Promoting Kindness Through the Positive Theatrical Arts: Assessing Kuwait's Boomerang Programme

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Abstract As the field of positive psychology aims to build and strengthen the well-being of individuals, its repertoire of empirically validated strategies designed to do so is growing. Kuwait's "Boomerang" anti-bullying theatre programme designed to increase social kindness in schools is an example. The tools of applied theatre were taught to facilitators, who in turn trained seven to ten students who were real-life bullies, victims, and bystanders across seven Kuwaiti schools to become actors in each institution's culminating theatre play. Participating acting students and audience members were assessed to determine the effects of the programme. Results showed that their perceptions of social cohesion and trust, a positive school climate, and life satisfaction improved. Implications for student well-being are discussed, alongside the broader use of the positive arts, an emerging area of positive psychology.

Keywords Theatre · Kindness · Bullying · Empathy · Positive arts · Well-being

Abbreviations

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
MENA	Middle East/North Africa
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPI(s)	Positive psychology intervention(s)

Introduction

As the science of well-being grows under the banner of positive psychology and in education specifically, efforts to boost levels of student well-being using empirically derived interventions multiply. Schools are considered vital spaces in which young people can learn the skills to flourish in life and deal with challenges (Coulombe et al., 2020; Thorburn, 2018; White & Kern, 2018). One of these challenges is school bullying, a predictor of life satisfaction in

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young people and an area where school policies, as well as interventions, can be altered to ensure that the well-being of young people is maintained (Marquez & Main, 2021). Accordingly, positive approaches are being developed by schools, which include the teaching of well-being skills as much as the creation of more positive settings (Coulombe et al., 2020; White & Kern, 2018). Such skills are vital, especially as studies show the limited success of more traditional school interventions, such as the punishment of bullies, zero-tolerance policies, and psychosocial services for victims alone (Borgwald & Theixos, 2013; Bradshaw, 2015; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015). Theatrical interventions may offer an antidote to bullying as these include the skills of compassion, kindness and pro-sociality (People United, 2017).

Accordingly, we explore the impact of "Boomerang", Kuwait's first school-based theatre programme designed to tackle bullying via the development of empathy and kindness. We review rates of bullying in Kuwait, the efficacy of theatre programmes, and how the arts in general, a new conceptual space in positive psychology (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018; Darewych & Riedel Bowers, 2018; Lomas, 2016), can boost well-being and alter schools for the better. We also consider the place of such programmes in education policy.

Bullying

Prevalence

On average, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) identifies that globally, 23% of students report being bullied a few times a month, with some countries reporting prevalence rates as high as 40%, others at 5%. Boys also seem more likely to report both bullying other children and being bullied themselves (Abdulsalam et al., 2017; Baldry, 2004; Glew et al., 2005; OECD, 2019). When it comes to type of bullying, girls tend to report more psychological bullying, while boys report more physical bullying (Alsaleh, 2014; Beldean-Galea et al., 2010; Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010). Bullying is revealed in many ways, including physical violence or the threat of it, verbal abuse and ridicule, online intimidation and humiliation, and spreading gossip to ostracize others (Furlong et al., 2004; Giovazolias et al., 2010; Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012; Modecki et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2019).

Bullying also occurs in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region. In fact, the MENA area is estimated to have the third highest prevalence of bullying in the world, with 41% of students reporting they were bullied at least once in the past month (UNESCO, 2019). Specifically, in Kuwait, Alsaleh (2014) found the prevalence of bullying in 9th and 10th grade to range between 42 and 71% for males

and between 10 and 81% for females. Another study showed one third of their sample to be victims of bullying and that non-Kuwaiti children or those with one non-Kuwaiti parent were victimized more often (Abdulsalam et al., 2017; retracted 2019). This finding concurs with other school-based studies showing the top reason for bullying in the MENA region was due to nationality, race and skin colour (UNESCO, 2019). Al-Fayez et al. (2012) conducted a study on over 4000 Kuwaiti students showing that significant numbers of youth experienced physical and psychological abuse by parents and others, as well as sexual attacks and threats, with a high prevalence of boys experiencing unwanted sexual touching. Such issues led to depression, anxiety, and poor quality of life. Across the MENA region, bullying of a sexual nature among both boys (18%) and girls (10%) is also more prevalent than in any other region (UNESCO, 2019).

