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EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION PROGRAM FOR THE PREVENTION OF BULLYING BEHAVIOUR IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

School is the place where students develop their own strengths, receive new knowledge, form their own personality, make them perceive reality and the world around us. Unfortunately, nowadays bullying behaviour persists and is very common in the school environment, the environment that society relies on the most in forming a personality to which the future belongs. Bullying is a form of abuse, detrimental to the well-being and healthy and harmonious development of pupils. It can be a simple form of neglect or it can extend to complex forms of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Bullying is characterised by the behaviour or attitude of repeatedly and intentionally 'bullying' as a way of gaining power over another person. This behaviour affects all students, from the person who bullies, those who are victims to those who witness it. The aim of the present study was to implement an educational intervention programme to prevent and combat this form of bullying behaviour in primary school students. The results showed that both the participants of the experimental group and the participants of the control group were involved in these bullying behaviours. After participating in the activities carried out in the proposed intervention programme, the participants of the experimental group obtained lower averages for the bullying subscale and the aggression subscale, but statistically significant differences were not found in the threat scale.

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1. Introduction

What can be exemplified is that "bully" is a person who uses their own power to dominate, hurt or frighten others (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, n.d.). A definition by the Norwegian-born researcher, Olweus (1993) on bullying based on research, implementation and evaluation programs over time, states that: a student is bullied when he/she is exposed, repeatedly over time, to negative actions from one or more students. A negative action is when a person intentionally causes, or intends to cause, physical pain or discomfort to another person, through physical contact, words, or in other ways (Olweus, 1993).

According to Craig et al. (2009), bullying occurs when a student is repeatedly teased in a way they don't like, but it is not when two students of similar power or authority argue or fight. It is also not bullying when a student is teased in a friendly and joking way.

In the study by Gugel (2013), it was highlighted that bullying cannot stop by itself, but needs outside intervention. For example, in the student health intervention, participants from 27 countries indicated that every student had been involved in a bullying conflict at least once (Krug et al., 2002).

Bullying behaviour leads to negative consequences for all parties involved in the behaviour, and some of the behaviours persist into adulthood (Salmivalli & Peets, 2018). Those involved in and identified as victims of bullying behaviour are more behaviourally unstable (Haynie et al., 2001; Rivers, 2011). In addition, Polanin et al. (2012) and Gaete et al. (2017) demonstrated that these consequences are present even in students who witness bullying behaviour.

2. Problem Statement

Bullying behavioral aggression has been studied most in school contexts where the influence of positive or negative climate, on the frequency of bullying and victimizing behavior (Gendron et al., 2011; Marsh et al., 2012; Richard et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2013), teacher responses (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006), poor/precarious teacher-student relationships (Bacchini et al., 2009; Doll et al., 2004; Richard et al., 2012), lack of teacher support and involvement in school activities (Barboza et al., 2009). Students are also distrustful and do not report bullying if they view their climate as negative (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). This relationship between school climate and bullying/victimization may be bidirectional, however low school climate contributes to bullying and vice versa. Also the levels of bullying and aggression in classrooms are different from one classroom to another because it is due to individual differences in individuals. This indicates that something in the classroom context potentiates or inhibits their behaviour.

The factors that contribute to the activation and maintenance of bullying are classified as follows:

- a) At school level
 - i. Absence of proactive strategies:
 - ii. Lack of a school policy to prevent and combat bullying.
 - iii. Lack of adult behavioural modelling;
 - iv. Lack of organisation and supervision of teenagers during breaks and in playgrounds.

b) At family level:

- i. Parental power imbalance where the father holds absolute power (Stevens et al., 2002), lack of emotional support from parents, inadequate discipline and abuse (Baldry, 2003; Baldry & Farrington, 1999); all these characteristics influence the educable's conducive development;
- ii. Poor parental supervision, lack of communication, and parental attitudes about the adolescent's undesirable behavior contribute to the causal direction of the learner's bullying behavior.

