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Bullying in Elementary School: An Analysis of The Film *Wonder* (2017)

Shima Sari Dewi Fatimah, Dr. Rd. Safrina Noorman, M.A

English Language and Literature

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

shimasariidewi@upi.edu, safrina@upi.edu

ABSTRACT

Different genres are used to address bullying as a social problem. This research investigates bullying in a film, *Wonder* (2017) which uses an elementary school as the locus of the story. The research aims to determine how the film depicts bullying in an elementary school and what messages are conveyed from the presentations. The researcher uses Coloroso's (2015) theory of bullying and Boggs & Petrie's (2008) theory of characterization in films to analyze the presentation of bullying in films and the messages conveyed from the presentation. The research discovered that there are three types of bullying depicted in the film. They are verbal, physical, and relational bullying. The findings indicate that bullying does happen in elementary schools, the bullying victim tends to remain silent, and people around the victim tend to ignore the occurrence. The film suggests that bullying is an issue for society to be aware of. The research then suggests that this kind of issue should be addressed in other literary genres as bullying presentation in literary genres can be used as the tool for learning the ways to solve bullying and sharing perspectives of people who are affected by bullying.

Keyword: bullying in elementary school; film analysis; the film Wonder (2017)

INTRODUCTION

Everyone needs to maintain social relationship. In the process of maintaining social relationships, misunderstandings can occur. The causes of misunderstanding can be from different backgrounds, different perspectives, or different physical looks. Differences can result in conflicts such as group conflicts. For example, school brawl, which may happen among members of a group or between groups. There are various causes of conflicts. One of them is bullying. According to Farrington (1993), bullying is repeated oppressions, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful one. This means when one party feels more powerful than the other party there is a possibility for bullying to happen.

Anyone may experience the act or form of bullying, including children in elementary schools. School is one of the places where children may experience oppression in a form of bullying. There are cases of bullying in elementary schools. The study conducted by Shetgiri (2013)

indicated that bullying was prevalent in the United States. The study reported that the types of bullying have not changed much but the frequency of bullying has slightly decreased throughout the 1990s to the early 2000. However, the impact of bullying has not significantly changed. However, according to the data assembled by School Crime Supplement (2017), among 24,650,000 students aged 12-18 in the United States in 2016, 20% of them victims of bullying. 13% experienced acts of bullying in the form of insults, 13,3% experienced rumors, 3,9% was threatened with harm, 5,3% was pushed, shoved, tripped, or spat on, 1,9% was asked to try or do things they did not want to do, 5,2% was excluded from activities on purpose, and 1,4% had their belongings damaged or destroyed. The data also show that the ratio of males as the victim of bullying was higher than females.

According to Fauzia and Rahmiaji (2019) in their study, in 2018, the police received 966 bullying reports. The police could only handle 347 cases through law enforcement or

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mediation between the victims and the bullies. Sugiati (2019) found in her study that 64% of the study participants confessed that they experience bullying, which might make them feel inferior. Based on the result of the studies, the cases reported to the police and the subjects' responses to bullying are only the tip of the iceberg. It does not cover all the other possible effects which affect not only their self-esteem but also their physical and mental health.

Based on the previous studies, their findings indicate that the issue of bullying needs to be raised more and represented in media for children. This is the topic the film *Wonder* (2017) brought up where it reflects on the series of bullying, especially body shaming which reflected the reality. The problem that is shown through this movie is how bullying impacts not only adults but also children in elementary school. As stated by Esch (2008), the act of teasing, mockery, and bullying which presented in children's literature may provide acceptable insight to the viewer on changeable kinds of bullying and the

arise problem that may occur, along with the resolution for avoiding as a victim. Esch (2008) also stated that children may build a connection with the characters from the story and how are their feelings which can boost their self-confidence, empathy, and insight.

Studies about bullying in children's literature may help to raise awareness about how bullying impacts children. Thus, this research will present bullying among the elementary school students presented in the film *Wonder* followed by the messages that are being delivered from the film by using the theories of bullying by Coloroso (2015) and theory of characterization in films by Boggs and Petrie (2008).

METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative since the purpose of this research is to see how bullying in an elementary school is being presented through the characters of the film *Wonder*. Leavy (2017) states that a qualitative approach is used to locate the subjective experiences of people and the value of a meaning, which permits

the research to construct a solid understanding of a chosen topic and to unpack the value that people use to explain their activities, situations, circumstances, people, or objects. Therefore, this research is qualitative because it analyzes the scenes to explore the act of bullying in elementary school presented in the film.

Textual analysis is conducted as the tool to analyze the data of this research. As McKee (2001) explains, textual analysis as the methodology is a way to gather and analyze the information in academic research. The data are in the form of dialogue and scenes collected from the film, which is why textual analysis is the applicable analysis for this research.

The source of data is the film *Wonder* which is released in 2017. The film is directed by Chobsky and adapted from a novel with the same title written by R.J Palacio in 2012. The film was produced by Lionsgate in the United States with a runtime of 113 minutes.

There were two reasons that the film *Wonder* was chosen as the subject for the research. First, the film raised the issue of bullying which was still current and touched on the issue of acceptance of people with deformities. These two issues are sensitive and are not openly discussed with children in Indonesia. Second, the film also presents bullying among elementary school students. Based on the researcher's experience, in elementary schools students, are usually unaware of bullying. They might take it for granted as if bullying is part of daily activities. Some even think it is just practical jokes or pranks. Even worse, adults often do not take bullying seriously as well. Therefore, a film presenting bullying in elementary school is worth investigating so that learnings can be made.

The data are collected from scenes of the film *Wonder*. The data which are in the form of dialogue and shots were taken from six selected scenes that contained the act of bullying in an elementary school. The data were analyzed based on the characteristics and types of bullying.

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They are adapted from Coloroso (2015). The types of bullying, according to Coloroso (2015) are verbal bullying, physical bullying, and relational bullying. Meanwhile the characteristics of bullying, according to Coloroso (2015) are a sense of entitlement, an intolerance toward differences, and the liberty to exclude. The two theories about bullying proposed by Coloroso (2015) helped the researcher to identify the act of bullying and make meanings from them. For the film element, the researcher uses the theory of characterization in films proposed by Boggs & Perrie (2008)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results from the analyzed data show that bullying in elementary school was presented in the film *Wonder* through characters who bully verbally, physically, and relationally or socially. Characterization was analyzed using the theory from Boggs and Petrie (2008) of characterization in films. The characterization occurred in different types of bullying. The different types of bullying were identified by applying the theory of

bullying from Coloroso (2015). The characters represent aspects of bullying such as the victim, bullies, the bystanders, and the family of the victim as well. It is also indicated that there are underlying messages concerning the importance of being aware of bullying. The film also implies that bullying can happen anywhere even in elementary schools. The findings will be presented in two sections. They are characterization and the messages delivered from the film.

Characterization in different types of bullying.

To examine how bullying is presented in the film, the researcher uses the theory of characterization from Boggs and Petrie (2008) which consists of characterization analysis. Characterization analysis was initiated by identifying bullying scenes which are found to occur in six scenes: School Tour scene, First Day of School scene, Halloween scene, Lunch at the Cafeteria scene, Science Project Fair Assignment scene, and Drawing & Photoshopped Picture scene. After the scenes are established,

different types of bullying were identified. They are verbal, physical, and relational. Hence, this section will present characterization based on the types of identified bullying in the selected scenes.

Characterization in Verbal Bullying.

A. Verbal Bullying in School Tour scene.



Figure 4. 1– Julian thought about Jack-Will and Auggie’s failure in science. (00:08:27)

In Figure 4.1 there are three characters, Auggie, Jack-Will, and Julian facing the camera. The other two characters, Jack-Will and Auggie were shot from behind. The third verbal bullying appeared in Julian’s utterance which said “Hey maybe you could fail together.” It refers to Auggie and Jack-Will. While Auggie was implied in the

utterance because he was new and facially deformed, Jack-Will was implied because Julian knew he was lacking in Science. Therefore, Julian’s utterance is also considered verbal bullying

B. Verbal Bullying in First Day of School Scene.

In the First Day of School scene, it presents all the elementary students’ character. The scene depicts Auggie’s first day as a new student at a public school. Due to his condition, Auggie’s physical appearance caught students’ attention which showed in various forms of reaction. Some of the reactions were identified as verbal bullying.



