

Raising Awareness and Creating a Safer School Environment Through Understanding Tween Bullying

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ABSTRACT

Bullying among tweens remains a significant educational and social concern because it affects emotional well-being, peer relationships, and academic engagement during a critical stage of child development. This study examines why bullying occurs among tweens and how safer school environments can be created by interpreting bullying through Michel Foucault's concept of power. The research uses an exploratory descriptive design that combines Socratic questioning, literature review, and a small classroom survey involving eight students. The analysis shows that participants most frequently associated bullying with physical and cyber forms, while jealousy, insecurity, stress, social conflict, and the perception that bullying is enjoyable emerged as recurring explanations for why students bully others. Interpreted through a Foucauldian lens, these findings suggest that bullying is not only an individual behavioral problem but also a relational and institutional issue shaped by unequal power, peer hierarchies, and limited opportunities for students to exercise voice. The study argues that prevention requires more than punishment. Schools need to strengthen supervision, cultivate fairness and empathy, decentralize opportunities for student participation, and create supportive structures that reduce the rewards of domination. The article contributes to bullying scholarship by showing how a Foucauldian perspective can deepen understanding of tween bullying while remaining closely connected to practical school-based prevention.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying continues to be one of the most persistent threats to student well-being in school environments. Although often dismissed as a normal part of growing up, bullying is better understood as a repeated form of harm that disrupts learning, damages peer relationships, and undermines the sense of safety that schools are expected to provide (Olweus, 2013; Volk et al., 2014). For tweens, generally understood as children aged approximately nine to twelve, this issue is especially significant because the

period is marked by rapid changes in self-concept, peer affiliation, social status, and emotional regulation. During this developmental stage, children become increasingly aware of reputation, difference, and belonging, which can intensify status competition and make them more vulnerable both to victimization and to using aggression as a means of gaining influence (Cook et al., 2010; Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Bullying also matters because its consequences extend beyond immediate distress. A substantial body of research has shown that peer victimization is associated with psychosomatic symptoms, anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-worth, and school adjustment problems (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). It can also negatively affect academic performance. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that peer victimization is associated with lower academic achievement, even if the average effect is modest, because repeated exposure to peer aggression interferes with concentration, school attendance, and engagement with learning (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). These consequences are particularly serious when bullying occurs in spaces that should protect children, such as classrooms, playgrounds, and digital environments connected to school life.

The prevalence of bullying further underscores the importance of the issue. Comparative and meta-analytic work suggests that traditional bullying remains more common than cyberbullying, although the two often overlap and reinforce one another (Modecki et al., 2014). Research on tweens in the United States likewise shows that bullying and cyberbullying already affect children before adolescence is fully underway, challenging the assumption that such problems are mainly restricted to older students (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). This indicates that intervention efforts need to begin early, before harmful peer dynamics become normalized.

Despite the large number of anti-bullying programs and studies, an important conceptual gap remains. Much of the existing literature treats bullying primarily as an individual behavior involving a clearly stronger aggressor and a weaker victim. That perspective is useful, especially for identification and reporting, but it can be too narrow if it ignores the wider social and institutional conditions that make bullying meaningful, rewarding, or difficult to resist (Horton, 2020; Nasseem, 2025). A purely behavioral approach may identify the bully and the victim, yet fail to explain how school norms, peer hierarchies, and uneven opportunities for participation create conditions in which domination becomes socially advantageous.

This study addresses that gap by interpreting tween bullying through Michel Foucault's understanding of power. Foucault's work is relevant because it shifts attention away from the idea that power is simply possessed by one person and imposed on another. Instead, power is relational, diffuse, and embedded in everyday practices, institutions, norms, and systems of visibility (Foucault, 1982). In school settings, this means bullying can be understood not only as personal cruelty but also as a social process in which students attempt to secure recognition, status, compliance, or silence through repeated acts of domination. A Foucauldian perspective therefore opens analytical space to ask not only who bullies whom, but also how school structures, disciplinary routines, and peer cultures shape what counts as strength, weakness, belonging, and exclusion (Horton, 2020; Nasseem, 2025).

