

The Preventive Role of Social Work Practice in Reducing University Bullying

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Abstract:

The study aims to explore the preventive role of social work practice in reducing bullying within the university environment. The research paper analytically and descriptively examines the theoretical frameworks of bullying as a form of aggressive behavior. It also explores the different types of bullying and their psychological and social effects on individuals, particularly university students. The paper highlights the role of social work practice through the preventive approach, which is considered an effective method to reduce the risk of bullying against students; in cooperation with key university stakeholders such as the university administration; faculty members, and social workers.

Finally, the study presents a proposed model for social work practice in the university context. The findings revealed that:

-Integrating the preventive approach as a strategy to reduce university bullying contributes to creating a healthy and safe academic environment

-Implementing strategies based on awareness , guidance, and counseling helps mitigate and reduce bullying behaviors.

Organizing study days and training workshops allows for addressing negative behaviors within the university setting

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Establishing listening and social support units, and promoting a culture of reporting within the university, ensures a safe and supportive academic environment.

Keywords: Preventive role; social work practice; university bullying; social worker; Reducing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of student-related problems in higher education is an important issue, particularly in light of the changing social, educational, economic, and technological conditions. The life situations that university students face have given rise to numerous social problems, often resulting from dysfunctions within socialization institutions such as the family, school, and others.

Among these problems is bullying behavior, which negatively affects the educational environment that includes various actors—students, faculty members, and university administration—and has an adverse impact on students' performance. This phenomenon has become increasingly widespread in university settings, calling for more in-depth research on university bullying.

As a negative behavior, bullying has severe and far-reaching consequences. Victims often suffer from social effects such as isolation, withdrawal, and social exclusion, as well as psychological effects like stress, anxiety, and sleep or eating disorders, which may even lead to tragic outcomes such as suicide. Furthermore, bullying has a significant impact on students' academic performance, leading to lower achievement and academic disengagement.

Consequently, university bullying has attracted considerable attention at the global, Arab, and local levels in terms of research and investigation. However, studies focusing on university bullying remain limited compared to those addressing school bullying.

Despite the existence of regulatory mechanisms such as laws and disciplinary councils, bullying behavior continues to increase, with its forms evolving from traditional bullying to cyberbullying as a result of

technological advancements. This form of bullying often occurs in secrecy, away from the supervision and control of university authorities.

Therefore, this research paper seeks to propose an accompanying mechanism to support the university's role in reducing bullying within the academic environment through the practice of social work and the adoption of the preventive approach as an effective strategy for combating bullying.

Based on the above, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the preventive role of social work practice in reducing bullying behavior among university students?
- What is meant by bullying, and what are its types and effects?
- What is meant by social work practice, what are its components and objectives, and what role does the preventive approach play in social work practice within the university environment to reduce bullying?

2. Significance of the Study

. The significance of this study lies in highlighting the role of social work practice in protecting university students from manifestations of bullying—a phenomenon that has recently become widespread among students. University students are increasingly exposed to various forms of bullying, including verbal assaults, threats, harassment, and intimidation, which often extend beyond verbal abuse to physical, social, and symbolic violence.

The importance of this research also stems from clarifying the role of social work practice within the university environment, particularly through the intervention of the social worker, who plays a crucial preventive role in protecting and supporting bullied students and in correcting the behavior of bullies.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify the preventive role of social work practice in reducing bullying behavior within the university environment.
- To define the concept of bullying, its types, causes, and effects.
- To explore preventive approach strategies in social work practice.
- To determine the role of the social worker in addressing the phenomenon of bullying in the university context.

4. Definition of Concepts and Terms Related to the Study

- **Role:**

“It is the pattern of behavior expected by the group from an individual who occupies a certain position within it. This behavior distinguishes the individual from others who occupy different positions.”⁽¹⁾

- **Operational Definition of the Preventive Role:** It refers to the efforts and actions undertaken by the social worker to prevent the occurrence of problems within the university environment, particularly bullying behavior.

- **Social Work:** According to the *Dictionary of Social Work Terms*, social work is defined as: “Processes aimed at bringing about various social changes among individuals, groups, and communities within the framework of the profession’s principles and theories, carried out by professional social workers.” ⁽²⁾

- Arlien Johnson defines the profession of social work as: “A profession performed for people with the purpose of helping them as individuals or groups to establish satisfying relationships and achieve levels of living consistent with their desires and capabilities, in harmony with the goals of society.”⁽³⁾

(1) El-Sayed Abdel-Hamid Atiya. *Fundamentals of Group Work*. Alexandria, Egypt: Modern University Office, 2001; p31

(2) Abdel Nasser Selim Hamed. *Dictionary of Social Work Terms* (1st ed.). Amman, Jordan: Osama Publishing & Distribution House, 2012; p213.