Figure 4. 2- – Julian commented about the way Auggie eats. (00:19:23)

Figure 4.2 presents two characters, Julian and Auggie in the cafeteria. Julian’s utterance as displayed in the

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subtitle stated “You eat like the Sarlacc monster, my young Padawan.” when Julian came into Auggie who was sitting alone. Julian used the reference Sarlacc monster which is a hideous creature character in Star Wars’ film series to describe how Auggie eats. Based on the film *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (1983), Monster Sarlacc is a hazardous carnivore creature that eats human bodies with its tentacled maw. Julian compares Auggie’s usual practice which has no disability with other dreadful characters’ habits. Due to the illustration on how Julian refers to Auggie as Monster Sarlacc for the way he eats is formed as an insult which included as verbal bullying.

C. Verbal Bullying in Halloween Scene.

The characters Auggie, Julian, Jack-Will, Amos, and Miles were seen in the scene. Halloween was Auggie’s favorite holiday since he could go to school by hiding his facial deformity with a Halloween costume. Students touched him without feeling afraid of his appearance. Turns out, Auggie

found Jack-Will, his only best friend, was talking about Auggie along with Julian and other boys about his appearance.



Figure 4. 3 – The boys were talking about Auggie. (00:45:15)

Figure 4.3 presents the characters Julian, Jack-Will, Amos, and Miles. The boys were talking about Auggie’s facial deformity. The dialogue between Julian, Miles, and Amos is written as follows:

Miles: “It does look like him.”

Julian: “This part, right?”

Amos: “Yeah.”

Miles: “I mean, he’s always reminded me, like, **the shrunken head**, you know?”

Amos: “Or an **Orc**.”

Miles: “Yeah.”

Julian: “If I looked like him, I’d swear I’d put a

hood over my face every day.”

Julian, Amos, and Miles brought a costume which is the Darth Sidious head costume. The utterance “I mean, he’s always reminded me, like, the shrunken head, you know?” “Or an Orc.” is indicated as verbal bullying as Miles & Amos referred to Auggie’s facial deformity with hideous creatures such as shrunken head and orc. Based on a web thecollector.com, Shrunken Head or *tsantsas* are human head which severed as a trophy by tribal cultures in myriad ways. Meanwhile Orc, according to Merriam Webster, is a mythical creature of horrid form or aspect. Based on the two explanations about the reference used by Miles and Amos are considered as verbal bullying since they compared the creatures with Auggie. Julian’s utterance “If I looked like him, I’d swear I’d put a hood over my face every day.” is included as verbal bullying with harsh criticism. Therefore, there might be an intention from Julian, Amos, and Miles to insult Auggie by referring to his condition

with dreadful creatures and harsh opinions about Auggie’s facial deformity.

D. Verbal Bullying in Science Fair Project Assignment scene.



**Figure 4. 4 – Julian confronted Jack-Will.
(01:08:56)**

Figure 4.4 presents two characters, Jack-Will and Julian when Julian confronts Jack-Will about the science fair project group. Julian’s utterance as depicted in the subtitle “Why not? Do you really wanna be partners with that freak?” refers to Auggie as ‘that freak’ since Jack-Will chose to be partners with Auggie instead of with Julian and Amos. Coloroso (2015) asserts calling names is one form of verbal bullying. Therefore, the dialogue spoken by Julian is indicated as verbal bullying. As Julian’s utterances depict his disagreement of Jack-Will’s refusing his decision proves his sense of entitlement to influence others as

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Coloroso (2015) mentioned it as the characteristic of bullying.

Based on the utterance and dialogues attached in this section, proves verbal bullying occurred in elementary school. Verbal bullying occurred because of the unfamiliarity of others' differences and the feeling of superiority because of someone who is seen as inferior due to the victim's difference. The character Julian was put up in the center as he uses his power to gain what he wanted by verbally harassing Auggie whereas Jack-Will disapproved of his idea.

Characterization in Physical Bullying.