In a family climate lacking security, emotional support and poor communication between the two parties, social reality will be perceived as distorted, making it difficult for the child to cope with the hostile social environment, becoming inhibited, having serious difficulties relating and withdrawn (Eckersley, 2006). Reinforcing the child's self-confidence through verbal stimulation and constructive criticism helps the child not to inhibit himself and to display exemplary behaviour. Olweus (1993) believes that becoming a bully or a victim is due to the emotional environment within the family, where relationships between parents and between parents and child are devoid of love between them. Constantly applying physical correction to children in the home environment can lead to the child adopting bullying-like behaviour. Also the lack of clear rules and the protective behaviour of parents can lead to and especially increase the risk of exposure to bullying, with the child becoming a victim more often than their peers, Olweus (1993).

c) Classroom level:

- i. Background;
- ii. Socio-economic status;
- iii. Adoption of aggressive language to resolve any type of conflict;

What can be stated is that if within the classroom of students, we have poor management, it can lead to a deterioration of the educational climate, which even facilitates dropout.

d) At individual level:

- i. The need for power and dominance;
- ii. Lack of assertiveness, empathy;
- iii. Self-image;
- iv. Gender;

A distinctive characteristic of bullies is their aggressiveness towards peers, but not only, they also adopt this behaviour against teachers, adults and even parents. Bullies have a more positive attitude towards violence and the use of violent means than students in general. These acts of violence are characterised by impulsiveness and the need to dominate other children. Often in school, in order to win the sympathy of their peers, pupils who fail to perform well at school, take on certain aggressive bullying behaviours. In the work of many authors, a view of bullies is For example, Olweus (1978) argues that people who exhibit aggressive and harsh behaviour are in fact those who are anxious and insecure "under the surface" (Olweus, 1978). In several studies, bullies have been found to have average or slightly below average popularity (Bjorkqvist et al., 1982; Olweus, 1993, 1978; Pulkkinen & Tremblay, 1992). Aggressors are often surrounded by a small group of two to three supportive peers who seem to like them (Cairns et al., 1988). Aggressors with such behaviour do not seem to achieve low levels of popularity but quite the opposite, they are considered leaders in some circumstances. Equally evident is the fact that

there is a strong link between aggressive bullying behaviour and negative psycho-social functioning in students, which can be described by: low self-esteem (Hodges & Perry, 1996; Olweus, 1993; Slee & Rigby, 1993); high levels of depression (Craig & Pepler, 1998; Hodges & Perry, 1996; Olweus, 1993; Salmon, 2000; Slee, 1995); anxiety (Craig & Pepler, 1998; Hodges & Perry, 1996; Olweus, 1993; Slee & Rigby, 1993); suicidal ideation (Rigby & Cox, 1996) and feelings of loneliness (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Nansel et al., 2001).

3. Research Question

The question from which we started this research is the following: How effective is the proposed educational intervention program on reducing bullying behavior among fourth grade students?

4. Purpose of the study

The aim of this research is to implement an educational intervention programme on preventing and combating this form of bullying behaviour in 4th grade students, with a focus on the following objectives:

- i. To assess and identify the forms of bullying-type aggressive behaviour of the participants included in the study.
- ii. To develop and implement an intervention programme to combat or prevent bullying behaviour.
- iii. Evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed educational intervention programme through the re-assessment of bullying-type aggressive behaviour in the participants included in the research.

5. Research methods

5.1. Research hypothesis

The hypothesis of this research is:

Applying the educational intervention program "Stop Bullying!" to 4th grade students will lead to a decrease in bullying-type aggressive behavior.

- i. Independent variable: educational intervention programme.
- ii. Dependent variable: bullying behaviour.

5.2. Participants

The participants included in this study were 76 pupils aged between 10 years and 5 months and 12 years and 6 months (Mature = 11 years and 6 months), pupils of "Dr. Ioan Mihalyi de Apsa Secondary School, and "Secondary School No. 5, in Sighetu-Marmației, Romania. Of the total number of participants 35 are girls and 41 are boys.

Following the scoring of the responses to the given questionnaire, the participants were divided into two experimental groups: the control group and the experimental group.

The control group consisted of 33 students aged between 9 years and 10 months and 11 years and 11 months, from grade IV B, from the "Dr. Ioan Mihalyi de Apsa, Sighetu-Marmației" Secondary School, of which 13 girls and 20 boys.

The experimental group of 43 pupils, including 25 pupils, aged between 10 years and six months and 11 years and 10 months, from grade IV C, at the Gymnasium School "Dr. Ioan Mihalyi de Apsa, Sighetu-Marmației, of which 13 girls and 12 boys. And the experimental sample from the Gymnasium School No. 5, Sighetu-Marmației, consisting of 18 pupils, aged between 10 years and 5 months and 11 years and 7 months, with an average age of 11 years, from class IV A, of which 9 girls and 9 boys.

The selection criteria for the sample of participants were as follows:

- i. To be primary school students;
- ii. The age level of the students to be between 10 years and 5 months and 12 years and 6 months;
- iii. Participating pupils must be from the "Dr. Ioan Mihalyi de Apsa" Sighetu-Marmației Secondary School, i.e. "Sighetu-Marmației Secondary School No. 5".

