

## UNDERSTANDING BULLYING AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN: A PRELIMINARY STUDY USING A MODIFIED SOCIAL EXPERIMENT APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

*Bullying is a global phenomenon affecting children's social and emotional well-being. In particular, primary school students are vulnerable to bullying due to their developmental stage. Conventional research methods such as qualitative interviews have yet to precisely determine the number of bullying incidents among primary school children. Furthermore, respondents who lack comprehension skills struggle to respond adequately using these approaches. This modified social experiment aims to determine the prevalence of bullying among primary school children and to elucidate the bullying narrative experienced by the respondents using a modified social experiment approach. A survey adapted from the assessment instruments of the Malaysian Ministry of Education's Handbook for Managing Bullying in Schools Survey was used to collect data from 111 students between 10 and 12 years old at a primary school in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, Malaysia. The survey data were then subjected to descriptive analysis. Four types of bullying, which are physical bullying, verbal bullying, extortion, and ostracism, were deemed prevalent. Reportedly, the victim-respondents were bullied owing to differences in social class, religion, and physical appearance. Several respondents also highlighted the threats posed by the bullies should they fail to comply with their orders. This study highlights the urgent need for customised interventions and preventive strategies to effectively address bullying in school systems. Lastly, potential research directions and recommendations are provided to facilitate educators and policymakers to promote safer and more inclusive primary school environments.*

Keywords: School bullying, primary students, social experiment, extortion, ostracism.

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### INTRODUCTION

Children are entitled to receive education in a conducive environment. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in Article 19 specifies a child's right to be protected against all forms of harm; Articles 28 and 29 outlines a child's right to education and associated goals in the child's development; Article 34 highlights protection against sexual exploitation and abuse; Article 36 denotes protection against harm to a child's welfare; and Article 39 implies the need for a child-victim to receive appropriate recovery support and social reintegration. These stipulations allow school children to learn new things, make friends, and play with their friends in a safe environment.

The issue of school bullying, which denies children's rights to safety, dignity, and mental well-being, implies non-compliance with Articles 19 and 28 of the UNCRC. Such fear-inducing and discriminating incidents negatively impact students' academic achievements, emotional health, and development of critical social and cognitive skills (Espelage & Hong, 2019). Based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Global Status Report on School Violence and Bullying (2019), almost one in three students experienced school bullying at least once in the past month. The highest prevalence rate of school bullying was documented in sub-Saharan Africa (48.2%), North Africa (42.7%), and the Middle East (41.1%), while the lowest rate was reported in Europe (25%), the Caribbean (25%), and Central America (22.8%). Despite highlighting the prevalence and detrimental impact of bullying on children's lives, the UNESCO report did not include incidents of school bullying

in Malaysia. However, Radhi (2023) reported that a total of 9,207 bullying cases in Malaysian schools were recorded by the Ministry of Education from 2021 to October 2023.

Dating back to more than 150 years, bullying was first examined in the 1970s (Hymel & Swearer, 2015) and continues to garner much scholarly interest (Ahmad & Salleh, 1997). Ishak et al. (2023) underscored the exponential rise of publications on primary and secondary school bullying since 1996. Simply put, this topic remains a relevant discourse in current times. Nonetheless, the emphasis placed on bullying among secondary school students often leaves similar incidents among their primary school counterparts underexplored. Although bullying begins at a younger age and the behaviours learned in early childhood are retained (Bullock, 2002; Pichel et al., 2021), many people often mistaken bullying among younger children such as arguments and name-calling for playful teasing. These public misconceptions could explain the lack of focus on bullying cases among primary school children (Mittala & Babua, 2020).

Compared to studies on bullying among primary school students in Western countries, those in Asia are relatively scarce (Ishak et al., 2023; Sittichai & Smith, 2015). Few studies in Malaysia investigated bullying cases in primary schools (Ang et al., 2018; Paul, Jehom & Fadzil, 2021; Sudan, 2016; Ismail et al., 2014). As such, the severity of primary school students' bullying cases are often gauged from news reports and anecdotal evidence following the paucity empirical works. Furthermore, existing qualitative research in Malaysia primarily focused on bullying among primary school students (Paul, Jehom & Fadzil, 2021; Sudan, 2016). Although this approach clearly depicts the experiences and social processes of school bullying, outcome generalisability is limited. The lack of research focusing on primary school students and the insights derived from qualitative research, which did not accurately represent the population, highlights both literature and knowledge gaps in understanding the prevalence of bullying among primary school children.

