Reducing the Incidence of Bullying in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The present study discusses the issues of bullying prevention in secondary schools with the objective of finding out about the efficiency of the experiential learning method in this context. Within a more extensive research study under realisation, the method of pedagogical experiment was applied to a sample of 100 vocational school students, and its partial results are presented. A set of experiential activities was prepared for teachers and used by them in the experimental group (50 students) within a 10-month bullying prevention program. In the control group (50 students), traditional methods of bullying prevention were used. To examine the effect of the intervention, the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire was administered to the participating students before and after the intervention (pre-test and post-test). The obtained research results suggest that the implementation of experiential learning activities contributed to a more positive school climate and favourable conditions for the realisation of bullying prevention in the participating school. Although given the limits of the research study, the present findings cannot be generalised to the entire population of vocational school students, the study brings unique data that fill the gap in current knowledge and create a basis for further research activities.

1- Introduction

Bullying is a global problem that can have a negative impact on the development, achievement [1], and mental and physical health of individual students, as well as groups. It can be characterised as a manifestation of negative behaviour to which an individual is repeatedly exposed, typically for a longer period of time [2]. There are two basic characteristics that distinguish bullying from other types of aggressive behaviour—it is systematic and characterised by an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim [3]. When assessing the reality of what is and what is not bullying, it is necessary to always keep in mind how the observed manifestations can affect the person in question, i.e., the person to whom they are intended, but also the observers of this activity since, as pointed out by Brugman, van der Meulen, and Gibbs [4], bullying does not exclusively concern two participants—the victim and the bully. It is rather a group phenomenon, as there are also other persons involved in this negative behaviour—bully-victims, bystanders, victim defenders, and bully-allies who are observers of bullying or at least know about its occurrence [5].

It is not a matter of questioning whether bullying negatively influences participants' mental or physical functioning. There is empirical evidence that in victims, a wide scale of problems can be observed, for example, mental health issues [6], suicidal tendencies [7], poor academic performance [8], etc., but there is also a body of research that confirms the negative impact of bullying on other participants, including the bully [9], e.g., depression symptoms [10], anxiety [11],

poor performance [12], delinquency [13], or suicidal tendencies [14]. Furthermore, numerous international research studies have been focused on the long-term psychological effects on adolescents, and they have shown that all group members involved in bullying during adolescence, either as aggressors or victims, had adverse mental health consequences in adulthood. While victims showed high levels of depressive symptoms in adulthood, both groups had an increased risk of psychiatric hospitalisation due to mental health disorders [15]. Therefore, it is important to introduce measures to eliminate bullying in school environments and to introduce tailored prevention programs.

1-1- Bullying in Schools

Another factor that plays an important role when it comes to bullying between peers in schools is the quality of the school environment in which bullying occurs and the extent to which it is tolerated. In the case of problem relationships and interactions in schools, violence escalates, leading to fear and insecurity in relationships [16], and, subsequently, to conflicts that are frequently manifested in the form of bullying [17]. There is research evidence that inclusive educational environments increase empathy in the members of the school community [18], promote the acceptance of diversity, and improve the quality of social relationships [19]. Based on the above, it can be assumed that the quality of the school climate is associated with the occurrence of bullying [20-22], and a positive school climate helps prevent bullying [23-25] as it provides factors that protect students against the impact of adverse experiences [26, 27]. On the other hand, if unhealthy relationships prevail in the environment of schools or peer groups within schools, the emergence of bullying is more than likely. In this process, the personality and work of teachers, but also teacher-student relationships, play an important role [2, 28, 29]. Especially the work of class teachers (a specific position in schools in the Slovak Republic) who are familiar with the character of relationships in their class and can identify specific threatening situations is significant.

Bullying in schools is often perceived as a lack of safety in interpersonal relationships. The findings by Coyle et al. [30] support the idea that positive relationships and social support make schools safer [31] since they function as protective factors for young people experiencing victimisation.

1-2- Bullying in Vocational Schools

The context in which vocational schools operate is different from that of other types of schools. The dynamics of bullying are greatly influenced by students' academic performance, socioeconomic status, and cultural backgrounds. So, vocational school students can be considered a heterogeneous group, which can cause labelling or stereotyping that promotes various types of bullying behaviour (physical, verbal, relational, skill-based, or cyberbullying). Another distinguishing feature of vocational education and training is its close link with the labour market [32]. As Huang et al. [33] point out, the competitive character of the labour market impacts the climate of vocational schools and can be reflected in a higher incidence of bullying than in other types of schools. Also, Penghui & Mengfan's [34] findings show weaker anti-bullying attitudes in vocational school students than in their peers.

1-3- Teachers' Role in Bullying Prevention

Teachers are an important factor in bullying prevention, as they have a double role of educators and role models that can foster inclusion and promote peer support. Furthermore, they are usually the first person the students can contact when facing adversity. Teachers have the power to shape students' behaviour since they are the determinants of the school and classroom climate quality because a positive school climate contributes to bullying prevention [23, 35-37]. Teachers should actively engage in bullying prevention activities and be directly involved in bullying elimination. During the teaching process, they should recognise any signs of bullying and intervene immediately in its early stages. Still, as research findings show, there is a big share of teachers who are not able to identify bullying [32], can recognise only several of its forms (e.g., physical bullying) [38], or completely overlook it [39]. There are also differences in how teachers respond to bullying [40]. Teachers can also take over the role of conflict mediators and help resolve problems among students, but also, in this context, the quality of teacher-student relationships is important [41, 42]. Implementing efficient measures—including effective prevention programs that eliminate bullying or at least decrease its incidence in the classroom—is a challenge for educational systems.

Teachers' efficiency in bullying prevention is influenced by their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs [43]. Therefore, more attention should be given to increasing teachers' sensitivity in teacher education [32, 44] since they need to develop a scale of appropriate and efficient intervention strategies.

