



# Critically Describing the Effectiveness of Antibullying Interventions Used at Schools

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**Abstract.** Bullying at schools has been among the public concerns that prevailed as it causes many negative consequences, including poor academic performance, poor physical and mental health, in addition to suicidal or criminal acts.

**Purpose-** To critically describe the effectiveness of the antibullying interventions at schools.

**Methodology-** A descriptive qualitative study that was conducted utilizing a critical review of literature. The study has utilized the available electronic database. References were mainly chosen among the ones published in the last five years; special consideration was given to studies conducted in UAE.

**Findings-** Several programs were developed and implemented to manage bullying. Interventions entailed constructing strict anti-bullying school policies, and utilized various involvement levels; being whole school, or one group such as parents, teachers or students. Many interventions were rooted in sociocultural theories to enhance resilience and positive behaviour development among students. Antibullying interventions in the UAE were mostly targeting awareness with compromised measurement of effectiveness.

**Implications-** Identifying the best antibullying interventions may contribute to increasing awareness among stakeholders, and thus facilitate decisions that may inform the policy making pertinent to managing bullying at schools in the UAE.

**Originality/ value-** Limited number of studies were conducted in the UAE.

**Keywords:** School Bullying · Anti-Bullying programs · Anti-bullying interventions · Bullying in the UAE schools

## 1 Introduction

Bullying has attracted the world's attention and became a global priority (UNESCO 2018), as 70% of the students reported that they have witnessed bullying at schools, and 20% of them have experienced it (CDC 2014). The variation in bullying rates were correlated with income inequality, families' and schools' support (Elgar et al. 2013).

For bullying to occur, there has to be a disparity in strength between the perpetrator and the victim, besides a repeated intentional physical, verbal, or emotional harm (Olweus 1994). Additionally, bullying behaviours vary according to the culture and may range from isolation in the east to physical and verbal harm in the west (Toda 2016).

Furthermore, bullying can happen in real world as well as virtually (Gradinger et al. 2015).

The major predisposing factors for bullying, as perceived by students include; lack of classroom management, lack of awareness about bullying among students, lack of supervision and punishment of bullies by teachers, in addition to some victim's characteristics, such as, being less attractive or low achiever. Furthermore, victims usually have no or low support of parents or teachers (Li & Hesketh 2021).

Regardless of the form of bullying (physical, verbal, cyber, or others), it usually results in negative consequences, which may lead to harming self or others (Aboagye et al. 2021), (Nickerson et al. 2020). Therefore, the prevalence and consequences of bullying have necessitated that governments develop antibullying interventions at schools. However, effectiveness varied between programs and countries (Swearer et al. 2017).

The purpose of the study is to critically describe the effectiveness of the antibullying interventions used in schools.

A main question that the study will answer is that: What are the types and characteristics of the effective antibullying interventions that can be used to reduce the rates of bullying among adolescents at schools?

## 2 Significance

Although the Middle East countries are among the areas of the highest percentages of bullying UNESCO (2018), they have a deficiency in the anti-bullying programs (Gaffney et al. 2019). This necessitates developing programs to manage the bullying epidemic and anti-bullying policies that are built on zero tolerance for bullying (Li & Hesketh 2021), (Shawki, Al-Hadithi & Shabila, 2021) which requires extensive research. However, adopting readymade programs might not be helpful as there are variations in the bullying behaviour between the western and Eastern country. Besides, programs that were tailored to a specific culture, may not be as effective if utilized in other cultures. For instance, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) was very efficient in Norway, yet, it did not show similar results when used in the USA and Malaysia (Smith, 2016).

Despite of the high prevalence in the UAE that may reach 30% (OECD 2019), only few scholars have studied antibullying interventions in UAE. The deficit in research within the UAE may be due either to underreporting of bullying cases, or to the cultural sensitivity of the topic. This study may shed some light on this crucial phenomenon, and thus aid in increasing the governmental fund for research targeting developing, customizing or adopting and testing effective antibullying programs in the UAE.

## 3 Theoretical Framework

More than one theory was adopted to explain the related aspects of bullying. Firstly, bullying as a behaviour is perceived differently according to the culture, and the context, and is rarely being objectively interpreted. This was the main framework of the sociocultural approach that was referred to by Maunder & Crafter (2018)). Additionally, the (Conservation of Resources) theory was used to explain the motivation and the behaviours of the bystanders who are watching the bullying act. The theory claims that

individual affective differences result in various coping processes to lessen stress, and preserve resources such as power (Itzkovich, Barhon & Lev-Wiesel 2021).