Also, research on bullying among primary school students involving the *Orang Asli* children remains scarce. A challenge in collecting data among this group of children is the appropriateness of employing survey questionnaire. Due to their low reading literacy (Liu et al., 2021; Rosly & Mokhtar, 2021), the *Orang Asli* children may not be able to read and understand the survey questionnaire. This could have driven past researchers to use qualitative data collection techniques to obtain the data on school bullying involving *Orang Asli* children. For instance, Paul, Jehom and Fadzil (2021) are one of the few studies that conducted in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather data on bullying from 32 *Orang Asli* primary school students. Hence, this drawback renders it challenging to collect quantitative data on bullying experiences via self-administered survey questionnaires. An innovative approach to collecting data on bullying among this group of children is necessary to bridge the methodological gap.

This study developed two objectives in response to the aforementioned gaps. The first objective is to determine the prevalence of bullying among primary school students aged 10 to 12. It was done by recording the number of respondents who had experienced the respective bullying behaviors. The second objective was to elucidate the bullying narrative experienced by the respondents using a modified social experiment approach. This objective was meant to gather the respondents' information on how they were being bullied.

This study enriches the current body of knowledge in three ways. First, empirical evidence was provided on bullying prevalence among primary school students in Malaysia. The scalability and subjectivity issues highlighted in past qualitative research were addressed in this quantitative work. Second, the social experiment methodology adopted in this research allows more primary school students to address the survey items despite their low literacy level. Third, this study collected narratives of bullying incidents from the victim's perspective. Although such information could be qualitatively gathered, the modified social experiment approach allows more primary school students, especially the *Orang Asli* children, to freely share their experience in an authentic setting.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Bullying implies the intention to harm another person who is incapable of self-defence. This repeated form of aggression is either perpetrated by a group or person over time (Olweus, 1978). Bullying can occur in places where people including children and adolescents interact, such as schools (Ishak et al., 2023), online platforms (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022), and neighbourhoods (Percy-Smith & Matthews, 2001). As one of the most extensively-studied (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Ishak et al., 2023) and publicly-recognised topic (Chai, 2018), school bullying in secondary and primary schools, its significant impact on children and adolescents' well-being and development (Rigby, 2003), and the long-term societal consequences (Wolke et al., 2013) have been studied in the context of misbehaviour.

Social media, empirical works, and public discourse have underscored bullying incidents in secondary schools, with stories of severe incidents frequently circulating on digital platforms and in news outlets (Loh, 2024). Although bullying behaviours have been shown to begin early in childhood and reflect long-term developmental impacts (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2024), bullying among primary school children is relatively underexamined. Misinterpreting this act as playful interactions among young children could account for the public tolerance on aggressive actions. Children tend to engage in sociodramatic play, which overlaps with aggression. Educators may struggle to distinguish between playful and serious aggression, specifically among boys who demonstrate higher levels of playful aggression (Hart & Tannock, 2013). Many children may view their actions as part of normal peer interactions rather than bullying, further complicating the identification of bullying behaviours (Parsa, 2023). Adults are often unaware of the extent of bullying incidents, as some students do not report the occurrence of bullying (Lavanya & Prasad, 2014). Regardless, Mittala and Babua (2020) argued that children around seven years old and those between 10 and 12 are more susceptible to this act. Boys often experience physical bullying (e.g., hitting and pushing) and verbal bullying (e.g., name-calling), while their female counterparts encounter relational bullying. Social exclusion or gossip-related bullying, such as being excluded from groups and having rumours spread about them, are prevalent forms of bullying behaviour among this age group.

Victims may experience bullying behaviour in distinctive ways. Physical, verbal, relational or social, and cyberbullying constitute the primary forms of bullying (Nur et al., 2023). Physical bullying involves direct bodily harm or intimidation through physical aggression such as kicking, pushing, and punching (Kennedy, 2020), whereas verbal bullying involves aggression using words such as name-calling, ridiculing, and teasing (Kurniasih et al., 2020; Sabramani et al., 2021; Scheithauer et al., 2006).

Relational or social bullying entails the manipulation of social relationships to harm the victim's social standing via exclusion, rumor-mongering, or ostracisation (Chester et al., 2017). Finally, cyberbullying occurs with the increasing use of the Internet, social media, and digital devices (Bjärehed, 2021; Lavanya & Prasad, 2014). Such advancements allow bullies to reach victims even outside of school hours. The present study examined physical bullying, verbal bullying, extortion, and ostracism as per the Malaysian Ministry of Education's Handbook for Managing Bullying in Schools (2014).