Victims, Bullies, and Bystanders

Victims of bullying fall into two categories: passive and aggressive (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). The former struggle with low self-esteem, a poor self-image, and garner less social and physical status than their peers (Furlong et al., 2004; Marsh, 2018). Victims may report sadness, depression, anger, anxiety, suicide attempts and ideation (Fredrick & Demaray, 2018; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Holt et al., 2015; Livingston et al., 2019), as well as physical health problems (Beckman et al., 2013). Social anxiety, fear of rejection, and lack of consequent social skills have also been noted (Sbarbabo & Smith, 2011). A Kuwaiti study showed that 26% of adolescents reported at least one suicidal behaviour and that being exposed to bullying at school was a contributing factor (Badr, 2017). Aggressive victims (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003) showed externalizing and internalizing behaviour such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, as well as hyperactivity and aggression (Kim et al., 2006; Kumpulainen & Räsänen, 2000). Less self-control, low school engagement, high levels of offensive and defensive aggression, and poor psychological health were other features (Juvonen et al., 2003; Stein et al., 2007).

Bullied youth were also more likely to report using tobacco, alcohol and drugs (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010; Livingston et al., 2019). Their academic performance was also impacted by as much as six to nine months of lost learning (Ladd et al., 2017; Mundy et al., 2017; Oliveira et al., 2018), while the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (OECD, 2019) showed that victims scored 21 points lower in reading. In schools with a 5% bullying prevalence, PISA science scores are, on average, approximately 517 points; in schools where bullying reaches 10%, it drops to 470 points (OECD, 2017). Such academic losses not only weaken employment probabilities and earnings over time (Brimblecombe et al., 2018; Chevalier &

Feinstein, 2006), but student well-being, the classroom climate, the ability of students to like school, and feel a sense of belonging there as well (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017; OECD, 2019).

Young people who bully are also not all alike. Some have high levels of confidence, an elevated social status as well as popularity, while others are insecure, anxious and not at all popular (Guerra et al., 2011; Marsh, 2018; Sullivan, 2000). The latter tend to show higher rates of anti-social activity, such as vandalism or criminal behaviour as well as higher rates of alcohol and substance use (Bowllan, 2011; Espelage et al., 2000). Another type was also identified, the 'bully-victim', who is an aggressive victim that also bullies others (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Finally, bystanders to bullying also suffer; wanting to fit in, be a kind person and support others in distress, but equally desiring to protect themselves (Eijigu & Teketel, 2021; Hutchinson, 2012).

Positive Psychology and the Arts

Positive psychology represents a shift in psychology's focus and posits that building positive states like kindness and empathy is at least as important as remediating negative states (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). An extension of this work has been to develop positive psychology interventions (PPIs), the behavioural, motivational and cognitive activities designed to generate positive emotions and experiences, as well as decrease negative emotions (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013; White et al., 2019). The field not only considers strategies with explicit positive psychology concepts but all activities that meet the prescribed goal of increasing positive emotion, subjective well-being, flourishing, social well-being, or similar constructs (Schueller et al., 2014). Accordingly, the "positive arts" operate as a novel conceptual space with the potential to generate well-being (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018; Darewych & Riedel Bowers, 2018; Lomas, 2016). Although art has been used in relation to well-being, it has often been directed towards the treatment of mental illness and distress through art therapy; however, the emergence of positive psychology has led to an appreciation of various art forms, including drama and theatre, being harnessed as part of a suite of interventions to promote flourishing (e.g., Cole, 2016; Darewych, 2020; Lomas, 2016).

Drama and Theatre as a Positive Psychological Intervention

In analysing art's potential, several channels have been identified through which a range of artforms from music to literature contribute to flourishing (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018; Darewych & Riedel Bowers, 2018; Lomas, 2016).

These include (1) helping individuals make meaning of their external and emotional worlds; (2) providing an enriching emotional experience; (3) offering opportunities for aesthetic appreciation; (4) play and entertainment; (5) a means of building social bonds with one another and self-reflect as a community; as well as (6) exercise good character, when it is most difficult to do so. As social relationships play a role in well-being, interventions that involve expressions of kindness and empathy towards others can go a long way to helping youth in the context of bullying (Keyes, 2005).

