

Can Emotional Intelligence Act as a Weapon (Warrior) Against Bullying?

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Abstract: To build an effective and safe learning community fighting with bullying is critical, which can be done via increasing students' emotional intelligence. This paper aims to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and bullying rate, and how an effective bullying prevention program can be organized. For this study, the qualitative research design was chosen. A convenience and snowball sampling were applied to hold the interview with school teachers and psychologists. Eight teachers and two psychologists from different schools were interviewed via the zoom.com platform. The findings revealed that, for most teachers, the term 'emotional intelligence' was relatively new. However, psychologists were well aware of this concept. All respondents were well aware of the concepts of bullying (victims of bullying, bullies, bystanders, and victimization). Most importantly, all respondents believed that the development of emotional intelligence can help prevent or at least diminish the bullying rate. Developing emotional intelligence should become one of the priorities for reducing the bullying rate among students. Bullying prevention/intervention programs should have a complex nature.


1 INTRODUCTION


Bullying has been around for millennia, but detailed study on its nature and occurrence and prevention attempts is relatively recent (Limber et al., 2018). Besides, according to the most recent UNESCO report (2019), school violence and bullying are still major global issues. Bullying still remains one of the most stressful events that have a negative impact on adolescents' well-being (Nozaki, 2019). On the one hand, there is brutal bullying with its ruthless nature, and on another hand, compassionate emotional intelligence (EI) that comprises sensitivity, understanding, consciousness, and sympathy. According to EI theory, those who are capable of absorbing information about emotions and using it as a guide to regulate their moods have better emotional adjustment and social connections (Barrera et al., 2019; Divecha & Brackett, 2020). In addition, adolescents with greater EI are better able to adapt to

stressful experiences and the annoyances of everyday life (Davis & Humphrey, 2012), reporting higher well-being scores (Sánchez-Álvarez, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2015).

In order to build an effective and safe learning community fighting with bullying is critical, which can be done via increasing students' emotional intelligence. Consequently, the goal of this research was to explore whether teachers in Georgia associate high emotional intelligence levels with a low bullying rate, what their idea is about bullying intervention programs; what teachers' opinions and reasons are in connection with the bullying rate, whether it has increased or decreased in Georgian schools. It also aimed at investigating what teachers' recommendations to reduce bullying rates at schools are, in order make suggestions for further research. Correspondingly, the research questions were: 1) Are school teachers in Georgia well aware of IQ and bullying? 2) Can a bullying-prevention program be

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based on development of EI? 3) How do teachers in Georgian schools interpret bullying intervention programs and what are their recommendations? 4) Has the bullying rate increased or decreased in Georgian schools and what are the reasons? 5) What do teachers recommend for reducing bullying rates at schools?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW ON EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE PREVENTING BULLYING

When we encounter the concept of emotional intelligence, what first comes to our mind is that emotional intelligence is about understanding and regulation not only of one's own, but also of others' feelings and emotions. This definition of emotional intelligence has been highlighted by various researchers (Goleman, 2017; Rueda, Pérez-Romero, Cerezo, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2022).

According to Bower et al. (2018), EI has five components based on Daniel Goleman's theory: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. The literature review emphasizes Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence; out of its five components, based on it as well as research findings, this article highlights the importance of social skills, self-regulation, and empathy and how each component impacts bullying (Goleman, 2017).

If a person has social skills, he/she behaves in a way that is competent for social tasks. A socially competent person is characterized by the following features: 1) can make and maintain friends easily, 2) can control emotions 3) can find a solution to interpersonal problems without generating further conflicts (Silva et al., 2018). When it comes to bullying, if we want to improve the social skills of victimized students, we need to emphasize the importance of social and emotional skills. These skills will facilitate conflict resolution, adaptive coping strategies, and emotional self-control (Silva et al., 2016).