5.3. Measures

5.3.1. The Olweus bully/ victim questionnaire (Olweus, 2006)

The bullying assessment questionnaire (Olweus, 2006) is a set of questions arranged and presented in a precise order, either orally or in writing, serving to gather in a standardized situation the opinions, feelings, beliefs and behaviours of the subjects. The reason for choosing this questionnaire in the present research is due to the accessibility of data processing from a statistical point of view.

The students' answers to the 22 items are nothing more than their situation on a rating scale that shows their attitude/behaviour towards what is being researched. In order for respondents to provide information as close to the truth as possible, they therefore completed the questionnaire without giving their names. The questionnaire was administered to the whole class at once and the questions were worked through together with the researcher to provide explanations to the children about any difficulties they had in understanding the terms. Examples that were easy for the pupils to understand were also given for each question. The only personal information entered on the questionnaire was the age and gender of the respondent.

The bullying assessment questionnaire developed by Olweus, (2006) was adapted into Romanian using the back-translation technique, (it includes three scales related to bullying, aggression and threats/rumours) aims to assess the child's quality of life in the school environment (during the last three months before the questionnaire was applied).

The questionnaire is divided into three subscales: bullying subscale ("How much have you been bullied, teased, bullied at school in the last 3 months?"), bullying subscale ("Have I been shouted at in various forms, have I been teased in an insulting way?"), bullying subscale ("Have I been called names in various forms, have I been teased in an insulting way?") and bullying ("I have been hit, pushed or pushed in various places in school (e.g. classroom, bathroom, fast-food)"); subscale bullying ("I have been threatened or forced to do things that I did not want to do"); subscale threat/rumours ("Other students have told lies or spread false rumours about me in order to alienate other students from me").

The time taken for the students to complete the questionnaire was 45 minutes due to discussions during the completion. Questioning of students in the two schools was carried out after signing an informed consent.

There are some studies that have highlighted the validity of this instrument using various methodological approaches. For example, Bevans et al. (2013) evaluated the OBVQ victimization scale using Item Response Theory (IRT) in a sample of 17,198 United States students. They found that the questionnaire has a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha full scale 0.84) using ten items from the victim dimension. The researchers also concluded that the victimization factor has two subdimensions (direct and indirect types of victimization), and it has a better fit when stratifying by gender. Also, Breivik and Olweus (2015) used IRT modeling and studied the psychometric properties of the OBVQ in a sample of 48,926 students in Norway. They found an optimal scale using eight items (they did not include the item about cyberbullying nor the item about other forms of bullying) in which bullying others corresponds to one factor, and the items that had the highest-severity parameters were taking money from others, spreading false rumors, and threatening others.

5.4. Procedures

This research had an experimental design and was conducted over a period of three months.

In the pre-experimental stage, a questionnaire was administered to all participants in this study, both control and experimental groups, in order to note how often this bullying type of aggressive behaviour occurs in students. It was also aimed at identifying the subtypes of bullying-type aggressive behaviour to which students resort.

In the experimental phase, the activities developed in the proposed educational intervention programme were carried out following the identified problems.

Stop Bullying!" intervention programme consists of a set of 5 activities with the following main objectives: creating rules to ensure a safe environment for students, developing interpersonal and assertive communication skills, developing awareness of how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them; developing unconditional acceptance and developing interpersonal relationships.

In the educational-instructional activities, methods such as symbolic play, brainstorming, case study examples, group discussions, role-play, ice-breaking exercises, explanation, feedback, Johari's window were used.

In the post-experimental phase, the questionnaires from the pre-experimental phase were reapplied to see if any changes occurred in minimizing bullying behaviour in students.

6. Findings

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the results obtained in the pre-test stage

Group		Intimidation	Aggressiveness	Threatening
Control	N	33	33	33
	Mean	18.06	19.60	21.93
	Std. Deviation	3.3	3.4	1.63
	Minimum	12,00	12,00	19,00

	Maximum	26,00	27,00	24,00
	% of Total Sum	23,2%	23,6%	22,1%
	% of Total N	21,7%	21,7%	21,7%
Experimental	N	43	43	43
	Mean	18.60	18.7	21.58
	Std. Deviation	2.68	4.2	1.81
	Minimum	14,00	10,00	18,00
	Maximum	25,00	26,00	25,00
	% of Total Sum	31,2%	29,3%	28,3%
	% of Total N	28,3%	28,3%	28,3%

