

## EFFICACY OF A SCHOOL BASED INTERVENTION PLAN FOR VICTIMS OF BULLYING

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*Submission date: 30 July 2018*

*Accepted date: 30 March 2019*

*Published date: 1 Sept 2019*

### Abstract

Bullying has become a common problem for today's youth, compelling researchers and policymakers to focus their attention towards addressing this issue in schools. This study aimed at devising a holistic plan to curb bullying by improving the pro-social behaviour of bullied schoolchildren, helping them avoid bullying, evade its adverse effects and helping the school make policy changes. A school-wide intervention plan was created for Pakistani schools. Two schools were involved in the study, one control and one experimental. 12 victims were recruited for this study, six from each school. The victims were selected through teacher reports and were later screened for bullying using Illinois Bully Scale (IBS). The same scale was used to study bullying, victimisation and fighting tendency of the participants, and to evaluate their social skills, How Are My Social Skills Checklist (SSC) was used. The study and the intervention, each had three phases. Study: pre-assessment, intervention and post-assessment. Intervention: individual and group therapy (emotional management, social-skill building and problem-solving), teacher and parent training, and anti-bullying school-policy. Pre-post IBS and SSC scores revealed significant improvement in the experimental group.

**Keywords:** Intervention, Problem Solving, Social Skills, Victimisation

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Bullying has become one of the most significant issues concerning school children, resulting not only in school violence but lifelong impact on the victims. Therefore, research and policy making is needed to curb bullying in schools and help the victims. It has consistently been found that victimisation has grave consequences for children. The victims become fearful and anxious in the bullying environment. They are more likely to develop avoidance behaviours, skip school, and have significantly lower attendance compared to other children (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005). Moreover, they sometimes show excessive aggression, such as bringing a weapon to school for self-defense or hurting the bullies for revenge ( Smokowski, & Kopasz, 2005 ). All these factors adversely affect the school performance of the child (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006).

Furthermore, victims exhibit both internalising and externalising problems as well as relational issues. Internalising problems include anxiety disorders (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010), depression, loneliness, withdrawal and psychosomatic complaints (Sourander, et al., 2007). Provocative victims, who provoke and tease to get a reaction are likely to have externalising problems, for instance, delinquency,

burglary and theft (Sigfusdottir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson, 2010). Relational problems faced by the victims include poor peer-support (as they have poor social and communication skills) and poor social problem-solving (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000).

Considering the long-term consequences of victimisation on children and the school environment, an increasing number of schools and state education departments across the world are interested in a state-wide comprehensive policy on bullying. Since bullying is a common phenomenon at schools, it is essential that victims are provided help in standing up to the bullies. It is also essential to help them improve their social, communicative behaviours that have been damaged because of bullying. Hence, several anti-bullying programmes were initiated by various countries, like the Sheffield Anti-Bullying project in the UK (Smith, Ananiadou & Cowie, 2003), the Toronto Bullying Prevention Programme (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994), and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program for students in Malaysia (Yaakub, Haron & Leon, 2010).

There have been several anti-bullying programmes that have been effective in Western countries; for instance, the Sheffield Anti-Bullying project (UK) which introduced a school-wide policy against bullying; furthermore, it introduced additional interventions focusing on curriculum changes, classroom and playground as well as individual work with bullies, victims, or the peer group. This programme was found to be highly effective (Smith, Ananiadou & Cowie, 2003).

In an intervention plan carried out in South Carolina's rural communities, following the guidelines of the Olweus Programme. It offered additional support materials for school staff and involved members of the local community. In intervention schools, bullying rates decreased significantly, and increased significantly for control schools. However, in the second year of the intervention, no significant differences were found between the intervention and the control schools (Smith, Anaindou & Cowie, 2003).

The programme carried out in Toronto was similar to the Sheffield Project. It worked on three levels namely school, classroom, and individual. The components of the programme ranged from working in classrooms and playground to using art and drama to create awareness about bullying. Some schools in Toronto also implemented a peer-level conflict-mediation programme, which was highly effective (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994).