Lack of self-control, commonly referred to as the manifestation of self-regulation capacity, is frequently linked to antisocial and under-controlled behavior (Murray & Kochanska, 2002). One of the essential psychological correlates that has always been associated with different kinds of violation of social rules, including bullying, is self-control. When exposed to bullying situations among students, it is necessary to analyze the level of self-regulation, which can predict different uses of coping strategies

and result in different emotionality (Fuente et al., 2014). Different researchers (García-Vázquez et al., 2020; Cho, 2018), claim that low self-regulation or self-control increases the negative impact of bullying.

Longobardi et al. (2019) and Cuff et al. (2014) clarified that various definitions of empathy make it challenging to compare different studies. Despite a very complex nature of empathy, the study that was conducted by Noorden et al. (2015) proved that empathy is negatively associated with bullying.

Social skills improvement can significantly reduce victimization, encourage students to be more polite and friendly, solve problems peacefully, as well as reduce the difficulty the victims of bullying have with social skills (Silva et al., 2018). Self-regulation or self-control skills can significantly reduce the bullying rate. Low self-control increases the negative impact of bullying, while high self-control reduces the negative impact of bullying and victimization (Cho, 2018).

Empathy has a multidimensional nature. It is divided into affective empathy and cognitive empathy. Bullying is negatively associated with empathy. Victimization is negatively associated only with cognitive empathy. Defending is positively associated with both types of empathy (Noorden et al., 2015). If schools want to reduce the level of bullying, and implement bullying intervention programs, these programs should improve students' social, self-control and empathy skills and emotional intelligence level as a whole.

Social skills, self-regulation and empathy are negatively associated with bullying (i.e., reduce it). Therefore, it is necessary to take into consideration these factors while developing emotional intelligence and struggling with bullying in an educational institution. Developing various components of EI within curriculum and (especially, humanities) subject syllabi, as well as organizing special events and campaigns at school and neighbourhood / community level should help minimize the stress and even threats in society.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methods

In this study qualitative research design was applied. Therefore, this study is of exploratory nature. Exploratory research is used when the researcher needs more data for the phenomenon than they already have. For data collection a semi-structured interview was conducted.

3.2 Participants

Eight teachers and two psychologists from various primary and secondary schools in Georgia participated in this research. The participants were volunteers. The first approach the researcher used was convenience sampling, as the researcher contacted two colleague teachers. The second approach was snowball sampling. The reason for using the non-probability sampling procedure was due to accessibility issues.

3.3 Procedure

Before applying the interview, interview questions were examined by three experts to be checked for content validity. The content of interview questions is valid when it properly and clearly covers all items that is intended to cover.

First, using the convenience sampling approach the researchers contacted two colleague teachers, then they applied the snowball approach and interviewed two more teachers recommended by them, etc. The process continued in the same way until the researcher had the desired sample size – 10 respondents. The interview consisted of seven questions and each participant was interviewed for 30-40 minutes. The interview was conducted via the zoom platform and the process was videotaped.

After the interviewing process was completed, the researchers converted the recording to text, only necessary information was taken out from the interviews, and it was sent back to the participants for final approval. After receiving the final approval from the participants, the researchers coded the answers to generalize the collected data.

3.4 Interview Questions

The following questions were posed to the interviewees:

- 1) What is emotional intelligence (what are its components)? How important for a person is to have it on a high level? How important is it for society that people’s emotional intelligence level is high? – to answer RQ1.
- 2) What is your opinion about bullying (Who usually become victims of bullying, bullies, bystanders, what is victimization)? – To answer RQ1.
- 3) What is your opinion about bullying prevention/interventions programs? How would you describe an effective bullying prevention/intervention program? - To answer RQ2.

4) What do you think, has bullying recently increased or decreased in Georgia (Why/not? Can you give several reasons)? – To answer RQ4.

5) What is your expectation, how can developing social skills, (cognitive/affective) empathy, and self-regulation/self-control impact the ways how students interact with each other?- To answer RQ 2.

6) Do you think emotional intelligence can help prevent/fight bullying? If yes, say how. – To answer RQ3.

7) What would you recommend to reduce bullying rate? - To answer RQ5.

3.5 Results

Table 1: Content-analysis of interviews results: EI.

