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An emotional intelligence intervention programme for primary school bullies: A South African case study

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Background: Bullying within a school context negatively affects both the bully and the victim. Although bullying is prevalent in primary schools in South Africa, there is a gap in the literature on interventions in this context, specifically interventions that involve the development of socio-emotional skills.

Aim: This study aimed to develop an emotional intelligence skills enhancement programme to serve as an anti-bullying intervention, and to do a preliminary evaluation of the efficacy of the intervention.

Setting: A purposive (non-random) sample of 112 learners between 7 and 13 years of age was drawn from a primary school in Gauteng, South Africa.

Methods: In Phase 1 of the study, the performance of a bully and non-bully group on the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth Version (BarOn EQ-i:YV) was compared utilising an independent samples *t*-test. In Phase 2, the effectiveness of the intervention programme was evaluated for the bully group. Emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings were obtained for an experimental and control group before and after the intervention. A mixed multivariate analysis was used to determine the effect of the intervention.

Results: In Phase 1, the non-bully group scored significantly higher on all the emotional intelligence domains. In Phase 2, significant improvements in the case of emotional intelligence and behaviour were found following the intervention.

Conclusion: The intervention resulted in an improvement in emotional intelligence skills of bullies and a decrease in the prevalence of bullying behaviour. These findings provide support for the importance of emotional intelligence in addressing bullying behaviour.

Contribution: The content and structure of the present programme could guide the development of future programmes. The results should, however, be regarded as tentative because of the small sample included during the evaluation phase. Follow-up research with a larger, more representative sample is recommended.

Keywords: bullying perpetration; emotional intelligence; intervention; primary school learners; bullying victimisation; bullying involvement; social competencies; emotional competencies.

Introduction

Violence and aggression are viewed as a range of behaviours that may cause harm, hurt or injury to another person. Although the emphasis in the case of violence is often placed on physical harm, Laas and Boezaart (2014), in their overview of the bullying-related legislative framework in South Africa, argue that a broad definition of violence provides for the inclusion of non-physical abuse. Bullying has been classified as a form of violence (e.g. CDC, 2024) and it has been associated with involvement in a range of violent behaviours (Al Ali, Qasem & Aldwaikat, 2025; Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007). School bullying is regarded as one of the most prevalent forms of school violence (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; UNESCO, 2023). School bullying in South Africa has gained media coverage as it has been associated with the death of several learners. The South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) expressed concern about the number of incidents of violence in the form of bullying, suicide, stabbing and shooting in schools in South Africa reported in only the first few weeks of the 2023 academic year (Polity, 2023), and they reiterated the need for school safety to ensure effective teaching and learning (SADTU, 2024). The development and evaluation of an emotional intelligence intervention programme as a potential means to address school bullying in the South African context is discussed in this article. The programme is a targeted intervention focused on primary school learners identified as bullies.

Prevalence and impact of school bullying

Bullying behaviour is not a one-off occurrence, and many learners will experience bullying, whether as a victim, perpetrator or bystander, at some point in their school career (Jan & Husain, 2015). Bullying is described as unwanted aggressive behaviour that involves a real or perceived power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). The victims of bullying are repeatedly and over time exposed to negative actions on the part of one or more bullies, and they find it difficult to defend themselves. It is not limited to physical bullying but also includes verbal, non-verbal, emotional, social or relational, sexual, discriminatory and cyberbullying (Juan et al., 2018; Laas & Boezaart, 2014; UNESCO, 2023; Wagemaker & Mirazchiyski, 2023).

According to Gaffney, Farrington and Ttofi (2019), reports of bullying victimisation are among the highest in sub-Saharan Africa, and an increase in childhood bullying has been observed in this region (Armitage, 2021). Furthermore, school-based bullying victimisation is high in South Africa in comparison to other countries (Savahl et al., 2019), and Wagemaker and Mirazchiyski (2023) found that South Africa is one of the countries with the highest average rate of cyberbullying. School bullying affects all age groups, and Juan et al. (2018) refer specifically to the impact on the immediate and long-term well-being of children who are potentially exposed to unsafe school environments from a young age. The target population in the present study was primary school learners. Manual et al. (2021) report on the prevalence of bullying victimisation among South African primary school learners aged 10 to 12 years. This study included a nationally representative sample (N = 7067), and the prevalence of bullying victimisation varied between 21.59% and 48.63% depending on province and type of victimisation. Pillay (2021) also found that a high percentage (47.8%; N = 443) of primary school learners in the Johannesburg area indicated that they had been bullied.

Any form of bullying may have an impact on both the victim's and perpetrator's personal and social development, physical and mental health and academic performance (Armitage, 2021; Eyuboglu et al., 2021; Fry et al., 2018). Victims may suffer from anger, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, somatic symptoms, regular reports of illness, poor academic performance, self-harm and suicidal ideation (Bryson et al., 2021; De Wet, 2016; Eyuboglu et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Relationships with peers as well as family relationships may deteriorate, resulting in feelings of rejection, loneliness and isolation (Armitage, 2021; Ortega et al., 2012). Problems often persist into secondary school and adulthood.