Numerous interventions, policies, and educational programmes have focused on addressing bullying in school (Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2021; Merrell et al., 2008). Foon et al.'s (2020) systematic review suggested that teachers who actively keep track of their students should be trained to identify signs of bullying, the bullies, victims, and bystanders. In 2023, the Ministry of Education introduced new guidelines to address bullying, sexual harassment, and racism in school environments. Apart from outlining how schools should tackle reports of bullying, investigate incidents, and implement preventive measures, the guidelines underscore the need to educate students on the detrimental effects of bullying and the importance of abiding by anti-bullying law (Kit, 2023). Robust interventions must be tailored to the students' developmental stage. Monks and Smith (2006) revealed that young children's understanding of what constitutes bullying differs from that of adolescents and adults. As such, primary school children may struggle to conceptualise bullying behaviour in the same way as their older counterparts.

The knowledge-attitude-behaviour (KAB) model was used to investigate bullying behaviours in the present study. Yi and Hohashi (2018) explained that this framework was developed in the health promotion domain, where knowledge about a subject could directly and indirectly influence one's attitude and behaviour, respectively. The KAB model has denoted the influence of knowledge on attitude and behaviour in other areas involving e-waste (Iyer, 2018), learning and performance (Schrader & Lawless, 2004), and online disclosure of personal data (Li et al, 2023) following its conception. Hence, this model was incorporated into the current work to investigate how knowledge about bullying could foster positive attitudes among primary school children and reduce bullying incidents. However, this paper only outlined the model's first component, which is knowledge. Specifically, relevant information about bullying incidents were elicited by asking primary school students to address several statements. By providing primary school students with foundational knowledge about what constitutes bullying, they could better recognise bullying behaviours and foster a more harmonious school environment. Furthermore, this knowledge-focused approach is particularly relevant for primary school students, as a simplified understanding of bullying behaviors may be more accessible than complex discussions on attitude and behavior change.

Previous scholars have used cross-sectional surveys as a research instrument to determine the prevalence of bullying among primary school students (Ang et al., 2018; Ismail et al., 2014). Regardless, collecting reliable data on bullying among younger children with low reading literacy is a challenging phenomenon. An Astro Awani news report revealed that 175,304 children in Malaysia, specifically those in rural areas including *Orang Asli* children (Roslee, Wahab & Nordin, 2021), are still unable to read at the end of their primary schooling (Rahim, 2023). Traditional survey methods may not be suitable for this group following their reliance on students' ability to independently read and comprehend questions. In the context of urban areas, Ismail et al. (2014) excluded 12-year-old public primary school students in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, who did not understand the Malay language well or those with language difficulties from participating in their survey. Despite not being explicitly mentioned in the authors' paper, these students were most likely excluded to avoid yielding unreliable data and potential biases.

These challenges were overcome with qualitative research instruments, which were used to collect data from primary school students. Paul, Jehom and Fadzil (2021) derived data on bullying from 32 primary school children of the *Orang Asli* community via in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Likewise, Sudan (2016) conducted an in-depth interview to collect data from two primary school victim-respondents' of bullying at a school in Selangor, Malaysia. This research tool provides useful insights into the phenomenon, but prevents researchers from understanding the prevalence of bullying among primary school students. Hence, a modified social experiment was used to collect data from primary school students. This innovative child-centric approach facilitates data collection without distinguishing between the students' level of reading literacy.

## METHODOLOGY

The study reported in this paper constitutes part of a more extensive study that delineates the nature, causes, and consequences of bullying among primary school children in Malaysia. An innovative intervention would be developed based on the elicited data. Hence, this preliminary work aims to identify the prevalence of bullying and gauge the respondents' bullying narrative.

Empirical data were gathered from students attending a public primary school in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, Malaysia. This school was selected for two reasons. First, the second author met the school headmaster to invite the latter to participate in the University Social Responsibility Programme. The headmaster expressed his interest in hosting the bullying awareness programme at the school following the meet-up. Second, 88% of the school students were indigenous people (*Orang Asli* or *Orang Asai*). Only 10% of the student population was Malay. The remaining 2% comprised other races. Most of the students in this school demonstrated low reading literacy. The researchers decided to conduct the preliminary study at this location, as the number of bullying cases among the *Orang Asli* children (Paul, Jehom, & Fadzil, 2021) has yet to be systematically collected. Furthermore, the modified social experiment used for data collection is justified due to the low reading literacy among the school students.