Theme	Key words	Frequency
EI components	understanding others’ emotions	10
	understanding their own emotions	10
	social skills	6
	self-control	4
	empathy	3
	effective communication	2
	control over one’s emotion	2
	adequately expressing one’s emotions	1

The answers to the first interview question (Table 1) showed that the respondents know what emotional intelligence is, and what is common among their answers is that all of them define it as understanding one’s own and others’ emotions and understanding these emotions can help a person develop effective communication.

Possessing emotional intelligence by both teachers and students was assessed as very important by all respondents (10) for schools (7), families (5), and whole society (4).

As for the second question (Table 2), the answers revealed that the participants had a deep understanding of concepts: bullying, victims of bullying, bullies, bystanders, and victimization. The respondents were familiar not only with the terms bullying and victims of bullying but also ‘bystanders’, ‘victimization’, etc. They (4) stress that indifferent bystanders silently support bullying and also realize (3) that some bullies in the past were victims of bullying.

Table 2: Content-analysis of interviews results: bullying.

Theme	Key words	Frequency
causes of bullying	violence	7
	lack of social skills	4
	victim	7
	bystander	5
	families	4
	environment	3
	superiors	2
bullying results	physical harm	2
	verbal harm	2
	emotional harm	1

These terms, as Noorden et al. (2015, p. 640) categorize them, are: (1) “Bullying”, including bully, assistant, and reinforcer roles, (2) “Victimization”, dealing with victim roles, (3) “Defending”, including helper, defender, intervener, mediator, and consoler roles, (4) “Bystanding”, including passive bystander, outsider, and noninvolved roles.” Moreover, the respondents’ answers can be supported by Camarero-Figuerola, Dueñas, and Renta-Davids’s (2020) idea that bullying is a complex process that involves social, psychological and pedagogical aspects and it is harmful for a child from physical, psychological and moral dimensions, especially in the school environment

As for the third question, “What is your opinion about bullying prevention/intervention programs? How would you describe an effective bullying prevention/intervention program?”, its findings are presented in Table 3.

The teachers (4) mentioned that so far the existing prevention programs are held only in some schools, that these programs are quite unprofessional (3) and non-systematic (2), mostly after a new loud case occurs (6).

Table 3: Content-analysis of interview results: effective bullying prevention/ intervention.

Theme	Key words	Frequency
bullying prevention / intervention	nation-wide educational campaign	10
	working with parents	10
	class meetings dedicated to the topic	4
	educating teachers	6
	making up learner profiles including their behavioral / emotional problems	4
	the need of more psychological support at school	3
	dealing with wrong behavioral standards (e.g., if someone hits you, hit back	2

The respondents spoke about different factors that can be included in an effective bullying prevention/intervention program: nation-wide educational campaign using mass-media, educating children by starting from parents, having special departments at school formed with qualified teams of psychologists, learner profile program showing not only academic performance, but also emotional development, and raising teachers’ awareness. First of all, all respondents emphasize that parents’ involvement in bullying prevention programs can have a positive impact on reducing the bullying rate among students in a school context. As Kolbert et al. (2014) claim, parents’ involvement in bullying prevention programs plays a pivotal role in preventing bullying behavior in school systems. The respondents’ answers about bullying prevention programs vary and this is a common situation all over the world, as, despite the fact that there have been a

lot of bullying prevention programs developed and utilized to prevent bullying at schools, there still is no shared opinion what the best practice is. According to Morrow, Hooker, and Cate (2015), “while these programs share similar features, they also vary in numerous ways, most notably in their specific components (e.g., institutional policies, staff training, student education, reporting procedures, targeted interventions, parent involvement, ongoing evaluation)”(p.87).

The fourth question that the respondents answered was whether bullying had recently increased or decreased in Georgia and what the reasons of it are. Seven out of ten respondents think that bullying, especially the physical type of it, has increased. Three teachers believe that people have started talking about bullying more than in the past, this is why it seems that bullying has increased. The respondents mentioned that there, unfortunately, is no nation-wide statistics dealing with bullying and victimization, which may make an impression that the problem is not acute. But it is very acute. Five respondents also mention the new type of bullying which has recently appeared – cyberbullying, which has not reached such dangerous level as in some developed countries, but does exist.

