

Emotional Intelligence Life-Skills Programme In The Prevention And Management Of Bullying Behaviour In Schools.

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Abstract:

Bullying victimization and perpetration in South African schools is an ongoing blight and this study's focus was on the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in a Life-skills programme in prevention and management of bullying behaviour. Emotional intelligence plays an integral role in life skills pedagogical content knowledge, therefore, EI Life-skills intervention programme was developed and implemented to equip bullies with emotional and social competence and empathetic skills that will enable them to constructively solve conflicts. Quantitative research method was used to collect and analyze data for the study. The total sample of (n=40) participants comprised of Grade 09 learners between the ages of 13-15 were selected. The choice of the sample was motivated by the fact that the selected learners were bullying perpetrators. The (n=40) were evenly distributed into two groups, namely, Group A (experimental) and Group B (control) 57.5% were males and 42.5% were females. The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) (1998) was used to collect data from the participants. Pre-test and post-test trials were conducted. The effectiveness of the programme was assessed to determine whether it can be used as an intervention tool to decrease bullying behaviour from those who bully others. Participants in the experimental group scored higher in overall EI when compared to participants in the control group post-intervention. This suggests that EI as a life-skills programme can be a powerful intervention tool in preventing bullying by fostering empathy, improving communication, and enhancing social skills among learners.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, life-skills, programme evaluation, bullying behaviour, prevention, management

Introduction

The prevalence of bullying victimisation and perpetration continues to escalate in South African schools with most of such incidents resulting in detrimental consequences (Juan et al, 2018). The negative outcomes associated with bullying victimisation and perpetration have been well-documented in literature and such has highlighted the need for effective intervention and prevention programmes (Steyn & Singh, 2018). Olweus (1994) defined bullying as a form of aggression that is repeatedly directed at the victim with an intention of causing harm or distress. There should be a perceived or actual power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator. According to this definition, bullying conduct possesses three distinguishing characteristics that set it apart from other forms of violence: Firstly, intention to harm, secondly, recurrent in nature, and thirdly, an obvious power imbalance between victim and perpetrator (Gaffney et al., 2019).

Lubbe (2019) suggest that several intervention programmes have been put in place with the aim to prevent and manage bullying behaviour in South African schools however, such programmes appear to be less effective as bullying incidents continue to escalate in schools across the country. According to Jabulani and Edward (2021) most of the intervention programmes implemented in South African schools focus on learner discipline as per guidance from school policies (i.e., calling in the parents to school or suspending the child who has misbehaved, calling in law enforcement). The whole school development approach rarely focuses on the social and emotional competency of the learner involved in bullying behaviour as perpetrators. Therefore, the researcher has seen a need for development and implementation of bullying behaviour prevention and management programme that will focus on building emotional and social competency skills to decrease the occurrence of bullying incidents in schools.

Steyn and Singh (2018) conducted a study on managing bullying in South African secondary schools. A qualitative research design was used to investigate the problem through an interview process with participants from secondary schools, as well as a circuit manager from the uThungulu district of KwaZulu-Natal. The findings confirmed that the problem of bullying emanated at different levels such as family, the family, school and the community. Their paper concludes with the provision of a model to manage and curb bullying that focuses on the bio-ecological system. Bio-ecological systems theory looks at the different systems that interact together to mold a child's social and emotional development (Woolfolk, 2019). The theory believes that if there is a positive correlation among the systems that can bring about positive outcomes in terms of social and emotional competency in learners.

According to Cabello & Fernandez-Berrocal (2015) EI as a construct is similar to intelligence as it is comprised of different domains that cover both emotional and cognitive aspects that form an overall emotional intelligence concept. Such domains include, emotion perception, Emotion facilitation and thinking, understanding and managing emotions and interpretation and regulation of emotions. Literature on bullying behaviour illustrates a significant relationship between bullying behaviour and EI (Mendez et al., 2018). It has been evident in the literature that individuals with high levels of EI are competent and capable of processing emotional information and are able to use this information as a guide to regulate their emotions (Quintana-Orts et al., 2021).