In the UK, non-profit organization People United (2017) reviewed outcomes from their participatory art programmes, like theatre. In three school-based programmes focussing on children from Years 1 through 6, outcomes included greater kindness, empathy and self-efficacy, as well as stronger social connections relative to non-participating control groups. Programming was targeted to engender kindness, altruism, forgiveness and hope, the elicitation of joy and open perspectives, as well as values clarification, and involved teachers, students, staff and parents, as well as community members and organizations. Programmes involved theatre, poetry, music workshops and performances, photography, movie making, and creative writing competitions. The positive effects were seen up to a year after participation. Other research on older children suggests that theatre and drama programmes are effective in boosting youth's social relationships (Joronen et al., 2011), reducing aggression (Graves et al., 2007), strengthening cooperation and enhancing classroom climates (Mages, 2010), as well as developing greater self-confidence (Belliveau, 2007; Rousseau & Moneta, 2008).

"Applied theatre" includes a range of theatrical disciplines designed to give voice to people and the issues that matter to them (Prendergast & Saxton, 2016). This reflective and rehabilitative type of theatre is designed to benefit people through the discussion of difficult topics. It is partially unscripted giving room for audience participation and offers the means for emotional expression, with endings remaining open for audiences to question or change. Such presentational theatre offers real content through the participation of thinly disguised characters that combine their experiences and the roles given to them. Bystanders are involved as they encourage bullying, protect victims, or passively ignore them (Bakema, 2010; Gini et al., 2008). Thus, participants are more than observers and actors; they make moral decisions, experiment with choices, enact a sense of agency, and experience other's realities (Abraham, 2017; Waters et al., 2012). The performing arts provide opportunities to empathize with others, a vital point as empathy is a predictor of bystander intervention, and programmes that harness it are considered effective (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2017; Thompson & Smith, 2011). Such experiential education also furthers

the development of youth's socioemotional skills (McLennan, 2008; Waters et al., 2012).

The Present Study

Participants

The study included (1) Participating theatre students (victims, bullies and bystanders); and (2) Observing members of the student audience who functioned as a control group. Data collection was conducted across 13 middle and high schools in Kuwait; however, data from six schools were omitted as less than 10 students participated and/or responded to the surveys. The final pre-intervention sample consisted of 216 participating students and 1207 observing students ($N = 1423$) across seven schools. Table 1 shows numbers per school and gender ratios. A total of 650 students were between 10 and 12 years old, 576 were between 13 and 14, 168 were between 15 and 16, 25 were between 17 and 18, and one student was 19 or older. A total of 1080 students were Kuwaitis, 25 identified as belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations (i.e. Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates), and 318 were from other countries. The post-intervention sample consisted of 72 participating and 503 observing students ($N = 575$).

Measures

All students received the same measures offered in Arabic and English. All scales showed acceptable reliabilities. SPSS 26 and JASP 0.12.2.0 were used for data analysis.

The *Student School Survey* (Williams & Guerra, 2007) is a 70-item measure, of which 38 were used, that involves subscales on social cohesion and trust, perceptions of school climate, perceived problem of bullying at school, and levels of perpetration, bystander behaviour, and victimization. The scale is appropriate for ages 10 to 17. Sample items for each subscale include social cohesion and trust (Items 1–7), e.g.

"Students in my school generally get along with each other"; school climate (Items 8–16), e.g. "When students break rules at my school, they are treated fairly"; perceived problem of bullying at school (Items 17–22), e.g. "Students teasing, spreading rumours and lies, or saying mean things to other students"; bully perpetration (Items 23–26), e.g. "I teased or said mean things to certain students"; bully bystander behaviour (Items 27–34), e.g. "I tried to defend the students who always get pushed or shoved around"; bully victimization (Items 35–38), e.g. "A particular student or group of students teased and said mean things to me". Responses are given on a four-point scale, with the option to "pass" if students preferred not to respond.

The *Students' Life Satisfaction Scale* (Huebner, 1991) is a seven-item measure of life satisfaction in children that is measured along a six-point Likert scale. Item examples include "I wish I had a different kind of life" and "My life is better than most kids." The scale is designed for use with children as young as 8 years of age. The scale has been shown to have acceptable internal consistency, a unidimensional factor structure, and adequate temporal stability.