(3). Hassanien Sayed Abou Bakr. *Introduction to Social Work*. Tripoli, Libya: University of Libya Publications. 1974, p199

• **Operational Definition of the Social Work Profession:** Efforts provided to members of society to help them adapt and achieve a better level of functioning within their social environment.

• **Social Worker:** A social worker is a professional practitioner of social work who has received academic and professional preparation through formal education in social work and has acquired a body of knowledge from related social sciences. The social worker also undergoes field training in social institutions to develop the necessary professional skills. Personal attributes required of a social worker include good health, emotional stability, moral integrity, and a pleasant appearance. ⁽¹⁾

• It can thus be said that the social worker is the professional responsible for practicing social work, equipped with scientific knowledge and practical skills to assist individuals, groups, and communities within specialized institutions.

• **University Bullying:** Before defining university bullying, it is necessary to first define *bullying* in general.

• **Definition of Bullying:** According to Behsnaoui and others, "It is behavior through which physical, psychological, or emotional harm or harassment is inflicted by a bully on another weaker individual for any reason, and in a repetitive manner."⁽²⁾

• Another definition states: "It is aggressive behavior aimed at causing harm to another person—psychologically, verbally, or physically—where the individual engaging in such behavior holds power over the victim."⁽³⁾ Accordingly, bullying can be defined as a

(1) , Bassam Mohammed Abu Alayan.. Methods of Social Work. Khan Younis, Palestine: University Student Library. 2015,p40

(2) Ahmed Fikri Bahnassawi, & Hassan Ramadan Ali;School Bullying and Its Relationship to Achievement Motivation among Preparatory Stage Students. Journal of the Faculty of Education, Port Said University, 17;2015;p8.

(3) .Nawal Boumachta. (2021, June). Bullying Behavior through Social Media: Transition from the Real World to Cyberspace – A Descriptive Study. Tataweer Journal,2021; 8(1),p 155.

form of aggressive behavior manifested in a power-based pattern of domination by an aggressor over a victim, resulting in psychological, physical, or emotional harm.

- **University Bullying** refers to the abuse directed by a student toward others in various forms, including verbal insults, mockery, physical attacks, or harassment based on body image or physical disabilities, and placing another student in an embarrassing or humiliating situation in front of peers.⁽¹⁾

- **Operational Definition of University Bullying:** It refers to behaviors that violate university rules and regulations, such as domination, ridicule, name-calling, and verbal or physical aggression, which occur within the university space in the absence of effective supervision.

- **University Environment:** According to ‘Ismail’ ⁽²⁾, the university environment is “the human context in which interactions occur among the main elements of university work, including the physical space, faculty members, students, administration, student organizations, and community relations clubs.”

- **Social Worker (Reiterated):** A social worker is a specialist in social work who must possess individual qualities, practical skills, and scientific competence that qualify them to work in various sectors and fields of social service.

5. The Conceptual Context of Bullying: Types, Causes, and Effects

The phenomenon of bullying is ancient and widespread across both developed and developing societies. Literature and prior studies indicate that bullying behavior first appeared among schoolchildren and was initially perceived as playful teasing between students. However,

(1) .Mahmoud Dawood Al-Rubaie.. *University Bullying*. Iraq. Retrieved from; 10February ; 2024, <https://uomus.edu.iq/NewCol.aspx?newid=22691>

(2). Ali, Said Ismail. *University Life in Egypt. Journal of Educational Studies*, 8(49).1993.

due to its negative consequences, researchers in psychology and sociology began to take interest in understanding its dimensions and manifestations. As a result, *Olweus* opened the field for systematic research on the phenomenon to provide a theoretical foundation for bullying behavior⁽¹⁾

Bullying is defined as repeated aggressive acts aimed at causing physical or psychological harm to a relatively weaker student who is unable to defend themselves.