On the other hand, low levels of EI have been significantly associated with bullying behaviours as individuals who are bullies have been shown to have low levels of EI and this has resulted in them perpetuating violence against their peers (Trigueros et al., 2020). Rueda et al (2022) conducted a study on the role of emotional intelligence in adolescent bullying and their findings showed that greater levels of emotional perception in learners who are bullies and lower levels of emotional understanding and regulation. This in turn causes bullies to misunderstand/misperceive the intentions of others as they lack empathy which may then result in them victimizing others. The study revealed the importance of designing and implementing programs of EI in the school context as prevention and action against bullying. Similarly, Cerezo, et al. (2022) conducted a study to explore the role of EI in adolescent bullying. Their findings indicate that the EI dimensions of cognition, emotional control and management were negatively associated with bullying behaviour. This suggests that learners who bully others have difficulties with thought processing and this in turn causes difficulties with managing emotions appropriately. Peachey et al. (2017) mentions that this could be due to the learner's lack of ability to accurately perceive emotions in others and lack of empathy. Therefore, there is a need for the enhancement of EI in prevention and management of bullying behaviours in schools. EI life-skills means a programme that was developed to teach and develop learners social and emotional competency to improve their emotional intelligence. High levels of emotional intelligence is positively associated with: an ability to perceive things accurately and emotional informed decision-making ability.

Numerous anti-bullying intervention programmes that promote the development of social and emotional competency such as EI have been developed and implemented within the international context; and they have proven to be very effective. Programmes such as KiVa, Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme (OBPP) and RULER have proven to be very effective in decreasing victimisation as well as bullying behaviour incidents (Cerezo et al., 2019). According to Espelage (2018) programmes that focus on Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) particularly EI are structured to improve a wide range of students' social and emotional competencies and impact bullying at the individual and peer levels of the school social ecology. Such programmes have shown to be an effective component in comprehensive bullying prevention interventions and other interventions as they improve social-emotional skills that are associated with decreases in bullying and other forms of aggression.

Materials and Method

The study sought to examine the effectiveness of an EI Life-skills programme in the prevention and management of bullying behaviour. The focus is on assessing and improving the EI of bullies in order to minimize the occurrence of bullying incidents. Correlational research method was used to determine the extent of a relationship between these two variables using statistical data. The following hypothesis was tested to determine the relationship among the two variables:

Hypothesis: EI life-skills programme has a great impact in the prevention and management of bullying behaviour.

The total sample of (n=40) participants comprised of Grade 09 learners between the ages of 13-15 were selected. The choice of the sample was motivated by the fact that the selected learners were bullying perpetrators. The sample was collected in township schools infested by school-based violence. Most of the participants were from low-income single parent households. The (n=40) were evenly distributed into two groups, namely, Group A (experimental) and Group B (control) 57.5% were males and 42.5% were females. Instrument: Data was collected using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) (Schutte et al, 1998). The test was used to assess participant's level of EI. The SSEIT is a standardised measure, and it is suitable for use with both adolescents and adults. The questionnaire comprised of 33 questions that assesses four domains of EI, namely, emotion perception, emotion and thought facilitation, emotion understanding, and emotion regulation. Each question is rated on a Likert scale of 1-5 ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The average scores for SSEIT are reported like the traditional Intelligence test, hence, the average score for EI is also 90 and the standard deviation is 15. This means that if a person scores 90 on this test, they are in the average range of EI. A score of 115 will mean that a person is 1 standard deviation above the mean and if a person obtains a score of 85 it means they are 1 standard deviation below the mean.

The score ranges for the level of EI were categorised as follows:

- 130+ = Superior
- 120 -129 = High

- 110 -119 = Above average
- 90 -109 = Average
- 80 – 89 = Low average
- 70 – 79 = Low
- 70 and below = Very low

A pre-test and post-test were conducted on both groups to assess the level of EI prior to the intervention. The experimental group received an intervention in a form of life-skills workshop focusing on EI. A post-test was then done to determine if there were any differences on the groups post intervention. Inferential statistics was used to provide informational coefficients, test hypotheses and draw conclusions. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, (SPSS) was used to carry out the analysis process.

