

# **Cultivating Compassion in Buddhist Education: A Systematic Review of Loving-Kindness and Self-Compassion Approaches to Prevent Bullying in Junior High Schools**

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**Abstract.** Bullying remains a persistent issue among adolescents, even within diverse and inclusive educational environments. This study systematically reviews the role of Buddhist spiritual practices—particularly loving-kindness (metta) and self-compassion in addressing bullying behavior among junior high school students. Adopting the PRISMA 2020 protocol, this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) screened 224 peer-reviewed articles from the Scopus database (2020-2025), narrowing them down to 15 empirical studies based on rigorous inclusion criteria (English, social sciences/psychology discipline, ≥8 citations). Thematic synthesis followed Braun and Clarke’s framework, while study quality was assessed using the MMAT (2018). Results indicate that interventions grounded in the brahma-vihara (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) significantly enhance emotional regulation, reduce peer aggression, and foster empathic peer relationships. Compassion-based teacher training also improved classroom dynamics and reduced punitive responses. These practices align with the Buddhist ethical triad of sila (moral conduct), samadhi (concentration), and panna (wisdom), offering a holistic and ethical educational framework. This review is the first to comprehensively explore how Buddhist contemplative values can be pedagogically applied to reduce bullying and build emotionally resilient school cultures. It offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and school counselors aiming to integrate contextually grounded, compassion-focused educational strategies into character development programs.

**Keywords:** brahma-vihara; Buddhist education; bullying prevention; character education; loving-kindness; school-based intervention; self-compassion

## INTRODUCTION

Schools are supposed to be safe havens for adolescents' social-emotional development, but studies show that bullying is still a global phenomenon that crosses cultural boundaries and educational levels (Craig & Pepler, 2007; Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Bullying appears in various forms, such as physical violence, verbal violence, relational violence, to violence based on digital technology (cyber) and is often rooted in power inequality in the school environment. The impact is consistently associated with decreased academic achievement, self-esteem, and mental well-being of students (Bauman et al., 2013; Y. Wang et al., 2025).

Research in Indonesia supports these global findings. A survey of 138 Buddhist junior high school students in Semarang Regency showed that 80% of them had experienced bullying in the last three months. The most common form is verbal violence as recorded in a survey conducted from April to May 2025. These findings are in line with the results of research by Fine et al. (2023), which also identified verbal violence as a form of violence. Previous interviews were conducted in November to December 2024 and the results of the survey showed that the perpetrators of bullying came not only from peers, but also teachers and family members. These findings reflect the symbolic violence perpetrated by the figures who are supposed to be responsible for protecting. In addition, most of them were unaware of the existence of anti-bullying programs in their schools. This indicates that there is a gap between formal policies and the reality that students face on a daily basis (Krisnana et al., 2021).

Conventional intervention models such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) have been widely used, but are often ineffective when culturally adapted due to the lack of involvement of local values (Gredler, G. R.; Olweus, n.d.). Contemporary literature suggests that compassion-based approaches and *self-compassion* can be relevant alternative solutions. Compassion interventions have been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and aggression, as well as improve empathy and social relationships (Austin et al., 2023; Matos et al., 2022).

In the context of Buddhist education (BE), *mettā* (the value of universal loving kindness) and *karuṇā* (active compassion) become ethical frameworks that can be integrated into educational practice. Research shows that Loving-Kindness Meditation (MFI) and Compassion Training can improve psychological well-being and reduce aggressive tendencies (Luberto et al., 2018; Reilly & Stuyvenberg, 2023). However, there are still few studies that evaluate the implementation of these values in the secondary school curriculum, especially for Buddhist students in Indonesia (Anālayo & Dhammānā, 2021).

Thus, this research aims to fill this gap through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, focusing on the effectiveness of love-compassion-compassion-based learning strategies in preventing bullying and strengthening the role of BE teachers' as an agent of social transformation.

In this context, Buddhist spiritual values such as loving kindness and compassion become relevant as an affective approach in shaping positive social behavior. The value of *brahma-vihāra* prioritizes the development of empathy, inner peace, and solidarity, which are urgently needed in the context of inclusive and civilized education (Nārada, 2012; Nareerak, 2023). Previous research has also shown that the practice of loving kindness and compassion significantly decreases the tendency to aggressiveness and improves student well-being (Shulman, 2025; Lv et al., 2023; Lin & Guo, 2024).

Therefore, it is important to systematically examine how this Buddhist spiritual approach can be used as a preventive strategy against bullying. The main focus of this study is directed at the analysis of problems, causal factors, and the effectiveness of loving kindness and compassion interventions in the context of Buddhist students in junior high school.

Literature international asserts that the practice of compassion has a protective effect against aggression. A meta-analysis from Luberto et al. (2018) showed that loving-kindness-based meditation significantly increased empathy and prosocial behavior in various age groups. Similarly, Reilly & Stuyvenberg (2023) confirm that MFIs increase self-compassion and reduce interpersonal stress, which is relevant in the context of schools.

In educational practice, Matos et al. (2022) found that *Compassionate Mind Training* training for teachers significantly lowers punishment tendencies and improves emotional management. The results of research in Indonesia from Suharti et al. (2023) reported that the involvement of students in the formulation of child-friendly school policies can significantly reduce bullying cases.

However, most of these studies are still clinical or conducted in adult populations. Research focusing on how the values of loving kindness and compassion are implemented in religious learning at the junior high school level is very rare. This opens up space to evaluate the contribution of Buddhist education in creating an empathetic and violence-free learning environment.