The negative psychological impact of bullying is not limited to victims. Bullies and bully-victims are also affected. According to Juvonen and Graham (2014), indirect forms of bullying in particular require social skills. However, bullies often fail to develop the skills that form the basis of lasting relationships characterised by trust (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). This includes sharing, empathising and constructive negotiating. Bullies are often unable to display their anger in a socially acceptable manner, and they do not take responsibility for their actions. They may be rejected by their peers and may themselves be victims of bullying. Juan et al. (2018) identified being a perpetrator as a risk factor in becoming a victim. Aggression has been associated with social dominance (Juvonen & Graham, 2014), and in cases where the bully is supported by peers, this may reflect a need to protect their own status, rather than approval of the bullying behaviour. Short-term effects of bullying perpetration include poor academic performance, truancy, increased risk for alcohol and substance abuse and involvement in crime. They may also develop mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, panic disorders, self-harm and suicidal ideation (Eyuboglu et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Bullying can continue into adulthood (Armitage, 2021; Gaffney et al., 2019) and is associated with domestic abuse, antisocial behaviour, poor emotional control, substance abuse, poor employment, convictions of crime, depression and suicide (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Rationale for an emotional intelligence intervention programme

Emotional intelligence refers to a person's 'self-knowledge, self-awareness, social sensitivity, empathy, and ability to communicate successfully with others' (Covey, 2004:51). Emotional intelligence theories are categorised in terms of whether they regard emotional intelligence as an intelligence or whether it is seen in terms of its non-cognitive contribution (MacCann et al., 2003). Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (2016) categorised emotions with other intelligences, and they defined intelligence as the ability to perceive and understand emotions, to reason abstractly, using the information generated by emotions to enhance thinking, and to manage emotions in the self and others (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2004). The mixed model theorists regard emotional intelligence as distinct from cognitive ability, but neither should it be categorised as personality (Byrne et al., 2007). Emotional intelligence is:

> [*A*] 'cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands.' (Bar-On, 2006:14)

This has been operationalised by Bar-On (2006) in terms of five components, each comprising a set of skills, namely intrapersonal (emotional awareness, assertiveness, independence, self-regard and self-actualisation), interpersonal (empathy, social responsibility and interpersonal relationships), stress management (stress tolerance and impulse control), adaptability (reality testing, flexibility and problem-solving) and general mood (happiness and optimism). The Bar-On model of emotional intelligence was used as a theoretical framework in the development and evaluation of the intervention programme in this study. As indicated, this model comprises emotional and social

competencies that facilitate personal and interpersonal functioning as well as the ability to adapt to and cope with daily demands. In developing the programme, activities were targeted at the specific skills included under each of the five components (refer to Table 3). Enhancing these skills enables the individual to constructively manage situations of emotional conflict. The trait models of intelligence (also categorised as mixed models) include dispositions usually associated with the domain of personality (Petrides, Pita & Kokkinaki, 2007; Petrides et al., 2016).

Emotional intelligence, therefore, indicates an individual's potential for appropriate context-related and socially acceptable behaviour. An emotionally capable person has learned how to constructively deal with emotions and emotional content, and they have the emotional understanding and self-regulation that are important to build and maintain healthy relationships (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Hagelskamp et al., 2013; Rivers et al., 2013). Emotional intelligence contributes to anger management and thus constructive conflict resolution (Garaigordobil & Pena-Sarrionandia, 2015). Learners with higher emotional intelligence are less prone to aggressive behaviour and acts of violence (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Buckley, Storino & Saarni, 2003; Haynes, 2014), and emotional intelligence can also act as a protective factor as it enables individuals to manage situations of emotional conflict (Alvarado et al., 2020).

Research has provided support for an association between emotional intelligence and bullying perpetration and victimisation. A systematic review by Rueda et al. (2022) indicated that there is a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and involvement in bullying for both bullies and victims. Articles published from 2008 to 2020 that focused on adolescent bullying were included in the review. Both bullies and victims were able to perceive and express emotions but lacked the ability to understand and regulate emotions. Rueda et al. (2022) concluded that emotional intelligence can protect against and prevent bullying. Kokkinos and Kipritsi (2012) found a negative correlation in the case of trait emotional intelligence with both bullying perpetration and victimisation, whereas emotional intelligence as an ability (perception and understanding of emotions) correlated negatively with victimisation in the study by Alvarado et al. (2020). The study by Kokkinos and Kipritsi (2012) included elementary school children, and bullying was significantly predicted by trait emotional intelligence and cognitive empathy, whereas trait emotional intelligence and affective empathy predicted victimisation. The focus by Alvarado et al. (2020) was also on younger children (8 to 12 years old), and they referred to the progressive increase in emotional intelligence as an ability as a possible explanation for the negative correlation between age and victimisation in their study. Their findings are supported by the findings from a large-scale study by León-del-Barco et al. (2020) with primary school learners that showed that emotional intelligence serves as a protective factor against being bullied at school.