A. Physical Bullying in First Day of School Scene.

Physical bullying is also identified in the First Day of School scene. Figure 4.5 below shows the character Auggie and other students. Auggie was being targeted as he was on his own while other students in a group threw balls at Auggie during sports class. Within the fact that Auggie did not do many

sports activities as he was being homeschooled before, Auggie had a hard time adjusting himself with other students' who were throwing the balls to Auggie in a group. The action of the students in a group by hitting and throwing Auggie with the ball in the scene is included as bullying since Coloroso (2015) added hitting as the form of physical bullying. As Coloroso (2015) inserts intolerance towards differences as characteristic of bullying, therefore the group of boys' action to throw balls at Auggie shows their behavior as intolerance towards others where they have seen Auggie as inferior which formed as physical bullying. The scene put the group of boys where used their power in a group to abuse Auggie physically.



Figure 4.5 -The boys were throwing Auggie with the balls. (00:20:25

Characterization in Relational Bullying.

A. Relational Bullying in First Day of School scene.



Figure 4.6– Everyone stared Auggie. (00:14:17)

Auggie is identified in the First Day of School scene, acts of relational bullying are also found in the scene. Figure 4.6 presents Auggie who was facing the camera with other students in the background looking at him as he walked into the school courtyard. The students were looking at Auggie because of Auggie’s facial deformity which made Auggie feel unease. Therefore, the act of staring and avoiding Auggie when he walked down the courtyard is considered relational bullying.

B. Relational bullying in Lunch at the Cafeteria scene.



Figure 4.7– The girls talked about Jack-Will and Auggie. (00:54:21)

In Figure 4.7, the characters in this scene are the girls; Charlotte, Summer, Ximena, and Maya who had lunch together at the same table. After seeing Auggie asked Jack-Will to stay away from him, made the girls wondering what happened to both of them. Ximena assumed that both did not get along anymore because Jack had been ‘infected’ by Auggie. As the dialogue from Ximena, Charlotte, and Maya is exposed below:

Charlotte: “I wonder what happened.”

Ximena: “Maybe Jack touched Auggie and couldn’t wash his hands in time. Jack finally got ‘the plague’.”

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Charlotte: “That’s not very nice.”

Maya: “What? We didn’t start it.”

As the rumor spread around about Auggie infecting people from touch, Ximena assumed if Jack-Will had been infected by Auggie then Jack-Will got the ‘plague’ for not washing his hands after touching Auggie. Maya told Charlotte if the rumor was not started by them. Coloroso (2015) affirms that spreading rumors is a form of relational bullying, whereas it is used to make people avoid the victim by warning them with the rumor. The assumption from Ximena and Maya about Auggie spreading the ‘plague’ to Jack-Will is considered as relational bullying. This act of spreading rumors is also proof of Coloroso’s theory of (2015) characteristic of bullying which is the liberty to exclude someone. Thus, this scene depicted rumor spread as to how relational bullying occurs in elementary school which resulted in students avoid Auggie since they were afraid of being ‘infected’. The characters of Ximena and Maya were evolved to engage in

relational bullying by spreading the rumors of Auggie.

C. Relational Bullying in Science Fair Project Assignment scene.



Figure 4.8– Julian’s request to Ms. Petosa. (01:08:31)

Other than verbal bullying, relational bullying is also identified in Science Fair Project scene. Julian, Amos, and Jack-Will were presented in figure 4.8 with the camera focused on Jack-Will. The setting was set during the science class when Ms. Petosa talked about the science fair project. Ms. Petosa asked students to pair with their tablemates for the science fair project. Knowing Jack-Will is Auggie’s tablemate, Julian asked Ms. Petosa to allow Jack-Will to be part of his group even though he already partnered with Amos. Within the fact that Julian knows Ms. Petosa asked the students to have their

tablemate as their project's partner and Jack-Will was Auggie's tablemate, made Julian's intention seem to exclude Auggie from having any partners for the project. As relational bullying includes excluding someone from the others according to Coloroso (2015), therefore Julian's request in this scene is considered as relational bullying. Julian's utterance is also implied as the act to exclude someone since Coloroso (2015) mentioned the liberty of excluding as a characteristic of bullying. His action impacted Auggie which made Auggie felt as if he did not belong to any group. In this scene, Julian's character was involved to see his power in dominating other's people will by excluding someone which resulted in relational bullying.

d. Relational Bullying in Drawing & Photoshopped Picture Scene.



