Philippines and the organizational conditions contributing to a perceived shift from empathy to intimidation. Thirty-five school counselors participated in semi-structured interviews analyzed through Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. The narratives revealed a disturbing progression: bullying manifested through subtle verbal belittlement and 'chismis'-driven exclusion, yet was structurally anchored by weak leadership and heavy workloads. These experiences did more than cause distress; they fundamentally reshaped the counselors' professional identities and their ability to remain present for their students. The findings introduce a 'Dynamic Equilibrium Model' of workplace bullying, positioning leadership neutrality and structural accountability as critical pivot points for restoration. Ultimately, the study underscores that workplace bullying is both an occupational well-being issue and a service-quality concern, requiring psychologically safe systems to preserve the integrity of counseling services.

Keywords: workplace bullying; school counselors; 'chismis'; organizational culture; empathy-to-intimidation; psychological well-being

INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying involves repeated negative acts over time, typically characterized by a power imbalance that limits a target's ability to defend themselves and increases the risk of cumulative harm (Branch et al., 2013; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Bullying may be expressed through direct hostility, such as insults, public ridicule, and intimidation, or through indirect relational behaviors such as gossip, exclusion, and undermining. Across occupational settings, bullying has been linked to psychological distress, impaired work functioning, and weakened organizational trust and cooperation (Branch et al., 2013; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Verkuil et al., 2015). These effects are not only personally harmful but also institutionally significant, as bullying can erode psychological safety and undermine the quality of work relationships and services (Branch et al., 2013).

Evidence across sectors indicates that workplace bullying remains both prevalent and damaging. Studies in healthcare and other professional settings have shown that bullying may be enacted through hostile communication, unrealistic demands, workload pressure, and hierarchical mistreatment, often resulting in anxiety, stress, emotional exhaustion, withdrawal, and reduced engagement (Javed et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2023). In Philippine workplace contexts, bullying has likewise been associated with stressful organizational dynamics, absenteeism, reduced productivity, and turnover (Alcantara et al., 2017). Within these settings, bullying is often entangled with specific cultural dynamics such as 'crab mentality' and professional jealousy, where individuals may feel threatened by the success or perceived status of their peers. These findings underscore the need for prevention and response mechanisms that include clear behavioral standards, safe reporting pathways, and leadership accountability (Branch et al., 2013). This cultural complexity exists within a broader Philippine educational landscape characterized by ongoing reform and shifting institutional pressures, which can exacerbate workplace tensions (Symaco, 2012).

School counseling work may carry additional vulnerabilities because it requires sustained emotional labor, client-centered engagement, and ethical decision-making within demanding institutional environments (Nor et al., 2023). Because this is an empathy-dependent profession, the presence of bullying represents a significant ethical paradox: those tasked with fostering psychological safety are subjected to its antithesis. Counselors are expected to respond empathically to clients while also managing confidentiality, professional boundaries, and role complexity, often under heavy workloads and institutional pressure. Such conditions may increase stress and burnout risk and may weaken the psychological resources needed to sustain empathic practice (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Nor et al., 2023). When workplace bullying occurs in school counseling settings, it threatens not only counselor well-being but also professional functioning and the integrity of client services (Harris et al., 2020; Van Heugten, 2021).

Bullying within counseling work is particularly concerning because it contradicts the profession's ethical emphasis on respect, empathy, and psychological safety. Yet context-specific evidence on bullying among school counselors remains comparatively limited, especially regarding how bullying manifests in counseling workplaces, which organizational and cultural conditions sustain it, and what intervention priorities are feasible in school counseling settings (Harris et al., 2020; Van Heugten, 2021). Addressing these gaps, the present study examines workplace bullying among school counselors in the Philippines through reflexive thematic analysis, with attention to manifestations, sustaining conditions, impacts on well-being and professional practice, and participant-identified priorities for prevention and response.

School counseling is fundamentally an empathy-dependent profession, requiring sustained emotional labor and ethical decision-making within demanding institutional environments. However, when workplace bullying occurs, it creates a significant ethical paradox: the very professionals trained to foster psychological safety for others find themselves in an environment defined by intimidation

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace bullying refers to repeated negative acts that occur in a context of power imbalance, thereby limiting the target's capacity to defend themselves and increasing the risk of cumulative harm (Branch et al., 2013; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Across occupations, exposure to bullying has been associated with psychological distress, reduced morale, lower job satisfaction, and impaired work functioning (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Verkuil et al., 2015). For school counselors, these risks are particularly significant because the profession depends on empathy, trust, ethical responsiveness, and sustained emotional labor. Existing scholarship on helping professionals suggests that bullying, harassment, and emotional abuse can contribute to anxiety, burnout, disengagement, and diminished service quality (Harris et al., 2020; Van Heugten, 2021; Wolor et al., 2023).