Llorent et al. (2021) identified specific social and emotional competencies (i.e. self-awareness, self-management and motivation, social awareness and pro-social behaviour and responsible decision making), as well as moral competencies that acted as protective factors against bullying involvement. On the other hand, lacking emotional understanding and self-regulation could contribute to bullying behaviour (De Wet, 2016; Rueda et al., 2022), and the bully's attitude and behaviour reinforce relationships characterised by isolation, further undermining the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills (Ainsworth, 2017). Rueda et al. (2022) found that perpetrators do not necessarily lack the ability to perceive and express emotions, but that their difficulty lies in understanding and regulating emotions. Schokman et al. (2014) also found a negative relationship between bullying and the management and control of emotions. However, their results showed that those who engaged in bullying showed an understanding of emotions. Their study involved adolescents, similar to the study by Rueda et al. (2022). It may be necessary to distinguish between the perception and understanding of own emotions versus the emotions of others to explain the contradictory findings. Lee et al. (2021) furthermore suggest that understanding the emotions of others does not necessarily imply empathy, a skill that contributes to trust-based relationships and social support.

Various authors refer to the fact that emotional skills can be learned, developed and enhanced (e.g. Bar-On, 2006; Goleman, 1998; Petrides et al., 2016). Training in schools to enhance the emotional skills of learners improves emotional awareness and understanding (Hagelskamp et al., 2013; Rivers et al., 2013). It equips learners with effective strategies for managing their feelings, expressing negative feelings in a socially acceptable way and behaving compassionately. According to Brackett and Rivers (2014), this could lead to a decrease in the prevalence of bullying. Swearer et al. (2014) argue for the inclusion of psychological, cognitive and social factors in bullying interventions, and socio-emotional learning programmes in schools have shown a positive impact in terms of interpersonal relationships and academic results, as well as a decrease in problematic behaviours (Bergin et al., 2024; Durlak et al., 2011; Hosokawa et al., 2024).

Local and international research has been carried out to explore the efficacy of various intervention programmes. As expected, the results varied, but Gaffney et al. (2019) concluded that school bullying prevention programmes are effective in reducing bullying perpetration and bullying victimisation. Studies specifically on emotional intelligence as an intervention against aggression, violence and bullying provided support for the effectiveness of the related programmes (Castillo et al., 2013; Di Fabio & Kenny, 2011; Garaigordobil & Peña-Sarrionandia, 2015; Kärnä et al., 2011; Schoeps et al., 2018). The ability to perceive and understand emotions, as well as the use and regulation of emotions, improved. Anger and aggressiveness decreased and more effective conflict-resolution strategies were used. Schoeps et al. (2018) reported a decrease in cyberbullying per se and

an increase in self-reported life satisfaction. Garaigordobil and Peña-Sarrionandia (2015) furthermore found that the positive effect lasted beyond the intervention.

There is a gap in the literature on similar interventions in the South African context, specifically in primary schools, and the aim of the present study was to investigate whether the enhancement of emotional intelligence could lead to a decrease in bullying behaviour in a primary school context. Literature supporting a relationship between emotional intelligence and involvement in bullying behaviour, as well as support for emotional intelligence skills development as an intervention against bullying, formed the basis of the present study. As discussed above, the Bar-On model of emotional intelligence was used as a theoretical framework in the development and evaluation of the intervention programme. An emotional intelligence-based anti-bullying intervention programme was developed, implemented and evaluated.

The specific objectives were:

- to compare the emotional intelligence scores of identified bullies and non-bullies;
- to compare the emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings of identified bullies pre- and post-intervention; and
- to compare the emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings of bullies who completed the intervention with those who did not complete the intervention.

It was hypothesised that:

- H0 – There would be no difference between the scores of non-bullies and bullies on the emotional intelligence scales.
  H1 – Non-bullies would score significantly higher on all the emotional intelligence scales.
- H0 – The emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings of identified bullies would be unchanged pre- and post-intervention.
  H1 – The emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings of identified bullies would increase significantly post-intervention.
- H0 – There would be no difference between the emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings of bullies who completed the intervention and those who did not complete the intervention.
  H1 – The emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings would be significantly higher for bullies who completed the intervention in comparison with those who did not complete the intervention.