By applying the bullying assessment questionnaire (Olweus, 2006) in the pre-test stage, the data presented in Table 1 were collected for the three subscales (bullying/aggression/threat). The data obtained showed little difference between the participants in the study. Thus, the control group on the bullying subscale obtained the following data: 45% reported that they had been involved in this type of behaviour at least once or twice in the last three months, 15% twice a month, 10% were involved weekly and 30% were not involved at all. The data collected indicates that 51% were hit, pushed, offended or had personal belongings (pen, writing utensils, coat) destroyed. The aggressors reported were: 21% from the same class, 24% from neighbouring classes but in the same year and 40% from older classes. Teachers' intervention in conflict resolution is mentioned by pupils that 33% intervene sometimes, 18% always. In addition, in the experimental group, in the bullying subscale the study participants mentioned that they had been involved in this type of behaviour such as: 60% hitting, pushing, destroying things, using obscene comments and gestures at least twice in the last three months. The aggressors indicated are: 52% from the same class, 25% from adjacent classes but in the same year and 12% from older classes. Teacher intervention in conflict resolution: 51% always, 33% sometimes, 16% rarely. The data collected on the reaction of observers when a pupil of the same age is bullied are: 60% try to help, 35% have not observed such behaviour in peers of the same age, 5% do nothing but think bullying is a good thing.

The results of the control group on the bullying subscale are as follows: 52% reported that they were excluded once or twice from a group, 39% two to three times a month, 55% reported that other pupils spread rumours and lies once or twice, 27% mentioned that bullying happened in the school yard and in the corridor. The aggressors reported were both boys and girls.

The results of the experimental group on the aggression subscale indicate that 70% were excluded from a group once or twice in the last three months, 37% mentioned that other pupils spread lies and false rumours once or twice, the aggressors were both girls and boys, in the school yard and in the corridor, 47% taking part once or twice in the last three months in these aggressive behaviours, 23% twice three times a month and 10% about once a week.

As for the control group on the threat subscale, the following data were obtained: 52% mentioned that they were threatened in various forms once or twice, 24% two to three times a month (silly/ stupid, fat), 57% were threatened to do something they did not want to do once or twice (run away from class, lie), the bullies were both boys and girls. On item 15 (Have you told anyone that you have been threatened in the last three months?) 52% told the school counsellor, 30% the head teacher, 18% the nurse. Students who observe another student being threatened claim that 42% feel sympathy and 58% feel

sorry for him/her and try to help, also the feeling of fear/fear that they might be a victim is 40% sometimes, 24% rarely and 36% never.

For the experimental group, the following data were obtained for the subscale threat: 74% mentioned that they like school very much and 21% very much. For the question how many friends do you have the following results were obtained, 49% have more than six friends, 17% have only four to five and 11% two to three friends. Of the students 58% have been offended once or twice in the last three months, 35% two to three times a month and 5% about once a week. The 51% of students reported that the threat was made by one student, 19% by two to three students and 30% were not threatened at all, 72% reported the incident to the school counselor, 21% to the principal and 7% to the nurse. Students who observe another student being threatened claim that 37% feel sorry and want to help him/her, 28% feel some compassion for him/her, 21% feel uncomfortable, 14% feel they deserved it, also the state of fear/fear that they might be victimized is 40% rarely, 35% sometimes, 25% never.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of behaviours used by gender of research participants

Gender		Teasing/ Names	Ignore/exclude from friends group	Gossip	Push/ shove/ swear	Deprivation of property/ destruction of personal property
female	N	35	35	35	35	35
	Mean	1,41	2,02	1,67	1,04	1,03
	Std. Deviation	.67	.83	.71	.20	.16
	% of Total Sum	41,6%	39,0%	34,4%	45,3%	46,8%
	% of Total N	46,1%	46,1%	46,1%	46,1%	46,1%
male	N	41	41	41	41	41
	Mean	1,7	2,7	2,72	1,07	1
	Std. Deviation	.66	.85	1.03	.38	.10
	% of Total Sum	58,4%	61,0%	65,6%	54,7%	53,2%
	% of Total N	53,9%	53,9%	53,9%	53,9%	53,9%

The results on the behaviours used according to the gender of the participants included in the research in Table 02 show the following data: 61% of boys and 34% of girls used teasing/name-calling once or twice; 48% of boys and 34% of girls ignored or excluded another child from their peer group; 61% of girls and 34% of boys teased another peer two to three times per month; 54% of girls and 26% of boys bullied/pushed/cussed once or twice a week (swore); 3% of girls mentioned destroying other peer's property to get back at them.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of post-test results