It manifests through recurring aggressive behaviors intended to inflict psychological or physical harm on others, often accompanied by the bully's need to display dominance and superiority — in other words, *to exercise power over others*. Thus, bullying can be defined as “aggression practiced by some university students toward their peers, causing them social and psychological harm”⁽²⁾

5.1 Causes of the Spread of Bullying

There are several factors that have contributed to the emergence and spread of bullying behavior, which can be summarized as follows:

- **Psychosocial Causes:** These include the failure to meet psychological needs, leading to anxiety and tension — for instance, lack of attention and feelings of being undervalued in key social institutions such as school, family, or peer groups. These frustrations generate anger and rebellion against controlling environments, prompting individuals to engage in bullying behavior.

Moreover, adverse social conditions and family instability also contribute significantly to the formation of bullying tendencies.

- **Modern Technology, Films, and Electronic Games:** Such media often promote aggressive and violent behavior. With the decline of socialization institutions and the absence of parental supervision, young people—especially children—absorb the values and behaviors

(1) . Ahmed Fikri Bahnassawi, & Hassan Ramadan Ali. *School Bullying and Its Relationship to Achievement Motivation among Preparatory Stage Students*. *Journal of the Faculty of Education, Port Said University*, 17(8).2015.p15

(2). Nadia Ahmed Amara Abdel Moneim. *A Proposed Vision from the Perspective of Casework to Limit the Problem of Bullying in the University Environment*. *Journal of the Faculty of Social Work for Studies and Social Research*, 29.2022;p617.

propagated by technological media. Animated films and electronic games based on fantasy, power, and combat foster aggressive and violent tendencies.

5.2 Types of Bullying

According to *Ashoush* ⁽¹⁾; bullying can be categorized into two main forms: traditional (direct) bullying and modern (cyberbullying).

A. Traditional Bullying:

- **Physical Bullying:** Includes acts of physical violence such as hitting, slapping, and kicking.
- **Verbal Bullying:** Includes insults, name-calling, and the use of inappropriate or derogatory nicknames.
- **Emotional Bullying:** Involves harassment, intimidation, threats, and rejection by peer groups.
- **Sexual Bullying:** Includes threats of sexual acts or the use of obscene and inappropriate language.
- **Social Bullying:** Involves exclusion, marginalization, and rejection from friendship groups.
- **Racial Bullying:** Arises from hatred or prejudice toward individuals or groups based on race or ethnicity and often manifests as ridicule or mockery of a particular background.
- **Bullying of Property:** Involves taking, damaging, or refusing to return others' belongings, such as tearing clothes, destroying or stealing books, or damaging personal items like pens and notebooks⁽²⁾.

B. Cyberbullying: This refers to bullying conducted through the Internet using digital technologies, social media platforms, emails, or other online communication tools. It is a repetitive behavior intended to intimidate, defame, or humiliate individuals, and represents an

(1) Abeer Mahmoud Mohamed Ashoush. The Educational Role of the University in Addressing the Phenomenon of Bullying among Its Students (An Analytical Study). Journal of the Faculty of Education, Mansoura University, (116). October;2021.

(2) Haifa Al-Fawzan. The Role of the University in Confronting Bullying from the Perspective of Female Students of Shaqra University. Journal of the Faculty of Education, Mansoura University, (120)2022.,p 394

aggressive form of behavior in which the bully uses electronic means to exert power over their victims.

5.3 Effects of Bullying

The growing interest in studying bullying behavior in general—and university bullying in particular—stems from the negative and long-term consequences of this aggressive behavior, which gives rise to multiple social and psychological problems, including:

- **Increased suicidal tendencies** or attempts to escape the effects of bullying.

- **Psychological pressure** such as anxiety and depression. According to *Al-Suwaihi* ⁽¹⁾ ;“the feeling of depression is not limited to bullying victims only, but also extends to those who witness cyberbullying incidents.”

- **Academic problems**, including poor academic achievement, frequent absenteeism, or permanent dropout from studies.

- **Social health deterioration**, manifested in loneliness, social isolation, withdrawal from peer groups, and deterioration of social relationships.

- **Low self-esteem**, accompanied by fear, suspicion, and mistrust of others.

- **Psychological and physical disorders**, including sleep disturbances and eating disorders.

6. The Conceptual Context of Social Work Practice

Social work represents one of the fundamental pillars of society, as it plays a crucial role in helping individuals solve problems through interventions at the individual, group, and community levels. These interventions rely on specific strategies that require the social work practitioner to possess professional knowledge, analytical skills, and interpersonal competence. Social work is a **systematic social method designed to help individuals prevent and address social problems**.