Research methods and design

Study design

The study comprised two phases. Phase 1 entailed a cross-sectional design involving comparative analysis, whereas a quasi-experimental design was used in Phase 2. The latter is regarded as suitable in school-based evaluations where experimental designs are not always feasible (Gaffney et al., 2019). Teachers identified bullying perpetrators based on a study-specific set of criteria (Lubbe, 2019). The emotional intelligence of a sample of bullies and non-bullies was assessed during Phase 1, and their performance was compared. In Phase 2, a subsample of participants was randomly assigned to an experimental and control group, each comprising an equal number of bullies and non-bullies. The experimental group completed the intervention. Emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings were obtained for the experimental group and the control group before and after the intervention. The effect of time (pre- and post-intervention), group membership (experimental and control) and the interaction between time and group membership were determined for the bullies. Although this phase focused on the bullies only, non-bullies were included to safeguard the identity of the bullies.

Study population and sampling strategy

A purposive (non-random) sample of learners between 7 and 13 years of age was drawn from a primary school in Gauteng, South Africa. The school volunteered to take part in the study.

Inclusion criteria implied that participants had to:

- be primary school learners between 7 and 13 years of age;
- indicate their willingness to participate in each phase, respectively;
- have the informed consent from a parent or legal guardian to participate in each phase, respectively;
- be able to understand, speak and write in English; and
- be enrolled at a school in a specified region in Gauteng, South Africa.

The teachers in the school used a set of criteria developed for this study to identify bullies (Lubbe, 2019). To protect the identity of the bullies, an equal number of non-bullies were included in both phases of the study. The sample for Phase 1 of the study comprised 112 learners (56 bullies and 56 non-bullies – see Table 1). In the case of both the bully and the non-bully group, the number of participants aged 7 to 9 years comprised 54% of the sample, and the participants aged 10 to 13 years comprised 46% of the sample. Learners had to indicate if they were prepared to continue with the second phase of the study. The sample for Phase 2 comprised 30 bullies and 30 non-bullies, randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (see Table 2). Participants were primarily Black African learners, while their language of tuition was English. The age ratio was similar to that in Phase 1.

Intervention programme

The BarOn EQ-i:YV results for the bully group informed the development of the intervention programme. The aim was to enhance the skills an individual requires to be

TABLE 1: Participants included in Phase 1 of the study (N = 112).

Participants	*n*	Male	%	Female	%
Bullies	56	40	71	16	29
Non-bullies	56	24	43	32	57

TABLE 2: Participants included in Phase 2 of the study (N = 60).

Participants	*n*	Male	%	Female	%
Bullies Experimental group	15	12	80	3	20
Non-Bullies Experimental group	15	7	47	8	53
Bullies Control group	15	13	87	2	13
Non-bullies Control group	15	3	20	12	80

regarded as emotionally intelligent. The activities in the 12-week programme focused on the improvement of self-awareness, including emotional awareness, assertiveness, self-actualisation, empathy, social responsibility, adaptability, making choices, stress management and control and positive mood activities, including optimism. The activities were conducted and supervised by the first author. Resources included games, board games, video clips, physical activities, role play and movies. Theoretical information on the topics was also provided, and to optimise the intervention, the participants had to complete a workbook and a homework book. The rationale for giving homework was to involve the parents or guardians. Participants were also given the opportunity to evaluate each session.

A solution-focused approach was followed, and this approach, together with the activities included in the intervention, assisted in the development of the emotional intelligence skills within the set timeframe. The emphasis was on finding a solution to the problem behaviour. The setting of the intervention resembled that of a group therapy session, including elements such as goal setting, collaboration and mutual acceptance and support. Confidentiality, a non-judgemental approach, unconditional acceptance and empathy were emphasised, especially as many of the participants shared personal experiences. Sharing contributed to group cohesiveness (sense of belonging) and this in turn meant that participants worked towards common goals. Group norms were included, and participants had to be willing to act as a bully buddy for any participating peer and for any other learner within the school context who needed support or guidance. Resources were also in place to assist participants who showed signs of distress during the intervention.

The bully and non-bully participants in the experimental group participated in the 12 weekly sessions of the intervention programme. The sessions were presented separately for two age groups, namely learners from 7 to 9 years and learners from 10 to 13 years of age. The topics for the two groups were the same, but the type of activities was adjusted to provide for a shorter concentration span in the case of the younger learners. The topics covered during the 12 sessions are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Emotional intelligence skills enhancement intervention programme.

