EMPOWERING THE VICTIMS OF BULLYING: THE 'BULLYING: THE POWER TO COPE' PROGRAM

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Abstract

This study replicates an earlier study (Markopolous & Bernard, 2015) that evaluated the impact of the program, *Bullying: The Power to Cope* (Bernard, 2019) on potential victim's cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses. The program is aimed at teaching student rational beliefs and coping skills they can employ to cope with various types of bullying. In the present study, participating classes were randomly allocated to either an experimental or control condition. The study conducted in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, consisted 115 participants (n = 55, experimental group; n = 60 in the control group), 57 males and 58 females, aged 10 to 14 years of age. Self-report data was collected pre- and post-test, measuring children's cognitive, behavioral and emotional coping responses to four written bullying vignettes. Measures of state and trait anxiety were also collected at pre- and post-tests. Results revealed students in the experimental group significantly improved in cognitive and emotional coping responses compared with students in the control group. Nonsignificant differences were found between males and females and between primary and secondary school students on their response to the program. State anxiety did not influence responsiveness to the program, but students with lower levels of trait anxiety (pre-test) made significantly greater improvements on emotional coping responses compared to students with higher levels of trait anxiety. Implications of these findings are discussed as well as limitations and considerations for future research.

Keywords: bullying, coping skills, CBT, children, prevention program, universal, school-based, social-emotional learning, cognitive behavior therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, distress, mental health, cognitive restructuring, irrational and rational beliefs

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Over the past three decades, bullying has emerged as an increasing concern for school communities around the world because of its prevalence and harmful impact (e.g., Gaffney, Farrington, & Ttofi, 2019). Bullying was previously considered an unpleasant yet typical social experience to occur during school years (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010). However, contemporary research suggests bullying victimisation and perpetration can have severe immediate and long-lasting consequences for children, their families and society at large (Fry et. al., 2018; Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Moore et. al., 2017; Price & Dalgleish, 2010). Additionally, large numbers of young people report being bullied. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2020) reported the following data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC, 2016): 7 in 10 children aged 12–13 experienced at least one bullying-like behavior within a year while one in four children aged 8–12 experienced unwanted contact and content while online.

Increased awareness and reporting of the detrimental effects and mental health concerns that stem from school bullying have resulted in a boom in research evaluating school-wide, anti-bullying interventions and programs aimed at curbing this negative behavior. A variety of intervention programs have been developed for use in school settings, each with a distinctive focus and often deriving from diverse theoretical models (e.g., Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Meta-analytic and systematic reviews suggest there is some evidence supporting the effectiveness of school-based intervention programs targeting bullying. However, evidence is varied and inconsistent (e.g., Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Smith, 2011; Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003). Ttofi and Farrington (2011) analysed the effectiveness of 44 school-based anti-bullying programs and reported that on average bullying perpetration was reduced 20-23% and victimization rates reduced 17-20% post-intervention. A review of 26 studies evaluating school-based interventions found reduction rates to be dependent on program type, age of children, and population group (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Anti-Bullying School Programs

Some of the more popular and researched programs include perhaps, the earliest, whole-school anti-bullying program, the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* (Olweus, 1993) designed to modify and improve the school environment to reduce and prevent bullying behavior partially through adults communicating warmth and positivity towards students including acting as positive and authoritative role models, stricter rules, regulations and consequences for anti-social student behavior, and the implementation of non-aggressive consequences for unacceptable behavior. The *Kiva anti-bullying program* (Kärnä, et. al., 2013) is based on several different theories including Bandura's social-cognitive theory and has a focus on increasing empathy, self-efficacy and anti-bullying attitudes of bystanders. The

Viennese Social Competence program (e.g., Strohmeier, et. al., 2012) which is based on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological perspective and Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes the responsibility of teachers and other adults in preventing student bullying behavior and the development in students of social skills they can use to prevent bullying and other forms of aggressive behavior.

The many universal school-based programs target different risk and protective factors linked to aggression, bullying, and victimization. From a socio-ecological and social learning perspective, bullying is understood as a systemic problem with mechanisms operating on several levels: individual, family, peer, classroom, and school. Anti-bullying preventive programs may target one or more factors involved in bullying and aggressive behaviors: individual (bully, victim, all students), peers, teachers, environment (school, home).

The *Bullying. The Power to Cope* (Bernard, 2019) program evaluated in the present study targets the individual student and derives from a major form of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) (Ellis, 1994). CBT principles and practices have been incorporated in a number of evidence-based, anti-bullying programs (e.g*., Friendly Schools*, Cross et. al., 2011) with the intent of strengthening the social-emotional skills of students such as empathy and friendship-making in order to reduce bullying behavior. The focus of REBT is empowering young people to manage and reduce the emotional stress of being bullied, including anxiety, feeling down and anger. The author of this program had been and continues to be concerned about the tendency of young people to take bullying personally and the impact this thinking style has on their depression and severe forms of self-destructive behavior (Ford, et. al., 2017). One of the fundamental practices of REBT is to teach people of all ages self-acceptance in order to not take things personally. The following example of two girls responding differently to the same example of cyber-bullying illustrates the importance of the way young people interpret and evaluate the act of bullying on their feelings and behaviors.