Within the Asia-Pacific educational sector, research has long established that workplace stress is a primary predictor of diminished job satisfaction among educators (Zhang, 2007). Furthermore, the impact of such stressors on well-being is often mediated by professional self-efficacy; when bullying undermines a counselor's confidence, it directly erodes the psychological resources needed for effective practice (Li & Liu, 2022).

The persistence of bullying is often shaped not only by individual disposition but also by organizational and cultural conditions. Leadership practices, shared norms, psychosocial working conditions, and reporting climates influence whether bullying is interrupted, tolerated, or normalized (Branch et al., 2013; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Passive or avoidant leadership may foster climates in which harmful behaviors continue unchecked, while hierarchical environments may discourage disclosure and reinforce silence. These conditions may be especially salient in school counseling settings, where workplace relationships and institutional trust are central to ethical and effective practice (Skogstad et al., 2007; Kim & Lambie, 2018).

Theoretically, the present study is informed by Social Learning Theory and Organizational Culture Theory. Social Learning Theory helps explain how intimidation and aggression may be modeled, reinforced, and reproduced in environments where such behaviors are tolerated or rewarded (Bandura, 1977; Harris et al., 2020). Organizational Culture Theory highlights how shared norms, implicit rules, and workplace expectations shape what becomes acceptable in daily interaction, including silence, compliance, and the normalization of relational aggression (Schein, 2015a, 2015b; Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). Together, these perspectives help explain how

bullying may become embedded in workplace routines and why empathic professionalism may erode into intimidation in particular organizational climates.

Despite extensive evidence on workplace bullying and its adverse consequences, context-specific research on bullying within school counseling workplaces remains limited. Much of the existing literature comes from general workplace samples or from other helping professions, which may not fully capture the distinctive realities of school counseling, including workplace-based boundary complexity, sustained emotional labor, and ethical role strain (Branch et al., 2013; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Van Heugten, 2021). Limited research has also examined how bullying is experienced specifically by school counselors, which organizational and cultural conditions may sustain it, and how these dynamics may contribute to a perceived shift from empathy to intimidation (Harris et al., 2020). In addition, relatively few studies foreground counselor-informed and context-feasible priorities for prevention and response, even though review-level evidence points to the need for stronger and better evaluated organizational interventions (Gillen et al., 2017).

Research Questions

1. What are the primary forms and manifestations of bullying among school counselors?
2. What factors contribute to bullying behaviors and the shift from empathy to intimidation?
3. How does bullying impact the psychological well-being and professional practice of counselors?
4. What strategies or interventions can be used to address bullying within counseling environments?

Theoretical/Conceptual Lens

This study is guided by Social Learning Theory and Organizational Culture Theory as interpretive lenses for understanding why workplace bullying may persist even in school counseling contexts where empathy and ethical practice are central. Social Learning Theory foregrounds how intimidation may be modeled, reinforced, and reproduced in environments where such behavior is rewarded or tolerated, particularly under power imbalance and weak accountability. Organizational Culture Theory highlights how shared norms, implicit rules, and leadership practices shape what is treated as acceptable in everyday workplace interactions, including silence, hierarchical compliance, and relational aggression. Together, these lenses support interpretation of how workplace bullying may emerge, be sustained, and become normalized within school counseling environments.

Use of the theoretical lens in interpretation. Social Learning Theory served as a sensitizing lens for interpreting how intimidation may be modeled, reinforced, and reproduced, as well as for identifying leverage points for prevention and response. Organizational Culture Theory guided interpretation of how norms, hierarchy, and silence may shape bullying manifestations and sustaining conditions, and how these may contribute to a perceived empathy-to-intimidation climate.

Contributions of the Study

This study contributes context-specific qualitative evidence on workplace bullying in school counseling settings in the Philippines. It clarifies how bullying manifests among school counselors, identifies perceived organizational and cultural conditions that sustain it, including the reported empathy-to-intimidation shift, and documents participant-informed priorities for prevention and response. The findings offer actionable implications for strengthening psychologically safe reporting pathways, leadership accountability, and supportive work systems that protect counselor well-being and help sustain ethical, high-quality counseling services in schools.