The *Modified Depression Scale* (MDS; Dunn et al., 2011) is a five-item measure of symptoms of depression in adolescents. Young people are asked how often they felt five symptoms in the past 30 days, with item examples including "Were you grouchy, irritable, or in a bad mood?" or "Did you feel hopeless about the future?" on a five-point Likert scale. The MDS shows acceptable internal consistency and detects high and low levels of depression. Students engaging in risk behaviours or who are victimized have greater depressive scores. Those who endorse four to five symptoms have a greater risk of suicidal ideation and failing grades (versus three or fewer symptoms).

The *School Kindness Scale* (Binfet et al., 2016) is a five-item measure of school-based kindness using a five-point Likert type scale. Items include perceptions of the frequency of kindness in the classroom and school (e.g. "Kindness happens regularly in my classroom") and whether it is encouraged (e.g. "My teacher is kind").

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for the Pre-Intervention Sample

School	N	%	Condition		Gender	
			Participating	Observing	Female	Male
Al Ghanem Bilingual School	114	8.0	30	84	35	79
American Creativity Academy-Hawally Girls Campus	420	29.5	25	395	420	0
Canadian Bilingual School	223	15.7	16	207	54	169
Al Resalah Bilingual School	61	4.3	26	35	27	34
Dasman Bilingual School	106	7.4	19	87	47	59
Al Takamul International School	135	9.5	18	117	0	135
Gulf English School	364	25.6	82	282	155	209
Total	1423	100.0	216	1207	738	685

Prior to analysis, three items of the Student School Survey (Williams & Guerra, 2007) were omitted from the bully bystander behaviour subscale as keeping them would have been substantially reduced the internal consistency of the scale; their omission improved the alpha of the scale from 0.27 to 0.69. Internal consistencies, means, and *SD*s of the scales are presented in Table 2.

Procedures

The tools of applied theatre were taught to teachers and/or school counsellors ('facilitators' henceforth) during a six-day training workshop delivered by the AlNowair group, an organization dedicated to boosting positivity in Kuwaiti schools. A train-the-trainer programme included several skills taught to facilitators, who then proceeded to coach and instruct their respective school students to practise and apply those to become actors in their school's culminating theatre play. Facilitators from each school identified seven to ten students who were bullies, victims and bystanders. Student training spanned 10 days, with the play conducted in respective schools on the tenth day. Students were taught (1) the basics of acting and public speaking (i.e. body language, voice projection, stage presence); (2) skills in emotional intelligence; (3) how to empathize with, and role play the views of bullies and victims; and (4) experiment with behavioural choices.

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether the programme had an effect on participating acting students compared with audience members (i.e. the control group). To begin with, we hypothesized at the pre-intervention stage that desirable outcomes such as fairness of school climate, social cohesion and trust, school kindness, life satisfaction, and bystander behaviour would be positively associated with each other and negatively associated with adverse outcomes

such as prevalence of bullying, perpetration of bullying, experience of victimization, and depression.

Next, theatre students and audience members were evaluated twice prior to the programme, and four weeks later. We used one pre-intervention assessment, as many of the students had only completed one; thus, if a student participated in both pre-assessments, only the second was used. We hypothesized that compared to the audience members (i.e. control group), those participating in the programme would report higher school climate, social cohesion and trust, school kindness, life satisfaction and bystander behaviour, and lower prevalence of bullying, perpetration of bullying, experience of victimization, and depression at time 2 (post-intervention) compared to time 1 (pre-intervention).

Finally, we also solicited the views of teachers via a survey and focus group. Of 52 facilitators, 17 responded to the survey, and 11 took part in the focus group. A selection of their comments is presented in the qualitative analysis to illustrate the range of views. The programme started in the fall of 2019 and ended in January 2020. Ethics approval was granted from the primary author's former institution, which included the necessity of informed consent from students and their parents and/or guardians for participation in the study.

