Empathy training and bullying among students at boarding school

Ade Rahmawati Siregar | Zulkarnain Zulkarnain | Suri Mutia Siregar | Muhammad Fakhru Riffat | Henny Setiawaty | Irene Cristin Pasaribu

Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia.

Abstract Bullying behaviors in educational settings pose a significant challenge, creating a dissonance that hampers the development of a positive and nurturing learning environment. The primary objective of this research is to assess the effectiveness of an empathy training model in reducing instances of bullying behavior within a specific educational setting. The study employed an experimental design involving 164 students from boarding schools. Initial assessments were conducted to determine the prevalence of bullying, with findings revealing that 56% of students had experienced victimization, while 32% had engaged in perpetrating bullying behaviors. Subsequently, a targeted intervention was executed, providing empathy training to a subset of 26 students actively involved in bullying. The study’s design utilized a pre-test to establish baseline data, implemented the intervention, and concluded with a post-test to assess the effectiveness of the empathy training model. The results of the study indicate a notable reduction in instances of bullying behavior among students who underwent the empathy training intervention. Furthermore, there was a significant increase in the overall level of empathy demonstrated by the participants who received the targeted intervention. The outcomes suggest that empathy training holds an effective strategy for mitigating bullying behaviors and fostering a more compassionate and respectful school environment.

Keywords: bullying, empathy, mental health, student, boarding school

1. Introduction

Bullying phenomena are prevalent in educational institutions due to certain characteristics exhibited by students, rendering them vulnerable targets for those who engage in bullying behavior. The absence of adequate supervision from both teachers and parents exacerbates instances of bullying, as indicated by data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) in February 2023, illustrating a surge in bullying cases, encompassing 1,138 incidents of physical and mental violence. The ramifications of bullying behavior extend to severe consequences, encompassing mental health issues and, in extreme cases, suicide (Ikhwan, 2014).

Students who tend to dominate others, using them as a means to achieve their objectives, often struggle to understand situations from the perspective of their peers. Their focus is primarily on their own needs and personal satisfaction, with a tendency to inflict harm on other teenagers, especially when there are no adults present to intervene. Additionally, they may perceive weaker peers as suitable victims for their bullying actions. These characteristics contribute to the creation of an environment where bullying behaviors can manifest and adversely impact the well-being of students within educational settings. Perpetrators tend to use mistakes, criticisms, and false accusations to project their inadequacy onto their targets. They are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions and have a thirst for attention (Lines, 2008).

Bullying is a complex psychosocial issue characterized by persistent acts of humiliation and degradation, wherein the perpetrator wields more power than the victim. This harmful behavior takes various forms, including physical, verbal, and relational bullying, each influenced by underlying factors such as parenting styles, individual self-esteem, prevailing group norms, and the overall atmosphere within the school environment (Olweus, 1999). Individuals who are victims of bullying undergo a substantial decline in both their physical health and overall well-being (Zulkarnain, Ginting, Novliadi & Pasaribu, 2023). The detrimental effects extend beyond the immediate emotional distress caused by the act of bullying. Persistent exposure to bullying situations has been correlated with a range of adverse health outcomes, including heightened stress levels, increased susceptibility to mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression, and disruptions in sleep patterns. Besides that, Bullying causes individuals to be unable to improve their interpersonal relationships, thus leading to a decline in their psychological well-being. The psychological well-being is an indicator of an individual’s support for their health (Zulkarnain, Tuapattinaja, Yurliani & Iskandar, 2019).

Bullying extends beyond conflicts and encompasses prolonged negative treatment directed at individuals who perceive themselves to be inferior in the situation (Zulkarnain, Ginting, Novliadi & Sebayang, 2017). The consequences of bullying extend...
beyond the immediate situation, impacting both the victim and the perpetrator adversely. Recognizing the far-reaching effects, it becomes imperative to implement comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies. These may include awareness campaigns to foster understanding and empathy, proactive school monitoring to identify and address instances of bullying, and the establishment of anti-bullying teams to actively combat such behaviours. Addressing the issue requires concerted efforts from schools, families, and communities. Schools play a crucial role in fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity, while families contribute by instilling values of empathy and kindness in their children. Communities, as a whole, need to prioritize creating safe and supportive environments where individuals feel protected and valued. In this collective effort, the goal is to not only address instances of bullying but also to cultivate a broader culture of compassion and understanding that extends beyond the immediate context (Selvia, 2022).