Two girls receive the same cyber-message on several occasions saying that each looks FAT and UGLY. Carmen is quite devastated; feeling extremely anxious and depressed about the impact of the message on her popularity, while Alex pays little attention to the message, reminds herself that she is a worthwhile person, and returns an SMS saying that the sender should have paid more attention in their recent health class on celebrating differences and not judging people by their appearance, culture or behaviour.

The emotional impact of this cyber-bullying event is dramatically different for the two girls because of the different attitude or mindset of each girl. As a consequence of her attitude of self-depreciation, Carmen's takes being cyberbullied quite personally and thinks, "Because I am being picked on for my physical appearance, there must be something wrong with me. I now think less of myself and I must be a real loser". In contrast, Alex's attitude of self-acceptance literally protects

her. She refuses to rate her self-worth and value based on another's opinion of her, instead thinking, "I accept myself no matter what" and "I am me and that's OK". (Bernard, 2019).

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, Rational Emotive Education

REBT has a long and robust evidence-based successful history of being applied by mental health practitioners to help young people with a broad range of emotional difficulties and mental health problems (e.g., Ellis & Bernard, 2006; Bernard & Joyce, 1984; Bernard & Terjesen, 2020). Additionally, REBT has been applied in schools for over four decades in the form of Rational Emotive Education (REE) (e.g., Knaus, 1974; Vernon, 2006 a, b) and You Can Do It! Education (e.g., Bernard & Walton, 2011; Bernard, 2013; Vernon & Bernard, 2019). REE is preventative, mental health education with substantial international research proving the effectiveness of REE in helping students in schools overcome social-emotional difficulties such as anxiety, feeling down and anger (Gonzalez, et. al., 2004; Hajzler & Bernard, 1991; Tripp, Vernon & McMahon, 2007; Terjesen, Duhning, Pata & Prizer, 2020; Yamamoto, Matsumoto & Bernard, 2017).

REBT emphasises the role of cognition in behavioral and emotional reactions to experiences. The theory postulates that the individual's behavioral and emotional responses to adversity depends on the extent to which s/he thinks in ways that are flexible, moderate, logical and evidence-based (rational) or rigid, extreme, not sensible and not empirical (irrational). Irrational thoughts about adverse events such as being teased or bullied lead to extreme levels of anxiety, feeling down and/or anger and unhelpful behaviors such as aggression or withdrawal, whereas rational thinking about adversity leads to less extreme levels of emotional upset and to goal achieving behavior. Students who experience extreme emotional and behavioral reactions to bullying often have a tendency to take the bullying personally ("I must be a loser."), catastrophize ("This is the worst thing in the world that could happen."), evaluate the bullying as intolerable ("I can't stand nor cope.") and to evaluate the act of being bullied in absolute terms ("This must not happen. People should always act considerately and treat me fairly."). Students who are better at emotional regulation when faced with bullying behavior appraise and interpret the bullying more moderately and flexibly, thinking: "I strongly want people to treat me nicely and not harshly, but sometimes that's the way others behave. Being treated this way is bad, but not the worst thing that can happen to me. I don't like, but I can cope. I accept myself, no matter what.").

Bullying: The Power to Cope Program

The *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program teaches students ways of thinking espoused in the practice of REBT and in REE including ways to cognitively

restructure unhelpful to helpful thinking. For example, they learn that 'Things are neither good or bad but thinking makes it so' (Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2), that they have the power to choose the way to think including how not to catastrophize ("This is not the end of the world"), to be self-accepting, not taking the act of bullying personally ("I accept myself no matter what") and to increase their frustration tolerance ("I can cope"). The program consists of four lessons. It includes four short, animated videos and associated classroom activities covering four elements: Part 1. Bullying and Its Impact; Part 2. Thinking Makes It So; Part 3. Things to Say and Do; and Part 4. Coping in Action. The *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program differs from other CBT-oriented, social-emotional learning programs such as *Second Step* and *Steps to Respect,* through its heavy emphasis on cognitive interpretation and restructuring, while sharing similar elements including the teaching of specific coping skills (actions to take; things to say) in response to bullying.

Replication

The present study replicates published research (Markopolous & Bernard, 2015) that investigated the effectiveness of the Bullying: The Power to Cope program. Self-report data were collected at pre- and post-test of students' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping responses to four written bullying vignettes. The sample consisted of 139 participants in Melbourne, Australia (n = 80 in the experimental group; n = 59 in the no-treatment, control group), aged from 10 to 14 years. Results indicated students in the experimental group improved in cognitive and emotional coping responses relative to students in the control group. Females showed greater improvement than males in coping responses to bullying as a consequence of the program. These preliminary findings provide encouraging support for the effectiveness of the *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program as a school-based intervention program. However, the results indicate that further evaluation of the effectiveness of the program across different educational settings and age groups is needed. Thus, the present study aims to demonstrate generalizability of previous findings and to corroborate and further strengthen the evidence base of the program. There is also a focus on a child's individual characteristics such as gender, age and anxiety and the impact they may have on program efficacy.

For more than two decades, research has revealed there are significant gender differences in the way young people cope with and manage being bullied. Frydenberg and Lewis (2000) reported that girls tend to seek social support at higher rates but are less likely to seek professional support in comparison with boys. Girls have been found to be more likely to utilise ineffectual strategies such as tension reduction, self-blame and worry, whereas boys engage in different non-productive strategies such as distancing, retaliation, aggression and avoidance (Causey &

Dubow, 1992). These gender differences can possibly explain gender differences in the utility of intervention programs addressing bullying.