The present study preserves three core arguments. First, bullying among tweens is a serious problem that can no longer be explained only as childish misbehavior. Second, unequal power is central to understanding why bullying happens. Third, bullying prevention requires schools to move beyond reactive punishment by cultivating fairness, kindness, empathy, supervision, and meaningful opportunities for students to exercise voice. These claims were explored through a modest but focused classroom-based inquiry supported by literature review and interpreted through Foucault's ideas about power and social control.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to understand why bullying happens among tweens and to identify ways to reduce it in school environments by using a Foucauldian interpretation of power relations. More specifically, the study asks how students themselves describe bullying, what reasons they give for why bullying occurs, and how those findings can be interpreted through the concepts of power imbalance, hierarchy, and institutional relations. The study contributes by connecting a small-scale

student inquiry with wider scholarly debates on bullying, thereby offering a practical and theoretically informed account of how schools can become safer environments for children in late childhood.

2. METHODS

This study employed an exploratory descriptive design. The purpose was not to test a causal model or generalize to a large population, but to build a focused interpretation of tween bullying by combining student perspectives with existing scholarship. The design brought together three elements: Socratic questioning, literature review, and a small classroom survey. These elements were selected because the research aimed both to examine a real educational problem and to interpret that problem conceptually through Foucault's theory of power.

The first element, Socratic questioning, functioned as an organizing strategy for the inquiry. The study was guided by sequential questions about what bullying is, why it happens, how students experience it, and what responses may help prevent it. Rather than treating the survey as a stand-alone instrument, the questioning approach helped structure the inquiry around clarification, assumptions, causes, implications, and solutions. In this way, the study remained closely tied to the central objective of understanding the roots of tween bullying and the possibilities for prevention.

The second element was literature review. Scholarly works on bullying, victimization, psychosocial effects, academic consequences, and power relations in schools were reviewed in order to situate the student responses within broader academic discussions. The literature review served two purposes. First, it provided conceptual language for interpreting why bullying occurs. Second, it allowed the discussion to compare the classroom-based findings with patterns already established in empirical and theoretical scholarship. Particular attention was given to studies emphasizing power imbalance, social dominance, school context, and anti-bullying strategies (Cook et al., 2010; Fraguas et al., 2021; Horton, 2020; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Nassem, 2025).

The third element was a survey administered to classmates. The survey consisted of ten questions related to experiences of bullying, types of bullying, perceived reasons for bullying, and possible ways to prevent it. The participants were eight classmates. Six participants were male and two were female, meaning that 75% of the sample was male and 25% was female. Four participants were aged 11, while the remaining four were between 12 and 15 years old. Because the sample was small and based on classroom convenience, the survey was used descriptively rather than inferentially. Its purpose was to capture the immediate social meanings that students attached to bullying in their own school context. The detailed demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profile.

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Male	6	75.0%
Female	2	25.0%
Age 11	4	50.0%
Age 12 to 15	4	50.0%

Data collection took place in the school context through direct distribution of the questionnaire. Responses were then summarized descriptively using frequencies and percentages. Because the sample size was limited, the numerical results were treated as indicators of patterns within this specific group rather than as generalizable prevalence estimates. The qualitative wording of participant responses was also considered, especially where students described bullying as "fun," linked it to jealousy, insecurity, stress, or interpersonal conflict, or suggested prevention measures such as more supervision and following rules.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, the survey responses were organized into descriptive categories: experience of bullying, forms of bullying, perceived causes, perceived targets,

and suggested preventive actions. In the second stage, these categories were interpreted using Foucault's concept of power as relational rather than merely possessed. This interpretive step was central to the research because the study aimed to explain bullying not only in behavioral terms but also in terms of hierarchy, control, and the production of compliant or marginalized positions within school life (Foucault, 1982; Horton, 2020; Nassem, 2025).