1-4- Bullying Research

The current situation in the field of problem or risky behaviour among young people in schools has been mapped by objective research [45-48], which confirms the seriousness of this issue and the existence of a link between problems in interactions between students and bullying in schools [49, 50]. On the other hand, the available research results vary in whether there are certain factors predicting or increasing the probability of engagement in bullying, such as social status,

family background, school achievement, gender, etc. This inconsistency in the findings suggests that anyone can become a victim of bullying, but also, the personality traits or the backgrounds of the aggressors are diverse. Therefore, schools should pay increased attention to detecting any signs of bullying, as well as to bullying prevention.

The results of several extensive international research studies on preventing or eliminating bullying from a broad spectrum of aspects are available. For example, Caldarella et al. [51] conducted a study focusing on the impact of positive behaviour on school climate and student outcomes. The study involved 300 high school teachers and 10,000 students from the western United States. The study confirmed the impact of a positive school climate on manifestations of risky behaviour, on the reduced incidence of indiscipline, substance abuse, aggression, antisocial behaviour, truancy, and school violence, which is in line with Klein et al. [52], who found associations between a positive school climate and a decreased frequency of risky behaviour in students, so consider the positive climate of the school environment a protective factor in the prevention of risky student behaviour. The study was conducted on a sample of 687 high school students who completed the School Climate Bullying Survey and the Youth Risk Behaviour Questionnaire (YRBS).

Bullying has also been the centre of attention in a range of studies in Slovakia. For example, Kariková & Šimegová [53] focused on the occurrence of bullying in secondary schools and pointed out that it is not possible to perceive bullying only as a manifestation of problem behaviour from its psychological point of view, but also its legal dimension and its overall impact on our society should be considered. Sarková [54] dealt with bullying and its forms among students, examining their experiences with bullying from the positions of victims and aggressors. The results of her research showed that 6-16% of students were victims of bullying, while younger children, especially boys, became victims of bullying more often. 8-17% of students, more boys than girls (almost twice as many among 11-year-old children), admitted bullying their classmates. More than two-thirds of the participating students witnessed bullying, which is alarming. In their research, Marošiová & Savinová [55] analysed phone recordings to find out about bullying and violence among children and adolescents. The research showed that 63% of the cases of bullying were related to the school and 57% to relationships between classmates. The available research findings showed that every second student turned to a teacher, another competent official at school, or a parent. In only 17% of all reported cases, the bullied students explicitly stated that no one helped them, and 10% admitted that they had no one they could ask for help. In Blahová's [56] research study, school social pedagogues and prevention coordinators confirmed the occurrence of aggressive behaviour and bullying, as well as other manifestations of problem behaviour, such as the use of legal and illegal drugs, truancy, inadequate use of the Internet including cyberbullying, etc.

1-5- Purpose of the Study

Monitoring bullying and other manifestations of aggressive behaviour in the school environment has been carried out for several decades, and there is a body of research on a broad scale of issues associated with them. Experience shows that there is no specific age group for which bullying is characteristic, but being in a very sensitive period of development, the occurrence of bullying among adolescents is a frequent subject of interest to the professional and lay public, and the present research study also focuses on it.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the accumulation of fear in society, social isolation, and increased use of social networks influenced young people greatly. Consequently, the character of their interactions and behaviour changed. When comparing the frequency of the occurrence of bullying in Slovak vocational schools in 2016 and 2020, an increasing trend can be observed. This represents a challenge for teachers, who must deal with new manifestations of student behaviour, including new forms and intensity of aggression. In addition, if vocational schools are the focus of attention, teachers in them face some additional problems if compared with, for example, secondary grammar school teachers, as—caused by a significant decrease in youth's interest in vocational education and training in Slovakia—vocational schools are not in a position to select their students. Therefore, they often have to recruit students with poor performance, and behaviour problems also occur in these schools more frequently [57]. In this context, it is not surprising that the work of vocational school teachers is considered more demanding [58].

Teachers significantly impact the quality of the classroom climate, and by introducing effective prevention activities, they can promote positive relationships in the classroom [2, 28, 29]. For them, it is very important to be able to analyse the situation, perform diagnostics, and, based on available information, appropriately react in a particular situation. However, it is not possible to introduce effective measures without being familiar with current trends. Therefore, teachers need up-to-date information, and the ambition of the present research study is to fill the gap in this field with data from the Slovak educational environment that can be used by educational practitioners, bring implications for further research, and can also serve as a useful source of information for universities providing teacher training programs. So, in the present research study, the impact of an intervention based on experiential activities within a prevention program on the occurrence of bullying in vocational schools was analysed.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) [59], inspired by Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, provides a theoretical framework for the study. According to Kolb, knowledge is created through transforming experience, which means that learning is a holistic adaptive process that combines experiences, perception, and cognition. The Experiential Learning

Theory brings an efficient alternative to traditional approaches to teaching and is based on a four-stage learning cycle: 1. Concrete experience—activating methods of learning, hands-on and emotionally engaging activities are used; 2. Reflective observation—students reflect on what they were doing and what they learnt; 3. Abstract conceptualisation—students understand the principles; and 4. Active experimentation—students are ready to use their knowledge and skills both inside and outside the school environment in real-life situations. Compared with cognitive and behavioural theories, it must be pointed out that cognitive theories emphasise the role of cognitive processes, while behavioural theories ignore the role of experiences in learning. The Experiential Learning Theory promotes deep learning and behavioural changes through active engagement, reflection, and application, which makes it appropriate for changing social behaviour, i.e., it is suitable for bullying prevention.

The purpose of the study is not to propose a particular intervention program but to learn more about the efficiency of the experiential learning method in the context of bullying prevention. The students in the experimental group participated in experiential learning activities during sessions with their class teacher for ten months (one school year). The experiential learning method was used to promote students' active participation in knowledge acquisition and using sensory experiences to enhance learning [60]. In the present study, the partial results of an extensive research study under realisation focusing on various aspects of bullying and bullying prevention are presented.