METHODS

This section describes the research design, participants, data collection procedures, analytic approach, and strategies used to support trustworthiness in examining workplace bullying among school counselors.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis to explore how workplace bullying is experienced and understood among school counselors in the Philippines. A qualitative design was appropriate because the study sought to examine participants' accounts of bullying, the meanings they attributed to these experiences, the workplace conditions they perceived as sustaining them, and the ways such experiences were understood to affect well-being and professional practice. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it provides a flexible yet conceptually robust approach for identifying patterns of shared meaning across a dataset while recognizing the researcher's active and interpretive role in knowledge production. In this study, the approach was used not simply to summarize participant responses, but to develop an analytic account of how bullying was enacted, sustained, experienced, and responded to within school counseling contexts. The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, understood as a recursive and reflexive set of analytic tools rather than a rigidly linear procedure.

Participants

A purposive sample of 35 school counselors from different parts of the Philippines participated in the study. Participants were selected because they could provide information-rich accounts of workplace bullying within school counseling settings, whether through direct experience or close exposure. Eligibility criteria required that participants were currently practicing as school counselors, willing to discuss workplace bullying-related experiences, and able to provide informed consent. This sampling approach was appropriate to the study's qualitative aim of generating in-depth, contextually grounded insights into how bullying is experienced and interpreted in school counseling workplaces.

Data Collection and Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in either face-to-face or online formats, depending on participants' availability and circumstances. Semi-structured interviewing was appropriate for the study because it allowed participants to describe their workplace bullying experiences in depth while also giving the researcher flexibility to probe for clarification, elaboration, and context. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews focused on participants' experiences and perceptions of workplace bullying, including how bullying was manifested, what conditions appeared to sustain it, how it affected psychological well-being and professional practice, and what responses or interventions they considered important within school counseling settings. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To protect confidentiality, identifying information such as the names of schools, administrators, colleagues, and other workplace-specific details was removed or masked during transcription and reporting.

Interview Guide

An interview guide was developed from the literature on workplace bullying and counseling workplace dynamics and was refined prior to data collection to strengthen alignment with the study aim and improve the clarity of prompts. The development and refinement of the guide were informed by methodological recommendations for semi-structured interview design. Questions were open-ended and designed to invite detailed accounts of participants' experiences, including the forms and manifestations of bullying, perceived contributing conditions, impacts on psychological well-being and professional practice, and possible strategies or interventions for addressing bullying in counseling workplaces. The guide functioned as a flexible framework rather than a rigid script, allowing the researcher to follow participants' accounts while probing for depth, meaning, and context. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and de-identified prior to analysis.

The development and refinement of the interview guide followed established academic frameworks for protocol refinement. Specifically, the process was informed by the methodological recommendations of Castillo-Montoya (2016) and Kallio et al. (2016) to ensure the clarity of prompts and the alignment of questions with the overarching research aims. This rigorous refinement allowed the researcher to capture the nuanced transition

from empathy to intimidation while maintaining the 'insider' lens vital for decoding local phenomena such as 'chismis'.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis involved recursive and reflexive engagement with the dataset rather than a strictly linear sequence of steps. The researcher first read and re-read the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the breadth and texture of participants' accounts, while recording initial analytic observations through memo writing. Initial codes were then generated across the dataset by attending to meaningful features of the data relevant to the study aim. Coding was treated as an active and interpretive process, not as a purely descriptive or mechanical task. Codes were subsequently examined for patterns of shared meaning and iteratively developed into candidate themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and defined in relation to both the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole in order to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and analytic depth. Theme development involved revisiting earlier interpretations, combining or separating candidate themes where needed, and clarifying the central organizing concept underpinning each theme. The final analysis was written as a narrative account supported by representative verbatim excerpts. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytic process to document coding decisions, theme development, and ongoing reflexive notes. Coding and theme development were conducted manually using Excel as an organizational aid.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the study did not seek interrater reliability or consensus coding as markers of analytic quality. Instead, emphasis was placed on reflexive engagement, interpretive depth, transparency of analytic decisions, and coherence between the study's theoretical lens, analytic procedures, and written account.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was supported through strategies aligned with qualitative rigor and reflexive thematic analysis. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, careful attention to participants' accounts, and the use of representative verbatim excerpts to ground interpretations. Participant feedback was sought on summarized interpretations to consider resonance and clarity, while recognizing that, within reflexive thematic analysis, thematic interpretation remains an analytic and reflexive responsibility of the researcher rather than a process of participant validation of one fixed meaning. Dependability was supported through an audit trail documenting interview procedures, analytic decisions, theme development, and revisions made during analysis. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memoing, which enabled the researcher to critically examine assumptions, positionality, and interpretive choices throughout the study. Transferability was supported through rich description of the school counseling context, participant experiences, and analytic themes while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher's positionality as a counseling professional and educator was acknowledged throughout the study, and reflexive notes were maintained to support transparency regarding how this standpoint may have shaped interpretation.