A study conducted in Malaysia to evaluate the effectiveness of Olweus bullying prevention programme. It used pre-test/post-test comparison including a control group across six secondary schools in Malaysia. The components of the programme included formation of anti-bully committees in the experimental schools, training for these anti-bully committees, programme for awareness of parents, classroom intervention and workshops for school counsellors. The results for all students at each of the experimental school showed that victimisation decreased in girls' schools. However, the opposite picture was seen in the co-educational school. Girls' schools seemed to have responded better to intervention than boys' schools because their programme included school support staff and teachers at multiple levels, bullying awareness workshops were conducted for them, and they discussed bullying in class, which proved to be an effective component of the programme (Yaakub, Haron & Leong, 2010).

Although there are several existing programmes that have shown effectiveness in other countries, it was important to design a relevant and comprehensive plan for schools in Pakistan. Such a plan would 1) cater to the individual needs and specific set-up of the local schools and 2) work at all fronts, including children, teachers, school administration and parents. Such a programme was developed in this study, focusing on bullying and its consequences on victims in specific and the school environment in general.

This was a ground-breaking research for school in Pakistan, as there was no precedent of such an intervention programme. The novel aspect of this study was that it combined all aspects of a student's life including parents, teachers, peers and school. Moreover, it not only focused on individual and group intervention with students, but also introduced classroom intervention and school-wide policy changes to address the issue of bullying.

### **1.1 Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this research was to introduce a systematic school-based intervention plan against bullying and to evaluate its efficacy by introducing administrative policy changes in Pakistani schools. This was expected to curb bullying and empower the victims. The intervention plan aimed at helping the victims to stand up to bullying by teaching them necessary social skills and the skills to protect themselves. Furthermore, it focused on restoring their sense of self-worth damaged by constant bullying, teasing and name-calling. The school was provided with an effective anti-bullying policy, designed as per the needs of the school. The policy was not only culturally and socially relevant for the Pakistani society and addressed the reasons and dynamics of bullying in Pakistani schools but was also highly comprehensive as it involved the students as well as the teachers, the parents and the school. This enabled the school to take a strong initiative against bullying.

### **1.2 Purpose of Research**

The main objectives of our interventional study were to understand the dynamics of bullying in Pakistani schools using previous research; to screen and identify the victims of bullying; to understand the intensity, gravity and form of bullying they are subject to; and school-level policy making to address this issue and provide individual and group therapy to the participants focusing on their personal, social and emotional problems.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

The current school-based intervention programme was carried out over the span of four months. It was a quasi-experimental, non-equivalent control group design. An experimental group and a non-matched control group comprising victims of bullying were assigned through non-random assignment because of the different schools selected and the group therapy approach that was part of the school-based programme. The two groups were compared to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention plan, using pre-test and post-test design. The participants were recruited from two junior schools (grades two to five) and were not matched by gender or race because they were recruited based on their experience of bullying. In this research, random assignment was not possible due to difference in the schools selected and the group therapy approach that was to be given supplemented by the school-based programme. The experimental and control groups were taken from two different schools to avoid the results being impacted by school-wide administrative policy changes on the control group. There were three phases of the study: At pre-test level, participants were screened for victimisation through individual assessment. After pretesting, a ten-week intervention plan was carried out for the pro-social skills of the victims, focusing on their emotional management, social skills and problem solving. Lastly, post-testing was done to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies used, by comparing both the pre-test and post-test scores. The scores for control group and experimental group were also compared.

## 2.1 Phase I

The purpose of the first phase was to outline the sampling procedures and measurement tools to assess the participants for the skills focused in the intervention plan.