Table 4: Content-analysis of interviews results: preventing bullying.

Theme	Key words	Frequency
factors of preventing bullying	increased positive interaction	8
	better understanding of each other	6
	respecting a personality in another person	4
	work to decrease aggressiveness	3
	directing the natural aggressiveness to a positive track	2
	discovering more effective ways of conflict resolution	2
	trying to be in another person’s shoes	1

As for question five (Table 4), all respondents’ (10) expectations of how developing the social skills, empathy, and self-regulation/self-control can impact the ways how students interact with each other, were very positive.

For the question six, all (10) respondents’ answers showed that they understand the need of bullying prevention, not simply reacting to it when it already occurs. They see the ability of emotional intelligence skills to prevent bullying. Based on the respondents’ answers, developing emotional intelligence skills can reduce the bullying rate, however, it has its limitations (3), as some students have inborn (or further developed) neuropsychological problems which education alone cannot solve and medical interference is compulsory. Several (7) respondents mention that only united measures of raising children’s emotional intelligence can yield a tangible result: government (through legislation and gathering the information, defining educational policies) (6), society (first of all, mass-media, in programs, talk-shows, interviews, articles, debates, movies, books, etc.) (5), school (4), family (4), religious and other organizations (3) should cooperate with each other and create a network of measures preventing and fighting with bullying. Internet content should be under control concerning bullying and violence (10).

This is in line with Bunnett (2021) who claims, “...peer networking activities, centered on improving EI, resilience and peer relations will likely reduce the incidence and subsequent negative outcomes of bullying and victimization in schools” (p.1061).

Here are the respondents’ recommendations (question 7) on what should be done to reduce the bullying rate. It was recommended that government, the Ministry of Education and Science and the schools should continue working collaboratively and the whole responsibility is not left only on schools (10). They need to develop a program, a policy of making the school (and not only) a safe place. Collaboration is important for developing an effective bullying prevention programs.

It was recommended to bring to teachers’ and parents’ minds that developing emotional intelligence in students also will be vitally beneficial in reducing the bullying rate, which can be done by parents and school first of all (6). The content of school subjects, especially, literature, history and languages, should emphasize humanism, empathy, self-awareness, self-control and self-regulation (8). Social skills should be developed through team work in and out of class (6). More extracurricular events are needed to have a greater impact on bullying decrease (6). They may involve watching documentaries, movies and reading

books followed by discussions on bullying. School psychologists' role in organizing such events is great (4). Of course, it is important that parents are involved in trainings concerning the development of emotional intelligence in their children, but they will be ineffective unless parents listen to their children empathetically, unless they view some 'family' movies together and discuss them, unless they involve their children in acts of charities, etc. (3). Teachers and school administration need to be periodically retrained concerning the methods of increasing EI and decreasing bullying, they need to exchange experience between schools (2) and get acquainted with international experience (5).

These ideas are supported by Inocencio and Inocencio (2021), they claim that anti-bullying campaigns that raise awareness about how harmful bullying is, and how important understanding others is, can play a pivotal role in reducing bullying. Moreover, teachers should continue familiarizing themselves with what bullying is, how bullying prevention policies work, and, of course, the code of conduct. However, all respondents agree that eradicating bullying completely is a very complex process and almost unachievable.

3.6 The Ethics of the Research

As the research is a qualitative one, there are few ethical absolutes that really matter. These absolutes are: confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and rational judgment. Harming participants, in any way, in the name of science, is against the fundamental rule of the researcher. Consequently, all the participants are mentioned in the research results as T1, T2, etc. The recordings are confidential and have been used for research purposes only. The researchers did their best to make logical conclusions based on the obtained answers.