(1) *Saud Sati Al-Suwaihi*. .Reducing Cyberbullying Behaviors and the Negative Effects of Cyberspace on Human Personality. Journal of the Faculty of Education, Vol. 1, Part 173, January 2019; p p 684–716.

The concept of social work has evolved through various theoretical perspectives. Some scholars view social work as both an art and a science, while others define it as a helping profession or a field concerned with individuals who experience adjustment difficulties.

Accordingly, social work can be defined as:

“The scientific method of serving humanity and a social system that addresses human problems, develops capabilities, and assists existing social institutions in performing their roles, as well as establishing new systems needed by society to achieve the welfare of its members.”⁽¹⁾

Social work has three main professional methods:

- Casework (Social Case Work)
- Group Work (Social Group Work)
- **Community Organization (Community Development)**

It also has **supporting methods**, including social research and the administration of social institutions. The field covers a variety of domains such as health, family, the elderly, employment, juvenile care, childhood, persons with

7. The Conceptual Context of Social Work Practice

Social work represents one of the essential pillars of society due to its significant role in helping individuals, groups, and communities overcome problems through preventive and remedial interventions. This professional practice relies on scientific knowledge and interpersonal skills that enable the social worker to engage effectively and ethically.

The concept of social work has evolved through various theoretical and practical perspectives. Some scholars consider it both a **science and an art**, others see it as a helping profession, while another view defines **it as a** profession dedicated to assisting individuals who face difficulties in social adjustment.

Accordingly, social work can be defined as:

“A scientific method of serving humanity and a social system that

(1) Ahmed Mostafa Khater. *Social Work*. Alexandria, Egypt: Modern University Office 2009, p.132

aims to solve human problems, develop individual capacities, assist social institutions in fulfilling their functions, and create new systems necessary for the community to achieve the welfare of its members.”⁽¹⁾

Social work encompasses three main methods: casework, group work, and community organization, as well as auxiliary methods such as social research and social welfare administration. Its fields of application are diverse, including health, family, elderly care, employment, juvenile rehabilitation, childhood, people with special needs, and educational institutions such as schools and universities.

8.1. The Fundamental Components of Social Work Practice

The profession of social work is built upon several essential foundations and standards, including:

- **Scientific Foundations of Social Work:** Social work relies on the principles of the scientific method to analyze and interpret social situations through comparison, analysis, experimentation, and historical inquiry. It applies various research tools such as observation, interviews, questionnaires, and case studies. Moreover, social work draws upon related social sciences—such as psychology for diagnosing psychological problems and promoting mental health, and sociology for understanding society, group dynamics, and diagnosing social issues.

- **Methods of Social Work:** Social work is based on three main methods: casework, group work, and community organization.

- **Professional Competence and Skills:** As a profession, social work requires practitioners to possess specific personal attributes, cognitive abilities, and professional skills—such as a genuine desire to help others, the ability to establish professional relationships, and the capacity for sound judgment and problem analysis.

- **Defining the Profession’s Goals:** The primary aim of social work is to improve the quality of life for individuals, groups, and communities by addressing their problems through preventive, therapeutic, and developmental programs.

(1) . Ahmed Mostafa Khater, opcit; p132.

7.2. The Objectives of Social Work

Social work practice seeks to achieve a set of interrelated objectives that can be categorized into three main areas:

First: Preventive Objectives

Social work emphasizes prevention by developing mechanisms that protect individuals from falling into social problems, enabling them to perform their social roles and adapt to their environments. To achieve this goal, social workers engage in the following activities⁽¹⁾ Contributing to the improvement of individuals' living standards.

- Raising public awareness through lectures, seminars, media, and training workshops.
- Conducting social studies and surveys to identify social problems, their causes, and possible solutions.
- Promoting desirable social change among individuals, groups, and communities.
- Helping individuals and groups make effective use of their available resources and capacities.
- Introducing changes to existing social systems to solve societal problems and reduce their prevalence.
- Cooperating with other community institutions to prevent individuals from becoming victims of social problems.

Second: Therapeutic Objectives

Social work also seeks to rehabilitate individuals, groups, and communities to restore their capacities to perform expected roles. This is achieved through:

- Studying and diagnosing individual and group problems to develop appropriate intervention plans.
- Relying on rehabilitation programs—psychological, social, physical, and vocational—to improve individuals' conditions.