Gender

An examination of the impact of cognitive-behavioral and coping skill programs with students has shown that in a proportion of studies, boys and girls often respond differently to the same programs. For example, Pahl and Barrett (2010) examined the effectiveness of the Fun Friends (Barrett, 2005) program that is designed to increase social-emotional competence and decrease and prevent worry and emotional distress. At post-intervention and at 12-month follow-up, both males and females within the intervention group demonstrated reductions in anxiety. In the intervention group, improvements were also found in behavioral inhibition and in social-emotional skills (e.g., emotion regulation and social skills), with females experiencing greater improvement than boys from pre- to post-intervention.

The efficacy of the *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program was investigated by Markopoulos and Bernard (2015). The strength of this program is in strengthening the cognitive and emotional responses of potential victims. The majority of school-wise anti-bullying intervention programs focus on changing bystanders' attitudes and behaviors. Girls were found to make significant improvements in emotional and cognitive coping responses to hypothetical bullying vignettes, whereas boys did not. The study revealed that although girls and boys had similar mean scores at the conclusion of the program, the significant improvement in coping by girls was due in part to girls beginning females the program with markedly greater irrational evaluations and negative emotionality in response to bullying vignettes. These results echo previous research indicating girls are more likely to assess problems as extreme and perceive they have diminished ability to cope with difficulty (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993, 2000). Gender differences in relation to both coping and program utility highlights the need to further explore the extent to which gender differences exist in the efficacy of CBT-type anti-bullying programs.

Age

Age-related differences have also been found in how young people cope with bullying.

Younger children are inclined to favor more overt bullying behaviors such as physical aggression and direct verbal bullying (Rivers & Smith, 1994) and are more likely to tell an adult or a peer, distance themselves from the bully and worry about the situation (Kristensen & Smith, 2003). In comparison, covert, indirect and relational types of bullying are more frequently reported as age increases. Older children and adolescents are less willing to seek social support from adults and more likely to engage in externalising behaviours and tension reduction, such as drinking

and smoking, in response to stressful situations (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000; Kristensen & Smith, 2003).

Studies aiming to ascertain how age affects the efficacy of anti-bullying programs have noted varying results. Some studies have demonstrated increased utility and significant results in childhood, reducing in efficacy as age increases (Smith, Salmivalli, & Cowie, 2012).

Yeager, Fong, Lee, and Espelage (2015) reported significantly reduced or non-existent anti-bullying program efficacy for adolescents above Grade 8. In terms of the efficacy of CBT-type, anti-bullying programs, it is important to determine how age might influence their utility, because age has a clear impact on the way students engage in and respond to bullying.

Markopolous and Bernard (2015) found heightened emotional reactivity in girls before commencing participation in the *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program when responding to different bullying vignettes. Emotional reactivity refers to the intensity of an emotional response, the threshold of stimuli needed to provoke an emotional response and the time a person remains in that emotional state (Davidson, 1998). Intense emotional reactivity is strongly associated with anxiety (Carthy, Horesh, Apter, & Gross, 2010) such that effective responding to adversity may be attenuated by presence of anxiety. Anxious children respond to perceived threats and negative experiences with heightened reactivity, expressed as intense and frequent negative emotional responses. In a sample of 91 children aged between 10 and 17 years of age, Carthy, Horesh, Apter, Edge, and Gross (2010) examined whether anxious children experienced highly negative emotional reactivity and deficits in cognitive emotion regulation compared with non-anxious peers. Findings revealed that anxious children were more likely to respond with greater negative emotion and lesser cognitive regulation ability in comparison with controls. Research has also indicated that anxious children are more likely to respond to vignettes that elicited worry and anger and ambiguous vignettes with potentially threatening meaning with greater negative emotional intensity when compared with non-anxious children (Carthy, Horesh, Apter, & Gross, 2010; Suveg & Zeman, 2004). Therefore, examining the differences in child and adolescent levels of anxiety might serve to elucidate why bullying intervention and prevention programs appear to be more effective for some more than others.

Research Questions

Research questions 3 and 4 represent distinctive contributions of this replication study.

1. Do students who participate in the *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program show improvements in cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping responses to bullying vignettes compared with students who do not participate in the program

2. Do girls and boys respond differently to the program by demonstrating different levels of improvement in their coping responses (cognitive, behavioral, emotional) to bullying vignettes?

3. Do students in primary school (grades 5 and 6) in comparison with students in secondary school (grade 7) respond differently to the program by demonstrating different levels of improvement in their coping responses (cognitive, emotional and behavioral) to bullying vignettes?

4. Do students who obtained lower and higher scores of anxiety (state and trait) respond differently to the program by demonstrating different levels of improvement in their coping responses (cognitive, behavioral, and emotional) to bullying vignettes?