The study has several limitations that are acknowledged from the outset. The participant pool was small, drawn from one classroom, and dependent on self-report. The survey instrument was not designed for psychometric validation or large-scale comparison. However, these limitations do not invalidate the study's purpose. The project was intended as a focused exploratory inquiry into how tween bullying can be understood through student experience and philosophical interpretation, not as a representative epidemiological survey. Its strength lies in the integration of lived school experience, descriptive evidence, and theoretical analysis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Bullying Patterns

The survey findings show that bullying was familiar to most participants. Six out of eight students, or 75%, reported having experienced bullying. One participant, or 12.5%, indicated uncertainty, and one participant, or 12.5%, reported not knowing whether what they had experienced counted as bullying. Even within this small sample, the frequency of reported exposure suggests that bullying was not an isolated issue. Instead, it appeared to be part of the normal social landscape of the participants' peer environment.

The most prominent forms of bullying reported in the survey were physical and cyberbullying, each identified as especially common in the survey summary. Verbal bullying was also substantial, with half of the participants indicating its presence, while social bullying was mentioned less frequently. These patterns are meaningful. Physical bullying points to direct bodily domination, intimidation, and the visible performance of strength. Cyberbullying suggests that harmful peer power is not confined to school grounds but extends into digital spaces where humiliation and exclusion can continue beyond face-to-face interaction. Verbal bullying reveals that language itself is a mechanism of power, shaping embarrassment, shame, and social identity. A summary of the main survey findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Main Survey Findings.

Survey Indicator	Frequency/Result	Percentage
Experienced bullying	6 of 8	75.0%
Unsure about experience	1 of 8	12.5%
Did not identify experience	1 of 8	12.5%
Physical and cyberbullying most prominent	5 of 8	62.5%
Verbal bullying reported	4 of 8	50.0%
Social bullying reported	1 of 8	12.5%
Male students identified as most bullied in this sample	Descriptive trend	Not inferential

The prominence of physical and cyber forms is consistent with broader scholarship showing that traditional and digital aggression often overlap rather than exist as separate phenomena (Modecki et al., 2014). This matters because it suggests that anti-bullying efforts cannot focus solely on classroom incidents. Students move between physical and digital peer spaces, and power can be exercised across both. A student who dominates socially at school may continue that dominance online, while online humiliation may intensify offline vulnerability.

The survey also suggested that boys were perceived as the most bullied in this sample. Because the sample is very small and mostly male, this finding should be interpreted cautiously. It cannot be generalized beyond the group studied. Nevertheless, it raises an important point about the local form bullying may take in a specific school environment. In some peer cultures, boys may be more exposed to visible physical aggression or to norms of toughness that discourage reporting, emotional disclosure, or help-seeking. This local perception is therefore analytically relevant even if it is not statistically representative.

3.2. Causes of Bullying

When asked why bullying happens, participants provided varied but revealing responses. Some stated that bullying is seen as “fun” or “cool.” Others pointed to jealousy, disagreements, stress, bad moods, interpersonal problems, or insecurity. These responses are significant because they show that students do not interpret bullying as random. Instead, they associate it with motives connected to social emotion and status.

At first glance, explanations such as jealousy, stress, or bad mood might seem purely psychological. However, when read more carefully, they also point to social struggle. Jealousy implies comparison and competition. Calling bullying “fun” or “cool” suggests that domination may carry symbolic rewards, such as visibility, attention, or peer approval. Insecurity indicates that some students may attempt to compensate for vulnerability by controlling others. Disagreement and personal problems indicate that bullying can emerge when everyday conflict becomes organized around repeated humiliation or force rather than mutual resolution.