This primary school had 277 students at the time of data collection. Nevertheless, only 111 students aged 10, 11, and 12 participated in the study. The headmaster determined the students' participation in the study based on his professional judgment in managing student behaviour. In other words, judgmental sampling was used to select the samples. Table 1 presents the respondents' age and gender distribution. Most of the students were 11 years old ( $n = 44$ , 39.64%), with 15.32% of them being male ( $n = 17$ ) and 24.32% being female ( $n = 27$ ). The second-largest group comprised Standard 4 students ( $n = 35$ , 31.53%), with a higher proportion of female ( $n = 20$ , 18.02%) than male ( $n = 15$ , 13.51%) students. The smallest number of respondents comprised those in Standard 6 ( $n = 32$ , 28.83%). There were more male ( $n = 18$ , 16.22%) than female ( $n = 14$ , 12.61%) respondents in this age group.

**Table 1: Respondents' age and gender (n = 111)**

Class (Age)	Total	Male	Female
Standard 4 (10 years old)	35 (31.53%)	15 (13.51%)	20 (18.02%)
Standard 5 (11 years old)	44 (39.64%)	17 (15.32%)	27 (24.32%)
Standard 6 (12 years old)	32 (28.83%)	18 (16.22%)	14 (12.61%)

Contrary to past quantitative studies, which used cross-sectional survey questionnaires, and qualitative works, which employed in-depth interviews, this study incorporated a modified social experiment approach for data collection. Cook and Shadish (1994) stated that social experiments occur outside of laboratories to discover ways to change resistant behaviour rather than verify a theoretical statement about unidimensional causes and effects. Randomised and quasi-experiments are the two types of social experiments. The random assignment of participants distinguishes between both the types. Randomised experiments ensure that participants are randomly assigned to groups, while quasi-experiments allow participants or other individuals to choose their groups based on "who merits or needs the opportunity being tested" (Cook & Shadish, 1994, p. 546).

The social experiment approach has several advantages over traditional survey or qualitative methods. Based on Shadish, Cook and Campbell (2002), social experiments are a more dynamic, immersive, and observational means of encapsulating human behaviours and interactions in real-world or simulated settings. From a scholarly perspective, this approach allows for testing the instruments in controlled environments while also gaining key insights that may not be derived from surveys or interviews. The current work did not fully adopt this approach; rather, only its activities resembled the social experiment approach and the reversal design. The activities were conducted in a structured social context that engaged primary school students in a specific behaviour, which is by moving to designated areas. Second, they were designed to gain insights into the primary school students' bullying experiences in a group setting. Third, naturally-occurring experiences were observed rather than actively manipulating social or environmental factors to prompt specific responses.

The current survey instrument was adapted from the assessment instruments of the Malaysian Ministry of Education's Handbook for Managing Bullying in Schools (2014). Only 18 out of the original 22 items were selected in this study. The remaining four were discarded due to semantic redundancy. The original items were written in Bahasa Melayu but presented in English in Table 2. The items were refined and simplified to ensure respondents' comprehension. The instructions and 18 items in the interviewer-administered survey were read in Bahasa Melayu during the structured activity.

The researcher guided the survey respondents by asking questions, recording their answers, and making observations. The data collection procedure began by dividing the students into groups during the morning assembly. A teacher conducted this grouping to assist researchers in effectively managing the activity. The researchers marked three areas with different coloured tapes in a hall while waiting for the assembly to end. All the areas formed a box shape. The green box indicated a 'no treatment' area, the red box indicated a 'yes', and the yellow box indicated a 'no'.

Several steps were taken to collect the study data. First, all the students are required to stand in the green box as the starting point and then decide which box to step in after listening to the statement read by a researcher. For example, respondents who have experienced bullying behaviour must step into the red box ("Yes, I have experienced it") in response to the researcher's statement: "A student in this school had called me with a name that I dislike". Otherwise, they must step into the yellow box ("No, I have not experienced it"). Subsequently, students in the red box are encouraged to elaborate on how the bullying occurred. All respondents are required to return to the green box when no one else intends to share their experience. This process was repeated 18 times in alignment with the 18 items used. Known as the "Step in-Step out Game", this activity was repeated for another four times to cover the five groups of students. The researchers ensured that the respondents participated voluntarily. No attrition was recorded, as the respondents were enjoying the activity.

The facilitating researchers recorded all the students' answers using a printed table with four columns. The first column lists all 18 items, while the second and third columns are used to record the 'yes or no' answer to each item. The fourth column is used to record the students' narrative of the bullying behaviour experienced. The hand-written responses were then keyed into an Excel spreadsheet and assessed using descriptive analysis.

