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## Examining the efficacy of the Olweus prevention programme in reducing bullying: the Malaysian experience

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### Abstract

Many countries have adapted or adopted the Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme after it was reported that there was a significant reduction in levels of bullying and being bullied. The positive changes were maintained 20 months after the intervention. The objective of this study was to examine the efficacy of the Olweus prevention programme in reducing bullying in selected schools in Malaysia. This study used an experimental pre-test/post-test comparison including a control group involving six secondary schools. Results showed some indication of the effectiveness of the bully-intervention programme in one of the schools. Intervention at the classroom level showed more positive results.

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*Keywords:* Bully prevention, olweus, efficacy.

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### 1. Introduction

The last five years had seen a growing number of violent cases of bullying among school students being reported in the Malaysian media. One of the more appalling incidents of bullying that stunned the nation was in 2004, when a 16-year-old student was brutally assaulted by his seniors, which led to his death. In other cases, victims of bullying have suffered serious physical impairments such as damaged eardrums and spinal injuries.

Although bullying among school children is not a new phenomenon, it was not until the early 1970s that efforts were made to orderly study it (Olweus, 1993). One of them is a programme formulated by Olweus (2004), in Smith, Pepler, and Rigby (2004), that has been claimed to effectively reduce aggressive behaviour among school children by 50 percent. This positive change was maintained 20 months after the intervention.

These results stimulated other countries to adopt or adapt the Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme. However, the results of these efforts were varied and inconsistent. For example, a study in Canada by Pepler, Craig, O'Connell, Atlas, and Charach (2004) in Smith, Pepler and Rigby (2004), showed a slight increase. However, Smith, Sharp, Elsea, and Thompson (2004) also in Smith, Pepler and Rigby (2004) found positive outcomes on bullying as well as being bullied. On the other hand, Roland's (1989) study, in Tatum and Lane (1989) saw a slight increase in bullying and of being bullied. Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij and Van Oost (2000) studied Flemish

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primary and secondary school children and their findings showed a *mixed pattern*. While there were positive changes in primary schools, there were zero outcomes in secondary schools.

### *1.1. Objective of study*

The overall objective of this study was to assess the extent of bully-victim problems among secondary school children in the Federal Capital of Kuala Lumpur and to evaluate the effectiveness of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme in some selected schools.

## **2. Method**

All students (a total of 3816) from six secondary schools (three experimental and three control schools) in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur participated in this study. For both the experimental and control schools, there were one all girls' school, one all boys' school, and one co-educational school.

The study used an experimental pre-test/post-test comparison including a control group. The first part of the study looked at school level intervention, while the second part only looked at the Form 2 classes where additional intervention programmes were carried out.

### *2.1. Instrumentation*

The study used a bullying survey comprising 24 items. The survey identified three dimensions of bullying, viz., physical, verbal and relational; and five areas of being victims of bullying, namely, physical, verbal, relational, signal and extortion. The Cronbach test for reliability showed acceptable levels.

### *2.2. Steps in the Intervention Programme*

In the experimental schools, a school-based anti-bullying programme was implemented while the control schools did not receive any programme at all. The steps in the intervention were as follows:

- i. Bullying survey for all students in the participating schools (experimental and control).
- ii. Formation of anti-bully committees in the experimental schools.
- iii. A 3-day training for these anti-bully committees by the research team.
- iv. Another training session was given for those who could not attend the earlier training.
- v. Data entry & analysis of survey data.
- vi. Presentation of survey results to the respective schools.
- vii. Launching of the anti-bullying programme in each of the experimental schools.
- viii. Programme with parents in the experimental schools.
- ix. Classroom intervention for Form 2 students in the experimental schools.
- x. Additional workshop for school counselors in the experimental schools.
- xi. Follow-up meeting in the experimental schools.
- xii. Post survey carried out in both the experimental and control schools.

## **3. Findings**

### *3.1. Overall Bullying*

The three types of bullying identified in the study (physical, verbal and relational) showed an upward trend in the experimental schools as a whole. However, when the analysis was carried out separately for each type of school, a different picture emerged.