**Sample.** Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. There were 12 participants in the study between the ages of 7 and 12, ranging from grade 2-5. Six participants each were chosen from two schools, out of which five from each school continued as participants of the study. One school was chosen to be the experimental school, whereas the other acted as a control. The participants mostly belonged to middle-class families, and neither of the groups were controlled for gender or any other characteristics. Students from grade 2-5 were included in the sample, aged between 7-12 years. The participants included in the study were screened and identified as victims of bullying using Illinois Bully Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Those who tended to provoke attacks (provocative victims) were also included in the study. Students who were not being victimised but still had low confidence and poor social skills were not included.

**Research Instruments.** The following measurement tools were used in the study.

**Behavioural observation.** The participants were observed during one to one and group sessions as well as in and out of the classrooms to assess the occurrence and manifestation of problem behaviours, including social isolation, avoidance of social interaction, lack of friendships at school and refusal to interact with teachers or participate in the class. Behavioural observation mainly aimed at revealing the dynamics of the bully/victim interaction at school and to gain an in-depth understanding of what victims were going through.

**Semi-structured interview.** A semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants and their teachers aiming at identifying the nature of their problem, reasons for victimisation and its consequences for them. The participants were also inquired in detail about their family, academic and school life. The participants' interaction patterns with parents, members of family, teachers, peers and non-teaching school staff were addressed to explore the dynamics of victimisation and how it influenced their social skills, self-esteem, and emotional well-being.

**Illinois bully scale (IBS).** IBS, developed by Espelage and Holt (2001) and translated by Shuja and Atta (2011), was used in this study. An Urdu translation of IBS by Shuja and Atta (2011) was used. Statistical analyses of the translated scale showed high reliability, and Cronbach Alpha of the Urdu translation was .88. The three subscales of IBS (Victim, Bully and Fight) correlated significantly with each other. The highest correlation was found between Bully subscale and total IBS ( $r = .92, p < .01$ ), while correlation among subscales and total scale ranged from .44-.92 (Shujja & Atta, 2011).

**How are my social skills checklist (SSC).** To assess the social skills of the participants, SSC was used (Goldstein, Sprafkin, Gershaw & Kline, 1980). It is a 25 item self-report checklist intended for adolescents. The checklist was forward-translated from English to Urdu and was tested on 20 English-medium school children, grade 3-6. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling. After the initial phase of administrating the forward translated version, the original version of SSC was administered on the same respondents after one week. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the 25 items of the translated version of the scale is 0.947, indicating high reliability.

**Teacher ratings.** Teacher ratings were taken for the problematic as well as pro-social behaviours of the participants, both during pre-testing and post-testing. The aim was to assess the effectiveness of the intervention from a teacher's perspective and the classroom behaviour of the child.

**Procedure.** When the participants were screened for victimisation, it was found that the junior school students experienced more bullying-related problems than the senior school students. Thus, the intervention plan was implemented on junior school students (grade 2-5): the participants were assessed for victimisation, and those with the highest scores were recruited for the study. The participants were then interviewed to subjectively evaluate the nature and extent of their victimisation, before the assessment was formally started.

After the completion of the first phase, the participants were assessed for each of the skills that the programme focused on: emotional management, self-confidence using teacher ratings, social skills using the social skills checklist, and pro-social and problem-solving skills using teacher ratings.

## 2.2 Phase II

In the second phase of the research, the intervention plan was implemented. Some of the activities in the plan were taken from the anti-bullying programme of Operation Respect, the US (Roerden, Yarrow, & Lazar, 2000), and some were behavioural and cognitive techniques used in therapy with school children.

**Procedure.** The intervention plan had two dimensions: individual and administrative. The ten-week plan focused on individual and group sessions, often involving the entire class as well. Generalised classroom activities were arranged to involve every student of the school in the initiative against bullying.

The other aspect of the programme was the policy introduced at the school aimed at a) creating awareness and educating the teachers and parents about ways of addressing bullying and victimisation through workshops, b) adding more structure and monitoring to the classroom as well as the playground using help from teaching and non-teaching staff, c) using help from senior school students and the student council to monitor and regulate bullying, d) providing help to students who lagged behind in academics or other school activities, and e) introducing school activities focusing on educating children about bullying and its consequences (See figure 1).