Week	Group session	Topic
Week 1	**Session 1:** Intrapersonal activities	Introduction and signing of confidentiality contracts
Week 2	**Session 2:** Self-awareness	I am unique My superpowers
Week 3	**Session 3:** Emotional self-awareness	How do I feel? Where do I feel? What do I do with the feelings?
Week 4	**Session 4:** Assertiveness	I can Who is the boss?
Week 5	**Session 5:** Self-actualisation	Responsible me
Week 6	**Session 6:** Interpersonal activities Empathy	I understand me I understand you I care
Week 7	**Session 7:** Social responsibility	Interpersonal relationships I care I have, and I can make friends
Week 8	**Session 8:** Adaptability activities Adaptability	Problem-solving – Trial and error
Week 9	**Session 9:** Choices	Choices, responsibilities and consequences
Week 10	**Session 10:** Stress management Stress control	Breathe before you squeeze Impulse control Self-care
Week 11	**Session 11:** Positive mood activities Optimism	Positive attitude
Week 12	**Session 12:** How to help others activities Helping others	Bully Buddy helping others

Data collection

The *BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth Version (BarOn EQ-i:YV)* was administered to the bully and non-bully groups in Phase 1. Pre- and post-intervention scores for both the experimental group and the control group were obtained for Phase 2. The questionnaire is based on the Bar-On model of emotional intelligence (Bar-On & Parker, 2000). It is a self-report measure aimed at determining underlying emotional and social challenges in children and adolescents between the ages of 7 and 18 years old. The BarOn EQ-i:YV consists of 60 Likert-type items grouped under five scales, namely Intrapersonal (self-regard, emotional self-awareness, assertiveness, independence, self-actualisation), Interpersonal (empathy, social responsibility, interpersonal relationships), Stress management (stress tolerance, impulse control), Adaptability (reality testing, flexibility, problem solving) and General mood (optimism, happiness). Example items are 'I can easily describe my feelings' and 'Even when things get hard I do not give up'. Results on the first four scales are combined in a total emotional intelligence score. A data set specific to this manuscript was compiled with a specified approach followed in, for example, the rounding of numbers. The questionnaire has been normed for a sample from the United States and Canada. Support for the reliability and validity of the questionnaire is reported in the technical manual (Bar-On & Parker, 2000). The questionnaire has been used locally (e.g. Louw, Grobler & Cowden, 2018). The questionnaire was administered by the first author, who is registered as a counselling psychologist.

A *teacher rating scale* consisting of 10 positive (e.g. respect teachers, respect peers, shows empathy) and nine negative

behaviours (e.g. bullying behaviour was observed, inability to control emotions) was developed by the first author for this study. The scale was used to determine if the intervention resulted in a change in behaviours in the case of the bullies. The total number of positive behaviours was recorded daily (Monday to Friday) over 10 weeks. A score out of 500 was thus obtained for each participant. This score was transformed into a percentage. Pre- and post-intervention ratings for both the experimental group and the control group were obtained for Phase 2. The scale was regarded as more appropriate than self-report measures for the age group.

Data analyses

Concerning Phase 1, descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the scales on the BarOn EQ-i:YV, as well as for the total emotional quotient (EQ) score. An independent samples t-test was used to compare the performance of the bullies and non-bullies. A mixed multivariate analysis (Generalised Linear Modelling or GLM) was used in Phase 2. Pre- and post-intervention emotional intelligence scores and teacher ratings (within-subject), as well as the performance of the experimental and control groups (between-subject), were compared. The interaction effect was also determined. Note that the comparisons in the second phase were only carried out for the participants who were identified as bullies to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention programme. That is, the data for the bullies in the experimental group and the bullies in the control group were analysed. As indicated, non-bullies were only included in the second phase of the study as an ethical consideration (i.e. to protect the identity of the bullies).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa (09/2016). Permission for the study was granted by the Gauteng Department of Education (M2017/337) and the participating school. All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent and assent were obtained from the parents or guardians and the participants, respectively, for both phases of the study. An equal number of bullies and non-bullies was included in both phases of the study to protect the identity of the bullies. All participants were treated equally throughout the research process and during the intervention. Steps were in place to deal with any signs of distress or discomfort by a participant. Participants who took part in the intervention were informed that confidentiality could not be guaranteed, even though they signed a confidentiality form before the implementation of the intervention. No identifying information was published.

Results

Phase 1: Comparison of the emotional intelligence scores of bullies and non-bullies

The descriptive statistics for the BarOn EQ-i:YV (subscales and total EQ) are provided in Table 4 for the bully and non-bully groups. The scaled scores on the questionnaire have a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15, and a score between 90 and 109 is described as average (Bar-On & Parker, 2000). The performance of the two groups was compared by means of an independent sample *t*-test (see Table 5). Equal variances could not be assumed.

The mean for the total EQ score of the bully group (M = 68.75, standard deviation [SD] = 4.316) can be described as markedly low, whereas that for the non-bully group (M = 105.52, SD = 6.628) is high-average. The difference was significant (t[95] = –34.788, $p < 0.001$). The bully group scored below average on all the scales, although the mean score for the Intrapersonal scale approximated the average. The non-bully group scored significantly higher on all the scales, with the lowest mean score for General mood. In the case of all the scales, the effect size (Cohen's d) was large, with values greater than 0.08. The first hypothesis was thus confirmed, namely that non-bullies would score significantly higher on all the emotional intelligence scales.