Figure 4.9– Drawing & Photoshopped Picture from Julian to Auggie. (01:26:25 – 01:26:53)

Figure 4.9 shows Auggie's point of view when he received drawings and a picture edited by Julian. The drawing was about Auggie's facial deformity which is drawn by Julian. The group class picture was also edited by Julian where he removed Auggie from the picture. Julian also wrote a note in the picture with "No freaks allowed" and "Do everyone a favor and die!". As the fact, Auggie was also in the picture but Julian removed him made Julian's action seems to have the intention to exclude someone in a group. Therefore, what Julian did to remove Auggie from the picture and added threats to the picture were included as relational bullying which is done indirectly and digitally. Julian's behavior showed his liberty to exclude Auggie where he removed Auggie's presence in the picture. The drawings and photoshopped pictures may impact Auggie in destructing Auggie's self-esteem as if he was unwanted to his friends. Julian's character in the scene was evolved in relational bullying by using cyberbullying as the means to prove his power towards Auggie to exclude him from the same group as Julian.

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Becoming More Alert About Bullying.

The scenes that were being chosen about bullying imply messages to the audience to be more alert about the acts of bullying. Throughout the chosen scenes, the researcher found three main messages in the film. The messages are bullying can happen in elementary school, victims tend to stay silent when bullying occurs, and people tend to ignore bullying.

Bullying happens in elementary school.

The film proves bullying happens in elementary school and is experienced by the students. The act of bullying is not only because of children being mischievous as sometimes adults took bullying in elementary school as how children were being playful for others and tend to ask the victim for ignoring the bullying act. As the solution proposed in the film for each type of bullying, it shows how it also affects Auggie as the victim of bullying. From verbal attacks, he received from Julian and his classmates referring to him as

a hideous creature broke down his self-esteem which led him to blame his condition as the cause of bullying. Auggie also had to face the struggle of being the target of relational bullying, where the rumor spread around the students that if anyone touched Auggie they would get ‘infected’. Auggie also received several threats for him which consisted of words asking him to leave or be gone.

Victim tends to stay silent.

Another message brought up by the film is how it portrays the victim who staying in silent when receiving acts of bullying. Victims of bullying may not conquer the bullies when receiving the acts of bullying. Thus, the victim’s disappointment and frustration led to made them bottle up their feeling by themselves. The film portrays how Auggie as the victim was bottling his own emotion at first after receiving acts of bullying. As it is seen from the School Tour scene, at first Auggie did not respond to verbal attacks from Julian. Julian kept saying about how he may not pass science class since he was only homeschooled

before. After Julian and Jack-Will fought about Auggie responding anything to Julian, made Auggie finally responded to Julian by answering his question. Turns out, Auggie dared to correct how Julian pronounced the word 'supposably'. Auggie did not fight Julian physically or show that Julian's word had hurt him, but instead, Auggie showed that he is not different from any students who attend public school earlier in terms of academics. Auggie's action for responding to Julian shows that one of the ways to handle bully who has the intention to make others feel inferior is by showing them that the victims also had their strength or ability. Auggie shows Julian that he paid more attention to the words he said and corrected it so that Julian knows even though Auggie was only homeschooled before does not mean he was inferior to Julian.

People tend to turn a blind eye to bullying.

In the film, there are supporting characters with limited roles in the storyline. The researcher noted that there are three supporting

characters in the film. They are Jack-Will, Charlotte, and Summer. When the acts of bullying occur in the film, the three supporting characters tend to do three activities: looking at the victim from afar, ignoring the situation, and being hesitant to help. This type of activity is quite common even in real life. Such phenomena only strengthen the bullying to occur and to be repeated.