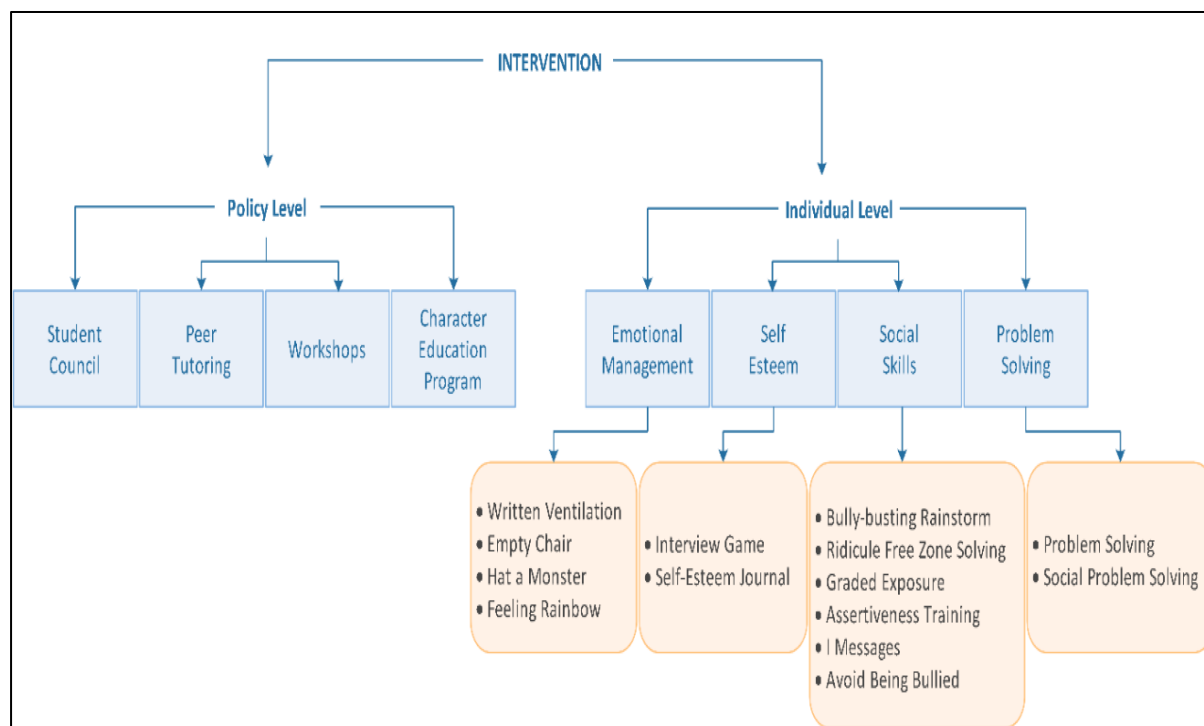


Figure 1. Summary of the Intervention Programme

### 2.3 Phase III

The third phase of the research was post-intervention assessment. In this phase, the assessment measures used during the pre-assessment phase were reapplied. The participants and the teachers were inquired about any improvements seen in the participants after being a part of the intervention. This aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention programme.

**Post Assessment.** Post assessment was conducted by re-administering the measures that were administered at the start of the intervention, during Phase I of the study. The scores of the original and the post-assessment were then compared to assess the improvement in the participants and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention plan.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Experimental Group's Score on Subscales of IBS

Illinois Bully Scale		Pre-assessment		Post-assessment	
Subscales	N	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Bully</b>	5	1.40	2.191	0.00	0.00
<b>Victim</b>	5	14.60	1.517	2.60	1.817
<b>Fight</b>	5	1.40	2.191	0.40	0.894

**Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Control Group's Score on Subscales of IBS Illinois Bully Scale**

Illinois Bully Scale Subscales	CONTRIBUTION		Pre-assessment		Post-assessment	
	N		M	SD	M	SD
<b>Bully</b>	5		5.40	1.52	3.80	1.095
<b>Victim</b>	5		10.80	2.59	11.00	1.73
<b>Fight</b>	5		1.00	1.00	0.60	0.89

**Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of Experimental Group's Score on SSC**

How Are My Social Skills? Checklist	N	Pre-assessment		Post-assessment	
		M	SD	M	SD
	5	49.20	6.98	66.40	9.61

**Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviation of Control Group's Scores on SSC**

How Are My Social Skills? Checklist	N	Pre-assessment		Post-assessment	
		M	SD	M	SD
	5	46.00	2.915	45.20	4.324

The overall mean scores of the experimental group on IBS decreased, whereas the control group scores showed no significant change (See Tables 1-2). On SSC, the overall mean scores of the experimental group significantly increased, whereas the control group did not show much improvement (See Tables 3-4). The disparity between scores of the experimental and the control group depicted that the school-wide intervention helped the participants deal with victimisation. These findings corroborate the previous findings, suggesting that intervention improves social skills of the participants. This helps them better defend themselves (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010), communicate assertively with the bullies and report bullying, thereby decreasing its incidents (Smith & Ananiadou, Cowie, 2003).

**Table 5. Average Scores of the Experimental Group Teacher Ratings**

Behaviours	Pre-Assessment	Post-Assessment
Helping	2.2	8.6
Sharing	2.4	8
Taking Initiative to Interact	1.4	6.8
Starting a Conversation	1.8	6.2
Praising Others	1.8	5.2
Assertiveness	1.4	7.2
Escaping Bullies	1.8	7.4
Reporting Bullying	2.2	7
Dealing with Bullying	1	6.6
Self-Concept	3.2	7.8
Confidence	2.8	7.8

**Table 6. Average Scores of the Control Group for Teacher Ratings**

Behaviours	Pre-Assessment	Post-Assessment
Helping	2.6	2.4
Sharing	1.4	1.6
Taking Initiative to Interact	2	1.8
Starting a Conversation	2	2
Praising Others	1.2	1.6
Assertiveness	1.2	1
Escaping Bullies	2.2	2.2
Reporting Bullying	1.6	1.8
Dealing with Bullying	1.4	1.2
Self-Concept	1.8	2.4
Confidence	2.2	1.8

The teacher ratings also revealed marked improvement in participants' social skills, confidence, pro-social behaviour and social problem solving (See Tables 5-6). The participants also showed improvement on the fight and bully IBS subscales, as they were given emotional management training. The training taught them effective ways of dealing with anger and standing up for their rights, rather than showing aggression. As participants with enhanced social skills tend to gain more peer-support (Hong & Espelage, 2012). This is likely to make them less vulnerable to victimisation. Moreover, victims of bullying lack problem solving and, specifically, social problem-solving skills. Participants who are better equipped with social skills are better able to help themselves out of problem situations and, hence, are less victimised (Pepler et al., 1994).

**Table 7. Comparison of Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test Results Obtained by Experimental and Control Group on Illinois Bullying Scale**

Subscales	Experimental Group				Control Group	
	<i>p</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>z</i>	
Bullying	.180	-1.342	.424	.042	-2.032	
Victimisation	.041	-2.041	.645	.000	1.000	
Fight	.180	-1.342	.424	.317	-1.000	

**Table 8. Comparison of Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test Results Obtained by Experimental and Control Group on Social Skills**

Group	<i>p</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>R</i>
Experimental	.041	-2.041	.645
Control	.581	-.552	-

The comparison of the experimental and control group on Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed scores of the experimental group decreased post intervention, whereas the control group scores showed no significant change post intervention (See Tables 7-8). These findings corroborate the previous findings, suggesting that intervention not only helped the participants fight bullying but also helped improve their pro-social behaviour and social skills (Yaakub, Haron & Leong, 2010).