Bullies often face challenges in establishing or maintaining intimate relationships, including those associated with courtship. This difficulty is linked to a range of distinctive characteristics that define their behaviour. Bullies typically demonstrate a lack of concern for others, reflecting emotional immaturity and frequent mood swings. Their demeanour is marked by irritability, and they display a notable absence of guilt or regret for their actions. Additionally, bullies exhibit traits such as low social sensitivity, a diminished ability to cooperate with peers, and an overall lack of empathy towards others (Rigby, 2007). Physically, bullies often stand out with larger and stronger bodies compared to their peers. This physical dominance is complemented by behavioural traits such as aggression, impulsivity, and low levels of empathy. Their actions are indicative of a general lack of concern or caring for the well-being of others (Rigby, 2007). Numerous studies converge on the observation that bullies consistently exhibit lower levels of empathy, further emphasizing the multifaceted nature of their behaviour and interpersonal challenges.

Warden and Mackinnon (2003) highlighted that teenagers exhibiting pro-social behaviour generally demonstrate higher empathy scores than those who engage in the role of perpetrators. Individuals with elevated levels of empathy possess a heightened ability to understand and share the feelings of others. As a result, they can anticipate the potential negative impact of their actions on others, encouraging them to thoughtfully consider their behaviour before acting. Conversely, bullies, characterized by low empathy, face challenges in foreseeing the adverse effects of their actions on their victims. Their reduced capacity to empathize makes it difficult for them to grasp the emotional consequences their behaviour might have on others. Consequently, individuals with low empathy levels may be more prone to repeating their bullying behaviour, as they may not fully comprehend or appreciate the harm they inflict on others. This lack of empathy contributes to a cycle of recurring bullying actions, underscoring the importance of addressing empathy as a key factor in preventing and addressing bullying behaviours among teenagers.

Murphy and Banas (2009) emphasized that individuals who engage in bullying exhibit a reduced capacity for empathy towards their victims. This diminished ability to empathize translates into a limited understanding of the emotions and experiences of the victims. Consequently, bullies may struggle to comprehend the impact of their actions on those they target. Furthermore, the perspective of bullies is often skewed, as they perceive violence positively or view it as a favourable means of achieving their objectives. This distorted perception contributes to the continuation of their bullying behaviour. The inclination to interpret aggression and harm as constructive or beneficial further underscores the complex psychological dynamics at play within individuals who engage in bullying.

Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) delved into the connection between low empathy and heightened levels of antisocial behaviour, with bullying being a prominent manifestation of such behaviour. Their findings revealed that the link between low empathy and antisocial tendencies was particularly pronounced among adolescents and young adults. Individuals who possess a heightened level of empathy demonstrate a profound concern for the well-being of their friends. This heightened sense of empathy enables them not only to recognize the emotions and needs of their friends but also to anticipate the potential negative impact of their own behaviour on others (Zulkarnain, Daulay, Yusuf & Yasmin, 2019). This suggests that interventions targeting empathy development in these age groups may be crucial in addressing and preventing antisocial behaviours, including bullying. Understanding these intricate relationships provides valuable insights for designing effective strategies to mitigate bullying and foster a more empathetic and prosocial environment.

Empathy serves as a powerful tool in mitigating aggressive behaviour, functioning through two distinct components. The first facet, known as cognitive empathy, involves one’s capacity to adopt the perspective of others, thereby gaining a nuanced understanding of their viewpoints and developing tolerance for their positions (Davis, 1996). This cognitive aspect allows individuals to delve into the reasons and motives behind the actions of others, fostering an enhanced comprehension that facilitates acceptance of the person’s behaviour. Davis (1996) explicates the second component of empathy, identified as affective empathy. In this dimension, an aggressive offender has the capability to emotionally resonate with the pain felt by the victim, leading to the experience of emotional stress. This emotional connection provides a direct link between the perpetrator and the consequences of their actions, creating a heightened awareness of the impact on the victim. To address the emotional stress induced by empathetic understanding, aggressive offenders may subsequently adopt strategies to reduce their aggressive behaviour. This process reflects a transformative cycle wherein heightened empathy contributes to an emotional connection, prompting an internal motivation to curb aggressive tendencies.

https://www.malque.pub/ojs/index.php/msj
Sahin (2012) delved into the efficacy of empathy training as an intervention strategy aimed at mitigating bullying among 6th-grade children. The findings revealed a noteworthy and statistically significant reduction in instances of bullying within the experimental group when contrasted with the control group. This suggests that the implementation of empathy training had a discernible impact on diminishing bullying behaviours among the participants. The positive outcomes observed in the experimental group imply that fostering empathy through targeted training initiatives can be a valuable and effective approach in addressing and curbing bullying tendencies in the context of 6th-grade students. These results contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the role of empathy-building interventions in promoting positive social behaviours and reducing harmful conduct, particularly within the critical developmental stage of early adolescence.