Method

Participants

Students were recruited from primary and secondary schools in Melbourne, Australia. The first author contacted multiple primary schools and secondary schools for inclusion and three responded as willing participants (two government primary schools and one government secondary school) yielding two Grade 5, two Grade 5/6 and two Grade 7 classes. Following approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne and each school, students and their parents were sent home a plain language statement and consent form. The three participating schools contributed 148 students, who were all invited to participate. The individual schools randomly assigned each participating class to either the experimental or control group. The decision was independent of the first author and largely based on the school's timetable. Of the students invited to participate, 119 (80%) returned consent forms and completed pre-intervention questionnaires. At post-intervention data collection, the final sample reduced to 115 students (57 girls, 58 boys), as four students were absent. The experimental group included 55 students (32 girls, 23 boys) and the control group included 60 students (25girls, 35 boys). Participants were aged between ten and fourteen years (M = 11.45 years, SD = 1.14). There were 55 students in Grade 5, 14 students in Grade 6, and 46 students in Year 7.

Measures

The Coping Response Bullying Questionnaire (CRBQ; Markopolous & Bernard, 2015) is a 44-item measure that is designed to assess student's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses to four bullying scenarios: physical, verbal, social, and cyber. Four items comprise the cognitive and behavioral scale and three items comprise the emotional scale for each of the four bullying vignettes.

Participants are asked to respond to written hypothetical vignettes, describing a common student experience of bullying by indicating how they would think and behave if the incident happened to them on a four-point Likert scale that ranges from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4). Additionally, participants are asked rate how strongly they would feel on a scale ranging from A Little (1) to Very (10). The vignettes are hypothetical scenarios and do not relate to participants personally, allowing students to express their opinions and choose how they might think, feel or act, while remaining detached from actual experiences and feeling safe from personal threat (Poulou, 2001).

Sample vignette and examples of CRBQ questions
A student who is in your class who is bigger and stronger keeps hitting and kicking you when nobody is looking and tells you if you tell anyone, he will just hurt you more.
Instructions: If the incident happened to you, show whether you agree or disagree with the following thoughts/behaviors or how you would be feeling by circling a number.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am a real 'loser'.	1	2	3	4
I would do nothing.	1	2	3	4

	A Little				Medium					Very
I would feel worried.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

The CRBQ takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. Raw scores are computed by summing the scores for each item across the cognitive, emotional and behavioral scales. Reverse scoring is required for item four on the cognitive scale and items two and three on the behavioral scale. Higher scores are indicative of less effective coping responses to situations of bullying. The CRBQ has shown adequate internal consistency at pre- and post-test for the Cognitive (α = .87 and .88), Behavioral (α = .79 and .84), and Emotional (α = .92 and .91) subscales (Markopoulos & Bernard, 2015). For the present study, the CBRQ demonstrated good internal consistency at pre- and post-test for the Cognitive scale (α = .87 and .89), the Behavioral scale (α = .85 and .85) and the Emotional Scale (α = .92 and .94).
The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory – Children (STAI-CH; Spielberger & Edwards, 1973) is a 40-item scale designed to assess children's state anxiety, a fleeting emotional state, and trait anxiety which is a proneness to experience elevated anxiety. The 20-item state anxiety scale requires participants to rate how they how

they feel about themselves "at this very moment" on a three-point Likert scale. The stem for each item is, "I feel", and for each adjective term there are three alternatives. The child responds by checking with alternative describes him best (e.g., "very nervous", "nervous", "not nervous"). Items indicating the absence of anxiety are reverse scored. The 20-item trait anxiety scale required participants to rate how they "generally feel" on a three-point Likert scale ranging from Hardly Every (1) to Often (3). The STAI-CH takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. Scores for each scale range from 20 to 60, with higher scores indicating greater anxiety. The STAI-CH is designed for children with a fourth grade reading level and above. In the current study, psychometric properties were strong, with internal consistency at pre- and post-test for state anxiety scale (α = .87 and .92) and trait anxiety scale (α = .91 and .93).

Test of Knowledge of Bullying: The Power to Cope Questionnaire (KBBPCQ; Markopolous & Bernard, 2015) ia an 11-item survey is designed to assess children's knowledge of bullying and coping skills taught during the *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program. There are nine multiple choice answer questions (e.g., "what is self-talk?') and two short answer questions (e.g., "What did you enjoy most about the program?"). The evaluative questionnaire allows researchers to determine information that was easily retained, information that could be further explained or reviewed, and student experiences of the program. Scores for multiple choice answer questions are computed by summing correct answers, with total raw scores ranging from 0 to 9. Higher raw scores indicate more acquired knowledge of bullying and coping skills taught.

Procedure

During pre-test (week 0), data were collected from all participants. Students in both the experimental and control groups completed paper versions of the CRBQ, CASS-A, and STAI-CH. The student researcher introduced the project, provided a brief explanation of the questionnaires and explained that all information provided was confidential. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaires independently and as honestly as they could. If participants did not understand or were unsure of how to answer a question, they were encouraged to ask the student researcher or classroom teacher for assistance. During weeks 1 to 5, the student researcher taught the *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program, to students in the experimental group at each participating school during a 55-minutes class session. Each school decided the program would contribute to their wellbeing curriculum and that all students would thus participate in sessions regardless of whether they completed the questionnaires. All sessions involved a short introduction to the content, the relevant animation, group discussions, and whole class, independent, and paired activities. Students were encouraged to contribute to discussions;

however, sharing personal experiences of bullying was not expected. Student handouts were collated into a workbook prior to program commencement and students kept these at the conclusion of the program to be used for future reference. Participants in the control group did not receive the program during these five weeks and continued with regular timetabled classes. Each school was provided the opportunity to deliver the program to the control group in order not to disadvantage these participants.