Our position as counseling professional provided a vital 'insider' lens, allowing us to decode nuances that a distant observer might miss, specifically how 'chismis' (gossip) is used as a calculated weapon to undermine professional safety

Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to decline to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Confidentiality was protected through the de-identification of transcripts and the removal or masking of workplace-specific identifying information, including the names of schools, administrators, colleagues, and other potentially identifiable details. Audio files, transcripts, and related study materials were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. In reporting the findings, only de-identified excerpts were used in order to protect participants'

identities and reduce the risk of workplace exposure. A distress protocol was provided for participants who experienced difficulty during and after the interview.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study focused exclusively on school counselors, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other counseling contexts such as clinical, community, or private practice settings. Second, the data were based on self-reported accounts of workplace bullying, which may have been shaped by recall, personal interpretation, and the sensitivity of discussing workplace harm. Third, interviews were conducted through both face-to-face and online modalities, and these differing formats may have influenced the depth, pace, or comfort of disclosure across participants. Despite these limitations, the study generated rich and contextually grounded accounts that offer meaningful insight into how workplace bullying is experienced, understood, and responded to within school counseling environments.

RESULTS

Analysis of interviews with 35 school counselors generated four interrelated themes that together illuminate how workplace bullying is experienced, sustained, and responded to within school counseling settings. Rather than representing isolated categories, these themes collectively show bullying as a form of relational and organizational harm: it was enacted in everyday interactions that undermined dignity and belonging, sustained by workplace conditions that enabled intimidation, experienced as eroding counselors' well-being and professional functioning, and addressed by participants through calls for structural accountability and supportive systems.

Theme 1. Bullying was experienced as relational and positional harm in everyday school counseling work

Participants described workplace bullying not only as openly hostile behavior, but also as everyday interactions that diminished professional dignity, weakened belonging, and placed counselors in devalued positions within the workplace. Bullying was experienced through public humiliation, belittling remarks, invalidating humor, exclusion, and gossip-based relational harm. Taken together, these accounts suggest that bullying was not merely interpersonal disagreement, but a pattern of interactions that communicated disrespect, inferiority, and social vulnerability.

Some accounts reflected overt verbal aggression and public belittlement. Participants described being demeaned in front of others, labeled negatively, or spoken to in ways that undermined their professional role. One participant recalled being "humiliated in front of employees during general assemblies" and called "misguided" as a nickname by a person of authority" (P04). Another participant emphasized that bullying could also be conveyed through remarks framed as humor but experienced as invalidating and demeaning: "Being told 'you have to do this because wala naman kang ginagawa'... is a way of belittling someone's role... framed as jokes, [but] hurtful and [they] undermine the value of the person's position" (P34).

Participants also described bullying as enacted through exclusion and ridicule, particularly when counselors differed in values, perspectives, or workplace positioning. One participant shared that "The older counselor would sometimes exclude their fellow counselors just because they don't have the same principles or point of view... and... make fun of other's... sensitive information" (P02). Gossip and the distortion of stories were likewise described as harmful practices that damaged trust and created emotionally unsafe work environments. As one participant explained, "Chismis became a form of bullying. A simple story was passed around, altered and exaggerated... [until] everyone involved was called in... People were upset and emotional..." (P34).

Theme 2. Intimidation was sustained by insecurity, hierarchy, silence, and weak accountability

Participants did not describe bullying as simply the product of individual temperament. Instead, they framed it as sustained by a wider workplace climate in which insecurity, competition, hierarchy, leadership inaction, and work strain created conditions under which intimidation could persist. This pattern suggests that the reported

shift from empathy to intimidation was not abrupt, but developed within organizational contexts where power was uneven, accountability was weak, and speaking up felt risky.

Some participants linked bullying to insecurity, jealousy, and fear of displacement. One participant referred to “Professional jealousy, crab mentality” (P17), while another described bullying as rooted in “insecurities and [feeling] threatened to be replaced” (P09). Other participants emphasized structural and leadership conditions that enabled bullying to continue, including “Poor leadership skills, lack of accountability, competitive culture... hierarchical imbalance” (P02). Work pressure was also described as part of the climate in which bullying unfolded, as reflected in comments such as “Too many workloads” (P26). Taken together, participants’ narratives indicate that bullying was sustained not only by harmful acts, but by organizational conditions that normalized silence, weakened protection, and allowed relational harm to remain insufficiently addressed.

Theme 3. Bullying eroded counselors’ safety, professional identity, and counseling presence

Participants described the impact of bullying as extending beyond distress in the moment. Bullying was experienced as undermining emotional safety, diminishing self-worth, disrupting work participation, and affecting counseling presence and professional identity. In this way, the consequences were not only personal but also professional, with implications for how counselors occupied their roles, related to colleagues, and engaged in client work.