2- Methods

The main research objective was to collect up-to-date information on the current situation in vocational schools concerning bullying and bullying prevention and to measure the efficiency of prevention activities based on experiential learning. To examine the changes in the experimental and control groups, a pre-test and a post-test were administered to the participating students. Within the experiment, the experiential learning method was used in the experimental group. In contrast, in the control group, traditional prevention methods were applied, which can be characterised as formal and structured approaches aiming at increasing students' awareness in the field of bullying and its consequences. These include oral presentations on the issues of bullying, using posters, videos, and information pamphlets; providing counselling services to students; using activities in the classroom, such as discussions; and implementing the topic of bullying into the content of various school subjects, etc. The duration of the experiment was ten months. In accordance with the research objective, the following research question was formulated: Does the application of experiential learning methods increase the efficiency of bullying prevention programs? In the presented part of the research study, the following hypothesis was tested: "There exist some statistically significant differences in the evaluation of the applied experiential prevention program between the experimental and the control groups."

For data processing and analysis, SPSS Statistics 22.0 was used, and descriptive statistics, as well as inductive and explorative statistical analysis—particularly the nonparametric Wilcoxon signed rank test/Mann-Whitney U test—were used.

2-1- Research Tool

To collect relevant data, the standardised Olweus Bullying Questionnaire [61] was used. The questionnaire was translated and adapted to the conditions of the Slovak Republic by Lehenová. It contains 39 Likert-scale items. In the original questionnaire, the items are not scored but are evaluated based on the frequency of responses, but in the present research study, a different approach was applied. In the administered questionnaire, some additional Likert-scale items were used to find out about students' subjective evaluation of the quality of school climate and their teachers' efforts in the field of bullying prevention.

The questionnaire was used to find out about the subjective evaluation of the quality of the school environment during the last three months, with the occurrence of bullying at the centre of attention. In the present study, only the data most relevant to the topic are presented.

2-2- Research Sample

The research sample consisted of a total of 100 respondents—students in 10th and 11th grades from vocational schools in the Prešov Self-Governing Region in Slovakia. In the research study, purposive sampling was applied, and when selecting schools, school leaders' and teachers' willingness to participate in the research study was decisive. Considering the standards for pedagogical experiments, the sample size is satisfactory (see Table 1).

The participating students were from four classes; in two of them, the experiential prevention program was applied, and in two classes, traditional methods of bullying prevention were used.

Table 1. Composition of the Research Sample

	Experimental group	Control group	Total
Female Students	30	32	62
Male Students	20	18	38
Total	**50**	**50**	**100**
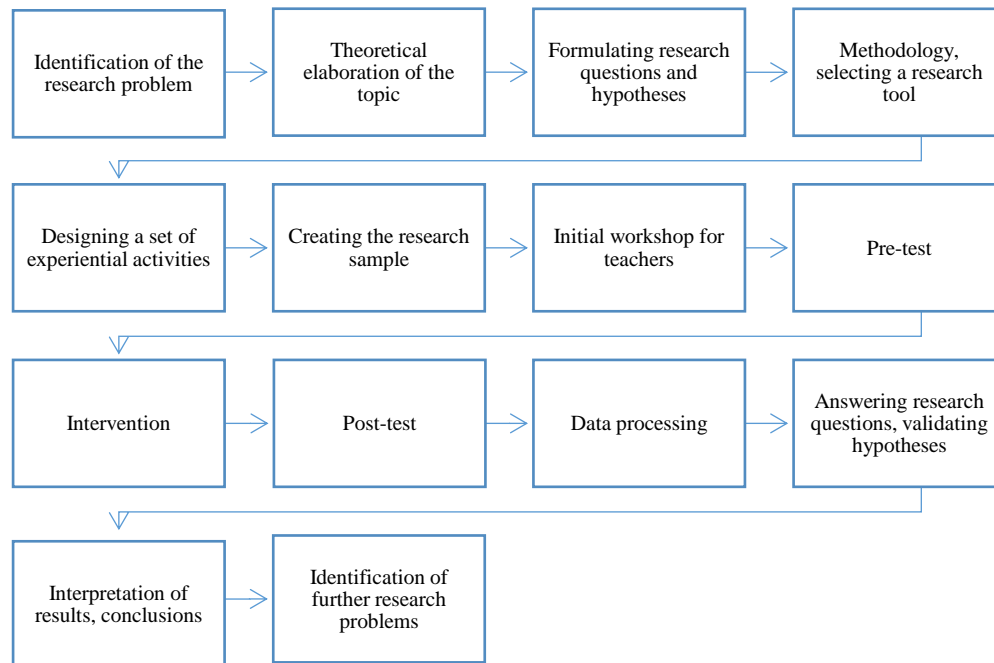
Figure 1. Research methodology

3- Results and Discussion

Since no statistically significant differences were found between the experimental group and the control group in the pre-test, the conditions for examining the effect of the intervention applied in the experimental group were optimal. It is important to point out that the participating students—regardless of the group to which they belonged—reported an occasional occurrence of especially psychological bullying in the classroom, as well as cyberbullying. According to them, although their class teachers attempted to eliminate bullying and other forms of negative behaviour in the classroom, the students were not completely satisfied with their work.

The students' responses provided us with a deeper understanding of the situation in their classrooms and their social climate and revealed some differences following the intervention. In the present study, we present the most interesting findings associated with students' experiences as expressed in the questionnaire items related to the formulated hypothesis.

### 3-1- Perception of School Climate and Social Relationships

1. Do you like your school?

As emphasised in the theoretical part of the present research study, the quality of school, school life, and school climate are subjectively perceived characteristics, but it can also be assumed that they have a significant impact on students, their experiences, performance, interactions, and well-being, as well as the occurrence of bullying [20-22]. According to Low & Van Ryzin [62], creating a positive school climate is a basic prerequisite to reduce bullying. The existence of relationships between these phenomena was also confirmed by the findings of Caldarella et al. [51] or Klein et al. [52]. Not only the quality of the physical school environment, the content and quality of teaching, or the characteristics of the teaching staff typical for a school are decisive, but especially peers can either positively or negatively influence the quality of a particular student's life within the educational institution. School connectedness and the feeling of belonging help buffer the negative effects of emotional distress in the school [63] and reduce discrimination and exclusion [64].

In Table 2 and in Figures 2 and 3, the preferences of the experimental group and the control group are compared for the item "Do you like your school?"". In the graph, a higher mean (AMEG = 3.98 > AMCG = 2.86) and standard deviation (SDEG = 1.08 > SDCG = 0.95) can be observed in the case of the experimental group, based on which it can be assumed that the students in the experimental group perceive their schools as more positive and safer environments compared with the students in the control group.