In week 7, all participants in the experimental and control groups again completed the CRBQ, CASS-A, and STAI-CH. Additionally, the experimental group completed the evaluative questionnaire, KBPCQ. The students were again encouraged to work independently and complete the questionnaires as honestly as they could.

Data Analysis

The current research project was quasi-experimental in nature, employing a repeated measures design with the condition (control and experimental group) as the between-subjects factor and time (pre- and post-test) as the within-subjects factor. The independent variables were condition, control group and experimental group, gender, male and female, grade of participants, primary school and secondary school, and level of state and trait anxiety (high and low). The dependent variables were the cognitive, behavioral and emotional coping responses to bullying vignettes at pre- and post-test.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 22 (SPSS 22) was employed to conduct all statistical analyses. First, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the homogeneity of control and experimental groups at pre-test, in terms of their cognitive, behavioral and emotional cognitive coping responses. The second repeated-measures MANOVA, was conducted to examine differences from pre- to post-test in participants cognitive, behavioral and emotional coping responses between the control and experimental group. The third and fourth repeated-measures MANOVAs were conducted to examine differences from pre- to post-test in participants' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping responses between girls and boys and primary and secondary school students in the experimental group.

For analysis, state anxiety and trait anxiety scores were recoded into two levels: upper and lower 50% of scores. Mean scores were used as cut-off points to delineate lower and higher scores. Repeated-measures MANOVA's were conducted to investigate differences in the effect of the program on cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping responses for students lower on state and trait anxiety (lower 50%), as compared to students who obtained a higher score (upper 50%) at pre-test. Finally, to

determine whether the experimental group had learnt and retained key skills taught scores of the KBPCQ were recoded into two levels: low scores ≤6 and high scores ≥7. Levels were based on ranges stated by Markopoulos and Bernard (2015). MANOVA analyses were chosen in preference to a series of Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs) to compare groups on a range of dependent variables simultaneously, while adjusting for and reducing the risk of Type 1 errors (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Preliminary analysis was conducted to ensure no violations of the assumptions required for multivariate analysis of variance. Assumption testing was conducted to assess adequate sample size, univariate and multivariate outliers, normality, linearity, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and multicollinearity, with no serious violations noted. Linearity was assessed via examination of scatter matrices and appeared to have an even distribution, random spread and no curvilinear scatters.

Missing Data

Prior to analysis, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 22 (SPSS 22) program was used to conduct data cleaning for all variables within each time point according to protocols outlined by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013). Data was screened for errors in responses and negatively worded items were reversed scored. All participant responses and total scores were found to be within the acceptable range. All variables were missing responses from four participants at post-test and consequently were deleted from further analysis in accordance with Field (2013). Missing values analysis revealed variables were missing no more than 0.9% of responses at pre-test and post-test. Subsequent investigations revealed one participant had missing data for all STAI-CH items at pre-test. To allow the participant data to be included in analyses for which they have the necessary information, exclude cases pairwise option was used to deal with the missing values during analysis in accord with Pallant (2013).

Results

Pre-Test Comparison of the Control and Experimental Conditions

A one-way between groups MANOVA was performed to investigate whether there were differences between the experimental and control group on students' cognitive, emotional and behavioral coping responses to bullying vignettes at pre-test. There was a nonsignificant difference between control and experimental groups on the combined dependent variables, $F(3, 111) = 0.96$, $p = .41$; Wilks'

Lambda = .98; partial eta squared = .25. When results for dependent variables were considered separately, a non-significant difference was found between control and experimental groups on all measures. These results suggest groups were homogenous on coping responses prior to intervention.

Effects of the Bullying: The Power to Cope Program

A repeated-measures MANOVA was performed to investigate the program effect on participants coping responses, from pre-test to post-test, between the control and experimental group. Descriptive statistics for cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping responses at pre- and post-test for the control and experimental group were determined (see Table 1). Results of the multivariate analysis showed a significant overall effect of time by group, $F(3,111) = 4.58$, $p = .005$; Wilks' Lambda = .89; partial $\eta_2 = .11$. This suggests there were significant differences on one or more dependent variables among the control and experimental group from pre- to post-test. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the effect of time by group interaction was statistically significant for cognitive coping response, $F(1, 113) = 10.47$, $p = .002$; partial $\eta_2 = .085$, and for the emotional coping response, $F(1, 113) = 5.61$, $p = .02$; partial $\eta_2 = .047$. However, the interaction of time by group did not reach statistical significance for the behavioral coping response, $F(1, 113) = .87$, $p = .35$; partial $\eta_2 = .008$.-By looking at the difference in change scores, it was clear the experimental group improved significantly more on their cognitive and emotional coping responses compared to the control group.