3.7 Discussion and Limitations

The study revealed that in Georgian school context emotional intelligence is a relatively new concept. Being so, it is not systematically applied such as in the USA (CASEL, 2017). In Georgia, mostly, EI is associated with understanding and handling not only one's own, but also others' emotions and feelings. This idea can be supported by Rueda et al. (2022), who claim that emotional intelligence provides a person with an ability first to understand and manage one's emotions and feelings, and then other people's feelings and emotions. The current study highlights the importance of social skills, self-regulation, and

empathy and their impact on bullying. This largely coincides with Daniel Goleman's theory, according to which emotional intelligence involves self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 2017).

It was found that the respondents had a clear idea of bullying and related concepts: victims of bullying, bullies, bystanders, and victimization. However, the respondents' opinions about effective bullying prevention/intervention programs varied. Some respondents suggested emphasizing raising parents' awareness first of all, while others believed in the complex approach involving the whole society. The respondents insisted on the need of having special departments at school with a team of qualified psychologists, and at the same time developing students' emotional intelligence skills, while some of them think that teachers can be the main players by showing love, care, respect, support, and empathy. All of them agreed that emotional intelligence has a paramount importance and it has to be integrated into any bullying prevention programs. Morrow, Hooker, and Cate (2015) research partially coincides with the current research findings, they claim that, despite the fact that various bullying prevention programs share a lot of similar features, however, there are a lot of differences in their specific components. These components are, for example, "institutional policies, staff training, student education, reporting procedures, targeted interventions, parent involvement, and ongoing evaluation" (p. 87).

Interestingly, some respondents doubted whether bullying has really increased or whether it seems so because in the last period people started talking much about bullying. Others think that bullying has really increased, and the reason is the lack of students', teachers', and parents' emotional intelligence, development of new technologies, access to social networking sites. The evidence in the US (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2017) mostly shows that bullying has increased and spread to a greater age spectrum, but there are no empirical studies on the issue in Georgia, so the situation here might be different. Anyway, it needs deeper and wider-scale research and is definitely troublesome.

The respondents hoped that developing social skills, empathy, and self-control in students would impact positively the way students interact with each other, thus, decreasing bullying. They will know how to behave in society. The research findings coincide with Silva et al. (2016; 2018). They found that a socially competent person can make friends easily, control his/her emotions, find solutions to problems without generating further conflicts, and these skills

can also reduce students' vulnerability to bullying and promote friendship. The current research findings revealed that teachers believe developing self-control and empathy can also have a positive impact on reducing the bullying rate at the school level. These findings are supported by Noorden et al. (2015), and García-Vázquez et al. (2020).

All respondents in the current study think that emotional intelligence can help prevent bullying. They believe that fundamental for this is developing social skills, empathy, and self-control. If a person has these skills, they can easily avoid conflicts, control their and even others' emotions, and feel comfortable in society. Reducing bullying is a complex process. Parental involvement along with special school departments and a team of qualified psychologists can diminish bullying levels in the school context. All respondents mentioned that developing emotional intelligence is of a paramount importance in this regard.

An important research limitation is the sample size. Of course, the obtained data would need validation on a larger scale, with application of various qualitative and quantitative methods. In fact, the research is the first step in a larger scale study - PhD dissertation (one author is a PhD student, while her co-authors are her scientific advisors). Another research limitation is that for gathering qualitative information only interview was used, triangulation would be the best approach to widely generalize research findings.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, recent research has once again confirmed that fighting and preventing bullying is a very complex process. Having an effective bullying prevention/intervention program at the school level requires a lot of hard work and cooperation between schools, parents and school, schools and scientists, and schools and governmental organizations. It is highly recommended that they all work together and have close cooperation and deep involvement in the process.

Another interesting finding that was confirmed through the interview was that developing emotional intelligence in students can help prevent bullying. Different components of emotional intelligence such as social skills, self-control, and empathy can benefit victims of bullying, bullies, and bystanders in various ways. While developing an effective program to fight bullying, we must always consider emotional intelligence as one of the most important components

of it. A deeper and wider study on the impact of EI on bullying reduction is needed in the future.

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