Empathy training is effective in diminishing the prevalence of bullying behaviour. This training program is designed with the explicit goal of cultivating and refining the skill of empathizing with individuals engaged in bullying. Its core components include a focus on fostering self-empathy, encouraging non-judgmental acceptance of others, promoting accurate listening, and instilling the capacity to adopt different perspectives, all of which contribute to a more empathetic mindset (Rutsch, 2013).

The objectives of empathy training encompass a multifaceted approach to fostering empathetic skills. This holistic approach to empathy training aims not only to develop empathetic responses in specific situations but also to cultivate a lasting and transformative shift in individuals’ overall approach to understanding and connecting with others. The integration of these objectives creates a well-rounded training program that addresses various facets of empathy, contributing to the establishment of a more empathetic and compassionate social dynamic (Rutsch, 2013).

This study focuses on training in student at boarding school aimed to improving their ability to react feelings of others with positive emotional response. With the enhancement of empathy through the training, adolescents develop the capacity to resonate with the emotions experienced by individuals who have been victims of bullying. The heightened empathetic response enables them to more keenly perceive and understand the feelings of those who have endured bullying, fostering a deeper connection and sensitivity to the emotional experiences of others.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research design

This study is experimental research, employing a pre-test and post-test control group experimental design. This approach involves assessing participants both before and after the experimental intervention, with a control group serving as a baseline for comparison. The statistical analysis for hypothesis involves the Wilcoxon signed-rank test and the Mann-Whitney U test. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test is employed when comparing two related groups, as pre-test and post-test scores within the same group. The Mann-Whitney U test is used to compare two independent groups.

2.2. Instruments

The Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire- Revised version (OBVQ-R), a self-report questionnaire and has been employed across diverse nations. It demonstrates satisfactory psychometric properties for gauging the occurrence of victimization, aggression, and diverse bullying forms on a global scale. The findings validated the two-factor structure of the OBVQ-R, and the reliability coefficients for the victimization and perpetration subscales were 0.81 and 0.75 (Gaete, Valenzuela, Godoy, Rojas-Barahona, Salmivali, & Araya, 2021).

The Empathy scale consists of four aspects, namely: self-empathy, accepting others, accurate listening, and perspective-taking (Rutsch, 2013). According to factor analysis, factor loadings for self-empathy ranged from 0.728 to 0.895, with an alpha coefficient of 0.853. For accepting others, factor loadings ranged from 0.797 to 0.815, and the alpha coefficient was 0.788. The factor loading for accurate listening ranged from 0.591 to 0.866, and the alpha coefficient was 0.716. Finally, for perspective-taking, factor loadings ranged from 0.718 to 0.804, and the alpha coefficient was 0.819. All reliability coefficients are above the acceptable threshold, indicating a high level of reliability in the measurements.

2.3. Subject

The subjects were 164 students of boarding school. Among the surveyed students, 100 (61.3%) were female, and 64 (38.7%) were male. The initial assessments were conducted to determine the prevalence of bullying, revealing that 56% of students had experienced victimization, while 32% had engaged in perpetrating bullying behaviours. Subsequently, a specific intervention was introduced, providing empathy training to a selected group of 26 students who were implicated in bullying. The subjects were divided, with 13 assigned to the experimental group and 13 to the control group.

