



School-based anti-bullying strategies in Taiwan and their effects

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ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Education in Taiwan provides subsidies to selected schools to implement school-based anti-bullying strategies. This study explored the types of strategies that were adopted in anti-bullying schools and investigated whether the prevalence rates of bullying were decreased and anti-bullying awareness increased among students in these schools relative to ordinary schools. Six anti-bullying schools and six ordinary schools participated in this project. A total of 1712 and 1593 students participated in the pre-test and post-test, respectively. Results found that higher numbers anti-bullying strategies adopted in schools did not correspond to lower prevalence rates of bullying and victimization. There were no significant differences in the mean scores for anti-bullying attitudes, the prevalence rates of bullying, victimization, and bully-victims between anti-bullying schools and ordinary schools. This suggests that schools should focus on the quality or effectiveness of their anti-bullying strategies rather than the number of strategies employed.

1. Introduction

In schools, bullying is the repeated and malicious aggressive behavior that is often directed towards students perceived as weaker. It has three main characteristics: intention, repetition, and power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). Research has shown that bullying often results in negative consequences for students who are involved in school bullying (Eastman et al., 2018; Rose, Simpson, & Ellis, 2015; Yang, Li, & Salmivalli, 2015). Researchers, educators, and administrators have taken note of these negative impacts and have attempted to prevent bullying.

Currently, many prevention and intervention programs worldwide deal with school bullying. For example, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) suggests that schools can implement strategies at the school, classroom, individual, and community levels to prevent and intervene in school bullying (Olweus, 2005). Another well-known program, the KiVa anti-bullying program, suggests using universal and indicated actions to prevent school bullying. The former focus on enhancing students' anti-bullying awareness and empathy, and the latter emphasize discussion with students who are involved in bullying incidents (Garandeau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014). These programs are the most famous examples of a "whole school approach".

Although different prevention programs may focus on various types of bullying prevention strategies, a meta-analysis reviewing 44 programs showed that, on average, school-based anti-bullying programs can reduce bullying by 20–23% and victimization by 17–20% (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Other meta-analysis showed that school-based

bullying prevention programs are effective in increasing bystander intervention behaviors (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). These findings suggest that schools may benefit in terms of reduced incidences of school bullying after implementing anti-bullying programs. However, some studies have found that half of the anti-bullying programs showed inconsistent results in preventing school bullying (Baldry & Farrington, 2007; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Another study showed that a whole-school bullying intervention initiative implemented in a US public high school helped reducing bullying and increasing disclosure, but showed no reduction in victimization (Allen, 2010). These inconsistent results suggest that further investigation is needed to examine strategies for bullying prevention.

1.1. National anti-bullying policies in Taiwan

In 2012, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan announced national anti-bullying policies, the "Regulations on the Prevention of School Bullying" and the "Directions Governing Ministry of Education Subsidies for Promoting Anti-bullying Schools." All primary and secondary schools in Taiwan must follow certain mandatory regulations. The MOE in Taiwan requires each school to establish an anti-bullying committee, ask members of the anti-bullying committee to attend bullying prevention trainings hosted by authorities or universities, report suspect incidents of bullying to the anti-bullying committee by teachers and staff, discuss and confirm each suspect incident of bullying by the anti-bullying committee of each school, report each bullying incident to the MOE within three days since its occurrence, investigate and handle

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each bullying incident within two months and then send a report to the MOE, let involved students and parents have the right to reapply in writing with grounds stated to the school within twenty days, let parents have the right to participate in all kinds of bullying prevention measures and trainings, dedicate the first week of each semester as a friendly school week to promote information about anti-bullying, set up reporting or appeal channels for students and parents, sign a cooperative agreement with a local police station and invite police officers to give talks about the law, host anti-bullying trainings each semester for in-service teachers, administer regular surveys to all elementary and secondary schools in April (non-anonymous survey) and October (anonymous survey) for estimating the prevalence rates of bullying and victimization in Taiwan. Principals, teachers, and administrators who violate these regulations will face a penalty or punishment.

The MOE provides financial subsidies to schools that are willing to implement school-based bullying prevention programs. Each anti-bullying school can receive a subsidy of up to NT \$200,000 (approximately USD \$6,250) annually to implement bullying prevention strategies. Each year, 35–45 schools, ranging from elementary to senior high schools, have received such subsidies. The MOE in Taiwan sets the evaluation criteria for these schools and encourages creative school-based strategies to prevent and intervene in school bullying.