Table 2. Do you like your school?

	Experimental group	Control group
Sample size (n)	50.00	50.00
Average	3.98	2.86
Median	4.00	3.00
Minimum	1.00	1.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00
Standard deviation	1.08	0.95
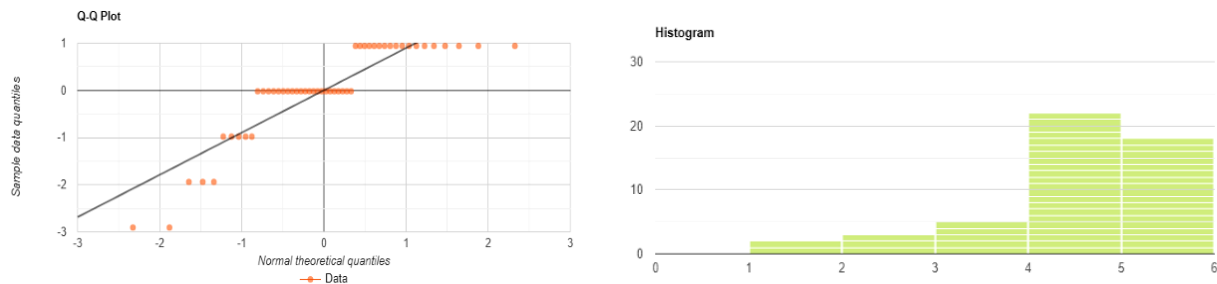
Figure 2. "Do you like your school?" – Experimental group
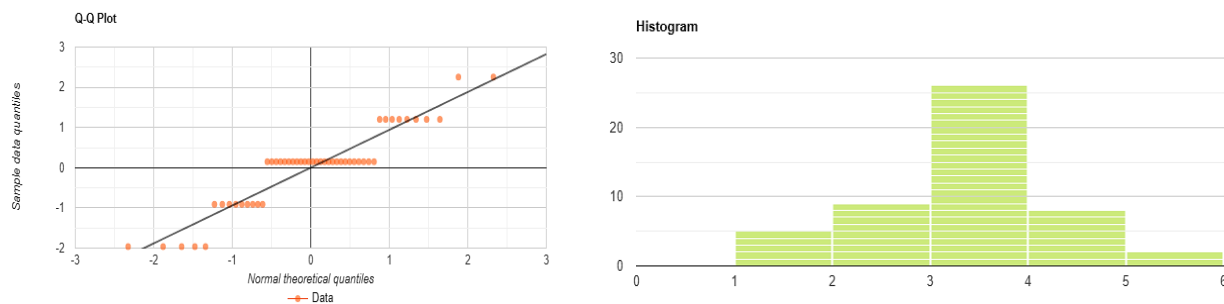
Figure 3. "Do you like your school?" – Control group

2. How many good friends do you have in your class?

The quality of interactions in the classroom is affected by the character of the existing social relationships between students and between teachers and students [28, 29, 65]—good relationships lead to positive interactions and are an important factor in the context of bullying prevention [19]. Forsberg et al. [66] focused on teacher-student relationships and victimisation and, based on their research findings, emphasised the importance of shaping these relationships as part of prevention efforts in schools. In addition, ten of Bokkel et al.'s [41] findings show that a higher quality of teacher-student relationships is associated with a less frequent occurrence of bullying in schools, suggesting that positive teacher-student relationships contribute to developing friendly connections between students as well. Bäker et al. [67] highlighted the importance of team-building activities in the context of strengthening peer and teacher-student relationships. Within such activities, the method of experiential learning can be well applied.

Peer relationships have an important role to play in adolescence since they are associated with phenomena such as inclusion, acceptance, belonging, support, help, intimacy, affection, etc. [68]. Friendly connections between schoolmates help fulfil the need for belonging and are also important in terms of their mental and physical health [69]. According to Van Harmelen et al. [70], the quality of friendships in adolescents predicts psychological resilience as well as mental well-being, personality traits, and the occurrence of psychiatric symptoms in the future. Having at least one friend in the classroom is an important protective factor for adolescents [71], and it can be assumed that if positive relationships and interactions prevail in the classroom, students are more willing to collaborate; they are more likely to help and support each other, as well as solve problems and handle conflicts together. So, presuming the existence of an association between the number of students' friendly connections in the classroom and the occurrence of bullying in the case of the item "How many good friends do you have in your class?", the responses of the students in the experimental group and the students in the control group were compared. A higher number of such connections was expected in the experimental group as one of the possible positive effects of the experimental intervention.

As shown in Table 3 and in Figures 4 and 5, in this item, no statistically significant differences were found in the number of friendly connections, although the mean in the case of the experimental group was slightly higher than in the control group (AMEG= 4.04 > AMCG=3.94; SDEG=0.92 < SDCG= 1.02), which could suggest that the students in the control group have more friends in the class, but a high degree of caution is required with this assumption. One of the possible explanations for similar results in both examined groups is that not the quantity but the quality of relationships is important, which is in line with Chen et al. [71]. The number of friendly connections per person in the experimental group ranges from 4 to 5.

Table 3. How many good friends do you have in your class?