2.4. Procedure

In the experimental group, participants underwent a structured empathy training program tailored to enhance their empathetic skills and understanding. The empathy training consists of four modules, each with a duration of 4 hours. The four modules cover self-empathy, accepting others, accurate listening, and perspective-taking. In the self-empathy module,
participants learn to empathize with themselves. In the accepting others module, participants acquire the skill to empathize with other people and apply it in real-life situations. Moving on to the accurate listening module, participants are instructed on how to listen attentively, refrain from adding their own input, and accurately reflect the speaker’s feelings and thoughts. Lastly, in the perspective-taking module, participants are expected to develop their own points of view and understand that their perspective may not always align with others’ perspectives. Each module begins with a brief review of the previous module and the assignments given. Following that, the trainer provides material specific to the current module. During this phase, participants are asked about their initial thoughts regarding the material. Once input from the participants is obtained, the trainer further expands on the material. Subsequently, participants engage in various tasks designed to practice the presented material. The presentation of the material concludes with a brief evaluation. Additionally, participants are assigned homework to enrich their understanding at home.

3. Results and Discussion

The research results confirmed the validity of the two-factor structure of the OBVQ-R, with the reliability coefficient for the victimization subscale reported as 0.81, and for the perpetration subscale reported as 0.75. Meanwhile, the Empathy scale revealed different reliability coefficients for each subscale. The reliability of the self-empathy subscale was 0.853, while the acceptance of others subscale had a reliability of 0.788, and the accurate listening subscale had a reliability of 0.716. Lastly, the perspective-taking subscale had a reliability of 0.819.

In this study, a cohort of 164 students enrolled in a boarding school participated, consisting of 100 female students (61.3%) and 64 male students (38.7%). Initial evaluations revealed that 56% of the students had encountered instances of bullying, while 32% had been implicated in perpetrating such behaviors. Subsequently, a targeted intervention program focusing on empathy training was implemented for 26 students identified as participants in bullying incidents.

The result of the Wilcoxon analysis on pre-test and post-test scores in the experimental group indicates a statistically significant difference (Z = -3.263; p = 0.001). The finding of a significant difference in scores between the pre-test and post-test in the experimental group implies that the intervention or treatment had an impact on the measured variable. The result of the Mann-Whitney test analysis, comparing post-test scores between the experimental group and the control group, revealed a statistically significant difference (Z = -4.348; p = 0.001). This finding indicates that the post-test scores in the experimental group were significantly different from those in the control group. The detailed results are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre test (Mean)</th>
<th>Post test (Mean)</th>
<th>Wilcoxon</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>22.69</td>
<td>33.61</td>
<td>-3.263**</td>
<td>-4.348**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **p<0.01.

The implementation of training interventions aimed at enhancing empathy in student at Islamic boarding school, particularly for individuals identified as perpetrators of bullying, has positive outcomes. The results of the intervention unequivocally demonstrated the effectiveness of the training in elevating levels of empathy among the targeted group. The positive results affirm the potential for change and growth even in individuals exhibiting bullying tendencies. The enhanced empathy observed post-training suggests that individuals can acquire and develop the crucial skills needed to navigate social interactions with greater sensitivity and understanding. targeted interventions in fostering empathy, not only as a means to address bullying but also as a broader strategy for promoting positive social behaviours and relationships among students. There are several reasons that explain the impact of empathy training on increasing empathy for perpetrators.

First, Empathy training employs a multifaceted approach to foster a deeper understanding of emotions and interpersonal connections. This comprehensive training involves subjects in a variety of activities, including engaging in discussions, revisiting and reflecting on previous material, participating in hands-on activities, attending presentations, evaluating relevant materials, and completing assigned home tasks. The diverse nature of these activities ensures that participants experience empathy in various contexts and scenarios. According to Sahin (2012), the incorporation of a wide range of activities, interactions, and lectures serves a crucial role in guiding participants towards identifying and understanding their emotional experiences. The participatory nature of these elements encourages active engagement, allowing individuals to connect theoretical knowledge with real-life situations. Home tasks, assigned as part of the empathy training program, play a pivotal role in extending the learning beyond the training sessions. These tasks are designed to encourage subjects to actively contemplate and apply their understanding of emotional recognition in their daily lives. By integrating empathy into their routines, participants can strengthen their empathetic abilities over time.