Results

The kurtosis values for bully perpetration and bully bystander behaviour were initially 7.13 and 3.06 respectively in the pre-intervention sample, which shows considerable deviation from normality. The total scores of these two variables were log10-transformed to correct for high degrees of kurtosis. After transformation, the kurtosis values dropped to -0.46 and -0.69 respectively. With these two

Table 2 Internal Consistencies and Descriptive Statistics

| | α | Pre | | | | Post | | | |
| | | Part | | Obsr | | Part | | Obsr | |
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Student School Survey: Social cohesion and trust	.68	4.98	3.24	4.02	3.49	5.54	3.61	4.26	3.90
Student School Survey: School climate	.81	7.98	4.66	6.47	5.07	8.80	4.91	6.86	5.68
Student School Survey: Perceived problem of bullying	.82	10.75	4.75	10.27	5.07	10.93	4.93	10.69	4.85
Student School Survey: Bully perpetration	.71	.32	.29	.27	.29	.30	.30	.33	.31
Student School Survey: Bully bystander behaviour	.69	.40	.33	.32	.32	.38	.30	.39	.33
Student School Survey: Bully victimization	.83	3.91	3.22	3.31	3.36	4.24	3.37	3.65	3.33
Student life satisfaction	.84	28.53	7.67	29.22	7.67	30.08	7.23	29.35	7.78
Modified depression scale	.69	14.85	3.81	14.95	4.21	15.37	3.97	15.23	4.41
School kindness scale	.75	18.44	3.94	17.75	4.10	18.56	3.80	17.75	4.31

Part participating group, *Obsr* observing group

transformations, the skewness values of the eight variables of the study ranged between −0.60 and 0.91, and the kurtosis values ranged between −0.91 and 0.33, which are within the acceptable range (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Correlation analysis

Thereafter, correlations were calculated among outcome variables (Student School Survey subscales, Students' Life Satisfaction Scale, Modified Depression Scale (MDS), School Kindness Scale) at the pre-intervention time point. The correlation matrix is provided in Table 3. There was a significant strong, positive correlation between school climate and both, social cohesion and trust ($r = 0.68$) and school kindness ($r = 0.46$), as well as between school kindness and social cohesion and trust ($r = 0.44$). Another significant strong positive correlation was found between bully perpetration and bully bystander behaviour ($r = 0.64$). Conversely, adolescent depression had a significant strong negative correlation with student life satisfaction ($r = -0.53$), and significant moderate negative correlations with social cohesion and trust ($r = -0.30$) and school climate ($r = -0.30$). There was no significant correlation among two pairs of variables between perceived bullying and both, school kindness and student life satisfaction. Perceptions of bullying seemed to have no impact on the positive measures of subjective well-being (e.g. life satisfaction, social cohesion and trust) and had a small impact on depression ($r = 0.11$).

Analysis of variance

A 2 (time point: pre and post) × 2 (experimental condition: participating and observing) repeated measure ANOVA was performed separately for each of the eight outcomes. A significant interaction between time and condition would suggest that the two groups of students have shown different rates of change in their outcome scores from the pre- to post-intervention. Notably, the interaction between time and condition was significant for three of the variables: Social

cohesion and trust $F(1, 573) = 6.249$, $p = 0.013$, $\eta^2 = 0.011$, school climate $F(1, 573) = 5.993$, $p = 0.015$, $\eta^2 = 0.010$, and student life satisfaction $F(1, 553) = 5.088$, $p = 0.024$, $\eta^2 = 0.009$. Thus, the main analyses focused on these three variables.

Preliminary results showed that the experimental condition had a significant effect on the score changes for three outcome variables. In the main analyses, demographic variables were held constant to examine if the effect of condition would hold. ANCOVAs were performed with the pre-intervention scores and condition as independent variables, while controlling for age, gender (female = 1, male = 0), nationality (Kuwaiti = 1, other = 0), and school (six dummy variables, with Canadian Bilingual School as the baseline). Levene's tests of equality of error variances were not significant in any of the models, suggesting that equal variances can be assumed. The results related to the pre-intervention scores and condition are in Table 4. Notably, the effects of condition remained significant for social cohesion and trust $F(1, 563) = 7.642$, $p = 0.006$, $\eta^2 = 0.013$, school climate $F(1, 563) = 6.951$, $p = 0.009$, $\eta^2 = 0.012$, and student life satisfaction $F(1, 543) = 5.566$, $p = 0.019$, $\eta^2 = 0.010$, after controlling for the covariates. The estimated marginal means are displayed in Fig. 1.