(1) . Bassam Mohammed Abu Alayan. *Methods of Social Work*. Khan Younis, Palestine: University Student Library;2015;p28

- Establishing therapeutic and rehabilitative centers, whether residential or day-care⁽¹⁾.

Third: Developmental Objectives

Social work contributes to the development of individuals, groups, and communities by designing social policies and developmental frameworks that consider both social and economic dimensions. It emphasizes balanced development between urban and rural areas and seeks to foster values of responsibility and encourage collective and voluntary community work.

8. The Preventive Approach in Social Work Practice

The **preventive approach** represents a professional activity undertaken by social workers to avoid the emergence of social problems affecting individuals, groups, or communities. This approach focuses on **preventive action** before problems arise, helping individuals to strengthen their capacities and prevent maladaptive behaviors.

As Al-Ma'ati ⁽²⁾ defines it:

“The preventive role of social work aims to help individuals enhance their ability to handle life situations, take action to improve their living conditions, prevent maladjustment, and promote good health and well-being.”

Prevention, therefore, is the final outcome of a series of processes that include research, treatment, education, and legislation. It involves efforts to **avoid, minimize, or control** problems before they fully develop.

The preventive approach in social work practice can be divided into three levels:

- **Primary Prevention:** Early interventions undertaken by social workers to prevent the conditions that may lead to the emergence of social problems.

(1) . Bassam Mohammed Abu Alayan. Opcit;p29

(2). Maher Abu Al-Maati. (2000, April 2–3). *General Practice Approaches to Addressing Social Problems and Phenomena*. The 13th International Scientific Conference, Faculty of Social Work, Helwan University, Egypt.;2-3 April2000;p39.

- **Secondary Prevention:** Efforts made by social workers to limit the escalation of a problem through early detection, addressing its causes, and providing timely intervention to prevent deterioration.

- **Tertiary Prevention:** Rehabilitation programs provided by specialized institutions through social workers to help individuals recover from existing social problems and prevent relapse.

According to Rifai⁽¹⁾ ;the preventive approach includes several essential components:

- **The Client Unit:** Individuals or groups who are more vulnerable to deviant or maladaptive behavior.

- **Life Situations:** Conditions of stress, tension, crises, and social challenges.

- **Community Institutions:** Both governmental and non-governmental organizations that play direct or indirect roles in preventing health, educational, or social problems.

- **The Social Worker:** A professional practitioner who implements preventive approaches within institutions.

- **The Professional Relationship:** The structured connection between clients, institutions, and social workers aimed at achieving effective assistance.

- **The Surrounding Environment:** Encompasses all the above components, along with the broader natural and social context.

The main objectives of the preventive approach in social work practice include:

- Developing professional methods specific to group work and community intervention.

- Promoting **change** as a fundamental goal of preventive practice.

- Ensuring the integration of rehabilitation and prevention in social intervention programs.

(1). Adel Mahmoud Rifai. (2013). *Social Work in the Field of Rehabilitation and Care of Street Children* (1st ed.). Cairo, Egypt: Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi.2013 ,p93

9. Social Work Practice in Universities to Reduce Bullying Behavior

The university is a vital institution of socialization that prepares and shapes students for both social and professional life. However, the university environment is not immune to social problems—among them, bullying behavior. The integration of university functions with social work practice plays a key role in reducing university bullying through the adoption of a preventive approach focused on awareness and early intervention.

This integration reflects a comprehensive approach combining prevention, education, and timely response. As an educational institution, the university seeks to cultivate moral values and civic behavior among students, while social work contributes by diagnosing bullying incidents, analyzing their social and psychological causes, and providing counseling and therapeutic programs.

The synergy between academic and professional fields strengthens the effectiveness of interventions aimed at creating a safe university environment characterized by mutual respect, solidarity, and positive social interaction. This, in turn, enhances the quality of university life and fosters healthy social behavior within the campus community.

Strategies That Universities Can Implement to Address Bullying Behavior

Among the strategies that universities can adopt to confront bullying behavior are the following:

1. Awareness and Sensitization Strategy: This involves educating university students through purposeful programs on how to use campus spaces positively—by organizing study days, training workshops, seminars, and forums. The goal is to promote positive values, guide student behavior toward respect and appreciation of others, and foster the development of healthy interpersonal relationships among peers.