Phase 2: Evaluation of the intervention programme

The pre- and post-intervention scores of the bullies for the total EQ on the BarOn EQ-i:YV are presented in Table 6. It should be

TABLE 4: Descriptive statistics for the bully (N = 56) and non-bully (N = 56) groups for the BarOn EQ-i:YV.

Scale	Bully		Non-bully	
	M	SD	*M*	SD
Intrapersonal	87.32	6.371	113.04	6.878
Interpersonal	65.38	1.287	87.88	5.794
Stress management	83.18	5.809	103.05	4.214
Adaptability	74.73	9.581	103.29	7.377
General mood	65.00	0.000	82.77	7.030
Total EQ	68.75	4.316	105.52	6.628

SD, standard deviation; EQ, emotional quotient; M, mean.

TABLE 5: Independent samples *t*-test to compare the BarOn EQ-i:YV scores of the bully (N = 56) and non-bully (N = 56) groups.

Scale	*T*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	SE difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
						Lower	Upper
Intrapersonal	-20.525	109	0.000*	-25.714	1.253	-28.197	-23.231
Interpersonal	-28.370	60	0.000*	-22.500	0.793	-24.086	-20.914
Stress management	-20.723	100	0.000*	-19.875	0.959	-21.778	-17.972
Adaptability	-17.670	103	0.000*	-28.554	1.616	-31.758	-25.349
General mood	-18.914	55	0.000*	-17.768	0.939	-19.650	-15.885
Total EQ	-34.788	95	0.000*	-36.768	1.057	-38.866	-34.670

*, Significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed); EQ, emotional quotient; SE, standard error; *df*, degrees of freedom.

noted that the same trend was found for each of the subscales. The mixed multivariate analysis showed a significant main effect for time (pre- and post-intervention) (F[1,28] = 288.895, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.912$) and for group membership (experimental and control) (F[1,28] = 366.602, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.929$). The interaction between time and group membership was also significant (F[1,28] = 402.053, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.935$). These results are presented in Figure 1. A pairwise comparison confirmed that the increase from pre-test to post-test for the experimental group was highly significant. The mean value increased from markedly low (M = 68.20) to high (M = 111.87).

The pre- and post-intervention positive behaviour ratings of the bullies are presented in Table 7. The number of positive behaviours over the 10-week period (maximum 500) has been transformed into a percentage for each learner. The mixed multivariate analysis showed a significant main effect for time (pre- and post-intervention) (F[1,27] = 161.949, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.857$) and for group membership (experimental and control) (F[1,27] = 133.004, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.831$). The interaction between time and group membership was also significant (F[1,27] = 222.699, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.892$). These results are presented in Figure 2. A paired sample t-test confirmed that the teacher rating of positive behaviour for the bullies in the experimental group increased significantly (30.93% to 84.87%). The second hypothesis that the emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings of identified bullies would increase significantly post-intervention was confirmed. The third hypothesis stated that the emotional intelligence scores and behaviour ratings would be significantly higher for bullies who completed the intervention in comparison with those who did not complete the intervention. This hypothesis was also confirmed.

TABLE 6: Descriptive statistics for the bullies in the experimental group (n = 15) and the control group (n = 15) for the total EQ scores on the BarOn EQ-i:YV.

Time	Group	*M*	SD
Pre-test	Experimental	68.20	3.427
	Control	68.73	3.283
Post-test	Experimental	111.87	7.918
	Control	65.13	0.352

SD, standard deviation; M, mean.

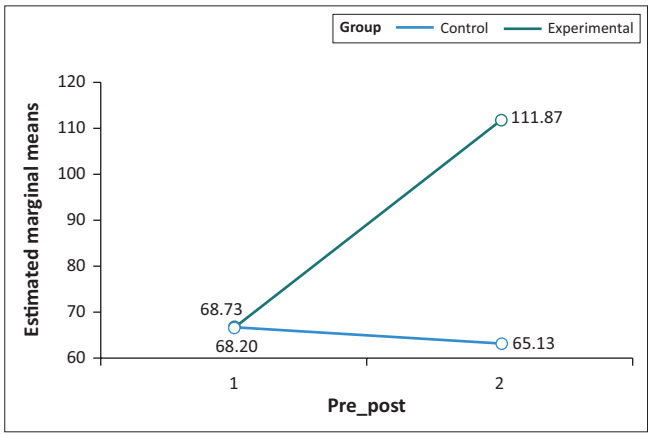

FIGURE 1: Estimated marginal means of EQ for the control and experimental group on the total EQ of the BarOn EQ-i:YV.

TABLE 7: Descriptive statistics for the bullies in the experimental group (n = 14) and the control group (n = 14) for the teacher rating scale.