The findings are tabulated in Table 1:

Table 1: Pre-test results of experimental group (n=20) and control group (n=20) - SSEIT.

Group	Scale	N	Mean	SD
Control	Emotion Perception	20	91.75	5.08
	Thought facilitation	20	80.95	4.71
	Understanding emotions	20	80.05	6.16
	Managing Emotions	20	73.2	4.18
	EQ Total	20	79.85	4.49
Experimental	Emotion Perception	20	91.35	5.67
	Thought facilitation	20	80.60	4.55
	Understanding emotions	20	81.35	7.03
	Managing Emotions	20	72.4	3.83
	EQ Total	20	83.65	4.72

The first sub-test of the SSEIT is emotion perception and it involves the ability to accurately perceive and recognize emotions. Emotional perception involves paying attention to and accurately decoding emotional information such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. The results show that both groups scored average on this subtest M91.75 and SD 5.08 (Control group) and M 91.35 and SD 5.67 (experimental group). This indicates that bullies are able to perceive and recognise emotional information in social situations, however, they deliberately ignore such information to victimise others.

The second sub-test of the SSEIT is emotion facilitation and it involves one's ability to employ feeling to enhance thinking. The individual must weigh emotions against sensations and thoughts. Such a set of skills prevents one from acting immediately. The findings show that both the control group score low average (M=80.95; SD=4.71) and (M=80.60; SD=4.55) on this subtest. This suggests that both groups have inadequate skills to facilitate thoughts and emotions using existing schemas. The low average scores from both groups may indicate impairments on emotion facilitation and thought-processing skills that lead to impulsive decision-making.

The third sub-test of the SSEIT is to understand emotions and it involves one's ability to accurately label emotions and reason with them effectively. One's understanding of what leads to various emotions is a critical component of EI. For example, annoyance and irritation can lead to rage if the cause of irritation continues to intensify. Hence, the ability to label emotions accurately is important when dealing with other people to enhance our self-understanding. The results from this sub-test show that both groups scored low average on this subtest (M=80.05 ; SD=6.16) for control group and (M= 81.35 ; SD=7.03) for experimental group. This suggests that both groups have inadequate skills to process and understand emotional information and to reason with such information effectively.

The fourth subtest, which is regulation of emotions, assesses one's ability to manage and regulate emotions in oneself and others to enhance emotional and intellectual growth. For example, learning to calm oneself when angry or being able to help another person alleviate the anger. Both groups scored low on this subtest (M= 73.2;SD=4.18) for the control group and (M=72.4; SD=3.83) for the experimental group.

This may indicate that bullies have inadequate skills to control and manage their anger in confrontational situations. The results from the total EQ cover an overall EQ, which is one's ability to monitor his or her own feelings and emotions and those of others, discriminate among them, and use this information to guide one's thinking and action". The results show that the overall bullies scored between low (M=79.85; SD=4.44) control group and low average (M= 83.65 ; SD=4.72) for the experimental group. The low to low average scores suggests that bullies may lack the capacity to perceive and understand emotions, empathise with others and in the process facilitate emotional information to make sound decisions. This means they will always struggle to solve problems rationally if their EI is not enhanced.

Emotional Intelligence Life-skills Intervention Programme

Emotional Intelligence (EI) Life-skills Program in prevention and management of bullying behavior in schools focuses on developing key emotional and social competencies in students. These skills can help create a positive and empathetic school environment, reducing the occurrence of bullying while promoting healthy relationships and self-awareness. See Annexure One for a detailed layout or structure of the programme.