Comprehensively, Rigby (2022) claimed that bullying may be due to individual factors, environmental factors or the interaction between them. Accordingly, the inherited characters may make the individual prone to be a bully via exhibiting behaviours as adaptive strategies to achieve dominance goals. Additionally, the availability of the external conditions in the environment such as the lack of teachers' and parents' support, or the availability of unsupervised areas at schools. Furthermore, the interface between both the individual and the environment may either enhance or hinder the potential for the bullying act to occur.

## 4 Literature Review

This section tackles the effects of bullying, followed by some of the international school antibullying interventions, and finally, antibullying management in the UAE.

### 4.1 Effects of Bullying on Adolescents

Interconnectedness between bullying and mental or physical health problems among adolescents were studied by many researchers. Surprisingly, bullying was identified as one of the main risk factors of suicide among adolescents (WHO 2021). Similarly, substance use, loneliness, anxiety, suicidal ideation and attempts (Aboagye et al. 2021) lack of sleep, and solitary (Hasan et al. 2021), anxiety, distress (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. 2018), depression and suicidal ideation (John et al. 2018), criminal acts (Shawki, Al-Hadithi & Shabila, 2021), shooting at schools in 71% of the cases (Nickerson et al. 2020). Ultimately, bullying may lead to deterioration in academic performance and there is a substantial relation between bullying and school dropout (Fry et al. 2018).

### 4.2 Examples of Anti-Bullying Interventions

Several anti-bullying interventions were developed. For instance, 'Olweus Bullying Prevention Program' targeted the whole-school, starting with the individual, moving to the community at large. The program defined unacceptable behaviours and their consequences, highlighted the "Hot-Spot" areas where victims are more likely to be bullied at, and recommended utilizing an individual approach with potential bullies and victims (Gaffney et al. 2019). Similarly, 'DFE Sheffield Project' in UK involved the whole school, including environmental development, integrated exercises in the curriculum. The project has shown effectiveness on the long-term of anti-bullying efforts among boys. However, bullying among girls has risen, and the percentage of self-reporting of bullying to teachers has remained unaffected. (Gaffney et al. 2019)

However, 'KiVa Anti-Bullying Program' reinforced empowering the bystanders. It utilized a well-designed curriculum to combat bullying via instilling anti-bullying attitudes, empathy and self-efficacy. (Grading et al. 2015). It entailed training teachers, and providing the students with virtual games, policies, disciplinary actions, a meticulous control of the playground, and increasing awareness among parents (Gaffney et al. 2019).

On the other hand, ‘NoTrap! Anti-Bullying Program’ was a web-based program that recruited students to facilitate anti-bullying discussions aiming to intensify empathy and enhance problem-solving skills. The program has decreased bullying by 35% (Gaffney et al. 2019).

Moreover, Viennese Social Competence (ViSC) Program’ focussed on social competencies enhancement among secondary students. It entailed training the teachers to spot bullying and manage it through structured scenarios, besides, identifying prophylactic measures via engaging students in deriving creative methods to prevent bullying (Gradinger et al. 2015).

Finally, the ‘InspirED Mission’ Program has taken into consideration the development of the adolescent’s brain and consequential thinking. It reinforced emotional intelligence via social media to boost positive behaviour change. The project entailed formulating a team with members from the students and the teachers to build a positive emotional school environment (Swearer et al. 2017).

### 4.3 Bullying Prevalence and Management in the UAE

Prevalence and nature of bullying in the UAE was explored by Rigby, Haroun, and Ali, (2019) who studied more than 1700 students in the age group of 12–15 (Grades 6 to 9). The results revealed that 16% of the surveyed students do not perceive the school as a safe environment. This percentage was a little lower than the findings of Pengpid, and Peltzer, (2020) based on the data retrieved from around 24 thousand adolescents who participated in the “UAE Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS)” during the years 2005, 2010, and 2016. Results showed that although physical attacks have diminished, bullying prevalence has significantly risen among both males and females. Similarly, Alomosh et al. (2020) utilized “The Illinois Bully Scale and Quia survey” after tailoring to the UAE culture to study bullying among 1300 students enrolled in the UAE schools. Results revealed that 33% of students were involved either as bullies, or victims. Verbal bullying was prevalent followed by cyberbullying. These numbers were comparable with the statistics issued by PISA (31.1%) regarding school bullying in the OECD countries (OECD 2019).

Additionally, Alketbi, Grivna, & Paulo (2021) reported a 7% increase in bullying at UAE schools in eleven years. However, 40% of the students believe that school staff including teachers ignore bullying, and they can stop bullying if they utilize more strict approach (Alomosh et al. 2019).

To attend to the bullying problem, a national strategy to prevent bullying was developed by the UAE government (Alketbi, Grivna, & Paulo 2021). Additionally, the MOE Cyber Security Awareness Program was effective in teaching children how to recognize and respond to online risks (AL Nuaimi and Fong 2020). The MOE guidelines also intended to enhance safe virtual learning environment to prevent cyberbullying (Siyam & Hussain 2021).