Time	Group	%	
		M	SD
Pre-test	Experimental	30.93*	8.730
	Control	32.43	9.271
Post-test	Experimental	84.87	6.958
	Control	28.14	8.170

SD, standard deviation; M, mean.

*, The total number of positive behaviours out of a maximum of 500 expressed as a percentage.

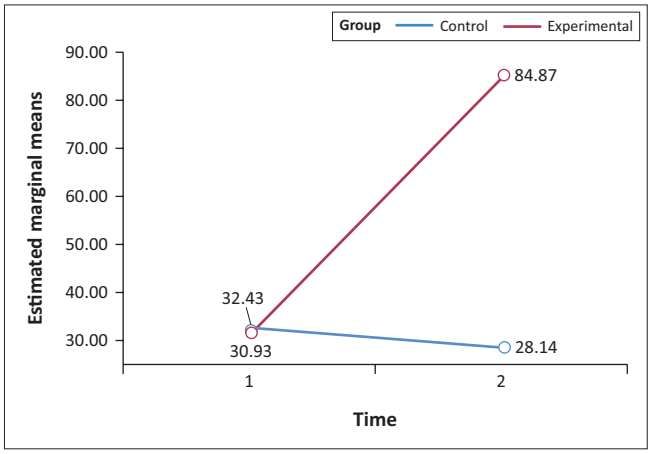

FIGURE 2: Estimated marginal means for behaviour ratings for the control and experimental group.

Discussion

Comparison of the emotional intelligence scores of bullies and non-bullies

The identified bullies scored in the markedly low to low-mean range on all the subscales, as well as the total EQ scale of the BarOn EQ-i:YV. As expected, their performance was significantly lower than that of the non-bullies on all the scores. The results support the findings by, among others, Kokkinos and Kipritse (2012) and Alvarado et al. (2020) that learners who demonstrate bullying behaviour score lower on measures of emotional intelligence. Learners who score low on emotional intelligence lack empathy, an understanding of emotions, and the ability to effectively regulate their emotions. Learners with high emotional intelligence skills, on the other hand, can identify emotions in the self and others, to positively form and deal with relationships, and to manage their feelings and emotions (Bar-On, 2006; Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Goleman, 1997; Hagelskamp et al., 2013; Rivers et al., 2013). They express negative feelings in a socially acceptable manner and are better able to behave in an empathetic manner towards those they interact with. In their systematic review on emotional intelligence and bullying, Rueda et al. (2022) found that lower levels of emotional intelligence are associated with involvement in bullying regardless of the role (i.e. as bully or as victim).

Consistent with the Bar-On model (Bar-On & Parker, 2000), emotionally intelligent learners will be able to understand their emotions and feelings, and they will also be able to understand the emotions and feelings of those

they interact with. The first subscale included in the BarOn EQ-i:YV (i.e. Intrapersonal) measures a learner's intrapersonal skills. A learner is considered emotionally and socially intelligent when they are aware of their emotions. Related characteristics include self-regard, assertiveness, independence and self-actualisation (Bar-On & Parker, 2000). The low scores obtained by the bullies are supported by the findings of Brackett and Rivers (2014) that learners who engage in bullying behaviour have not learned to recognise, understand, label and effectively express and report their feelings and emotions. Without this awareness, the learner will not be able to understand and appreciate the feelings of others. This will impact the ability to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with others (Parker, Kloosterman & Summerfeldt, 2014). The markedly low scores obtained by the bullies on the Interpersonal subscale are supported by Ainsworth (2017), who states that a bully's attitude towards others may be ascribed to a lack of development in interpersonal skills, which would allow them to respond effectively towards others and their environment. Enhancing social-emotional skills improves both intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning (e.g. Bergin et al., 2024; Hosokawa et al., 2024).

Stress management refers to a learner's ability to remain calm during stressful situations. Lacking these skills implies that non-productive coping strategies are used to reduce stress. Impulsivity and irritability may be noted. Without appropriate skills, the bully will also be unable to effectively manage any change occurring in their lives (Bar-On, 2006). Luo et al. (2023) identified stress as a predictor of school bullying behaviour. Based on the moderating effect of empathy and peer attachment in the relationship between bullying involvement and anxiety, Lee et al. (2021) recommend the development of empathy as part of bullying intervention strategies. This will enhance social and emotional relationships and support. The latter will be further strengthened by peer support systems. In addition to the lack of stress management, the very low scores on the scale measuring adaptability indicate a potential lack in terms of problem-solving skills for the bullies in the present study. Dealing with everyday problems requires flexibility and a positive response to challenges. These findings are consistent with reports of lower levels of emotional regulation for those involved in bullying (Rueda et al., 2022; Schokman et al., 2014).