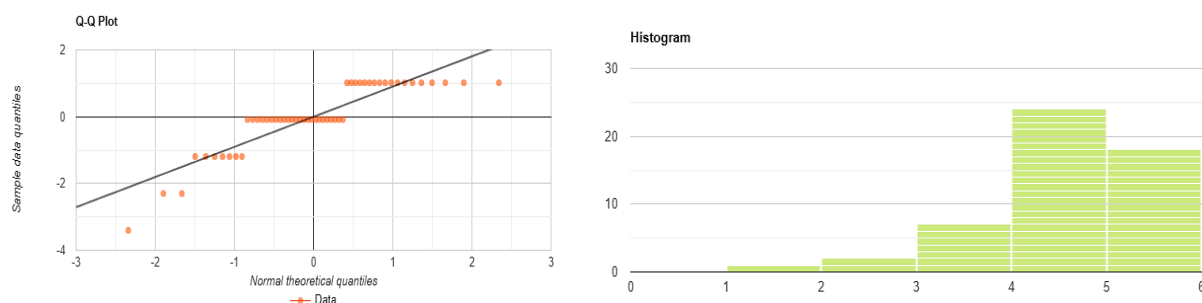|	Experimental group	Control group
Sample size (n)	50.00	50.00
Average	4.04	3.94
Median	4.00	2.95
Minimum	1.00	1.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00
Standard deviation	0.92	1.02

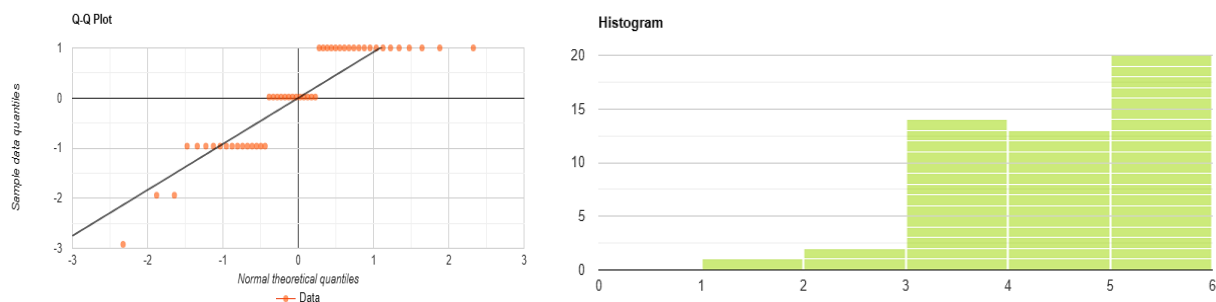**Figure 4.** "How many good friends do you have in your class?" – Experimental group

Figure 5. "How many good friends do you have in your class?" – Control group

From this finding, the question of whether teachers can influence the development of friendly connections in the classroom or if it is only the general social climate that they can impact arises.

3-2- Experiences with Bullying

1. How many times have you been bullied in the last three months?

The next question follows on from Aldridge, Blackstock, and McLure's [31] findings, according to which peer connectedness, reporting and seeking help, support for learning, and school connectedness are negatively associated with the occurrence of bullying, but also the findings by Cohen & Freiberg [36], Low & Van Ryzin [62], or Wang et al. [37], who pointed out the importance of school social climate from the perspective of bullying prevention.

In Table 4 and in Figures 6 and 7, the calculated scores for the item "How many times have you been bullied in the last three months?" are displayed. In the experimental group, a less frequent occurrence of bullying was presumed. This presumption was also supported by the finding presented above, according to which students in the experimental group perceived their schools as more positive and safer environments compared with the students in the control group. The obtained results show that, similarly to the previous item, a higher mean (AMEG=4.94 > AMCG=4.58) was calculated for the experimental group compared with the control group, but in the case of standard deviation (SDEG=0.24 > SDCG=0.75), a higher value was computed with the control group.

Table 4. How many times have you been bullied in the last three months?

	Experimental group	Control group
Sample size (n)	50.00	50.00
Average	4.94	4.58
Median	4.00	3.95
Minimum	1.00	1.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00
Standard deviation	0.24	0.75
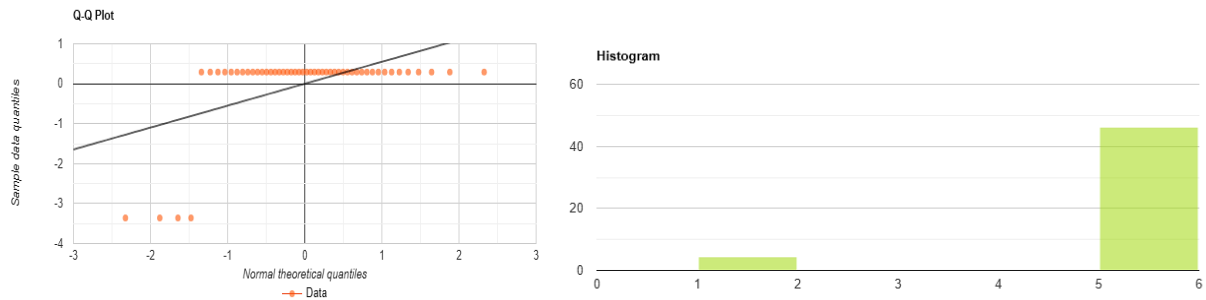
Figure 6. "How many times have you been bullied in the last three months?" – Experimental group
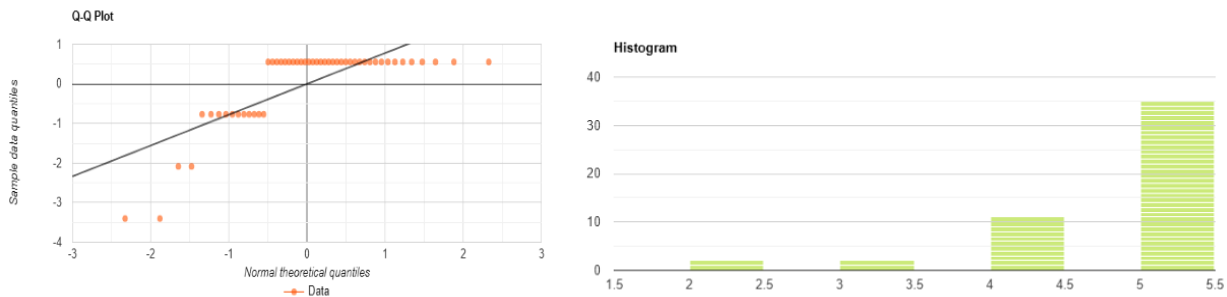
Figure 7. "How many times have you been bullied in the last three months?" – Control group