Several accounts described anxiety, anticipatory fear, and physiological disruption. One participant expressed worry even as an observer, stating, “Felt anxious, what if it happens to me as well” (P02). Another described a more sustained impact: “I remember not going to work or isolating myself. I questioned my self worth... I was not able to sleep properly and would become very anxious whenever there are meetings or gatherings” (P14). For some participants, the effects were severe enough to produce withdrawal from the workplace itself. One participant shared, “It was traumatic and forced me to resign even if I love my work as a counselor” (P09).

Participants also described spillover into counseling practice. One counselor stated directly, “Yes it has an impact on my professional practice and how I deal with my clients” (P01). Another highlighted how workplace bullying complicated ethical and relational boundaries within counseling work itself: “It’s hard to counsel someone in the workplace and to avoid multiple relationship such as: friend-counselee, colleague-counselee relationship” (P11). Together, these accounts show that bullying eroded not only personal safety, but also counselors’ ability to sustain professional confidence, ethical clarity, and therapeutic presence.

Theme 4. Restoring safety required structural protection, fair leadership, and spaces of support

When participants discussed responses to bullying, they did not frame the solution primarily in terms of individual resilience. Instead, they emphasized the need for organizational safeguards, fair and accountable leadership, preventive education, and support systems for counselors themselves. This theme suggests that participants understood recovery and prevention as requiring both structural and relational repair.

A recurring priority was the need for clear policy and safe reporting mechanisms. One participant stated that “Organizational policies should clearly outline zero-tolerance for bullying behaviors and provide guidelines for reporting incidents” (P05). Another stressed the importance of fairness and independence in grievance handling: “If the grievance committee is open and not subjective to the reports of higher authorities...” (P09). Leadership accountability was also positioned as central to change. As one participant put it, “They have to mediate not take sides” (P07). Participants also identified training and support as necessary components of response. One participant suggested that “A biannual conflict resolution session would be helpful” (P04), while others emphasized the need for emotionally safe spaces where counselors themselves could disclose distress without fear of judgment. As one participant stated, “Provide them with a safe space to share their experiences and feelings without fear of judgment...” (P05). Another offered a direct reminder of the relational needs of helping professionals: “We should have a support system. Counselors need counseling too...” (P12).

DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that workplace bullying in school counseling settings is best understood not simply as a series of isolated interpersonal conflicts, but as a form of relational and organizational harm shaped by workplace culture, power, and accountability. Across the themes, participants' accounts showed how bullying was enacted through everyday practices that undermined dignity and belonging, sustained by conditions such as hierarchy, silence, insecurity, and weak leadership response, and experienced as harmful not only to personal well-being but also to professional functioning and ethical practice. The findings position workplace bullying in school counseling as both an occupational health concern and a threat to the relational and ethical conditions necessary for effective counseling work (Branch et al., 2013; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012).

Bullying as relational and positional harm in everyday school counseling work

The findings indicate that bullying in school counseling workplaces may occur through both overt and relational forms of harm. Participants described humiliating remarks, belittling comments, exclusion, gossip, and reputational damage as recurring ways through which bullying was enacted. These patterns are consistent with workplace bullying literature describing bullying as repeated negative acts in which power imbalance constrains the target's ability to defend themselves, and in which harm may be delivered through both direct hostility and indirect relational means (Branch et al., 2013; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). In the present study, the prominence of relational forms such as gossip and exclusion suggests that bullying may become embedded in everyday workplace interactions and informal social networks, making it less visible as a formal violation yet still deeply harmful in its effects (Branch et al., 2013). This pattern is particularly important in school counseling settings because the profession is grounded in empathy, respect, trust, and psychological safety. When bullying is enacted through ridicule, invalidation, or social marginalization, the harm extends beyond interpersonal discomfort and begins to erode the collegial and ethical conditions needed for helping work. Bullying has also been documented within helping and mental health-related professions, suggesting that professional training, hierarchy, and evaluative workplace cultures may create vulnerabilities to mistreatment even within care-oriented roles (Brown, 2022; Harris et al., 2020; Van Heugten, 2021).

The findings indicate that bullying in school counseling workplaces often occurs through relational forms such as gossip and exclusion, which become embedded in everyday interactions. This pattern aligns with the work of Alcantara et al. (2017), who identified workplace bullying in the Philippines as a prognosis of stressful organizational dynamics. In the local context, 'chismis' (gossip) is not merely idle conversation; it is a documented form of professional harm entangled with cultural dynamics like 'crab mentality' that erodes organizational trust and productivity.