Group		Intimidation	Aggressiveness	Threatening
De control	N	33	33	33
	Mean	16,42	18,6	22,4
	Std. Deviation	2,9	2,57	1,87
	Minimum	10,00	15,00	19,00
	Maximum	22,00	24,00	26,00
	% of Total Sum	21,1%	22,4%	22,6%
	% of Total N	21,7%	21,7%	21,7%
Experimental	N	43	43	43
	Mean	10,5	10,74	20,6
	Std. Deviation	1,52	6,3	1,7
	Minimum	12,00	9,00	17,00
	Maximum	19,00	68,00	24,00
	% of Total Sum	24,4%	24,7%	27,0%
	% of Total N	28,3%	28,3%	28,3%
T independent test		$t_{(74)}=6.68^*$	$t_{(74)}=2.30^{**}$	$t_{(74)}=1.16$

* $p < .00$; ** $p < .05$

In order to observe significant improvements in terms of reducing bullying behaviour, the independent samples t-test was calculated. As can be seen in Table 03, the participants of the experimental group after participating in the activities carried out in the proposed intervention programme obtained lower means for the bullying subscale ($M = 10.5$) and for the aggressiveness subscale ($M = 10.74$), but statistically significant differences were not found for the threat scale. Thus, for the bullying subscale the following data were obtained: 35% had been bullied once or twice in the last three months. There was a decrease in the bullying mode of hitting or pushing, 37% were involved once or twice in the last three months (pushing), 12% were involved two to three times a month (hitting), 26% were involved in destroying personal belongings (pen, pencil or pen) once or twice in the last three months and 16% used inappropriate language once or twice in the last three months. The aggressors reported were: in the classroom 12%, in older and different classes 30%. Students in the experimental group also mentioned that due to communication with the teacher, conflicts in the classroom decreased.

In the aggressiveness subscale at the post-test stage the following data were obtained: 23% were expelled from a group once or twice in the last three months, 24% told lies once or twice in the last three months, mentioning that some lies they admitted after discussions with the teacher, bullies involved in bullying type behaviours, were both girls and boys, with actions taking place both in the school yard and in the corridor, 40% never took part in bullying behaviour and 60% said they had taken part in bullying behaviour once or twice in the last three months. In conclusion, the research hypothesis was only partially confirmed.

7. Conclusions

The school, which has an important role in the development of children and young people, together with the family and society, must consider permanent monitoring and access to strategies to control behaviours that are a risk to physical and mental health, with the aim of maintaining an optimal level of well-being in children.

Bullying is defined as hostile/exclusionary behaviour and teasing, humiliation. A pupil is labelled, teased, mocked in his/her circle of acquaintances or by peers who call him/her names (referring to physical appearance or medical/family problems). Sometimes this teasing turns into shoving or even, in some cases, physical attacks.

The basic characteristic of bullying is the asymmetric and unbalanced power relationship between the bully and the bullied, of course this behaviour is not occasional or singular, but is repeated over time against the same people but with an obvious difference in power on the part of the bully, who aims in a systematic, deliberate and unapologetic way to hurt, to intimidate the weaker person. The victim is unable to defend themselves with their own power remaining somewhat helpless against the bully, in this way it requires outside intervention (Gugel, 2013). The impact of this bullying behaviour both in the short and long term has a negative effect. Both victims and bullies lead to delinquent behaviour (Rigby & Cox, 1996; Sanders, 2004), peer rejection (Deater-Deckard et al., 2001), criminality (Eron et al., 1987), subsequent violence in school (Galinsky & Salmond, 2002), mental disorders (Kumpulainen et al., 1999), depression (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999). Victims of bullying often feel disadvantaged, sad, low self-esteem and, last but not least, a lack of self-confidence, due to the lack of adult involvement, guilt and shame for what has happened to them, causing them to isolate themselves, have no friends, be lonely and abandoned (Olweus, 1993), with friendships being damaged or not shared due to fear and mistrust of their peers.

The present study aimed at developing an educational intervention program to prevent and decrease the frequency of bullying behaviour in fourth grade students. The behaviours targeted in the programme are the three subscales of the questionnaire: bullying, aggression and threats/rumours. Following the implementation of the programme and the analysis of the data obtained, it turned out that the research hypothesis was only partially confirmed, as statistically significant differences were not found for the threat subscale.

One of the limitations of the research is the small number of participants in the present study. Therefore the data obtained are not statistically representative, hence a first future research direction would be to reapply the study on a larger sample of participants and over a longer period of time.

Another limitation of this research is the lack of assessment of exogenous variables such as parenting style or perception of social support.

A future research direction would be to develop a partnership with school counsellors in the educational institutions involved in the research on the development of personal development activities based on the components of emotional intelligence.

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