## RESULTS

Table 2 presents the frequency (i.e., counts and percentages) of different bullying behaviour experienced by the study respondents. Most of the respondents reported having experienced other students concoct tales about them ( $n = 91$ , 81.98%) to create a negative impression. The victims were said to have hit and bullied other students and browsed inappropriate websites. The second-highest bullying experience occurred when the bullies attempted to fight with the victims. While 22 respondents (19.82%) indicated having never been bullied in this way, 89 (80.18%) of them stepped into the red box. This response reflects their experience of this bullying behaviour.

**Table 2: Results of frequency analysis (n = 111)**

No	Questions	YES (Number of student and %)	NO (Number of student and %)
1.	Called me by a name that I dislike	80 (72.07%)	31 (27.93%)
2.	Forced me to give money	47 (42.34%)	64 (57.66%)

3.	Concocted tales about me	91 (81.98%)	20 (18.02%)
4.	Embarrassed me	79 (71.17%)	32 (28.83%)
5.	Tried to hurt me	80 (72.07%)	31 (27.93%)
6.	Made me do their schoolwork	74 (66.67%)	37 (33.33%)
7.	Forced me to do things I did not like	75 (67.57%)	36 (32.43%)
8.	Took my stuff without permission	85 (76.58%)	26 (23.42%)
9.	Laughed at me for no reasons	84 (75.68%)	27 (24.32%)
10.	Insulted my appearance	84 (75.68%)	27 (24.32%)
11.	Insulted my religion	65 (58.56%)	46 (41.44%)
12.	Insulted my lifestyle	71 (63.96%)	40 (36.04%)
13.	Forced me to join their group	51 (45.95%)	60 (54.05%)
14.	Tried to fight with me	89 (80.18%)	22 (19.82%)
15.	Won't let me play with them	61 (54.95%)	50 (45.05%)
16.	Threatened me	65 (58.56%)	46 (41.44%)
17.	Talked rudely to me	78 (70.27%)	33 (29.73%)
18.	Told me to hurt others	68 (61.26%)	43 (38.74%)

Other bullying behaviour types, with a count of over 80 students experiencing them, are presented as follows: taking the victims' belongings without permission ( $n = 85$ , 76.58%), laughing at the victims for no reason ( $n = 84$ , 75.68%), and insulting victims' physical appearance ( $n = 84$ , 75.68%). Some of the *Orang Asli* respondents admitted to being physically insulted due to their skin complexion (i.e., darker than other students) and height (i.e., shorter than other students).

Ostracism and extortion were documented in more than 60 cases. As reported by 61 respondents (54.95%), other students would not allow them to play together on a regular basis. They would be left out and ignored even while playing. Although the victims were ostracised by their bullies, they did not elaborate on the underlying reasons. Extortion was also prevalent among primary school students. Four behaviours of extortion reflected high counts. First, the bullies forced the victims to perform undesirable acts ( $n = 75$ , 67.57%), such as forcing them to ask for money from or hit other students. Second, the victims were forced to complete the bullies' homework. A respondent shared that he was forced to complete other students' Bahasa Melayu and Mathematics homework. Although the respondent did not elaborate on his points, he could have been bullied for being a Malay student with good literacy in Bahasa Melayu and Mathematics.

Third, many respondents selected the red box when asked about whether they had been told to hurt others. Sixty-eight respondents (61.26%) admitted to having such an experience. A 10-year-old respondent claimed that he was told to injure his friend. The bullies injured him following his refusal. However, the respondent did not specify the form of injury. Fourth, extortion occurred in the form of a threat. Only 46 (41.44%) of the respondents chose the yellow box, implying that they had never been threatened by their schoolmates.

More than 60 respondents experienced verbal bullying. Most of them chose the red box when verbal bullying-related items were read to them. Specifically, 80 respondents (72.07%) admitted that their friends had called them with undesirable names akin to *Dadu*, *Itik*, *Pendek*, *Hitam*, and *Gemuk* and those related to cartoon characters. Seventy-nine respondents (71.17%) experienced verbal bullying in the form embarrassing remarks. Seventy-eight respondents (70.27%) claimed that the bullies spoke rudely to them and called them stupid and poor. With a count of more than 50 cases, the last two forms of verbal bullying were related to insulting. Seventy-one respondents (63.96%) reported having been insulted due to their lifestyle or low economic status. Their families were poor and could not afford proper clothing or housing. Furthermore, 65 respondents (58.56%) were insulted due to their religion. Many of them admitted to being insulted for being Muslims. A few mentioned having been insulted for following the Baha'i religion.