However, the benefits for the schools that have received subsidies from the government and have implemented anti-bullying strategies are not clear. Research shows that anti-bullying programs help reduce the prevalence rates of bullying and victimization in schools. As more prevention strategies are adopted in schools, much reduction in the prevalence rate of school bullying can be found in these schools (Glover, Cartwright, Gouch, & Johnson, 1998; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). However, other studies have found that setting up anti-bullying rules or policies had no significant impact on bullying incidence in schools. It appeared that no matter how many anti-bullying policies were implemented, there was no significant difference in the incidence of bullying (Smith, Smith, Osborn, & Samara, 2008; Woods & Wolke, 2003). Questions yet to be explored include whether school-based anti-bullying programs supported by the MOE in Taiwan have any positive effects on bullying in schools, and which types of bullying prevention strategies were adopted and implemented in these anti-bullying schools.

1.2. Effective strategies to prevent and intervene in school bullying

There are many anti-bullying programs, each adopting different prevention strategies. Meta-analyses have identified some characteristics of effective anti-bullying school programs. Ttofi and Farrington (2011) identified several important elements that are associated with a decrease in bullying or victimization, including disciplinary methods, parent training/meetings, and cooperative group work. Further meta-analysis studies indicated that the most effective interventions are directed at improving students' social skills and modifying their attitudes and beliefs (Barbero, Hernández, Esteban, & García, 2012), while others have reported success with programs that address emotional control, provide peer counseling, or set a school policy on bullying (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2013). Thus, if more effective strategies are adopted in a school, then the school should have a higher likelihood of decreasing school bullying or victimization.

1.3. Anti-bullying strategies adopted in schools

Effective bullying prevention and intervention strategies that have been validated by previous studies are not necessarily adopted in schools. Many schools have their own policies and strategies to deal with school bullying. For example, five types of anti-bullying practices have been implemented by schools in the United Kingdom: whole-school approaches; proactive classroom strategies; proactive playground strategies; reactive strategies; and peer support (Anti-Bullying

Alliance, 2008; Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2012). Glover et al. (1998) indicated that schools may use pupils' posters, assemblies, invited speakers, videos, discussion groups, and subject-specific teaching to prevent and intervene in school bullying. Samara and Smith (2008) found that the most frequently used anti-bullying interventions were a whole-school policy on bullying (92%), the involvement of parents (88%), parents' reporting bullying (83%), cooperation by parents of bullies and victims (83%), mediation by adults (82%), and circle time (80%). These studies indicate the great variety of anti-bullying practices adopted in schools. Some anti-bullying strategies adopted in schools appear to be effective (e.g., disciplinary methods or setting a school policy on bullying), whereas others are viewed as ineffective.

1.4. Aims of this study

The MOE in Taiwan provides subsidies to schools and encourages school-based prevention strategies. These anti-bullying schools use many strategies to prevent or manage incidents of bullying. This study explores which types of anti-bullying strategies were adopted and whether these schools had lower prevalence rates of bullying and increased anti-bullying awareness among students compared to non-intervention (ordinary) schools. It is hoped that the results from this study will contribute to anti-bullying in schools. First, it will provide a better understanding of practical strategies that are more likely to be adopted in schools to prevent bullying. Second, it will identify whether school-based prevention strategies adopted in these schools improve prevalence rates of bullying and increase anti-bullying awareness among students.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

To compare the prevalence rates of bullying and anti-bullying attitudes among students before and after implementing bullying prevention strategies, data from self-reported questionnaires were collected during pre-test and post-test periods. A total of 1712 students, including 862 and 850 students from six anti-bullying and six ordinary schools respectively, participated in the pre-test. Among these, 383 (22.4%) were primary school students (5th and 6th grade), 717 (41.9%) were junior high school students (7th to 9th grade), and 612 (35.7%) were senior high school students (10th to 12th grade). There were 839 boys (49.0%), 847 girls (50.1%), and 16 who did not specify their gender (0.9%). The mean age was 14.4 years ($SD = 2.2$).

A total of 1593 students, including 807 students in anti-bullying schools and 786 students in ordinary schools, responded to the survey in the post-test. Among these, 353 (22.2%) were primary school students, 669 (42.0%) were junior high school students, and 571 (35.8%) were senior high school students. There were 746 boys (46.8%), 841 girls (52.3%), and 6 students who did not specify their gender (0.4%). The mean age was 13.7 years ($SD = 2.0$).

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. The Global Items of Olweus bully/victim questionnaire (OBVQ)

Two global items from the OBVQ (Olweus, 1996) were used in this study. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, a collaborative cross-national study by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, also adopted this method to estimate the prevalence rates of school bullying and victimization across nations (Inchley et al., 2016). A definition of school bullying that included the three main characteristics, namely power imbalance, repetition, and intention, was given at the top of the questionnaire. Students were asked to answer two questions: "How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months?" and "How often have you taken part in bullying another student(s) at school in the past couple of months?" A five-point

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