To calculate Cohen's ds, three separate paired-sample t tests were performed using pre- and post-intervention scores in the participating group, with the results shown in Table 5. Cohen's ds ranged between 0.210 and 0.269 and can be considered small, yet practically important. In sum, the intervention led to significant increases in social cohesion and trust, school climate, and student life satisfaction; however, there were no significant effects on other outcome variables. Our effect sizes (0.210, 0.256 and 0.269) are comparable to those found in prior positive psychological intervention meta-analyses, which had Cohen's ds ranging from 0.20 to 0.34 (Bolier et al., 2013), although others found effect sizes to be smaller (average $r = 0.10$) but still significant (White et al., 2019).

Table 3 The correlation matrix (pre-assessment)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Social cohesion and trust	1							
2. School climate	.677***	1						
3. Perceived problem of bullying	−.056*	.086**	1					
4. Bully perpetration	−.092**	−.118***	.097***	1				
5. Bully bystander behaviour	−.101***	−.108***	.103***	.636***	1			
6. Bully victimization	−.155***	−.068*	.323***	.327***	.312***	1		
7. Student Life Satisfaction	.275***	.278***	-.036	−.143***	−.122***	−.221***	1	
8. Modified Depression Scale	−.303***	−.302***	.108***	.139***	.157***	.272***	−.531***	1
9. School Kindness Scale	.443***	.459***	.021	−.154***	−.157***	−.157***	.241***	−.115***

Table 4 The results of ANCOVAs predicting social cohesion, school climate, and life satisfaction

		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Partial Eta Squared
Social cohesion	Pre-score	2684.552	1	2684.552	281.475	.000	.333
	Condition	72.889	1	72.889	7.642	.006	.013
	Error	5369.590	563	9.537			
School climate	Pre-score	6282.016	1	6282.016	350.707	.000	.384
	Condition	124.512	1	124.512	6.951	.009	.012
	Error	10,084.704	563	17.912			
Life satisfaction	Pre-score	15,223.341	1	15,223.341	500.959	.000	.480
	Condition	169.133	1	169.133	5.566	.019	.010
	Error	16,500.905	543	30.388			
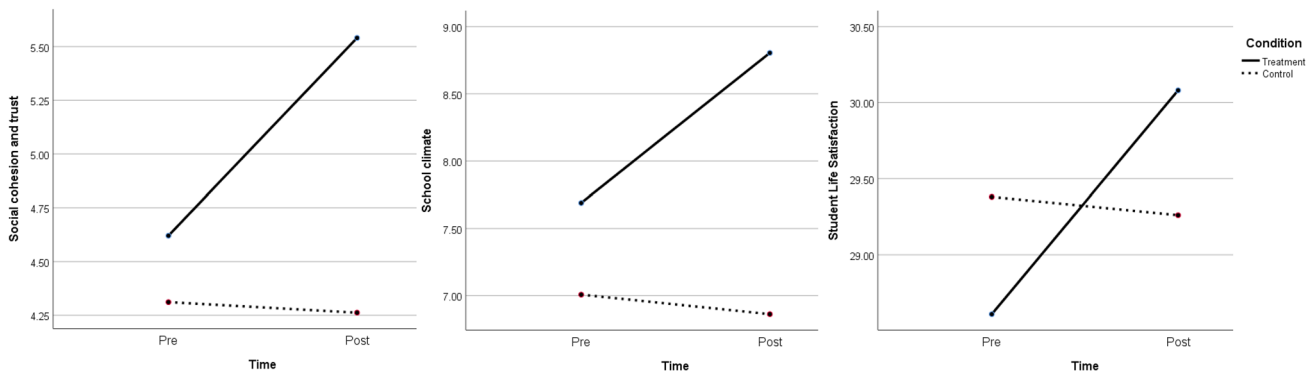
Fig. 1 Estimated marginal means across time and group

Table 5 The results of paired *t* tests with pre- and post-intervention scores in the participating group

	Mean difference	t	df	P	Cohen's D
School cohesion	.919	2.510	86	.014	0.269
School climate	1.114	2.384	86	.019	0.256
Student life satisfaction	1.471	1.958	86	.053	0.210