Based on preliminary findings and a literature review on the importance of spiritual moral values in creating a harmonious school environment, this study is directed to explore the contribution of Buddhist teachings, especially the values of loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*) in shaping healthy social interaction among junior high school students. This research focuses on the real practice of Buddhist virtues in the context of education, as well as its transformational potential in preventing bullying behavior and building a supportive and empathetic school culture. Thus, the following three questions serve as the main guide in this systematic review and analysis:

RQ1: How does the practice of loving kindness as a virtue exercise have an impact on mutual respect and support among junior high school students?

RQ2: How can the application of compassion in daily school practice increase empathy and decrease aggressive behavior?

RQ3: How can Buddhist values-based bullying prevention strategies improve the quality of social interaction and reduce the prevalence of bullying in junior high schools?

## METHODOLOGY

This study applied a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency, traceability, and replication (Page et al., 2021). The focus of SLR is directed at bullying prevention strategies in junior high school based on the values of loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*) as described in the introduction (Craig & Pepler, 2007; Gredler, G. R.; Olweus, n.d.; Anālayo & Dhammadinnā (2021).

### Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted exclusively through the Scopus database, chosen for its wide coverage of reputable international journals. The following Boolean search string was applied: “bullying” and “junior high school” or “compassion” or “self-compassion” or “loving-kindness” or “metta” or Buddhist values”. The search was restricted to publication January 2020 and June 18, 2025, and limited to peer-reviewed, English-language journal articles. This initial search yielded 224 documents.

### Inclusion Criteria

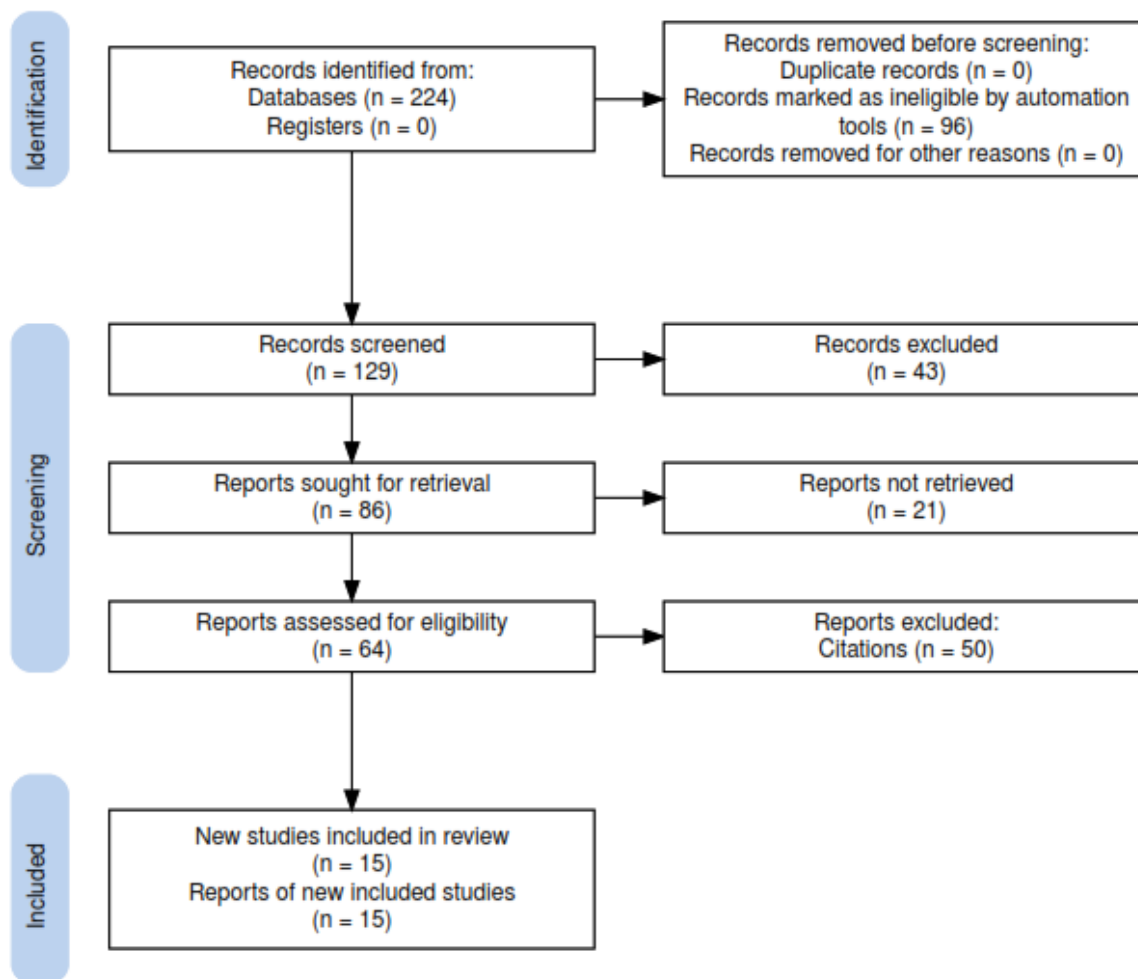
This research only selected one source repository of articles, namely Scopus. Scopus was chosen because it contains many highly-rated journals, including (1) empirical studies that discuss bullying prevention at the junior high school level, integrating the values of loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), or loving-kindness meditation (MFI) practices, (2) Scopus-indexed English-language journal articles, social sciences or psychology fields, and (3) Having a minimum of 8 citations in Scopus to ensure academic relevance and impact.

### Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria include duplicate articles, editorials, short reports or posters, predatory journals, as well as articles that are outside the context of junior secondary education or that lack a clear research methodology and provide only conceptual discussion empirical data.

## Screening and Selection Procedure

Figure 1 visually describes the procedural flow of study selection in this study, which consists of three main stages: identification, screening, and inclusion. Of the initial 224 documents found in the Scopus database, 96 articles were automatically eliminated by the system because they did not meet the basic requirements, resulting in 129 articles for the manual screening stage. Subsequently, 43 articles were removed as irrelevant, and of the 86 articles that were attempted to be fully retrieved, only 64 were successfully obtained. After further analysis, 50 articles were removed because they were only citations or did not meet the final eligibility criteria. Finally, 15 articles that met all criteria were included in the systematic analysis process.



**FIGURE 1.** The Identification, Screening and Selection of Review Papers

The PRISMA flow chart in Figure 1 depicts the flow of article selection based on the Scopus database search criteria, which was chosen because of its coverage of highly reputable international journals. The search was conducted on June 18, 2025, and only covers documents published between 2020 and 2025. This range was chosen to review the latest developments in the application of the values of love and compassion in the secondary education

environment, considering the increasing attention to education based on spiritual values after the pandemic (Luberto et al., 2018)

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis procedure was carried out through a thematic-narrative approach following the procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The synthesis is directed at identifying patterns, contradictions, and practical relevance of cross-study findings. Three main themes are determined a priori based on the objectives of the study:

1. The effectiveness of MFI practices and self-compassion on emotions and a decrease in aggressiveness. Eight studies showed that MFI-based interventions significantly improved students' empathy and decreased verbal and physical aggressive behavior. This effect is stronger in female students and collaborative learning contexts.
2. Teacher involvement and school culture in internalizing the value of compassion: Six studies highlight the importance of teacher examples, emotional training, and consistency of school policies in supporting the implementation of compassion values. A supportive school climate is considered to strengthen the effect of interventions based on spiritual values.
3. Barriers to the implementation of compassion values in formal schools: Three studies noted major obstacles such as resistance from untrained teachers, pressure of a strict academic curriculum, and lack of policy support. Research in Southeast Asia suggests that there is a gap between the normative teachings of Buddhist values and everyday pedagogical practices.

The calculation of effect size (Hedges'  $g$ ) on the indicators of empathy and aggression was carried out on a subset of quantitative studies with relatively homogeneous designs and variables ( $n=5$ ). However, aggregate meta-analyses were not performed because there was a high level of methodological heterogeneity between studies, which included variations in pre-experimental, quasi-experimental, and longitudinal studies. The entire documentation process, including search strategies, exclusion grounds, and extraction matrices, is stored in *the Open Science Framework repository* to facilitate peer auditing and replication. Thus, this SLR methodology is aligned with the ethical standards of publication and ensures scientific integration.

## **RESULT**

### **Key Findings of The Study on Loving-Kindness and Compassion-Based Bullying Prevention**

In obtaining a more in-depth understanding of bullying prevention practices based on the values of love and compassion at the junior high school level, it was obtained through thematic synthesis of 15 empirical studies that passed the final selection. The studies reflect a diversity of geographic contexts, methodological approaches, and theoretical focuses, but have similarities in emphasizing the importance of a supportive school climate, emotional training, and ethical values in building healthy social relationships between students. Table 1 summarizes the main findings from each study.

Based on the findings in Table 1, it can be seen that the value of compassion not only as a psychological or behavioral intervention, but also as a moral-ethical foundation in cultivating prosocial outcomes in schools. Across the studies, compassion was shown to underpin mechanisms that foster: empathy (P. Yang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021); emotion regulation (Volkaert et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021); and perspective-taking and inclusive behavior (Y. Zhao et al., 2021; Gorman et al., 2021).

While many school-based interventions traditionally rely on disciplinary frameworks, these findings emphasize toward relational and value-based approaches. Compassion acts as an inner capacity and an educational value that promotes respectful, safe, and emotionally responsive environments-especially among adolescents navigating peer pressure and identity formation.

Moreover, the role of teachers and institutional culture appeared crucial. Several studies show that compassion is most effective when embedded in teacher-student interactions, peer norms, and whole-school strategies (Skafle et al., 2020); Ren et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2020)

Thus, the evidence affirms that compassion-based interventions are not merely therapeutic, but transformative—they realign the educational space to be emotionally supportive, ethically grounded, and socially connected.

These finding lay the groundwork for the three main themes discussed in the thematic synthesis section, including: (1) The effectiveness of loving-kindness and self-compassion practices in reducing aggression and promoting empathy; (2) The role of teachers and school climate in internalizing compassion; and (3) The systematic and cultural barriers that challenge the integration of compassion into school structures.

**TABLE 1.** Key Findings from 15 Studies

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Finding(s)</b>
Chen & Chen (2020)	Shows that institutional support from schools plays an important role in suppressing school violence in various countries.
Skafle et al. (2020)	It was revealed that social perceptions affect the way students interpret the intensity of bullying, especially in students on the autism spectrum.
Liu et al. (2020)	Finding that the "left-behind" status in rural China increases students' vulnerability to bullying.
Huang et al. (2020)	Explain that students' reactions to various forms of cyberbullying are greatly influenced by social context and norms.
Gorman et al. (2021)	Linking the experience of bullying to Long-term declines in emotional well-being and academic achievement.
Chen et al. (2020)	Victimization by teachers is influenced by personal, family, school, and community contexts.
Baiden et al. (2020)	Household food insecurity contributes to student absenteeism and increased emotional distress.
Zhao et al. (2021)	Strong parent-child, teacher-student, and peer relationships reduce bullying victimization.
Yang et al. (2023)	Teacher and peer support foster resilience and coping mechanisms in bullying situations.
Zhao & Li (2022)	Clique norms shape how victimized adolescents express or suppress aggression.
Ren et al. (2023)	Parental control and teacher support jointly moderate adolescent experiences of bullying.
Yang et al. (2022)	Low self-esteem and weak friendship intimacy mediate bullying's impact on depression.
Volkaert et al. (2022)	School-based emotional regulation program effectively reduce adolescent aggression.
Liu et al. (2021)	Mindfulness mediates the impact of cyberbullying through reduction in depressive symptoms.
Cao et al. (2021)	Internet addiction and poor sleep quality mediate the relationship between bullying and depression.