In the all girls' experimental school, there were significant downward trends for the three types of bullying after one year. However, at the co-educational school and in the all boys' experimental school, all three types of bullying showed an upward trend.

For the control schools, all three types of bullying showed an upward trend in the all girls' control school and the all boys' control school. However, in the co-educational control school, all three types of bullying were on the downward trend.

### 3.2. *Bullying among Form Two Students*

Further analysis focusing on the form two students who were given additional activities at the classroom level, the findings again confirmed all three types of bullying to be on the decrease at the all girls' experimental school. The picture was also similar at the all boys' experimental school.

The analysis on the form two students showed all three types of bullying to be on the upward trend in all the control schools. Thus, when comparing the results on form two students in the control schools with those in the experimental schools, the findings suggest that, to a certain extent, the intervention at the classroom level did produce some positive effects in terms of reducing bullying behaviour.

### 3.3. *Overall Victims of Bullying*

The results for all students at each of the experimental school showed all types of being victims of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, signal, and extortion) to be on the downward trend in the all girls' school. However, the opposite picture could be seen in the co-educational school where all five types of victimization were significantly higher at the post-test stage. The situation at the all boys' school was somewhat mixed.

### 3.4 *Victims of Bullying among Form Two Students*

Among the form two students, the findings portrayed a mixed scenario. In the all girls' experimental school, the decrease in being victims of bullying was in three areas (physical, verbal and extortion). The decrease in being victims of bullying in the all boys' experimental school was also in three areas – relational, signal and verbal. As for the co-educational experimental school, the decrease was only in one area, namely, extortion.

In the control schools, the results showed an upward trend in all five types of being victims of bullying in the all girls' school, while in the all boys' school, the upward trend was in two types of being victims – relational and signal, In the co-educational school, the upward trend in being victims of bullying was in three areas – physical, signal, and extortion.

## 4. Discussion

The significant decrease in bullying in the all girls' experimental school could be justified from the different types of activities that were carried out in this school. The school had the most number of activities to create awareness among students, teachers, and school support staff about the different types of bullying and how to address the bullying problem in school. The school also named their anti-bully intervention programme *Love Your Friends* instead of just calling it an anti-bully intervention programme as in the other two experimental schools.

A large majority of the teachers from the all girls' experimental school knew about the anti-bully policy that the school had come up with. With the exception of the history, geography, and living skills teachers, the other teachers spoke and discussed about bullying in class, with the language teachers taking the lead. Seventy-five percent of the class teachers had put up their class anti-bully policy on the classroom notice board. The two counsellors in this school spoke about bullying in classes when they were doing relief duties. The school also had a series of other programmes with their students to create awareness of the effects of bullying on victims and bullies.

In the all girls' experimental school, five anti-bully posters given by the researchers were put up outside the counsellor's office throughout the year. In comparison, the co-educational school had two posters put up on the wall along the staircase leading to the counsellor's office while three other posters were put up inside the counsellor's

office but all these posters were taken down after a few weeks. In the all boys' school, the posters were not displayed anywhere.

The all girls' school also held a one-day seminar on parenting for parents in conjunction with the Parent-Teachers Association's (PTA's) annual general meeting in late March. Two of the researchers were asked to address the parents, and one of the topics was on the results of the school survey on bullying.

Comparatively, there were fewer teachers from the co-educational school who spoke about bullying with their students even though they were encouraged to do so. This could partly explain why bullying was still high in this school at the end of the anti-bully intervention programme. The counsellor from this school verbally revealed that there were teachers in her school who were involved in name-calling of their students.

Interviews with teachers and counsellors from the all boys' school revealed that physical bullying had a long tradition in this school inherited since the colonial days. Physical bullying was carried out by senior students outside the knowledge of teachers. Students who were caught did not view actions such as kicking, hitting or slapping others as bullying. Instead these behaviours were seen as a test of endurance on the part of the victims.

## 5. Conclusion

The results showed some indication of the effectiveness of the anti-bully intervention programme in the all girls' school, followed by the all boys' schools but not in the co-educational school. Classroom intervention showed more positive results. A further analysis on the control schools at both school and classroom levels did not show a decrease in either bullying behaviour or being victims of bullying.

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