These student explanations closely align with established research. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that bullying and victimization are associated with multiple individual and contextual predictors, including social competence problems, behavioral difficulties, peer relations, and school environment (Cook et al., 2010). Juvonen and Graham further argue that bullying has a social dominance function, meaning that aggression can serve as a strategy for obtaining or preserving status. From this perspective, the student perception that bullying can appear “fun” or socially rewarding should not be dismissed as childish exaggeration. It reflects the possibility that bullying carries relational benefits within a peer hierarchy, even while causing harm to the victim (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

A further implication is that bullying is sustained not only by the bully’s intention, but also by the social setting that tolerates or rewards the act. If peers laugh, stay silent, or admire the aggressor, the aggression becomes socially meaningful. If adults fail to intervene effectively, the aggressor may learn that power can be exercised without consequence. This is where the study’s Foucauldian perspective becomes particularly valuable.

3.3. Power and Bullying

Foucault’s account of power differs from the common assumption that power is a possession held by one person alone. For Foucault, power operates through relationships, institutions, norms, surveillance, and the production of what appears normal or acceptable (Foucault, 1982). Applying this idea to tween bullying changes the analysis in important ways.

First, bullying can be understood as a relational practice through which one student attempts to define another student’s place in the social order. A child who repeatedly hits, insults, embarrasses, or excludes another is not only expressing anger. That child is also producing a hierarchy in which the target is expected to occupy a lower position. In this sense, bullying is connected to what Foucault helps us recognize as the everyday micro-politics of school life. Status is established and defended through repeated practices that shape who can speak confidently, who is laughed at, who belongs, and who is silenced.

Second, a Foucauldian reading shows that bullying is not fully captured by simple categories of “strong” and “weak.” Traditional definitions rightly emphasize power imbalance as central to bullying

(Olweus, 2013; Volk et al., 2014). Yet the concept of power itself requires further examination. Horton argues that the field often treats power as self-evident even though the way power is exercised in schools is more complex (Horton, 2020). Power may involve physical strength, popularity, secrecy, access to digital spaces, control over reputations, or alignment with dominant peer norms. This is especially relevant in tween contexts, where friendship groups, group belonging, and fear of exclusion strongly shape social behavior.

Third, Foucault directs attention to the school as an institution. School routines, disciplinary systems, teacher responses, playground visibility, classroom culture, and informal peer rules all shape how bullying is made possible or challenged. Nassem argues that a Foucauldian approach helps move beyond narrow individualization by examining how institutional and social norms contribute to bullying (Nassem, 2025). This perspective is particularly useful for the present study because the participants' suggested solutions, such as more supervision, rules, peace-making, and awareness of consequences, implicitly recognize that bullying is embedded in a wider environment rather than limited to personal morality alone.

The survey findings can therefore be reinterpreted in Foucauldian terms. When students say bullying happens because it is "fun" or "cool," this suggests that domination is socially rewarded. When they mention jealousy or insecurity, these can be read as relational struggles over recognition and value. When they call for more supervision, they are indirectly responding to the institutional distribution of visibility and authority. Bullying persists where power can be exercised repeatedly, where targets are unable to resist effectively, and where norms do not sufficiently disrupt the gains of aggression.

3.4. Hierarchy and Silence

One of the strongest arguments to emerge from this study is that unequal power is central to bullying. This claim appeared directly in the original research idea and is strongly supported by the findings. The participants' responses repeatedly implied that bullying occurs when one student feels able to dominate another with little resistance. This may be through physical force, verbal humiliation, digital harassment, or social ridicule.

This finding resonates with the wider literature. Contemporary scholarship continues to defend power imbalance as a defining feature of bullying rather than a peripheral detail (Andrews et al., 2023; Olweus, 2013; Volk et al., 2014). Yet the present study adds an interpretive nuance by showing that power imbalance among tweens is not merely brute strength. It is social permission. Students bully when they perceive that they have the capacity, audience, and opportunity to do so.

This has consequences for victims. A repeated experience of being overpowered, mocked, or socially downgraded can produce silence. Victims may stop reporting because they assume nothing will change. They may minimize the experience, hide distress, or avoid situations where they feel visible. This dynamic helps explain why bullying is linked to psychosomatic complaints, emotional distress, and weakened academic engagement (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). The harm is not only in the incident itself, but in the repeated restructuring of the victim's relation to school. A child who feels powerless in peer relations may also feel less able to participate fully in classroom life.