Other report data

The views of facilitators were also solicited. Beyond a form of professional development, many saw this training as personal growth. Responses included "A new experience, with life changing for me first"; "I enjoyed my own learning but also seeing the children grow through the process"; "I grew as an educator". Another said "I've been rejuvenated in my professional capacity in an environment where encouraging inputs, support, cooperation and positive results can be few and far between." They observed students transition from voiceless to contributing, i.e. "students who were members of our stage production cast naturally grew in their stature"

and bullies shift from 'hard-to-like' to "lovable" students. "Our relationships have cemented into something more than just courtesy words when we pass each other in a hallway"; "I was able to develop a more open caring relationship with them"; "I saw a different side of them". They noticed more frequent kindness and greater awareness, i.e. "acts of kindness were not forced but started being initiated by students towards classmates"; "I saw students talking about how they never realized jokes could be thought of as serious—many commented they would think a bit more before sharing pictures of others on social media".

Teachers also felt the school climate shift: "I feel we are on a journey towards kindness, not just for the students but staff too"; "the environment started changing into a safer positive one"; "I started being appreciated more by the school"; "Teachers were closer to one another". Some cited other positive changes: "School management became more supportive"; "It brought the school together in a way which otherwise wouldn't have been possible". Still, not all felt hopeful: "Something I found disappointing was the administration and high school students and staff lack of support. Although it is a programme they feel passionate about, there was not enough organization or effort focussed on the

programme. Administration was flexible in letting staff go for the training and work with students and give the presentation, but the programme is more than just the presentation. It should be a motto that is followed in the entire school".

Discussion

Our study examined the effect of an anti-bullying theatre intervention on student well-being. As hypothesized at the pre-intervention stage, desirable outcomes such as fairness of school climate, social cohesion and trust, and school kindness had strong positive correlations with each other. In alignment with our hypothesis, adverse outcomes such as prevalence of bullying, perpetration of bullying, experience of victimization, and depression had moderate to small positive associations with each other. However, contrary to our hypothesis, there were no significant associations between perceptions of bullying, school kindness, social cohesion and trust, and life satisfaction. Perhaps direct experience with bullying and not perceptions of it is what predicts these outcomes. Further, bystander behaviour was not positively associated with desirable outcomes and instead was positively associated with adverse outcomes such as prevalence of bullying, bullying perpetration, and victimization. It is possible that bystander behaviour only becomes necessary when bullying occurs and if not undertaken well, may not be effective enough in buffering against bullying and victimization.

As hypothesized, participation in the theatre programme (compared to the control group) was associated with small but significant positive effects on school climate, social cohesion and trust, and life satisfaction. Although school kindness was not directly impacted by the intervention, its association with social cohesion and trust, along with students' participation in kindness clubs, suggests that there may be an indirect impact of the intervention on students' desires to improve school kindness. These findings point to the positive and protective impact of a theatre intervention for young people—those who bully and are bullied—in this context. Although the intervention had no effect on the prevalence of bullying, perpetration of bullying, experience of victimization, bystander behaviour, or depression, more research is needed to examine whether there is a need for stronger, longer, or even additional programmes (e.g., cyberbullying interventions, mental health support for bullies and victims) to meaningfully impact these outcomes (e.g. Jueajinda et al., 2021; Tiiri et al., 2020). Indeed, trauma research shows that body-based interventions can help reorganize neural networks impacted by trauma (Malchiodi, 2020); future research may consider incorporating such modalities within theatre-based programmes.

Finally, programme facilitators found the programme meaningful. Importantly, it contributed to their growth as educators and professionals and gave them deeper insight into their students. The programme also strengthened connections between teachers. While not the focus of the study, changes were realized in management teams and heads of schools with many acknowledging for the first time that adult behaviour in schools also bordered on bullying. Networking among schools occurred to a greater degree with management teams, teachers and parent groups. Networks enabling dialogue between parents and with schools also emerged. In these, parents developed and used resources to help themselves identify and address bullying. 'Declarations of Kindness' made by 13 schools pledged to replace disciplinary policies with restorative measures aimed at relationship building, kindness, and empathy. Kindness clubs were also established to enable students to continue practising kindness.