By integrating emotional intelligence into a life-skills program, schools can foster an environment where bullying is less likely to occur and where students develop the skills, they need to navigate social situations with empathy and respect. The activities were aimed at enhancing social and emotional skills of the participants. To achieve optimum results from the programme, the intervention consisted of practical activities as well as workbook and homework that participants could use to reflect what they have learnt from the programme.

At the end of each session learners were given a quiz and some homework to assess their level of understanding. The aim behind giving them homework was to ensure that they continue practice the skills in another context such as home. The homework activities had scenarios which they could use to engage others at home and write about their own experiences and observations. Through the programme it was discovered that some participants shared the same experience, and they could identify how others in the similar situation were feeling. They were comforted by the realisation that they were not alone. The participants also came into realisation how their actions impacted on others such as family, friends and peers. This was an eye opener for some as they appeared to show interest in changing their behaviour.

POST-TEST RESULTS

A post-test was conducted on both the experimental (n=20) and the control (n=20) groups to measure the effectiveness of the EI life-skills programme in the prevention and management of bullying. The results of post-test are analysed and discussed.

Table 2: Post-test results: Experimental group (n=20) and control group (n=20) - SSEIT.

Group	Scale	N	Mean	SD
Control	Emotion Perception	20	94.5	6.28
	Thought facilitation	20	83.4	7.71
	Understanding emotions	20	74.2	10.98
	Managing Emotions	20	83.3	3.95
	EQ Total	20	80.85	4.46
Experimental	Emotion Perception	20	115	9.06
	Thought facilitation	20	94.4	13.9
	Understanding emotions	20	128.2	15.38
	Managing Emotions	20	119.4	6.34
	EQ Total	20	108.25	12.20

The results show that the experimental group (n=20) performed higher (M115; SD=9.06) on overall EQ compared to the control(n=20) group (M=94.5; SD=6.28) although both scores were between the average and the high average range. The experimental group (n=20) further performed better than the control group (n=20) in three (3) different sub-tests of the SSEIT namely, thought facilitation (M=94.4; SD=13.9) for experimental group and (M=83.4; SD=7.7 for control group, understanding emotions (M=128.2; SD=15.38) for experimental group and (M= 74.2; SD=10.98) for control group and managing emotions(M=119.4; SD=6.34) for experimental group and (M=83.3; SD=3.95) for the control group. For overall EQ the results show that the in overall the control group scored low (M=80.85; SD=4.46) compared to the experimental group (M=108.25; SD=12.20).

In addition, a paired sample t-test was done to measure the significance of the differences in the EQ total scores in the experimental and the control groups separately. See Table 3:

Table 3: t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	113	83
Variance	153,5	51,5
Observations	5	5
Pearson Correlation	-0,289613918	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	4	
t Stat	4,188539083	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0,006911391	
t Critical one-tail	2,131846786	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0,013822782	
t Critical two-tail	2,776445105	

The results indicate that the increase from the pre-test to the post-test for the experimental group was significant with a pvalue of 0.01. It may thus be concluded that the EI life-skills intervention programme significantly improved the EI of the bullies in the experimental group.

Discussion

The main objective of the study was to determine the role of life-skills EI programme in prevention and management of bullying behaviour. The findings of this study revealed that EI as part of a life-skills programme is effective in altering learners' perceptions of how they should constructively address decision-making and life-skills issues. Participants in the experimental group scored higher in overall EI when compared to participants in the post-intervention control group. This indicates that the implementation of the programme was effective. The study demonstrated a positive link between EI and the reduction of bullying behaviours in school. The results are similar to the results obtained in the study conducted by (Divecha & Brackett, 2020). According to these authors, when learners can accurately perceive others' emotions it is assumed that their interaction will re-enforce their interpretation of social situations and use the available information constructively. However, it was evident from the findings that, although bullies can accurately perceive the emotions of others, they appear to have no regard, or have no emotion, towards how others are feeling when they are in distress or experiencing discomfort. Bullies appeared to lack empathy and understanding of how their actions affect others.