Table 1. The Effects of the Bullying: The Power to Cope Program

Coping Response	Time Period	Group						
		Control (*n* = 60)				Experimental (*n* = 55)		
		M	*SD*	95 % CI		*M*	*SD*	95% CI
Cognitive	Pre-Test	29.43	7.03	27.31-31.56		30.86	9.53	28.63-33.08
	Post-Test	28.58	6.99	26.72-30.45		25.80	7.60	23.85-27.45
Behavioural	Pre-Test	30.63	7.88	28.49-32.79		29.87	8.98	27.62-32.12
	Post-Test	31.07	7.39	28.99-33.14		29.35	8.80	27.18-31.51
Emotional	Pre-Test	69.28	26.55	62.56-76.01		67.18	26.03	60.16-74.21
	Post-Test	68.37	26.74	61.27-75.46		58.02	28.80	50.61-65.43

When examining within-group differences, results showed a significant improvement in mean score from pre- to post-test within the experimental group for cognitive, $F(1, 54) = 20.10$, $p \leq .001$; with a large effect size, partial $\eta2 = .27$and emotional coping responses, $F(1, 54) = 10.51$, $p = .002$; with a large effect size, partial $\eta2 = .16$ (e.g., Pituch & Stevens, 2016). There was a non-significant change from pre- to post-test for behavioural coping responses, $F(1, 54) = .49$, $p = .49$; partial $\eta2 = .009$, although there was a slight improvement in mean score. Whereas there were non-significant differences from pre- to post-test on cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping responses for the control group.

The results of the multivariate analysis showed a non-significant overall interaction of time by gender, $F(3, 51) = .13$, $p = .94$; Wilks' Lambda = .99; partial $\eta2 = .007$. Additionally, when each dependent variable was considered separately, the interaction of time by gender was found to be non-significant for each of the dependent variables. This indicates there were no differences between males and females on cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping responses from pre- to post-test, rather they made similar improvements in coping responses from pre- to post-test.

A repeated-measures MANOVA was performed to investigate differences in the effect of the program between students in primary and secondary school in the experimental group ($N = 55$). The results of the multivariate analysis showed a non-significant overall interaction of time by age, $F(3, 51) = .63$, $p = .60$; Wilks' Lambda = .96; partial $\eta2 = .036$. Results indicate no differences between children in primary school and secondary school on cognitive, behavioural, and emotional coping responses from pre- to post-test, rather they made similar improvements in coping responses as a result of the program.

Impact of state-trait anxiety on the effects of the Bullying. The Power to Cope Program

A multivariate analysis revealed a nonsignificant interaction between time and level of state anxiety, $F(3, 50) = .49$, $p = .69$; Wilks' Lambda = .97; partial $\eta2 = .029$. These results indicate children's entering levels of state anxiety does not influence the effectiveness of the intervention program on coping responses to bullying vignettes.

However, there was a significant interaction between time and level of trait anxiety found, $F(3, 50) = 3.09$, $p = .035$; Wilks' Lambda = .84; partial $\eta2 = .16$. This suggests there were significant differences on one or more dependent variables among those who obtained lower and higher scores of trait anxiety from pre- to post-

test. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the effect of time by level of trait anxiety interaction was statistically significant for emotional coping response, $F(1, 52) = 8.43$, $p = .005$; partial $\eta_2 = .14$. An inspection of the mean scores indicated children in the experimental group who obtained lower trait anxiety scores at pre-test reported greater improvement in emotional coping responses compared to those who obtained higher trait anxiety scores (see Table 2).

Table 2. Impact of Trait Anxiety on the Effects of the Bullying.
The Power to Cope Program

Coping Response	Time Period	Experimental Group					
		Lower Trait Anxiety ($n = 31$)			High Trait Anxiety ($n = 23$)		
		M	*SD*	95 % CI	*M*	*SD*	95% CI
Cognitive	Pre-Test	28.71	8.84	25.34-32.08	33.87	10.00	29.96-37.78
	Post-Test	23.65	5.70	21.01-26.28	28.74	9.05	25.68-31.80
Behavioural	Pre-Test	28.36	9.25	25.12-31.59	31.74	8.58	27.99-35.49
	Post-Test	27.74	9.28	24.58-30.90	31.39	8.01	27.72-35.06
Emotional	Pre-Test	65.29	26.98	55.74-74.77	69.30	25.59	58.26-80.35
	Post-Test	49.77	25.89	39.83-59.72	69.52	29.74	57.98-81.06

Evaluation of Children's Knowledge and Attitudes Regarding the Program at Post-Test

Data from the KBPCQ was used to investigate whether the experimental group had learnt and retained attitudes and coping skills taught in the Bullying: The Power to Cope program. Forty-five children achieved scores greater than seven on the multiple-choice section of the KBPCQ, indicating 81.8% of the experimental group remembered what they had been taught throughout the program. The KBPCQ also provided qualitative data. Table 3 presents the children's comments in response to question 10 ("How do you feel about your ability to cope with bullying?").

Table 3. Comments from Students on Ability to Cope with Bullying

Child Comment	Gender	Educational Level
I feel like if I was getting bullied now, I'd definitely know how to make myself calm and not worry about it.	Female	Secondary School
I think that my ability to cope with bullying is pretty good and has improved a lot over the past few weeks.	Female	Secondary School
Confident.	Male	Primary School
I think that over these sessions I have learnt how bullying does suck but there are heaps of ways to deal with it and it's definitely not the worst thing in the world.	Female	Secondary School
I feel that now, if I get bullied, I would be prepared and I would know what to do.	Female	Primary School
Although I haven't undergone any bullying yet, I can tell that after this amazing series of workshops, I can cope with bullying more than I thought I could.	Male	Primary School
I feel more confident.	Female	Primary School
I feel like I can actually cope with bullying.	Female	Primary School
I feel like if bullying ever happens I will have better ways to cope.	Female	Primary School

It appears as though the Bullying: The Power to Cope program was a helpful experience for students in the experimental group. 51 out of the 55 children (92%) reported the rational attitudes and coping skills taught in the program to be valuable and useful in their own lives. Additionally, children reported their confidence and abilities to manage situations of bullying had increased throughout the program.