The obtained data suggest that bullying is a less frequent phenomenon in the experimental group compared with the control group. Following the 10-month intervention, in the classes included in the experimental group, a lower incidence of bullying was detected, which is in line with what Chan et al. [72] claim, i.e., experiential learning should change students' thinking and behaviour under the impact of newly gained experience. This finding is consistent with Gilbert & Raffo's [73] or Battey & Ebbeck's [74] experience with implementing experiential prevention programs. However, not even in the control group is the situation serious in the examined field. It can be a result of the general school climate and the schools' work in the field of bullying prevention, but it is also not possible to ensure that there is no contact between classes, and thus respondents influence each other by passing on experiences to each other.
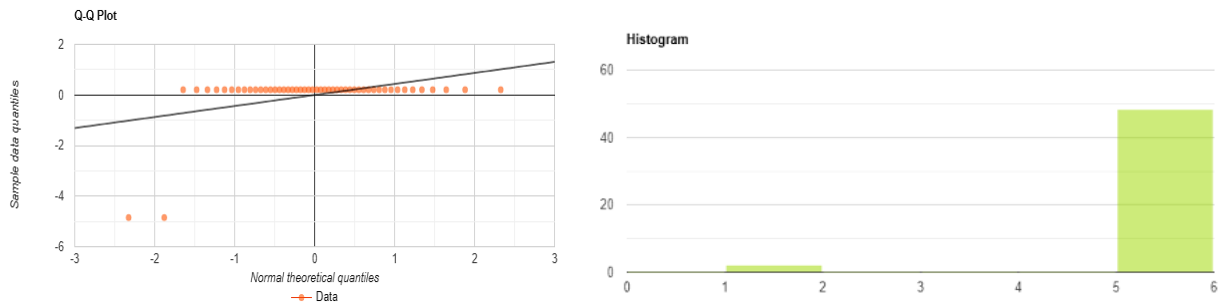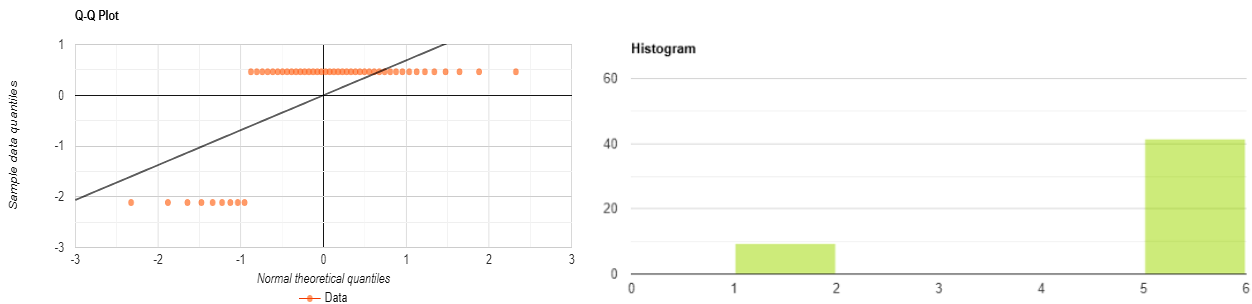
2. Have you been called mean names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way recently?

Verbal bullying is a serious issue in schools that is often left unnoticed but may cause damage to students' development. Kapitanoff & Pandey [75] detected taunts, calling names, and personal insults as frequently occurring phenomena in the classroom, and there is also a body of research indicating that verbal bullying is the most frequent form of bullying [76-78]. Poling et al. [79] found out that the tendency to bully peers verbally increases in adolescence. Wang et al. [76] also noted that while the incidence of physical bullying decreases in adolescence, no such tendency can be observed in the case of verbal bullying. Therefore, one of the questions was targeted on students' direct experiences with verbal bullying.

In Table 5 and in Figures 8 and 9, the results for Item 2, "Have you been called mean names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way recently?" are displayed. In the experimental group, the calculated mean was moderately higher than in the control group (AMEG=4.96 > AMCG=4.82), and the value for standard deviation was higher in the control group (SDEG=0.20 > SDCG=0.39).

Table 5. Have you been called mean names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way recently?

	Experimental group	Control group
Sample size (n)	50.00	50.00
Average	4.96	4.82
Median	4.90	4.55
Minimum	1.00	1.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00
Standard deviation	0.20	0.39

Figure 8. "Have you been called mean names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way recently?" – Experimental group

Figure 9. "Have you been called mean names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way recently?" – Control group

Based on the obtained results, it can be assumed that attacking peers verbally is neither common nor accepted, and individual cases of such manifestations are rather individual events than a long-term phenomenon in the research sample. It can be considered a positive but also surprising finding since verbal abuse and conflicts associated with the current political situation in Slovakia, which are often presented in the media, have become a common way of communication even in the case of the representatives of the country.
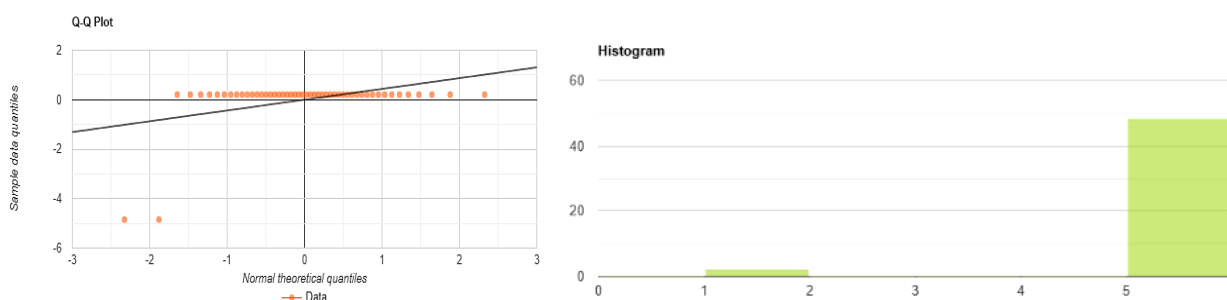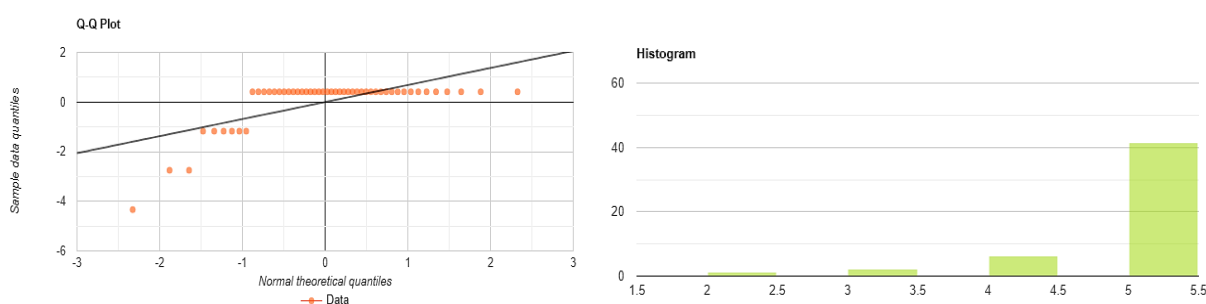
3. Have the students left you out of things on purpose, excluded from their group of friends, or completely ignored you recently?