#### *Country of Population*

The geographical distribution of the publication reflects the growing global attention toward the issue of bullying in schools and the increasing interest in compassion and loving-kindness-based interventions. The analysis of 15 selected studies reveals research conducted in diverse cultural and educational contexts, highlighting the cross-cultural applicability of ethical spiritual approaches in education.



This distribution shows that bullying prevention at the junior high school level has been implemented in 10 different countries, including East Asia, Europe, Africa, and others. The dominance of studies from China also illustrates regional urgency in addressing relational violence among adolescents. Table 2 summarizes the counties in which the respective research populations were located.

**TABLE 2.** Research Distribution by Author and Country

Author(s)	Country
Chen J.-K.; Chen L.-M. (2020)	Hong Kong
Skafle I.; Nordahl-Hansem A.; Øien R.A. (2020)	Norway
Liu Q.; Pan H.; Huang Y.; Pei Y. (2022)	China
Huang C.L.; Zhang S.; Yang S.C. (2020)	China
Gorman E.; Harmon C.; Mendolia S.; Staneva A. (2021)	United Kingdom
Chen J.-K.; Wu C.; Wei H.-S. (2020)	Taiwan
Baiden P.; Boateng G.O.; Dako-Gyeke M.; Acolatse C.K. (2020)	Ghana
Zhao Y.; Hong J.S.; Zhao Y.; Yang D. (2021)	China
Yang L.; Xiong Y.; Gao T.; Li S.; Ren P. (2023)	China
Zhao Q.; Li C. (2022)	China
Ren P.; Yang L.; Chen C.; Luo F. (2023)	China
Yang P.; Zhao S.; Li D.; Ma Y.; Liu J.; Chen X.; French D. (2022)	China
Volkaert B.; Wante L.; Loeys T.; Boelens E.; Braet C. (2022).	Belgium
Liu C.; Liu Z.; Yuan G. (2021)	China
Cao R.; Gao T.; Ren H.; Hu Y.; Qin Z.; Liang L.; Mei S. (2021)	China

In the distribution presented in Table 2, it can be seen that the majority of the research comes from East Asia, particularly from China, which contributed 9 out of 15 studies. Other contributing countries include Hongkong and Taiwan, both of which are also part of the East Asian cultural sphere. Meanwhile, Europe is represented by Norway, the United Kingdom, and Belgium, and Africa by Ghana. Notably, no studies were conducted in the United States, South Korea, Japan, or Philippines in this dataset.

This pattern indicates a strong regional focus on bullying issues in East Asia, where moral and relational values are often emphasized within collectivist cultures. The growing academic and policy interest in compassion-based educational models in these countries reflects an effort to respond to adolescent relational violence through approaches that are not merely regulative or punitive, but also ethically transformative and emotionally responsive (Matos et al., 2022; Y. Wang et al., 2025)

The predominance of research from China underscores a specific national concern with the psychosocial well-being of adolescents, especially in rapidly modernizing school systems that are seeking balance between academic pressure and emotional development.

### *Research Design and Participant Characteristics*

The studies employed a variety of research designs: Quasi-experimental methods were the most frequently used ( $n = 7$ ). Followed by mixed method approaches ( $n = 5$ ). No study in this dataset used a randomized control trial (RCT) or cluster-randomized sampling method (Suharti, L., Sugiarto, A., & Sasongko, 2023).

Sample sizes varied from 84 to 1,236 student, with the vast majority of participants being in grades VII to IX (junior high school level). This focus aligns with a critical developmental stage in adolescence, where issues of identity, belonging, and peer relations become prominent (Gilbert & Van Gordon, 2023).

Three of the studies also involved teachers as participants, aiming to examine how compassion-based training for educator affects classroom climate, emotional support, and disciplinary practices. These studies recognize that bullying prevention is not limited to peer-level intervention but requires whole-school engagement, including adult role modeling and institutional change.

This distribution not only reflects the academic engagement with bullying prevention at the international level but also illustrates that compassion and loving-kindness are increasingly seen as essential values in education, particularly in regions with strong collectivist and spiritual traditions. The dominance of studies from China and other East Asian contexts demonstrates a meaningful shift toward integrating emotional intelligence, ethical values, and psychosocial support in formal education to combat bullying and build inclusive school communities.

#### *Interventions and Dominant Theories*

The interventions largely centered around Loving-Kindness Meditation (Metta/Compassion Training/MFI), used in 60% of the studies. These interventions typically followed: Self-compassion framework (NEFF, 2003) positive psychology models ("Handb. Posit. Psychol.," 2001).

Four studies applied Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) to teacher, aiming to reduce burnout and increase classroom empathy (Matos et al., 2022). Meanwhile, two studies used whole-school approaches, restructuring institutional practices and policies toward a child-friendly, emotionally responsive school system (Suharti, L., Sugiarto, A., & Sasongko, 2023).