## 5 Methodology

A descriptive qualitative approach was utilized to provide in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun 2012). The philosophical underpinning is the constructivist paradigm. The related research studies were critically reviewed and discussed if they were published in English Language, between 2016 till date. However, substantial older articles cited in the recent articles were explored. Articles were sought based on the following criteria; the purpose, and location. Accordingly, bullying prevalence, effect, anti-bullying interventions, and finally the location as focused search was targeting studies conducted in the UAE. The prevalence of bullying as measured by the numbers of students who have reported being bullied, or the number of reported bullying incidents by the teachers and the schools' personnel. Then the studies that described the impact of bullying, and finally the studies that evaluated anti-bullying programs at schools, being worldwide, or in UAE.

As bullying is one of the topics where there is interconnectedness between education and health, being mental or physical, eligible articles were selected from the available online databases within Google scholar, the British University in Dubai Library, as well as SEHA E. Library.

## 6 Results and Discussion

Literature review has yielded numerous antibullying interventions including legislations, national laws, schools' policies, or anti-bullying programs. However, McGeough (2020) undermined the impact of the current US policies in lessening bullying at schools.

Several anti-bullying programs have shown effectiveness in reducing bullying in schools by 15–20% (Swearer et al. 2017). Many of these programs have advocated for working with all parties involved in the bullying, including bystanders, in addition to boosting online safety measure, yet, implementation has diverged. The programs utilized four main tactics to manage bullying. These include; the whole school, the peer involvement, the teachers' and parent's involvement, in addition to the positive behaviour change among adolescent's.

The whole-school approach targets the school community as a whole, which sounds promising, yet was not the most beneficial when compared to other approaches (Gaffney et al. 2019). The peer involvement approach reinforces the role of the bystanders as the perceived approval and admiration of the behaviour may work as an incentive for the perpetrator (Aboagye et al. 2021). The third approach focusses on raising awareness among parents and teachers. It entails integrating the antibullying intervention in the curriculum, besides enhancing constructive relationships between teachers and students. Puhl, Suh & Li, (2017) affirmed that parental support is vital. However, the fourth approach calls for the 'Positive behaviour change' as it considers the adolescent's consequential thinking in order to overcome the low effectiveness of the current anti bullying interventions (Swearer et al. 2017).

Measurement of the effectiveness of the previous programs is essential and requires a valid tool. It is worth noting that, bullying can be echoed in several forms, depending on the gender, age group, location and the culture. Consequences of exposure to bullying

vary as well. Thus, the tools to measure bullying may not be an accurate descriptor of the magnitude of the issue if used in different socioeconomic groups or cultures, which may hinder the measurement of effectiveness of the antibullying interventions.

UAE is in process of establishing the ground for anti-bullying interventions, however, meticulous emphasis on the evaluations is needed (Alketbi, Grivna & Paulo 2021). AL Nuaimi, and Fong (2020) argued that in the interventions that target increasing awareness, even if knowledge was acquired, there was no evidence that the knowledge was reflected into behaviour. The UAE ministry of education has developed guidelines to prevent cyberbullying. Nevertheless, these efforts were neither unified among the various Educational regulatory authorities in the UAE, nor integrated in the curriculum.

## 7 Conclusion and Recommendations

A large number of students are exposed to bullying every day, which may lead to serious psychological or physiological problems. Therefore, anti-bullying interventions aimed at enhancing children's self-efficacy, understanding that bullying is ethically erroneous (Thornberg et al. 2012), building resilience among adolescents, and encouraging the reporting of bullying.

Adopting a diversified approach might be helpful, where a general whole school intervention, with a meticulous supervision over the more prone areas for bullying, and an enhancement of positive behaviour among adolescents, integrated activities in the curriculum with proper training for teachers and parents to be able to early detect the students' involvement. The roles of the psychologist and the school nurse have to be nurtured in order to work with more susceptible students being perpetrators or victims. Therefore, allocating adequate financial resources to fund antibullying interventions is crucial (McGeough, B. 2020).

In the UAE there is a scarcity of research in the field of anti-bullying interventions. Further research is needed to develop a culturally appropriate interventional program that is tailored to prevent the bullying behaviour at schools in the UAE. Additionally, in order to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of any antibullying intervention that may be used, there is a need to use a culturally tailored tool to measure the bullying behaviour. Furthermore, governmental legislations and schools polices shall be tailored to address the various bullying behaviours.

The insufficiency of research pertinent to anti bullying interventions within the UAE was a limitation encountered. This might be due either to under reporting of bullying cases, or to low number of publications due to the cultural sensitivity of the topic.

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