2. Strengthening Religious and Ethical Awareness: Through religious guidance and moral education, universities can instill human values such as tolerance, respect, and cooperation.

3. Encouraging Positive Use of Leisure Time: Engaging students in cultural, educational, and sports activities helps redirect those exhibiting behavioral problems (such as bullying) toward positive participation and self-development.

4. Involving Faculty Members in Student Support: Specialists in sociology and psychology should be engaged to guide students experiencing behavioral or emotional problems, assisting them in adapting to university life and motivating them toward academic achievement and success.

5. Establishing Psychological and Social Assistance Centers: These centers should welcome students, listen to their concerns, monitor behaviors, and address problematic conduct in a professional and supportive environment.

6. Promoting Dialogue and Effective Communication: Strengthening channels of communication between university administration and faculty members enables the expression of concerns, resolution of problems, and development of collaborative strategies.

7. Employing Social Workers: Social workers should be integrated into the university setting to develop mechanisms and strategies for addressing, correcting, and guiding students who experience or engage in bullying behavior.

10. The Role of the Social Worker in Addressing Bullying in the University Environment

The profession of social work plays a crucial role in addressing the problem of bullying within the university setting. Tackling bullying is one of the primary goals of social work practice, especially within educational institutions. The social worker's role is central in maintaining social control and balance on campus through programs designed to assist both the victims and perpetrators of bullying.

Undoubtedly, social work practice in the university environment can play a significant role in helping students cope with bullying behavior—using individual and group work methods as tools for achieving preventive goals. The approaches adopted by social workers aim to help students take responsibility, mature emotionally and socially, and develop essential interpersonal skills—core elements of the preventive approach.

Through the combined efforts of university administration, faculty members, and social work practitioners, supported by educational curricula, it becomes possible to confront university bullying by reinforcing positive values and social norms that reject violence and racial discrimination. Such collaboration contributes to creating a safe and supportive university environment, enabling students to thrive academically and socially.

This preventive approach becomes most effective in the university setting through the proactive role of the social worker, which includes:

- Observing and identifying any signs of bullying within the university environment.
- Protecting the rights of students who are victims of bullying.
- Organizing and encouraging participation in university activities.
- Intervening immediately to stop bullying behaviors on campus.
- Establishing and enforcing appropriate disciplinary measures against bullies.
- Applying social work methods across casework, group work, and community organization.

Conclusion

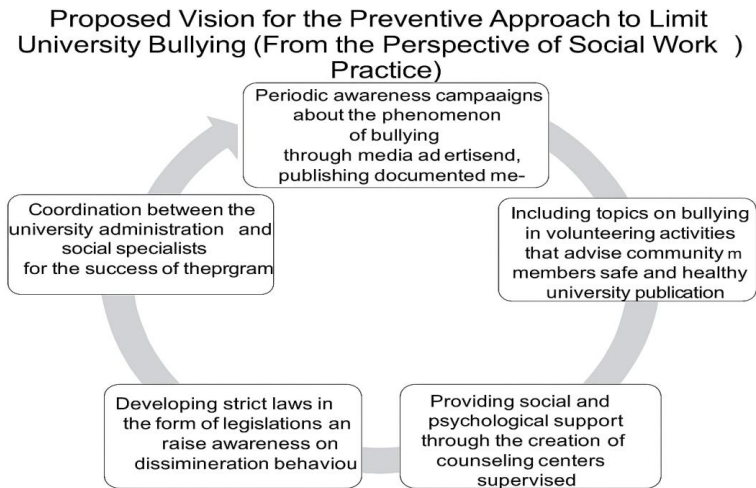
In conclusion, the integration of roles among all university stakeholders—administration, faculty members, students, and social work practitioners (including social workers and psychologists)—is essential for effectively addressing university bullying. Incorporating the preventive approach as a key strategy to combat bullying allows for the creation of a healthy and safe academic environment that fosters positive values, strengthens the sense of responsibility, and promotes justice and empowerment among students.

Such an environment enables students to adapt to emerging challenges, engage meaningfully in university life, and invest in the moral and cultural fabric of their academic community.

Recommendations:

- Emphasize religious and moral counseling to address behavioral problems.

- Establish digital platforms and online reporting systems for students to safely report cases of bullying within the university.
- Proposed Framework for a Preventive Approach to Reducing University Bullying (From the Perspective of Social Work Practice)



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