Bullying as organizationally sustained: insecurity, hierarchy, silence, and weak accountability

Although mentioned less extensively, participants' references to excessive workloads suggest that strain and overload may further reduce psychological safety and weaken the empathic and reflective capacities needed in helping professions (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Nor et al., 2023). In this sense, extreme workload strain acts as a catalyst for the erosion of empathy. When counselors are stripped of their 'emotional bandwidth' by systemic pressure, they become less equipped to resist toxic norms or support colleagues, allowing a climate of intimidation to fill the void.

Participants attributed bullying not only to individual dispositions but also to organizational and relational conditions that allowed intimidation to persist. This aligns with the perspective of Akpa et al. (2021), who emphasize that organizational culture is a primary determinant of institutional performance. When a workplace culture permits relational harm, it does more than distress the individual; it fundamentally undermines the collective efficacy and professional well-being of the counseling team. Accounts of insecurity, competition, hierarchical imbalance, leadership inaction, and workload pressure suggest that bullying was experienced within broader workplace climates where power was unevenly distributed and accountability was not always reliably enacted. This aligns with literature indicating that workplace bullying is shaped not simply by individual personality, but by psychosocial working conditions, organizational culture, and leadership practices that may either constrain or enable harmful behavior (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Branch et al., 2013). In particular, the

findings suggest that leadership response played a central role in whether bullying was interrupted or normalized. Participants described bullying as persisting when leaders failed to intervene decisively, when grievance processes were perceived as subjective, and when reporting felt risky because of hierarchy or possible retaliation. These narratives echo research on laissez-faire or avoidant leadership, which shows that passive leadership can create permissive environments in which negative acts continue without consequence (Skogstad et al., 2007). Workload pressure also emerged as part of this climate. Although mentioned less extensively, participants' references to excessive workloads suggest that strain and overload may further reduce psychological safety and weaken the empathic and reflective capacities needed in helping professions (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Nor et al., 2023; Rila et al., 2025). In this sense, extreme workload strain acts as a catalyst for the erosion of empathy. When counselors are stripped of their emotional bandwidth by systemic pressure, they become less equipped to resist toxic norms or support colleagues, effectively allowing a climate of intimidation to fill the void.

Participants attributed the persistence of bullying to organizational conditions and leadership inaction rather than individual temperament. As Akpa et al. (2021) emphasized, organizational culture serves as a primary driver of institutional performance. When a workplace culture permits or normalizes intimidation, it does not only harm the individual but fundamentally undermines the entire institutional performance and the psychological well-being of the counseling staff.

Erosion of counselor well-being, professional identity, and counseling practice

The findings show that bullying affected counselors in ways that were simultaneously personal and professional. This erosion stands in stark contrast to models of employee engagement that prioritize supportive human resource development as a prerequisite for professional flourishing (Lee et al., 2017). Participants described anxiety, disrupted sleep, reduced self-worth, fear of meetings, isolation, and, in some cases, resignation. These accounts align with meta-analytic evidence linking workplace bullying to poorer mental health across both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Verkuil et al., 2015; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). The present study extends this concern by showing how such distress is not confined to emotional suffering alone, but may also reshape how counselors relate to their work, to colleagues, and to themselves as professionals. This is especially consequential in school counseling because counselor well-being is closely connected to the relational quality of professional practice. Participants described perceived impacts on counseling presence, confidence, and boundary management, including strain in navigating overlapping workplace and counseling roles. These findings suggest that bullying may compromise not only occupational health, but also the ethical and relational capacities required in student-facing support services. Beyond direct targets, evidence also indicates that witnessing workplace bullying can harm the wider work climate and erode psychological safety (Nielsen et al., 2024). In school counseling settings, sustained emotional demands and high caseloads may further contribute to stress and burnout risk, underscoring the need for supportive systems and feasible workloads (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Rila et al., 2025).

Addressing bullying requires coordinated institutional responses rather than relying solely on individual resilience. Best practices in addressing workplace harm, as highlighted by Ferris et al. (2018), involve the implementation of a Zero-Tolerance Policy and the establishment of clear, transparent reporting pathways. Such structural anchors are essential for shifting the burden of safety away from the bullied individual and toward institutional accountability systems.

Restoring safety through structural accountability, fair leadership, and support systems

When participants discussed how bullying should be addressed, they emphasized organizational and relational solutions rather than relying solely on individual coping. Calls for clear anti-bullying policies, safe reporting pathways, fair grievance mechanisms, leadership neutrality, training, and support systems suggest that participants understood bullying as a structural concern requiring coordinated institutional response. This is consistent with broader literature emphasizing that workplace bullying is best addressed as an organizational problem through policy clarity, leadership involvement, consistent enforcement, and culture change, rather than through resilience demands placed only on those harmed (Branch et al., 2013; Gillen et al., 2017).