Discussion

The present study investigated the effects of the prevention program, *Bullying: The Power to Cope* (Bernard, 2019), designed to teach students attitudes and coping skills they can employ in response to various types of bullying. Findings revealed a significant overall effect of the program on student's coping responses. When coping responses were considered individually, participating students demonstrated significant improvements in cognitive and emotional coping responses to bullying vignettes compared with those who did not participate. However, there were no significant improvements found for behavioral coping responses post-intervention.

The current results echo those of Markopolous and Bernard (2015), who also found students' cognitive and emotional responses improved after implementing *Bullying: The Power to Cope*, with no significant change in behavioral coping. The consistency of results across the two studies suggests that the program is highly efficacious in improving the way students think about themselves and situations of bullying, which may in turn foster calm emotional reactions. Efficacy may be due to the focus on restructuring students' irrational and negative thought patterns as well as teaching that emotions and behaviors are greatly influenced by thinking as key aspects of the program. These techniques are the foundation of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) and rational emotive education (REE) and are consistently shown to be powerful in reducing irrational beliefs (e.g., Terjesen, et. al., 2020; Trip, Vernon, & McMahon, 2007). The current findings support the value in teaching students cognitive coping skills such as keeping things in perspective (using tools like the "Catastrophe Scale"), using positive rather than negative self-talk, unconditional self-acceptance and that they have a choice how to think when faced with bullying. It is these skills that enable students to effectively shift their mindset and negative thinking patterns, leading them to be less vulnerable and more resilient to potentially harmful effects of bullying.

Despite the cognitive and emotional improvements, the current study did not demonstrate a reduction in dysfunctional behaviors post-intervention. This is possibly explained by the short time-frame in which the program was taught and post-test data collected. Students were taught effective behaviours to better cope and manage situations of bullying if and when they occur, however, there was limited time in which these behaviors could have been practiced and put into action. Successful behavioral change often requires considerable opportunity for practice of behavioral skills coupled with the application of key cognitive changes, which is likely to take some time (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982).

It is also likely that many students participating in the program have not experienced bullying; therefore, they have not therefore had the risk present in their lives needed to enact behavioral change, as cited by Gillham, Shatté, and Reivich

(2001) as important for intervention effects to emerge. Furthermore, cognitive and emotional coping skills were taught over three sessions of the program, whereas behavioural skills, such as verbal communication and body language, finding someone to talk to, and seeking professional help, were taught over only one session. Given that only one session in the program is allocated to behavioral coping versus three sessions allocated to cognitive/emotional coping skills, adding more behavioral coping content to the program may result in behavioral improvements as well.

The findings from the current study support previous research highlighting the success and efficacy of school-based interventions, such as *Steps to Respect, KiVa, Cool Kids Program* and *Friendly Schools* (Berry & Hunt, 2009; Brown, Low, Smith, & Haggerty, 2011; Cross et al., 2011; Frey et al., 2005; Kärnä et al., 2013; Williford et al., 2012). By focusing on teaching adaptive coping skills, promoting assertiveness, confidence, self-efficacy and resilience within students, these programs empower students to respond more effectively.

The second research question examined gender differences in the effectiveness of *Bullying: The Power to Cope*. Results found no differences between males and females on cognitive, behavioral nor emotional coping responses from pre to post-test. This indicates while both boys and girls made significant improvements in cognitive and emotional coping responses as a result of the program, they made these gains similarly to one another.

This is in accord with previous research that found REBT and REE to be comparably effective for boys and girls (e.g., Bistamam et al., 2015). However, this finding is inconsistent with Markopolous and Bernard (2015), who found that girls made greater improvements in cognitive and emotional coping responses from pre- to post-test compared with boys. The authors explained that this finding is a result of females reporting less effective and more irrational cognitive and emotional coping responses compared with males prior to the program, thus greater gains were possible as a result of intervention. Conversely, the present results did not indicate any pre-test differences in cognitive and emotional coping responses between males and females. This is an important finding because it supports the effectiveness of REBT methods for both boys and girls. Additionally, as all participating schools were co-educational, the non-significant difference between boys and girls suggests the content is equally relevant and beneficial for both genders and their potentially different experiences of bullying.

The third research question examined differences in the effectiveness of *Bullying: The Power to Cope* and improvements made between primary school and secondary school students. Results demonstrated no differences across grade groups on students cognitive, behavioral or emotional coping responses from pre- to post-test, which suggests improvements were made regardless of grade level. Results provide support for the use and efficacy of Bullying: The Power to Cope with students from Grades 5 to 7 (ages 10 to 14). Previous research has shown varied results when investigating the influence of age on the effectiveness of bullying

prevention and intervention programs (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012; Yeager et al., 2015). However, a common finding is that program effectiveness decreases with increasing age (Smith et al., 2012). The current program found no age-related differences in effectiveness, indicating the program was able to focus broadly on bullying, while also using examples of bullying experiences and discussing the different types of bullying tailored to the age group of each participating class. Therefore, success of the program within different age groups may be partly attributed to the flexibility of activities, while maintaining important learning points in each session.