The study initially aimed at helping the participants with a detailed plan focusing on improving their self-esteem, which was replaced by individual activities for fostering confidence and improving self-worth. Since, it was found that most participants did not have poor self-esteem, since they had ample parental support, and the school environment also focused on fostering positive self-esteem. Hence, the intervention only aimed at working on the self-esteem of the participants who saw themselves in poor light due to constant bullying and name calling during individual sessions. That is why no detailed separate self-esteem management was used. Here, it can be argued that even if participants develop a poor self-concept, those who have ample parental support and peer affiliation are less likely to develop poor self-esteem (Wilkinson, 2004). The aim in early school years should be to help the participants develop a positive self-image, which is enhanced by focusing on their qualities and achievements. This can also be achieved by giving them confidence through parental support, peer support, and teacher involvement.

The policy aimed at ensuring that the school administration appreciates bullying as a problem for school children and commits to curb it at all cost (Pepler, et al., 1994). Evidence suggests that school-wide intervention programmes have been effective in dealing with bullying all over the world when a school committee is made to ensure that no incidents of bullying go unnoticed, and provide immediate support to the victims (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). The anti-bullying committee talked to the bully and the victim as soon as the incident was reported to make their intervention more effective. The policy introduced in this intervention focused on creating awareness about bullying and the impact of victimisation on a student's life among the students, teachers and parents. The school also initiated a direct approach to addressing bullying using the principles of reinforcement and punishment to ensure that positive, pro-social behaviour is encouraged and bullying is discouraged (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). The effort to develop classroom rules against bullying made sure that children were aware of the consequences of breaking those rules, and the rewards that will follow if they continually abide by the rules decided in their mutual classroom discussions.

The recommendations focused on fostering pro-social behaviours by including it in the curriculum in forms of story-telling, poems and discussions; the participants were taught about caring and compassionate behaviours (Pepler, et al., 1994). At this stage, the parents and teachers were involved in the programme to improve its effectiveness and to ensure that the skills taught to the participants were reinforced outside the session as well. The evidence suggests that the most-effective means of dealing with bullying at school was to develop the school-based intervention programmes that involve the entire school and all the stakeholders in a child's life to put an end to bully-victimisation (Pepler et al., 1994).

This programme was effective in dealing with bullying because it was a school-wide programme; it ensured that things taught in the sessions with the researcher were carried forward and applied outside of the session. The research aimed at changing the school climate, so that it became less tolerant of bullying and more receptive and reinforcing for pro-social behaviours. The programme could have been effective because the school administration, teaching staff and the parents were highly involved and ready to contribute for the well-being of each child. Furthermore, this programme was carried out with elementary school children, who are more likely to listen to their teachers and often show more interest in school-related activities (Smith, Ananiadou & Cowie, 2003). Lastly, the programme was tailored to the cultural needs and sensitivities of Pakistani schools and addressed bullying in a manner more relevant to the local school population.

### 3.0 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

This study developed an intervention plan to help victims of bullying. The findings revealed that the school involved as an experimental group yielded positive results. The participants showed improvement in the skills taught to them, and an overall reduction was seen in the incidents of bullying. This intervention for elementary school children employed several evidence-based techniques, including administrative policy changes in the school. The intervention introducing curriculum changes including teaching of pro-social behaviours to children and providing individual and group therapy to the participants proved highly effective as it helped change the school culture and initiate discussions around kindness and pro-social behaviours which were actively rewarded by the school.

The intervention and control groups were selected from two different schools to avoid the control group results being inevitably affected by the policy changes introduced in the experimental school. For this reason, it is suggested that an across school comparison, involving multiple intervention schools, is carried out in the future to determine the effectiveness of this intervention programme.

The participants could not have been controlled for gender or ethnicity as they were primarily selected based on teacher referrals for being victims of bullying and, hence, could not have been matched for gender and ethnicity. Future programmes should take more matched groups to control for factors like gender, ethnicity, education and background of the students.

Future programmes should encourage and provide guidelines for legislators to make it a part of the nationwide policy against bullying. Furthermore, future researchers can add more components, addressing the academic, familial and peer-related aspects of the victims' lives to make the programme more comprehensive.

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