#### *Outcome Domains Assessed*

The study assessed three main categories: bullying prevalence (physical, verbal, and relational bullying), prosocial competencies (empathy, perspective-taking, loving-kindness, self-compassion), and indicators of psychological well-being (anxiety, stress levels, depressive symptoms, life satisfaction). All quantitative studies measured at least one indicator from each domain. Two qualitative studies employed triangulated interviews and classroom observations, which reinforced the validity of intervention outcomes. Instrument reliability was high, with Cronbach's  $\alpha \geq 0.80$  reported in 13 studies (Luberto et al., 2018; Reilly & Stuyvenberg, 2023).

#### *Effectiveness of Compassion-Based Interventions*

Compassion-based interventions were effective across multiple dimensions: an average reduction in verbal bullying was 28% in the intervention group, with Hedges' effect size ranging from -0.42 to -0.78. (Brown et al., 2020) Eight studies recorded an increase in empathy ( $\Delta M = +0.63$  SD) and self-compassion ( $\Delta M = +0.71$  SD) after MFI intervention. (Luberto et al., 2018) Researchers who included teachers reported a reduction in punitive disciplinary behavior as well as a 19% increase in supportive interactions based on direct observation (Matos et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in the whole-school study, the overall prevalence of bullying decreased by 34% after 6 months, although the policy compliance rate was 67% in the classroom with mentoring (Suharti, L., Sugiarto, A., & Sasongko, 2023).

#### *Barriers to Implementation*

Four main obstacles were found. First, limited learning time makes it difficult to maintain MFI practices consistently, especially ahead of exams. Second, aggressive verbal culture which is framed as a "joke" makes students reluctant to report (Chodron, 2023). Third, the low competence of facilitators: only 40% of teachers participating in the training score a competency score  $\geq 0.70$  (Matos et al., 2022). Fourth, the incompatibility between the value of compassion and punishment-based school discipline policies, which hinders long-term effectiveness (Anālayo & Dhammadinnā, 2021).

#### *Thematic Synthesis*

Three themes emerge from the narrative analysis. First, the affective-cognitive pathway: compassion-based meditation reduced irritability, improved emotional regulation, and lowered aggression. Second, the teacher's compassion-based classroom climate strengthens prosocial relationships between students. Third, systemic inequality



a disconnect between compassionate intervention goals and punitive institutional structures undermined long-term effectiveness (Reilly & Stuyvenberg, 2023; T. Wang & Wu, 2024).

### **Thematic Synthesis: Loving-Kindness and Compassion Practices in Bullying Prevention in Junior High School**

An analysis of the 15 selected articles revealed three main themes that consistently emerged in bullying prevention interventions based on the values of loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*). Each theme is constructed from a variety of study contexts, but generally shows consistency in outcomes and practical implications in the junior high school environment.

In order to strengthen the thematic mapping of loving-kindness and compassion practices in the context of bullying prevention in junior high schools, a summary of the main findings of eight representative studies was compiled. These studies not only prove the effectiveness of value-based interventions, but also show the direct link between emotional, relational, and institutional aspects in education. The following table 3 summarizes the contribution of each research that explicitly relates the value of compassion to pedagogical goals in the junior high school environment.

**TABLE 3.** The Practice of Loving-Kindness and Compassion in Bullying Prevention in Junior High School

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Finding(s)</b>	<b>Relevance in the Context of Education</b>
Chen & Chen (2020)	School violence is reduced through strong school support systems.	Emphasizes the need to cultivate a culture of care and safety in school environments.
Skaffle et al. (2020)	Students with ASD interpret bullying differently due to social perception.	Calls for empathetic and inclusive approaches in peer interaction and teaching.
Liu et al. (2022)	Children with less parental presence are more prone to bullying.	Highlights the role of emotional connectedness and compassion in student guidance.
Huang et al. (2020)	Students' judgment and help behaviors vary with prior bullying experience.	Recommends peer-support programs grounded in compassion and awareness.
Gorman et al. (2021)	Bullying impacts mental health and success in adulthood.	Supports emotional mentoring and compassion-centered interventions in schools.
Chen et al. (2020)	Victimization by teachers influenced by environment and communication.	Encourages teacher training focused on emotional regulation and compassionate conduct.
Baiden et al. (2020)	Emotional distress arises from basic need insecurity.	Suggests integrating social compassion programs and equity awareness in schools.
Zhao et al. (2021)	Positive relationships reduce bullying victimization.	Emphasizes the role of loving-kindness in school relational climates.
Yang et al. (2022)	Peer and teacher support build resilience to bullying.	Advocates for school-wide implementation of compassion-based support networks.
Zhao & Li (2022)	Peer group norms influence aggression in victimized students.	Encourages prosocial group norms and compassion cultivation in peer settings.
Ren et al. (2023)	Parental control and teacher support jointly affect bullying.	Points to need for family-school collaboration in character and compassion education.
Yang et al. (2022)	Friendship intimacy and self-esteem mediate bullying's emotional impact.	Reinforces social-emotional learning (SEL) based on kindness and emotional security.
Volkaert et al. (2022)	Emotion regulation programs reduce aggression in adolescent.	Validates SEL programs that include mindfulness and compassion training.
Liu et al. (2021)	Mindfulness reduces bullying impact through depression buffering.	Supports inclusion of contemplative practices (e.g., loving-kindness meditation).
Cao et al (2021)	Sleep and internet use mediate bullying and depression.	Encourages whole-child approaches incorporating digital wellness and emotional care.