The present findings highlight that psychologically safe reporting is especially important in school counseling contexts, where hierarchy, role complexity, and professional visibility may increase the risks associated with disclosure. Participants' calls for neutral mediation and fair grievance handling suggest that response systems must do more than exist on paper; they must also be experienced as trustworthy, accessible, and independent of power favoritism. The workplace is never a static environment; it is in a state of constant flux. Our findings suggest a 'Dynamic Equilibrium' where the organizational response acts as a pivot. When leadership remains neutral and accountability is clear, the system heals; when they fail, the culture of intimidation simply becomes the new normal.

Similarly, recommendations for conflict-resolution training and structured support reflect an understanding that prevention depends not only on punishment of wrongdoing, but also on building workplace cultures that interrupt silence, promote respectful interaction, and care for counselors themselves. These intervention priorities should therefore be read as participant-informed practice directions that warrant further validation and implementation research (Gillen et al., 2017).

Post-Research Framework

Figure 1 presents a post-research framework synthesized from the study's four themes, showing how harm is enacted, sustained, and potentially interrupted within school counseling workplaces.

Figure 1. Dynamic Equilibrium Model of Workplace Bullying Responses

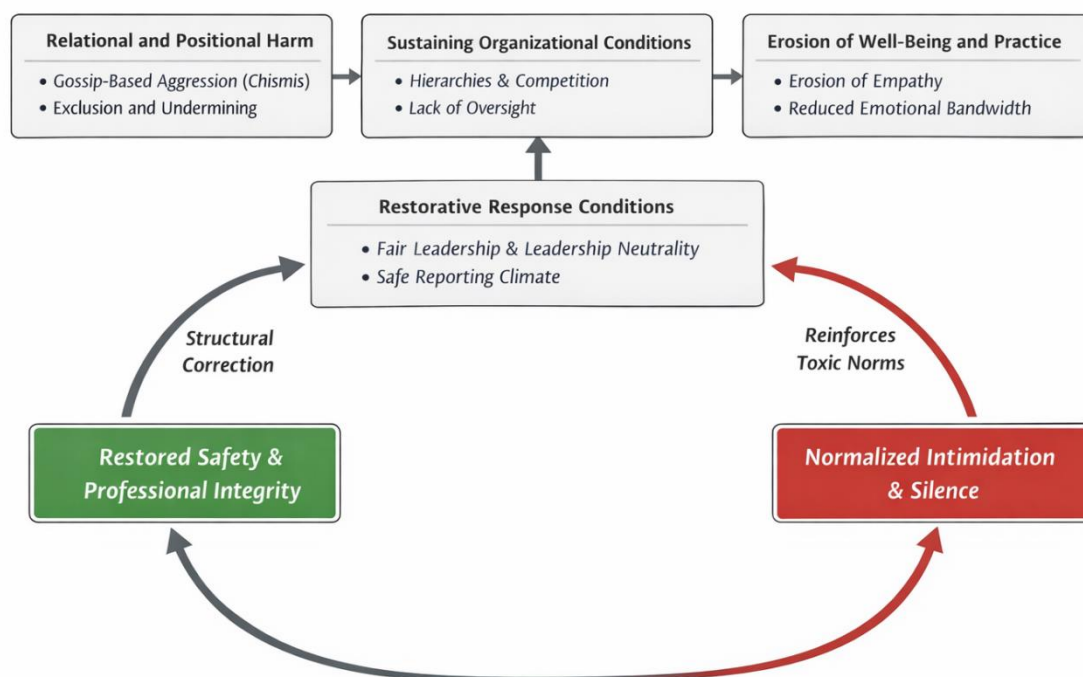


Figure 1. Post-research framework on workplace bullying among school counselors.

Note. The framework is an analytic interpretation derived from the four themes generated through reflexive thematic analysis. The framework functions as a 'Dynamic Equilibrium Model,' illustrating that the workplace climate is never static. It highlights a critical pivot point at the 'Restorative Response' stage, where 'Leadership Neutrality' is essential. If leadership fails to mediate fairly, a negative feedback loop reinforces a climate of normalized intimidation; however, structural protection and accountability can tilt the equilibrium back toward a culture of empathy and safety.