Implications

Programmes like this prompt the need to examine school responses, government legislation and school-based policies (Alhajeri & Alenezi, 2020; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015; Högberg, 2019; Marquez & Main, 2021; OECD, 2019). Using global PISA 2015 data, Marquez and Main (2021) found that bullying influenced student life satisfaction; in fact, school-based policy relevant to bullying shaped student well-being for the better. Policy that identifies expectations for behaviour, including how to teach and reinforce such aims, is imperative (OECD, 2019; Powell & Graham, 2017), but must also address well-being. Socioemotional skill programmes improve student mental health (e.g. Gutman & Schoon, 2015; Lambert et al., 2019; Mackenzie & Williams, 2018; Sklad et al., 2012) and confer positive learning and employment outcomes, i.e., greater likelihood of obtaining a degree, being hired for work, and higher income (DeNeve & Oswald, 2012; Longhi et al., 2018; Turban et al., 2013). Standardized test results and school engagement also rise (Bücker et al., 2018; Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Lewis et al., 2011; Suldo et al., 2011). Implementing and embedding such programmes as part of the curriculum would ensure not only that well-being aims are met, but potentially better learning too, given that the uneven distribution of well-being as a result of bullying and its associated lost learning is significant (Ladd et al., 2017; Mundy et al., 2017; OECD, 2019; Oliveira et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

We had one notable limitation in the delivery of this programme: data collection. Not all facilitators participated in the collection of data due to examinations, end of term, and holidays; this limited our sample size as well as the ability to track the well-being of facilitators as well, which we had planned to evaluate but were unable to do so given the few responses received. Communicating with the sheer number of schools and facilitators was time-consuming and entailed making continuous contact via email, telephone and in person visits to encourage data collection. Still, with good cooperation and continued close relationships with schools, crucial to the success of this programme, obtaining the numbers we did can be considered a success.

At the same time, we cannot dismiss the possibility that our results were obtained due to students simply receiving more attention (Ciarrochi et al., 2016), particularly as teacher-student relationships impact student well-being (Moore et al., 2018; Newland et al., 2018). Its role is not negligible. A study of 14,000 adolescents showed strong correlations between victimization and a loss of belief in others, alongside an increase in suicidality (Fullchange & Furlong, 2016); thus, youth may have benefited by rebuilding trust in adults and this may have influenced their perceptions of a more positive school climate. Alternatively, as children become aware of their rights and see them promoted by adults, their well-being also rises (Casas et al., 2018). Still, as with all programmes, a longer assessment period, as well as the maintenance and examination of bullying records to assess whether efforts objectively delivered, is further advised (Bradshaw, 2015; Joronen et al., 2011).

As home environments and family relationships also predict student well-being (González et al., 2015; Lawler et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2018; Newland et al., 2018), involving parents is key. Providing education on how to model and use kindness in parenting, asking about and responding to bullying (Joronen et al., 2011), and including them in theatre productions are viable options. Indeed, Larrañaga et al. (2018) found that not all parents were supportive or guided their children well in such instances, unwittingly reinforcing bullying. Continued skills training for teachers to address bullying must be upheld (Gregus et al., 2017) and may be useful for teachers, who are also themselves sometimes targets of bullying by students, parents, and management (De Cordova et al., 2019; Hale et al., 2017). As teacher well-being is tied to student achievement, stress and well-being (Harding et al., 2019; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016), its promotion is also clear.

Conclusion

As instructional and punitive approaches are not always effective and few school counselling services exist or are stigmatized in Kuwait (Kaladchibachi & Al-Dhafiri, 2018), more must be done to protect children and promote their well-being (UNESCO, 2019). A positive arts intervention may be a way for youth to build positive states of well-being and simultaneously, boost a range of positive outcomes, such as learning and future employment outcomes. Such offerings provide schools with positive alternatives towards developing safer and kinder learning contexts for students and teachers alike (Powell & Graham, 2017; Thorburn, 2018; White & Kern, 2018) and highlight the potential for art, particularly the transformative power of drama and theatre, to be harnessed to facilitate well-being, as per the notion of 'positive art' (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018; Darewych & Riedel Bowers, 2018; Lomas, 2016).

Declarations

Conflicts of interests There are no conflicts or competing interests to declare.

Ethical approval This study was approved by the United Arab Emirates University Ethics Review Board, ERS_2019_5928.

Consent to Participate Within the study's ethics review application, consent to participate was sought from both students and parents and approved by the United Arab Emirates University Ethics Review Board, ERS_2019_5928.

Consent for Publication All authors listed on this manuscript gave consent for this study to be published.

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