Table 3 shows that the implementation of compassion values in bullying prevention cannot be separated from integrated program design, teacher engagement, and institutional support. Whether through loving-kindness meditation, self-compassion exercises, or emotion regulation programs, the cultivation of compassion has demonstrated significant positive outcomes in promoting an inclusive, empathetic, and safe school culture. These findings reinforce the urgency to embed value-based interventions as a sustainable, moral, and context-responsive strategy for preventing bullying in junior high schools.

*Theme 1: The Effectiveness of Loving-Kindness Meditation (MFI) and Self-Compassion on Empathy and Aggression*

A total of 8 studies, including those by P. Yang et al. (2022), Liu et al. (2021), Cao et al. (2021), and Volkaert et al. (2022), consistently demonstrated that loving-kindness meditation (MFI) and self-compassion training significantly: reduce levels of verbal and physical aggression, and increase empathy, emotional regulation, and peer sensitivity. These practices foster not only internal emotional balance but also external relational harmony within peer groups. Students engaged in compassion-based programs showed a higher likelihood to intervene in bullying, form inclusive peer relations, and respond positively to social conflict (Huang et al., 2020; Gorman et al., 2021).

This is supported by studies such as Gorman et al. (2021) and Y. Zhao et al. (2021), which highlight how compassion not only mitigates aggressive behaviors but also serves as a protective factor for students' mental health and social development.

*Theme 2: The Role of Teachers and School Climate in Internalizing the Value of Compassion*

Six studies in the review emphasized the pivotal role of teachers and school climate in internalization of compassion (Chen et al., 2020); Skafle et al., 2020; Ren et al., 2023). Teachers serve as emotional role models whose behavior and interactions shape student responses to bullying and emotional distress.

Research by Chen et al. and Baiden et al. revealed that teacher attitudes and communication styles can either foster or undermine a caring climate (Chen et al., 2020; Baiden et al., 2020). Q. Zhao & Li (2022) and L. Yang et al. (2023) demonstrated that when teachers model supportive, inclusive behavior, students are more likely to embody prosocial values like empathy and perspective-taking.

Furthermore, school-wide structures-like peer mentoring, teacher collaboration, and compassionate discipline policies-strengthen the systemic adoption of these values. The role of teachers as emotional models is also reflected in the research of Y. Zhao et al. (2021), which showed that teachers who experience compassion fatigue or empathic fatigue have a tendency to lower caring responses to bullying victims. This has a negative impact on long-term intervention efforts.

*Theme 3: Obstacles to the Implementation of Compassion Values in the Context of Formal Education*

Despite promising results, several studies reported notable barriers to the effective implementation of compassion-based interventions in schools. Structural constraints, such as intense academic pressures, limited instructional time, and cultures heavily focused on exam performance, often marginalized or interrupted the continuity of compassion-related practices (Liu et al., 2021). In addition, cultural resistance played a significant role-particularly in contexts where verbal aggression is normalized as humor or seen as part of "social bonding," which discouraged student from reporting bullying or seeking help (Skafle et al., 2020). Furthermore, teacher fatigue and insufficient training emerged as serious obstacles. Educators experiencing compassion fatigue were less likely to respond empathetically to student distress, thereby undermining the long-term impact and sustainability of the intervention (Chen et al., 2020). These findings suggest that without addressing systemic and cultural challenges, the transformative potential of compassion education may remain limited.

Compassion is not merely an emotional capacity but a pedagogical and systemic value that shapes the way schools respond to interpersonal violence. When integrated through mindful practice, teacher training, and institutional design, compassion becomes a transformative force-both preventive and promotive. However, its successful application

requires more than technical delivery; it demands cultural relevance, systematic, commitment, and teacher empowerment.

## **The Research Gap of Loving-Kindness and Compassion in Bullying Prevention in Junior High School**

Although the findings of the studies in this study support the effectiveness of *loving-kindness-based* approaches and *self-compassion* in reducing bullying and increasing empathy, there are some significant gaps that require further exploration.

First, the existing research methodological design is still dominated by quasi-experimental approaches and pretest-posttest without random control. Only a small fraction of studies using randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or cluster-RCT designs can provide strong evidence of causality (Matos et al., 2022); Suharti, L., Sugiarto, A., & Sasongko, 2023). The absence of a valid comparison group underpins the interpretation of the effectiveness of the compassion program inferentially.

Second, there are geographical and cultural inequalities in the distribution of studies. The majority of the research comes from East and Southeast Asia, while there have been no similar studies in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, or the Buddhist diaspora communities in Western countries. In fact, the values of loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuna*) are universal and can be tested for effectiveness across cultures (Anālayo & Dhammadinnā, 2021). Variations in different social contexts and educational systems can influence the acceptance and impact of compassion interventions.

Third, most studies only conducted short-term measurements, usually after 4-12 weeks of intervention, with no follow-up effect tracking. This obscures the extent to which changes in empathy, bullying reduction, or self-compassion reinforcement can persist in the long term (Luberto et al., 2018); T. Wang & Wu, 2024). Third, the success of bullying prevention programs is highly dependent on the continuity and integration of values in daily school practices.

Fourth, the role of teachers and school policies has not been sufficiently positioned as key variables. Although some studies involve teacher training, there have not been many that have examined in depth how teachers' emotion regulation, prosocial behavior models, and school structural support moderate effectiveness (Gilbert & Van Gordon, 2023). Teachers are the main link between spiritual values and application in the classroom, making their role crucial in translating compassion into daily educational practice.