Excluding individuals from peer groups and not allowing them to participate in group activities can have serious consequences and can also influence their lives both inside and outside the school environment, but, as Lynn Mulwey et al. [80] pointed out, the causes of such exclusion must be carefully considered. There is a broad scale of causes leading to not allowing an individual to participate in certain activities; e.g., the individual may not meet the objective criteria of the group, and so, not every case of exclusion is bullying, even though it may be perceived by the student as injustice. As available research shows, exclusion causes lack of self-confidence, loneliness, feelings of uselessness, etc., and it can lead to mental health problems and behaviour issues [81]. As confirmed by the findings of Zhao et al. [82], the presence of pathological peer groups in schools or classrooms is among serious issues. In their research study, statistically significant associations between peer relationships and pro-bullying behaviour (including exclusion) were found.

The results for the item "Have the students left you out of things on purpose, excluded from their group of friends, or completely ignored you recently?" are shown in Table 6 and in Figures 10 and 11.

Table 6. Have the students left you out of things on purpose, excluded from their group of friends, or completely ignored you recently?

	Experimental group	Control group
Sample size (n)	50.00	50.00
Average	4.96	4.70
Median	4.95	4.85
Minimum	1.00	1.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00
Standard deviation	0.20	0.65

Figure 10. "Have the students left you out of things on purpose, excluded from their group of friends, or completely ignored you recently?" – Experimental group

Figure 11. "Have the students left you out of things on purpose, excluded from their group of friends, or completely ignored you recently?" – Control group

The calculated mean was higher in the experimental group (AMEG= 4.96 > AMCG=4.70), and the value of the standard deviation was higher in the control group (SDEG=0.20 > SDCG=0.65). The computed means indicate that the occurrence of ostracism as a type of bullying is less frequent in the experimental group than in the control group, and it could be considered proof of the efficiency of the applied experiential prevention program. The prevention program also included experiential activities aimed at developing collective spirit and sense of belonging and promoting mutual support in the group, which probably caused more positive outcomes in the experimental group. This is in line with Nwokolo & Okocha's [83] findings, according to which social skill training reduces the occurrence of bullying in schools, and also Trigueros et al. [68] claim that social skills are often an indication of behaviour associated with bullying. Social skill training is important from the aspect of being able to defend one's own dignity and freedom [84] as well, and because, especially during adolescence, the way individuals are treated, their popularity, and acceptance by their peers are important.

3-3- Teacher Engagement in Bullying Prevention

Do you think your class teacher does enough to eliminate bullying in the classroom?

Teachers are among the determinants of the quality of school climate and so play a crucial role in preventing bullying [85-87]. The extent to which teachers are actively involved in bullying prevention in schools has not been adequately investigated [88], but as Latino et al. [89] emphasised, teachers do not need to take over the role of psychologist; they should be the mediators between them and students, i.e., those who are able to recognise bullying, intervene immediately, and, if it is necessary, contact other professionals.

There is a lack of research studies on the efficiency of particular forms of teacher intervention [90], but Burger et al.'s [91] findings provide evidence showing that the form of intervention selected by the teacher can affect the role a student adopts in the peer group. For example, using group discussions increases the likelihood of becoming a defender.

Table 7 and Figures 12 and 13 display the results for the item "Do you think your class teacher does enough to eliminate bullying in the classroom?". Again, while higher scores were achieved in the experimental group (AMEG=3.08 > AMCG=2.36), the standard deviation was higher in the control group (SDEG=1.18 > SDCG=1.37).

Table 7. Do you think your class teacher does enough to eliminate bullying in the classroom?

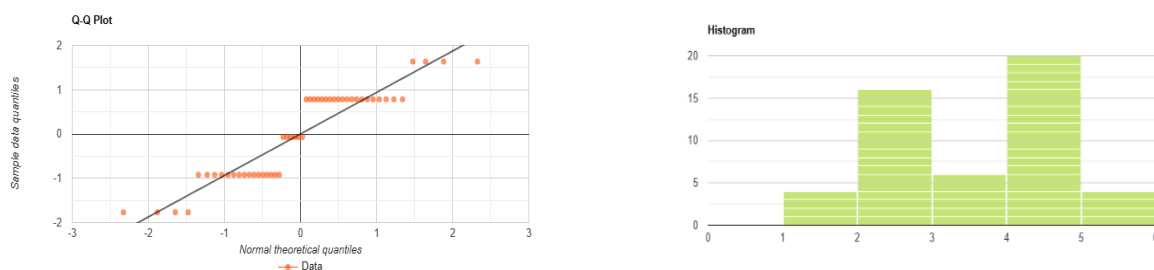|	Experimental group	Control group
Sample size (n)	50.00	50.00
Average	3.08	2.36
Median	3.10	2.20
Minimum	1.00	1.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00
Standard deviation	1.18	1.37