Being labelled as a bully and the stigma attached to a learner identified as a bully can have a detrimental effect on bullies and their general outlook on life. In general, bullies are not receiving the support they need, as previous studies show that the focus is placed on the victims of bullying and enabling them to protect themselves against bullying behaviour. It is therefore very difficult for a learner who does not receive the support needed to change, to be positive or to have a positive outlook on life. The bullies in this study scored significantly lower than the non-bullies on the General mood scale. This is supported by Eyuboglu et al. (2021) who found an increased risk of anxiety and depression for bullies and victims. Méndez et al. (2019) found that an optimistic outlook (as measured on the General mood scale) could serve as moderator between perceived aggressiveness or anger and related negative emotions.

Evaluation of the intervention programme

The findings from the present study showed tentative support for the success of the intervention programme. This is in line with earlier reports of the effectiveness of emotional intelligence as an intervention against bullying per se (e.g. Garaigordobil & Peña-Sarrionandia, 2015; Schoeps et al., 2018) and in improving problematic behaviour, school maladjustment, etc. (Bergin et al., 2024; Hosokawa et al., 2024). The bullies in the experimental group scored significantly higher on the BarOn EQ-i:YV after the implementation and completion of the intervention programme, both in terms of their pre-test versus post-test scores and in comparison to the control group. Furthermore, there was a significant improvement in the behaviour of the bullies in the experimental group as seen in the teacher ratings. Research showed that bullies behave in a disruptive manner, show no respect for authority, and are unable to show empathy towards their peers (Besag, 1989; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Mark, Värnik & Sisask, 2019; Olweus, 1978). Within the school context, the learner's behaviour is therefore viewed in a negative manner by their teachers. The intervention succeeded in changing this perception, as significant effects were found for both time (pre- and post-intervention) and group status (experimental and control group).

A change in teacher perceptions plays an important role in breaking the cycle of negativity that characterises bullying behaviour. Desensitisation implies a decrease in reactivity or sensitivity to a negative stimulus after repeated exposure to it (Mrug et al., 2015). Learners identified as bullies are often exposed to a negative home environment and being exposed to negative attitudes and negative behaviour becomes the norm for them. Entering the school context, these learners might not show any reaction towards the negative attitudes expressed towards them by teachers and learners. To break this cycle, the bully needs to experience the school environment in a positive manner (De Luca, Nocentini & Menesini, 2019; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Markkanen, Välimaa & Kannas, 2021).

Strengths, limitations and recommendations

The effectiveness of an emotional intelligence skills enhancement programme depends on various factors, including time management, planning, the structure and presentation of the programme, and the involvement of the learner, parent and teacher. The success of the intervention programme in the present study could, amongst other reasons, be attributed to the fact that the content is theoretically supported and aimed at training a broad range

of skills associated with emotional intelligence. Activities focused on the related intra- and interpersonal skills and suitable topics were identified for each skill area. Strategies used in this programme also serve as pointers for the development and implementation of similar programmes. Regular sessions were held over a number of weeks. The sessions were age-specific and attended by bullies and non-bullies. Including a bully buddy component is in line with the success previously reported for peer involvement. Theoretical information complemented the practical activities, and homework encouraged the parents to become involved. The solution-focused approach, combined with the principles of group therapy, is also recommended.

Although the findings on the emotional intelligence of the participants contribute to available information in this field, the outcome of the programme evaluation per se should be regarded as tentative because of the small sample included during the experimental phase. This affects the generalisability of the results. Follow-up research with a larger, more representative sample is recommended. Replication across schools and with different presenters should also be explored. Furthermore, the impact of the pre-intervention level of emotional intelligence on the effectiveness of the intervention should be determined. The use of teacher ratings of behaviour could also be supplemented with self-report measures in future research. The preliminary findings are nevertheless promising, given the small sample and the combination of different age groups in the sample.

Conclusion

Intervention programmes that focus on the development of emotional skills have reported success in terms of bullying perpetration and victimisation. The findings of the present study suggest that improved emotional intelligence skills could decrease the occurrence of bullying behaviour in the primary school context in South Africa, thus confirming the importance of emotional intelligence in addressing bullying behaviour. The school environment could be regarded as favourable for the teaching and learning of emotional skills, especially in the case of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who may lack adequate support in their homes. A supportive school environment might provide these children with the opportunity to improve their intra- and interpersonal skills and thus learning outcomes. Learners' ability to build healthy social relationships not only within the school context but also during their adult lives, will ultimately depend on being equipped with the necessary emotional intelligence skills required for their well-being.

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Competing interests

The first author was employed by the school that participated in the study. The author reported that they received funding from the University of South Africa, which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The author has disclosed those interests fully and has implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated university following its policy on objectivity in research.

Authors' contributions

The study was conceptualised and designed, and the empirical work was conducted by L.L. as part of her doctoral study under the supervision of R.v.E. and P.v.d.M. The authors co-wrote the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article, discussed the results, and approved the final version for submission and publication.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available because of the policies of the Department of Education.

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