Another possible explanation for the similar effectiveness between primary and secondary school students is that REBT has been found to be effective in various age groups across childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Hajzler & Bernard, 1991). However, Gonzalez et al. (2004) reported students in primary school benefited more from REBT programs than did those in secondary school. Therefore, as the population group in the current study focused on students in primary school and early secondary school, perhaps the developmental factors influencing the decrease in effectiveness, such as severity of problems and ingrained opinions and beliefs (Gonzalez et al., 2004; O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2002), were not pronounced enough to influence response to intervention.

The fourth research question examined whether effectiveness of the program and changes in coping responses were influenced by student's state and trait anxiety.

The findings revealed entering levels of state anxiety did not influence the effectiveness of the program. Students with high levels of state anxiety improved comparably on coping responses compared with students with low levels of state anxiety. This result also suggests that students with high levels of state anxiety can benefit from a universal intervention rather than requiring a targeted approach; thus providing support for class delivered social-emotional learning.

In contrast, students entering levels of trait anxiety did significantly influence the efficacy of the program. Students with lower trait anxiety levels made significantly greater improvements on emotional coping responses to bullying vignettes as a result of the program compared with students with higher trait anxiety levels. Previous research has found students with high levels of anxiety express more intense negative emotional responses to perceived threats and adverse experiences compared with less anxious peers (Carthy, Horesh, Apter, Edge, et al., 2010; Carthy, Horesh, Apter, & Gross, 2010; Suveg & Zeman, 2004) and they will thus be more likely to take longer and require more effort to employ new knowledge and skills to change emotional responding. However, results showed students with higher levels of trait anxiety improved similarly to those with lower levels on cognitive coping responses.

Development of appropriate cognitive responses to adversity has been linked to patterns of emotional regulation (Tamir, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2007). Therefore, it may be that children with increased anxiety are able to develop effective

patterns of cognitive response efficiently, but as emotional reactivity is heightened, newly developed cognitive response patterns do not provide necessary emotional relief (Carthy, Horesh, Apter, Edge, et al., 2010).

Furthermore, findings suggest temperamentally highly anxious young people may benefit less from brief cognitive-behaviour intervention than those less temperamentally anxious. If so, children with higher levels of trait anxiety may need additional intervention sessions to ensure the effective coping responses become automatic and influential on emotional responses.

Qualitative investigations revealed that participating in the *Bullying: The Power to Cope* program was a positive experience and empowered students to feel more confident and prepared in their ability to cope with bullying. Comments also suggest the program is enjoyable and fun.

Students were provided with opportunities to engage in group and whole class discussions, as well as independent work, a combination which has been reported to lead to feelings of increased engagement in the classroom (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2014). This is important to note because as a program that is enjoyable for students is likely to be more effective, due to students being more engaged in learning.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

The current study implemented the program in classroom and the significant results illustrate the ease of classroom use. The inclusion of a control group to demonstrate group differences was a strength of the current study as a common methodological flaw in intervention research is the lack of a control condition (Card & Hodges, 2008). However, there are limitations to be considered.

Participating students in Grade 5, 6 and 7 (ages 10 to 14) were recruited, so the present results cannot be generalised to year levels outside this range. Therefore, future research should attempt to demonstrate the positive results in other age groups, such as Grade 3 and 4 or Year 8 and 9. The study assessed students' coping responses at pre-test and immediate post-test. It is unknown whether improvements in cognitive and emotional coping responses could be sustained long-term. Additionally, the immediate post-test data collection may have limited the behavioral changes due to lack of opportunity to action the skills learnt throughout the program. Hence, future research would benefit from conducting a long-term follow up to determine long-term efficacy and sustainability of results.

Student self-report measures were used in this study to measure coping responses and and anxiety. Self-report measures can be subject to bias due to students responding in a socially desirable way, particularly when reporting on a behavior potentially seen as negative or socially unacceptable (Rigby, 1987). Furthermore, the use of vignettes as a means for judging student response to bullying may limit the validity of these results. It may be beneficial for future research to

incorporate behavioral observations and reports from parents and teachers to validate changes made as a result of the program.

The control and experimental groups were not truly randomly assigned. Due to implementation occurring in intact class groups within school timetabling, random allocation of students in schools was impractical. Nonetheless, future iterations could improve methodology by true randomisation. It is recognised that the statistical significance of results may have been influenced by the lack of independence in the data (i.e. students nested in schools/classrooms, O'Dwyer & Parker, 2014). Future research is needed to establish long-term effects of the *Bullying. The Power to Cope* program and its generalizability to other age groups.

Conclusion

A major takeaway of this and the previous study it replicated is that one element of a comprehensive school-wide anti-bullying prevention program is equipping all students with the mindset (attitudes and coping skills) they can employ when faced with victimization to emotionally regulate and respond effectively. REBT provides a theoretical framework that offers insight and practices (e.g., cognitive re-structuring, self-acceptance, anti-awfulising, high frustration tolerance, other acceptance) into how to go about empowering the victims of bullying. Recent empirical evidence has provided a newer perspective on the issue of bullying prevention, whereby schools have the opportunity to address bullying and its consequences by building the social-emotional capabilities of all students (Divecha & Brackett, 2020) leading to a reduction in anti-social and aggressive behaviour on the one hand and improved emotional coping and resilience on the other.

Authors' note

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