A Foucauldian lens deepens this point by showing that silence is not passive. It can be socially produced. When school environments fail to create trusted channels for voice, students may learn that resistance is risky or ineffective. The participants' emphasis on giving students more ability to speak up therefore deserves serious attention. Nassem argues that schools should decentralize decision-making opportunities so that pupils can exercise voice and become active participants in resisting harmful power relations (Nassem, 2025). In the present study, this idea aligns directly with the finding that prevention must involve more than formal discipline. Students need actual conditions under which speaking, reporting, and seeking help become realistic and respected options.

3.5. Safer School Environment

The survey respondents suggested a range of preventive actions, including educating students about consequences, following rules, increasing supervision, making peace, and avoiding escalation. When interpreted alongside the literature, these recommendations point toward a whole-school approach rather than a purely punitive response.

Punishment has a role in setting boundaries, but it is not sufficient on its own. A school that only reacts after harm occurs leaves intact the underlying peer culture that grants aggression social value. This is one reason why Foucauldian analyses of bullying are useful. They encourage schools to examine not only misconduct, but also the social arrangements that make misconduct rewarding or difficult to challenge (Horton, 2020; Nassem, 2025). If bullying is partly sustained by hierarchy, visibility, and unequal opportunities for resistance, then prevention must reduce those structural advantages.

3.6. Limits of the Foucauldian Lens

The present study supports the use of Foucault as a valuable framework for understanding tween bullying, but it also recognizes the limits of that approach. Its strength lies in foregrounding power. Foucault helps reveal that bullying is not simply private meanness or spontaneous aggression. It is a social relation shaped by hierarchy, regulation, visibility, and the ability to define another person's place in a group. This makes the framework highly relevant for school-based analysis, where institutional norms and peer status are constantly interacting.

At the same time, Foucault does not fully explain every dimension of bullying. The survey responses themselves show that stress, insecurity, jealousy, bad mood, and interpersonal conflict also matter. These factors suggest that emotional, developmental, and family-related influences are important as well. A Foucauldian perspective is therefore illuminating but not exhaustive. It explains the social organization of bullying especially well, yet it should be complemented by attention to individual development, emotional regulation, and family or community context.

This limitation was already implicit in the original argument and should be preserved. The most defensible conclusion is not that power imbalance explains everything, but that it explains something fundamental. Power is a central condition through which many other motives become socially effective. A student may feel jealous or insecure, but bullying occurs as bullying when those feelings are enacted through repeated domination within an unequal relationship.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined tween bullying as a school safety issue through the lens of Michel Foucault's theory of power. The findings from the classroom survey and literature review indicate that bullying among tweens is shaped by more than individual aggression. Physical and cyber forms emerged as the most prominent in the participant responses, while jealousy, insecurity, interpersonal conflict, stress, and the perception that bullying is enjoyable appeared as common explanations for why it occurs. Interpreted through a Foucauldian perspective, these responses suggest that bullying is sustained by unequal power relations, peer hierarchies, and school contexts in which domination can produce social rewards and silence can become normalized.

The study therefore concludes that effective bullying prevention must go beyond punishment alone. Safer school environments require active supervision, moral education centered on fairness and empathy, mechanisms for student voice, and school policies that reduce the social benefits of domination. A key contribution of this article is its demonstration that a Foucauldian reading of bullying can remain practically useful when connected to the everyday experiences of tweens and to concrete school-based prevention.

The study has important limitations. The survey involved only eight participants from a single classroom, the data were self-reported, and the findings are descriptive rather than generalizable. The study also did not include teacher, parent, or administrative perspectives, nor did it track bullying

longitudinally. Future research should therefore involve larger and more diverse samples, compare multiple school settings, and examine how student voice, school culture, and anti-bullying interventions interact over time. Additional work is also needed to translate Foucauldian insights into detailed and testable school practices. Even with these limitations, the study shows that understanding bullying as a question of power offers a meaningful path toward building safer, more inclusive schools for tweens.

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