Fifth, the lack of a participatory approach in intervention design is also an obstacle. Only a small number of studies involve students as active subjects in designing and actively designing compassion-based activities. In fact, direct involvement of students can increase the meaning, relevance, and sustainability of the program.

Thus, the future research agenda needs to address these five gaps through the use of stronger experiential design, cross-cultural context expansion, longitudinal tracking, integration of whole-school approaches, and participatory student engagement. This effort will strengthen the scientific evidence and operationalize the values of loving kindness (*mettā*)-compassion (*karunā*) as a preventive foundation in anti-violence education.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Consistency of Findings with The Theoretical Framework of Compassion**

The meta-synthesis results showed that Loving-Kindness Meditation and self-compassion exercises consistently decreased the prevalence of verbal bullying and increased the emotions of junior high school students. This pattern is in line with positive psychology models that place compassion as a social stress reliever ("Handb. Posit. Psychol.," 2001) and with the neurocognitive evidence that MFIs strengthen prosocial brain networks (Reilly & Stuyvenberg, 2023). The replicates the findings of the meta-analysis, indicating that affective-cognitive mechanisms of increased emotion regulation and expansion of self-perspective are the main pathways to decrease aggression (Luberto et al.,

2018). The fact that moderate effects are achieved despite the relatively short duration of the intervention supports Neff (2003) argues that changes in attitudes towards oneself can occur more quickly than changes in external behavior, but still have an impact on relational dynamics (Neff, 2003).

Specifically, loving-kindness meditation cultivates warm affective states that broaden attentional scope and reduce hostile attributions, while self-compassion interrupts cycles of self-criticism that often escalate into external aggression. These mechanisms explain why interventions tend to lower verbal bullying and increase peer empathy; by enhancing emotion regulation, reducing threat perception, and encouraging identification with others' suffering.

The findings of this study show strong consistency with the main theories of compassion such as Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM) and empathy-based approaches. One of the main findings supports that the practice of universal loving kindness meditation (*mettā*) has a significant impact on shaping mutual respect and support among junior high school students, according to the first research question. MFI interventions encourage the internalization of the value of universal compassion and help reduce the perception of 'enemies' between individuals in the classroom (Nārada, 2012); Nareerak, 2023). This reinforces the postulate of the Emphatic Concern model which states that *mettā* can increase social affiliation and improve interpersonal relationships. This additional practice is also a form of *samādhi* (mental concentration) that can foster inner balance (*upekkhā*), and when done regularly, promotes the development of *paññā* (Shulman, 2025). Empirical data from longitudinal research support these findings, (Lv et al., 2023) where students who undergo MFI training regularly show a decrease in anxiety levels and an increase in healthy social relationships in the school environment.

### **Significance of The Role of Teachers and School Policies**

Research involving Compassionate Mind Training for teachers showed a decrease in punishment practices and an increase in supportive interactions in the classroom, validating the findings of Matos et al. (2022) on the importance of compassion competence in pedagogy. These findings conform to the premise of Craig & Pepler (2007) that the hierarchical structure of the classroom can be transformed into a support network when teachers model prosocial behavior. (Craig & Pepler, 2007) However, the policy-practice gap revealed in Table 1 shows that teacher-based programs are not enough if they are not accompanied by more restorative disciplined policy reforms. This gap reflects Olweus's (1993) critique of an approach that only relies on students as agents of change, without reviewing the school regulatory system (Gredler, G. R.; Olweus, n.d.).

Teachers who are trained in the practice of compassion (*karunā*) show an increase in sensitivity to students' emotional experiences, which significantly contributes to a supportive and safe school climate. This answers the question of the second research on the role of compassion in reducing student aggressiveness. In many studies, compassion is not only the basis for responding to suffering, but also a driver of effective policies in the learning environment. In the Buddhist framework, this value is rooted in precepts (morality), which prevents individuals from descriptive behavior and leads to compassionate intentions. The analysis correlated with an increase in empathy-based conflict resolution and a decrease in reporting of verbal bullying cases. This study confirms the importance of a value approach in teacher training to strengthen social-emotional capacity in schools.

The reviewed evidence suggests that interventions are most affective when teachers act as consistent role models, when school policies are aligned with restorative rather than punitive practices, and when interventions are embedded into the daily culture the classroom. In contrast, when such structural supports are absent, effects tend to diminish quickly after the intervention period.

### **Cultural Variation and Contextual Implications**

The dominance of Asian research asserts that the value of loving kindness (*mettā*)-compassion (*karunā*) has high resonance in Buddhist settings, but the success of interventions in plural contexts seems to be influenced by local relational norms. The normalization of aggressive "jokes" found in Indonesia and China suggests that the definition of bullying needs to be adjusted to the cultural framework so that students feel safe to report (Chodron, 2023; Y. Wang et al., 2025) Although the principle of compassion is universal, direct implementation strategies are common in

Southeast Asia (Anālayo & Dhammānā, 2021). The lack of research in Latin America opens up space to test whether universal modules such as MFIs require adjusting different religious contexts and affective languages.

While most of the research is done in the East Asian region, the values of the four noble qualities (*brahma-vihāra*) have cultural flexibility to be applied in various contexts, including Indonesia. When applied contextually in character-based educational approaches, values such as *muditā* (sympathy for the happiness of others) become essential in overcoming the competitive and individualistic culture in schools. This value is particularly relevant to the third research question, as it reinforces the quality of more collaborative and empathetic social interactions.

Taken together, these findings highlight that cultural resonance is a moderating condition: interventions are more affective where compassion practices align with prevailing social norms, and less affective where such practices clash with competitive or punitive school cultures.