CONCLUSION

This study examined workplace bullying among school counselors in the Philippines and explored how workplace conditions may contribute to a perceived shift from empathy to intimidation. The findings show that bullying in school counseling settings may take both overt and relational forms, including verbal belittlement, social exclusion, misuse of authority, and gossip-based harm. Participants linked these experiences to insecurity and competition, weak leadership accountability, hierarchical imbalance, silence, and workload strain. They also described consequences that extended beyond personal distress to include anxiety, sleep disruption, diminished self-worth, withdrawal, and perceived disruptions in counseling practice and workplace-based ethical boundaries. The findings suggest that workplace bullying in school counseling is not simply an interpersonal difficulty but a broader organizational and professional concern. It affects not only counselor well-being, but also the relational, ethical, and functional conditions needed to sustain effective counseling practice.

Ultimately, the well-being of the school counselor is inextricably linked to the quality of student care. Workplace bullying does not just hurt the professional; it compromises the therapeutic presence and ethical clarity required to support vulnerable students. Strengthening psychologically safe and accountable workplace systems is, therefore, a fundamental requirement for preserving the integrity of counseling services in schools.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry implications for organizational policy, school counseling practice, professional preparation, and future research. Viewed collectively, the themes indicate that workplace bullying in school counseling settings should not be understood merely as a problem between difficult individuals. Rather, it should be approached as a form of organizationally enabled relational harm shaped by workplace culture, hierarchy, silence, and uneven accountability.

At the organizational and policy level, the findings suggest that bullying is sustained not only by harmful behavior but also by conditions that leave counselors insufficiently protected. Schools and educational systems may therefore need to move beyond informal or personality-based approaches to conflict and toward clearer institutional safeguards. These may include explicit behavioral expectations, psychologically safe reporting pathways, transparent grievance procedures, timely response processes, and consistent enforcement regardless of rank or position. Such measures may help weaken cultures of silence and communicate that bullying is an institutional issue requiring formal accountability rather than private endurance. Moving toward institutional safeguards also prevents the risk of weaponized resilience, where the burden of staying strong is placed on the bullied individual to justify a lack of systemic change. Instead, a Zero-Tolerance Policy must serve as a non-negotiable structural anchor that protects the counselor's right to a safe workplace.

For school counseling practice and ethics, the study suggests that bullying prevention should be regarded as an ethical and professional priority. Because participants described perceived effects on counseling presence, client-facing work, professional confidence, and workplace-based boundary management, unsafe workplace climates may compromise the reflective, relational, and ethical capacities required in counseling practice. Supportive supervision, consultation structures, and psychologically safe collegial environments may therefore be important in helping counselors sustain professional functioning, navigate workplace-based ethical tensions, and reduce fear-driven compliance that may undermine collaboration and service quality.

For training and professional development, the findings point to the value of preparing counselors more explicitly for workplace bullying and relational aggression in professional contexts. Counselor education and in-service development may benefit from integrating content on recognizing bullying patterns, documenting incidents appropriately, navigating organizational power dynamics, engaging in conflict resolution, and using reporting mechanisms in ethically grounded ways. Such preparation may be especially relevant given participants' emphasis on awareness, conflict-resolution training, and the need for structured support.

For research, the intervention priorities identified in this study should be interpreted as participant-informed directions for practice rather than evidence-tested solutions. Future studies may build on these findings by examining the feasibility, acceptability, and effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies in school counseling settings.

Further research may also explore how bullying is shaped by leadership style, institutional culture, and reporting climate, as well as how it affects counselor retention, professional functioning, and service quality over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy and reporting systems. Implement a clear anti-bullying policy defining prohibited behaviors, including relational bullying, and clarifying reporting steps, timelines, confidentiality protections, and graduated sanctions. Reporting mechanisms should be accessible and psychologically safe for counselors.

Leadership accountability. Train school leaders and supervisors on respectful supervision and bullying prevention. Require documented response protocols to reduce permissive climates and ensure consistent action regardless of hierarchy.

Capacity building. Conduct periodic training, such as biannual sessions, on conflict resolution, psychological safety, and professional communication within counseling teams. Scenario-based learning relevant to school counseling contexts may help translate policy into practice.

Support systems. Establish confidential peer support, supervision or consultation pathways, and referral options to address counselor distress, especially following bullying incidents. As participants emphasized, counselors also need spaces of support and care.

Monitoring and continuous improvement. Use anonymous climate surveys, periodic reviews of de-identified reported cases, and structured feedback loops to monitor bullying indicators and evaluate the implementation of anti-bullying measures over time.

Declarations

Funding and/or Conflicts of interests/Competing interests. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the **Mariano Marcos State University Ethics Board** on March 2025.

Informed Consent. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of their data.

Research involving Animals. This research involved human participants only. No animals were involved in this study.

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