Second, utilizing worksheets in the training process serves as a powerful tool, enabling participants to discover that their peers within the training have faced comparable instances of bullying, reflecting their own lived experiences. This realization becomes a crucial point of connection, forming the basis for a shared understanding among the participants. The incorporation of personal experiences into the group discussion setting is particularly impactful, as it not only deepens comprehension of the
training material but also creates an atmosphere of openness. Within the group dynamic, sharing personal stories fosters mutual empathy, creating a sense of unity among participants. This shared experience becomes a foundation for collective self-improvement, as individuals within the group encourage each other to learn, grow, and overcome the challenges associated with bullying. Corey (2003) highlights the significance of this process, emphasizing that recognizing shared experiences helps each member feel less isolated in their struggles. Furthermore, the group setting provides an invaluable support network. Group members become sources of inspiration, offering encouragement and understanding, exchange of advice, opinions, and feedback (Ellis & Bernard, 2007).

Third, Yıldız and Duy (2013) stated that empathy holds paramount importance. Empathy is characterized as the fundamental ability to comprehend and understand other people. Participation in group-based empathy training serves as a valuable platform for individuals to actively engage in and refine their empathy skills. Within this setting, participants are specifically prompted to empathize with their peers who are concurrently undergoing the same training, fostering a deeper understanding of the needs and experiences of fellow participants. This engagement entails a heightened awareness of noise levels to prevent disruptions during various training activities, ensuring a conducive learning environment for all involved.

The "Discussion" section of a research paper provides a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the study's results in the context of existing knowledge in the field. It is an opportunity for the researchers to delve deeper into the implications and significance of their findings, compare them with previous studies, and explore possible explanations for the observed outcomes. As the results are presented, make sure to cite references that justify, support, explain, or contradict the data evaluated and found in this study.

The authors critically evaluate their results in the discussion section, highlighting strengths and weaknesses, addressing any discrepancies or unexpected findings, and providing potential explanations or hypotheses. They may also discuss the limitations of the study, such as methodological constraints or potential sources of bias, and propose avenues for future research to elucidate the topic further. The discussion section often includes a synthesis of the key findings, relating them back to the research questions or objectives outlined in the Introduction.

4. Conclusions

This study indicates a significant connection between the cultivation of empathy and the reduction of bullying behaviour. Particularly among students at boarding school, the propensity for engaging in bullying is often correlated with a deficiency in empathy skills. The absence of empathetic abilities renders perpetrators less identifying the emotions of others, and responding appropriately to their concerns. This lack of sensitivity to the feelings of others becomes a critical factor preventing perpetrators from fully understanding the victim's experience, resulting in emotions of sadness, discomfort, and insult for the victim. Moreover, the failure of perpetrators to consider the emotional impact of their actions on their victims exacerbates the negative consequences of bullying. This lack of consideration for the feelings of those being bullied perpetuates a cycle of emotional distress. Victims, in turn, experience a sense of isolation and may struggle to cope with the emotional toll of the bullying experience. The emergence of bullying behaviour is a complex phenomenon influenced by inherent differences in characteristics between perpetrators and victims. Additionally, the opposition of victims to the actions of perpetrators, whether through resistance or disagreement, contributes to the escalation of bullying incidents. Furthermore, the existence of a tradition or culture of bullying within school environments serves as a significant environmental factor that fosters the development of bullying behaviour. School environment that integrates religious values teaches that bullying behaviour is not commendable, strengthening character education, teacher and student participation become integral strategies in preventing bullying. The formation of anti-bullying agent ambassadors aims to bolster support for school efforts. Increased emphasis on empathy can effectively reduce bullying behavior within the school. School involvement is considered a key factor in boosting student empathy and reducing instances of bullying.

4.1. Practical Recommendation Conclusions

Integrate empathy training as a formal part of the school curriculum. Develop age-appropriate modules that progressively enhance students' empathy skills. This could include activities, discussions, and real-world scenarios that encourage students to understand and share the feelings of others. Furthermore, encourage students, teachers, and staff to share their experiences and concerns, creating a supportive atmosphere. Open dialogue can help identify and address issues related to bullying more effectively. Finally, engage parents in empathy education by providing resources and hosting workshops that emphasize the importance of teaching empathy at home. Encouraging parents to reinforce these values can create a consistent message between home and school environments.

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the school administration for providing the necessary permissions for our research. Additionally, we extend our gratitude to the students; their active participation, openness, and candid sharing of experiences...
have been crucial to the development of meaningful findings. We also express our appreciate for the support received from the Faculty of Psychology USU, in facilitating and conducting this study.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the U.S.U. Faculty of Psychology Ethics Committee (No. 21/Komet/FPsi/2023).

**Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

**Funding**

This research project is funded by Talenta Universitas Sumatera Utara.

**References**