According to Kokkinos and Kipritsi (2018), a lack of affective empathy has often resulted in morally disengaged behaviours and the likelihood of one to participate in bullying behaviours. Additionally, Franzen et al. (2021) states that bullies may apply emotion perception bias and decide not to consider the feelings of others. They selectively and pre-emptively de-activate their emotional response using moral disengagement to absolve themselves from guilt and to promote immoral conduct (Luque González et al, 2022). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2017), assert that moral disengagement involves a series of cognitive processes used to morally disengage, to absolve themselves from guilt and it has been highly associated with bullying behaviours.

In a study conducted by Espejo-Siles et al. (2020), moral disengagement was determined to be a significant predictor of violent behaviour and peer violence. This was supported by Bjärehed et al. (2020) who assert that adolescents who engage in bullying behaviour tend to adopt various moral disengagement strategies to absolve themselves from guilt and remorse which will allow them to engage in immoral acts. This might then distort the way they understand and process social information and may negatively influence their behaviours or decisions in social situations.

The findings in a study conducted by Lubbe (2019) on EI as an intervention in the prevention and management of bullying behaviour in schools suggest that EI intervention was effective in the prevention and management of bullying. In the current study, the participants in the experimental group scored higher on different EI subscales including the overall Emotional Intelligence (EQ) post-intervention compared to those who were in the control group. In a recent systematic

review on the role of EI in adolescent bullying conducted by Jimenez-Arriaga et al. (2023), the researchers discussed the importance of designing and implementing EI programmes in the school context to prevent and manage bullying after seeing how bullying behaviours were associated with low levels of EI.

It was evident from this research study that enhancing EI can reduce bullying behaviours and promote prosocial behaviours. This is further supported by Vega et al. (2021) in their systematic meta-analysis on EI and aggressive behaviours in adolescents, it was revealed that adolescents with higher levels of EI were less likely to manifest aggressive behaviours. Similar findings were obtained by Trigueros et al. (2020), who assert that there was a positive correlation between EI and social skills and a negative relationship with bullying behaviour. In addition, the authors suggest that there is a need for the development of anti-bullying educational programmes that focus on the development of EI. Based on the findings obtained from this study the researcher concurs with these authors. If a learner's EI is enhanced, then they are in a better position to make informed decisions. In addition, such programmes should be integrated with the life-skills curriculum to ensure that all learners in school become socially competent.

In a meta-analytic study conducted by Espelage et al. (2018) on social-emotional learning programmes to reduce bullying behaviour among middle school learners, their findings showed a significant intervention effect for bully perpetration for learners in experimental condition compared to learners in the control condition with the decrease in bully perpetration over the period of three years. This suggests that social-emotional learning has a positive effect in reducing bullying in schools. Studies on SEL programmes have revealed reductions in bullying, victimisation, aggressive and argumentative behaviours, therefore, there is growing support and recognition for the role of SEL particularly EI in reducing bullying.

Conclusion

Numerous bullying behaviour prevention and management programmes have been implemented in schools internationally; however, bullying behaviour remains a pervasive problem, particularly in South African schools where bullying behaviour incidents have resulted in fatal incidents (Shattnawi, 2018). Studies have shown that the anti-bullying programmes that have proven to be effective are those that involve the whole school particularly those that include the development of EI skills enhancement (Gaffney et al., 2019, Lubbe, 2019). The objective of this study was to determine the role of EI lifeskills program in prevention and management of bullying behaviour. Previous studies suggest that bullying is significantly associated with low levels of EI (Quintana-Orts et al., 2021). Therefore, the researcher hypothesized that EI as a life-skills program can have a positive impact in prevention and management of bullying behaviour. The hypothesis was supported as the results show that the experimental group (n=20) performed higher on overall EQ compared to the control group (n=20). Therefore, incorporating emotional intelligence as an intervention tool in bullying prevention can significantly impact learners' social and emotional development. By fostering empathy, enhancing communication skills, and creating a supportive school environment - emotional intelligence can be a transformative approach in mitigating bullying and promoting positive relationships among learners.