The film also implies that a more courageous act to counter bullying is not easy to do. This is exemplified in the behavior presented by Jack-Will, Charlotte, and Summer. They became bystanders, who do not take action to counter bullying or the bully. However, the supporting characters experience a gradual change. They learned from the bullying. In the end, they took part in the efforts to counter bullying by taking sides with the victim, ignore the rumor, and refuse to take part in bullying.

Jack-Will, Charlotte, and Summer's change show how bystanders need to take any action as well as to counter bullying. The

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change can be started from themselves. First of all by not turning a blind eye to any bullying acts.

Based on the characterization analysis of the film *Wonder* (2017), the film successfully presents how bullying occurred in an elementary school with messages to alert viewers about bullying. By showing how *Wonder* presents the occurrence of bullying the researcher identified several reasons that films about bullying as the issue might help to raise awareness of bullying.

Films as a tool for learning.

To begin with, the first reason is that this kind of film may inspire filmmakers in the future to create more films which help the children learn about bullying, not to become a bully but learn how to handle bullying. Such films about bullying in elementary school may be used by teachers to raise awareness among students about: what bullying is and what they can do they happen to see the act of bullying around them. From the film, they may

learn about the messages and also identify their role in such cases.

Films as a way to enrich perspectives.

The second reason is that the film shares many perspectives with the viewers about people who are affected because of bullying. One of the effects shown by the film *Wonder* is how bullying affects the victim's self-esteem. The victim tends to blame themselves as their condition is the reason why bullying happens. They even have low self-appreciation whereas they feel that they do not deserve the achievements they have.

The family of the victims might learn from the film as well. The victim's family often are confused and are not sure of the ways to handle the victim's condition. They want a change but are also confused about what to do and worry if their way of approaching the victim would not help them to lighten the effect of bullying. Another perspective that is presented in the film is from bystanders. Whereas the bystanders may be confused about how to cope with

bullying and stand up for the victim. Bystanders also feel a dilemma where they want to protect or help the victim but at the same time, they are also afraid of being the target of bullying from the bullies if they protect the victim. The feeling of fear comes from what they see from bullies to the victim. As a result, it causes a dilemma for them to stand up for the victim or just ignore them to protect themselves. These various perspectives may enrich the viewer's insight into the struggles of people included in the bullying hence it is important to add these perspectives to the film.

Bullying has been one of the issues that are presented in Indonesian films. Similar to *Wonder*, bullying films in Indonesia depicted bullying which is caused by physical appearance. What makes Indonesian films of bullying different from *Wonder* is the portrayal of bullying in Indonesian films tends to be portrayed by teenagers rather than by children. Indonesian films also tend to use bullying as a side conflict in the film rather than the main issue. Thus, this research presents how the film *Wonder*

successfully presents how bullying occurred in an elementary school by presenting the characters who are involved in bullying such as the victim, the bullies, the bystanders, and the family's victim and also messages to raise awareness about bullying in children. The presentation of bullying in films may inspire filmmakers in Indonesia to provide films with bullying as the main issue from the point of view of children. By addressing the issue of bullying in children through films, Indonesian filmmakers may build awareness about bullying in children to viewers.

CONCLUSION

Bullying is aggressive behavior that has developed as a social issue. Bullying is perpetrated by someone or a group who appears to have greater power over someone or a group who appears to have less power which impacts the victim. Thus, this research of bullying in the film uses the film *Wonder* (2017) to determine how the film depicts bullying in an elementary school and what lessons are delivered via the presentations. This research uses the theory of bullying from

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Coloroso (2015) and characterization in films from Boggs & Petrie (2008) as theoretical frameworks to identify bullying in selected scenes.

Characterization in films found bullying in elementary school in three types of bullying: verbally, physically, and relationally. The bullies' characters have demonstrated bullying behavior by displaying an attitude of superiority, intolerance for difference, and the power to exclude someone from a group. Thus, the acts of bullying resulted in messages conveyed in the film to the viewers especially children & adult viewers to become more alert about bullying which also occurred in elementary school, how the victim tends to stay silent, and people tend to look away when bullying is happening.

As a result, it can be concluded that bullying in the film may be used to portray how bullying happens in an elementary school with messages to reduce the act of bullying. Therefore, it is critical to provide bullying in films to increase awareness of bullying among both children and adults.

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