Figure 12. "Do you think your class teacher does enough to eliminate bullying in the classroom?" – Experimental group
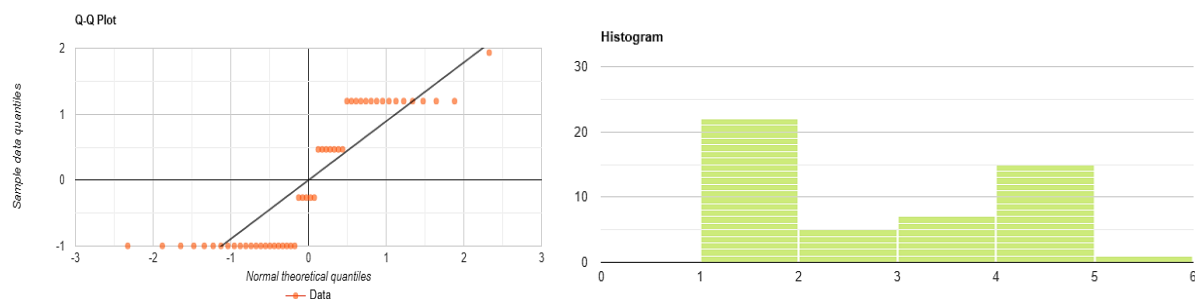

Figure 13. "Do you think your class teacher does enough to eliminate bullying in the classroom?" – Control group

The relatively low values of the arithmetic mean in both the experimental and control groups are surprising. Considering the fact that the class teachers in the experimental group applied experiential activities as part of bullying prevention, higher scores were expected. The obtained results indicate that—from the participating students' perspective—their teachers could do more in the field. On the other hand, the arithmetic mean for the experimental group is higher than for the control group, which underscores the importance of the application of experiential learning activities as part of bullying prevention programs. The obtained results could also suggest that the participating teachers were able to implement prevention activities as a natural part of the educational process in a way that was not even noticed by the students. This would be proof of highly developed skills and competencies in teachers, but to confirm such a presumption, further investigation is needed.

In compliance with the results of the presented part of the research study, it can be assumed that the social climate appears to be more favourable in the experimental group compared with the control group, which can be partially explained by the fact that the experimental group reported a less frequent incidence of bullying, and thus, these students perceive their schools as a more secure environment, but from a different perspective, a positive social climate contributes to reducing bullying, which is in line with the research results presented by, e.g., Low & Van Ryzin [62], Caldarella et al. [51], and Klein et al. [52]. This finding suggests that the applied experiential prevention program—to a certain extent—contributed to building positive relationships, which is the basis for reducing or even eliminating bullying in the classroom [19]. Based on the obtained results, the hypothesis presuming the existence of statistically

significant differences in the evaluation of the applied experiential prevention program between the experimental and control groups can be considered verified, and the effectiveness of the designed experiential prevention program was proven. Even though this finding is positive, we cannot be too enthusiastic about it, as students equally in the experimental and control groups reported that they had some recent experience with bullying, exclusion, or verbal attacks. Although participating in experiential prevention activities with their class teachers, the students in the experimental group were not completely satisfied with the actions of their teachers in the field of bullying prevention or elimination, which means that their skills need to be improved.

3-4- Implications for Practice

The present findings suggest that there is a gap in undergraduate teacher training, and therefore, in-service training opportunities should be available and accessible to practicing teachers. Still, undergraduate teacher training programs should be adapted to the educational reality. In this context, alongside training in the field of bullying prevention, in-service teacher training programs targeted on developing teachers' communication competencies are needed, as teachers should improve their skills in communicating with a class as a whole, as well as with individual students. Bufalino's [92] findings underscore the importance of experiential teacher training that can prepare them to build a positive classroom climate and prevent bullying. Furthermore, several measures should be implemented in schools, e.g., each school should have its tailored anti-bullying program considering its specifics, and all spaces in the school, including practical training areas, playgrounds, etc., should be supervised. Teachers should pay more attention to creating a safe environment and building positive relationships in the classroom. This can also be achieved by encouraging active participation in each student and fostering collaboration by promoting teamwork and mutual respect. All these recommendations are consistent with the principles of experiential learning and can be implemented into its activities, integrating knowledge from various subjects. There is a broad scale of methods of experiential learning that can be used in bullying prevention.

4- Conclusion

Bullying is a group phenomenon that is very difficult to eliminate in schools. Still, well-trained teachers can do a lot in this field through their systematic work and shaping students' thinking, behaviour, and interactions. The findings of the present research study confirm the presumption that the application of the experiential learning method may be an efficient alternative to traditional bullying prevention methods. It showed to be effective in improving the quality of the school climate in the experimental group as these students evaluated their schools more positively, which means that their school is a safe place for them. Other research findings also support this. The students in the experimental group reported a lower incidence of bullying and experienced exclusion less frequently compared with their peers in the control group. Further, no statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups were found in the number of friendly connections in the classroom, and both groups reported a low incidence of verbal bullying. What is a surprising finding, despite the use of experiential learning methods in the experimental group, which should be more attractive to students in comparison with the traditional methods of bullying prevention, is that none of the groups evaluated their teachers' efforts in the field as satisfactory, and their responses suggest that their teachers could do more for them. Therefore, it is important to provide teachers with sufficient attractive educational opportunities. Although the present research study has several limitations and the results cannot be generalised, the findings can be considered novel and contribute to the existing knowledge. These can also be used as a starting point for further research activities, a source of information for designing pre-service and in-service teacher training programs focused on applying innovative approaches to bullying prevention, and stimuli for developing effective prevention programs in schools based on the elements of experiential learning.

5- Declarations

5-1- Author Contributions

Conceptualization, G.G., L.P., and S.B.; methodology, G.G., L.P., and S.B.; software, G.G.; validation, L.P. and S.B.; formal analysis, G.G. and L.P.; resources, G.G., L.P., and S.B.; data curation, L.P., and S.B.; writing—original draft preparation, G.G., L.P., and S.B.; writing—review and editing, G.G., L.P., and S.B.; visualization, S.B.; project administration, G.G., L.P., and S.B.; funding acquisition, G.G., L.P., and S.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

5-2- Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

5-3- Funding

5-4- Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by The Board for Internal System of Quality Assurance of DTI University, Slovakia, in accordance with the Code of Ethics of DTI University, Slovakia.

5-5- Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

5-6- Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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