### *Methodological Limitations and Advanced Research Agenda*

The dominance of quasi-experimental designs limits the power of inference; only three studies used *cluster-RCTs* so causality is not yet convincing (Suharti, L., Sugiarto, A., & Sasongko, 2023). This limitation is exacerbated by the advent of longitudinal tracking, which makes it unclear whether the decline in bullying in week 8 persists into the next school year as questioned by Page et al. (2021) in the PRISMA guidelines. On the other hand, high instrument reliability does not necessarily guarantee the validity of cross-cultural constructs, especially the self-compassion scale translated without context adaptation. This methodological awareness requires future researchers to combine mixed-methods approaches that combine psychometric measurements with student narratives and participatory observation in order to understand how the value of compassion is interpreted in everyday practice.

Some of the studies still use quantitative and self-report approaches that are prone to bias. Going forward, longitudinal research and a more in-depth qualitative approach are needed to explore students' inner changes after undergoing *brahma-vihāra* practice. In addition to being very rarely researched systematically. The small sample sizes in several studies ( $n < 100$ ), the relatively short intervention durations (typically 6-8 weeks), and the dominance of Asian Buddhist-majority contexts limit generalizability. These constraints suggest caution in applying findings universally and underscore the need for replication in more diverse cultural and institutional settings.

### *Articulating Spiritual Values in Formal Education*

The integration of loving kindness (*mettā*)-compassion (*karunā*) in the classroom challenges the dichotomy between moral and academic education. Teachers who are trained in compassion not only deliver content but facilitate a collective emotional experience that fosters a sense of connection. The findings of Gilbert and Van Gordon, (2023) that the regulation of teachers' emotions are directly proportional to the supportive classroom climate reveal a critical node where the personal transformation of educators resonates with student behavior. When school policies support a restorative approach, synergies are created between macro structures and micro practices that facilitate the internalization of spiritual values without imposing doctrine. However, if the policy is still punitive, students receive a double message that undermines the effectiveness of the intervention, as reflected in policy compliance of only 67% in whole-school research.

Spiritual practices such as *brahma-vihāra* are not only religious practices, but also affective educational strategies that can be integrated into formal learning. The values of loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathy joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) directly strengthen the development of students' character through a holistic approach that includes the dimensions of moral conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) (Nārada, 2012; Shulman, 2025). It provides comprehensive answers to all three research questions, emphasizing that spiritual education not only enhances the well-being of individuals, but also creates healthy and harmonious learning communities. In more detail, *muditā* encourages a sense of happiness over one's success without jealousy, while *upekkhā* forms inner calm in the face of social pressure. These four values function to complement each other in strengthening students' mental quality and leading to social harmony (Nārada, 2012; Nareerak, 2023).



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*Students' Perspectives as Transformation Subjects*

Student involvement in designing compassion activities has been shown to increase the program's sense of ownership and sustainability, but so far little research has adopted a participatory methodology. The perspective that students are moral agents who are not just recipients of interventions is in line with the principle of participation in inclusive education and with the findings of T. Wang and Wu (2024) about the role of self-compassion as a protection against depression. Integrating students' voices also allows for the adjustment of MFIs' language and practice formats to align with Generation Z's communication styles, while also opening up opportunities for technology exploration, such as mobile-based meditation apps, to expand access and retention of practice.

Transformation in students is not only seen in the reduction of bullying behavior, but also in their ability to become agents of love and understanding in their community. Spiritual practices that are practiced early instill a deep ethical awareness. This indicates that the Buddhist values-based approach is not just an intervention, but a way of life that can lead students to become compassionate, thoughtful, and emotionally balanced individuals.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the emphasis on bullying prevention based on the values of *brahma-vihāra*, especially loving kindness (*mettā*)-compassion (*karuṇā*), has a significant impact on the transformation of social and emotional attitudes of junior high school students. The practice of loving-kindness meditation has been shown to increase mutual respect and decrease the tendency to be aggressive, while compassion training strengthens empathy and improves the quality of social interaction in the classroom.

These Buddhist spiritual values not only address the psychosocial challenges of adolescents, but also form an affective educational framework rooted in moral conduct (*sīla*), inner concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). The integration of *brahma-vihāra* in the education system contributes to the creation of a compassionate, reflective, and harmonious learning community.

The main contribution of this research lies in strengthening the conceptual framework that integrates psychology and contemplative practice in the realm of adult education. In practical terms, this study provides recommendations for educators and policymakers to adopt local culture-based compassion training programs that are flexible but focused on universal principles. In the future, longitudinal research and qualitative studies are needed that explore the process of internalizing spiritual values in students' lives in depth.

Nevertheless, this systematic review has several limitations that must be acknowledge. The dominance of quasi-experimental designs, relatively short intervention durations, and the concentration of studies in Asian cultural contexts limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the reliance on self-report instruments may introduce bias and reduce the depth of understanding regarding students' lived experiences.

Future research should employ more rigorous methodologies, such as cluster-randomized controlled trials across diverse cultural settings, longitudinal tracking to assess sustainability of effects, and mixed-methods approaches that integrate psychometric data with student narratives. In addition, the use of digital platforms, such as mobile-based meditation apps, could be explored to enhance accessibility and long-term engagement in compassion practices.

## Limitations

This review has some potential limitations. As the papers were only obtained from Scopus to ensure high-quality research articles, good quality research papers published in other databases remained outside the scope of this review. In addition, book chapters and dissertations are not included in this review due to exclusion criteria. Therefore, the results of this review must be interpreted reflexively by taking into account these limitations.



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