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ANNEXURE ONE STRUCTURE OF THE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE PROGRAMME

1. Understanding Emotional Intelligence

Definition: Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as the ability to recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others.

Core Components:

Self-awareness: Recognizing and understanding one's own emotions.

Self-regulation: Managing and controlling emotional reactions.

Motivation: Using emotional understanding to stay focused and motivated.

Empathy: Understanding and sharing the feelings of others.

Social skills: Building healthy relationships, resolving conflicts, and collaborating effectively.

2. Key Objectives of the Program

Prevent bullying behaviours by increasing emotional intelligence and promoting empathy.

Help students understand and manage their emotions, especially in stressful or challenging social situations.

Promote healthy communication and conflict resolution techniques.

Foster a positive school culture where all students feel respected and valued.

Empower bystanders to intervene effectively and safely when witnessing bullying.

3. Program Components

The programme was facilitated by the researcher who is qualified as a psychologist and three research assistants who are intern psychologists assisted. Participants for the intervention programme were separated into two groups, namely, the control group and the experimental group. Both groups were given a pre-test in order to assess the level of their emotional intelligence prior to the implementation of the program. The experimental group received a workshop focusing on emotional awareness, self-regulation, social awareness and the control group received a psych-educational workshop focused on bullying.

A. Self-awareness and Emotional Recognition Activities:

Identifying emotions through facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice.

Journaling about personal feelings and situations where emotions are triggered.

Role-playing to practice identifying emotions in different scenarios.

Goal: Help students understand their own emotional responses and build emotional vocabulary.

B. Self-regulation Techniques Activities:

Teaching relaxation techniques like deep breathing and mindfulness exercises.

Practicing reframing negative thoughts or using positive self-talk.

Discussing strategies for coping with frustration, anger, and sadness.

Goal: Equip students with strategies to manage strong emotions in challenging situations, reducing impulsive or aggressive reactions.

C. Empathy Development

Activities:

Listening exercises where students practice active listening and try to understand others' perspectives.

Group discussions about how others might feel in situations involving bullying.

Empathy-building games such as "Walk in Their Shoes," where students act out scenarios and explore different points of view.

Goal: Help students recognize the impact of their behavior on others and encourage kindness and compassion.

D. Social Skills and Conflict Resolution Activities:

Role-playing peer interactions, teaching appropriate responses in conflict situations.

Creating "conflict resolution charts" for students to refer to when facing disputes.

Group projects to foster collaboration and teamwork.

Goal: Equip students with tools to resolve conflicts peacefully and assertively, without resorting to bullying.

E. Bystander Training Activities:

Discussing the role of bystanders in bullying situations and how they can intervene positively.

Practicing bystander intervention strategies, such as reporting bullying or supporting the victim.

Providing safe spaces for students to express concerns about bullying.

Goal: Empower students to be active participants in creating a safe and supportive school environment.

4. Program Delivery

Workshops and Classes: Regular sessions, either as standalone workshops or integrated into existing curriculum. **Peer Mentoring:** Older students can mentor younger students, sharing emotional intelligence skills and strategies for managing bullying.

Group Discussions and Reflection: Regular opportunities for students to share experiences, ask questions, and reflect on their learning.

Teacher and Parent Involvement: Training for teachers and parents to reinforce emotional intelligence skills and support students outside the classroom.

5. Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Feedback and Surveys: Regular surveys to assess students' understanding of emotional intelligence, the frequency of bullying, and the effectiveness of the program.

Behavioural Observations: Teachers and staff can monitor behavioural changes, improvements in empathy, and the reduction in bullying incidents.

Ongoing Support: Providing continued emotional intelligence training throughout the school year and offering resources for students who need additional help.

6. Outcome Goals

A reduction in bullying incidents: By increasing self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, students are less likely to engage in or tolerate bullying behavior.

Improved school climate: A positive school culture where students feel safe, respected, and supported.

Stronger relationships: Enhanced communication, trust, and cooperation among students, teachers, and parents.