The majority of respondents could recall bullies trying to hurt them. Despite not being actually bullied, this behaviour may still be considered an attempt to physical bullying. With 80 respondents (72.07%) answering 'yes' and only 31 of them saying 'no' (27.93%), the count proved to be high when asked if they had experienced it.

The two remaining forms of bullying are related to extortion, albeit with counts of less than 60 cases. Specifically, 51 respondents (45.95%) answered 'yes' when asked if they have been forced to join the bullies' group. They were forced to join the group to strengthen it and bully other students. Intriguingly, some of the respondents mentioned that they were forced to join the smart student group without their consent. The other form of extortion entails being forced to give money to the bullies. Despite not many students having experienced it ( $n = 64$ , 57.66%), the narrative itself carried depth. Most of the bullies were the victims' classmates, who exhorted money ranging from RM1 to RM50. The victims also mentioned that they have been bullied in this manner since Standard 1.

Table 3 summarises the narratives of the respondents, who shared their bullying experience for 11 out of the 18 items. The researchers did not seek elaborations on the bullying experience for the remaining seven items, as the narratives were retrieved from voluntary sharing.

**Table 3: Summary of respondents' narratives**

No.	Item	Narrative
1	Called me by a name that I dislike	<i>Dadu, Pendek, Itik, Hitam, Gemuk, and</i> other cartoon characters.
2	Forced me to hand over money	Done by seniors and peers, RM1 to RM50, started since Standard 1.
3	Concocted tales about me	Tales about hitting other students, bullying other students, and browsing negative websites.
7	Forced me to do things I did not like	Forced to ask for money from other students, forced to do bullies' homework.
10	Insulted my appearance	Skin colour (darker than others), height (shorter than others).
11	Insulted my religion	Either being a Muslim or being a follower of the Baha'i religion.
12	Insulted my lifestyle	The families were poor, unable to provide nice clothes and proper houses.
13	Forced me to join their group	Forced to join the bullies' or smart students' groups without consent.
15	Won't let me play with them	When playing together, the victim would be left out and ignored.
17	Talked rudely to me	Called victim 'stupid' or 'poor.'
18	Told me to hurt others	Told to injure the victim's friend. If the victim refused, the bullies injured the victim.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine the prevalence of bullying among primary school children between 10 and 12 years old and gauge their bullying narrative with a modified social experiment approach. All items (excluding two) revealed a frequency count constituting more than half of the respondents. In this context, bullying is deemed prevalent among students within the 10-12 age bracket. Pichel et al. (2021) and Blanchflower and Bryson (2024) concurred that bullying begins at a younger age. Likewise, Lavanya and Prasad (2014) reported the prevalence of school bullying, which appears to peak from seven to 12 years old. Furthermore, the students reported experiencing verbal bullying (e.g., concocted tales about them, laughed at them, and insulted their appearance), physical bullying (e.g., tried to fight with and hurt them), extortion (e.g., took their belonging, made them complete the bullies' homework, and threatened them), and ostracism (e.g., would not allow them to play with the bullies). Different forms of bullying were perpetrated against the victims following previous works (Chester et al., 2017; Kurniasih et al., 2020; Nur et al., 2023; Sabramani et al., 2021; Scheithauer et al., 2006).

The narratives detail how the victims were bullied verbally and through extortion. Based on Kurniasih et al. (2020) and Sabramani et al. (2021), verbal bullying emerged as the most prevalent form. The victims claimed that the bullies insulted them through inappropriate name-calling and rude words due to their physical appearance, religion, and lifestyle. Some bullies even concocted tales about the victims hitting and bullying other students and browsing negative websites.

The students also mentioned having been forced to hand over money to the bullies from as early as Standard 1. This pattern continued through Standard 6. Parallel to Bullock (2002), individuals who learn a (negative) behaviour early in childhood tend to retain them. The victim-respondents were also forced to do the same to other students. Based on this scenario, extortion has a cascading effect. Most of the primary school students were also forced to bully or hurt their peers. The bullies victimised those who refused to follow their instructions. Thus, the victim is left with no choice but to engage in such behaviour to save themselves. Another form of extortion involved forcing the victims to complete the bullies' homework. Intriguingly, some students believed that being asked to join a group of smart students amounts to bullying. Although Monks and Smith (2006) suggested that younger children between four and six years old could have misinterpreted bullying behaviour, it appears from the present study young children in the age 10-12 bracket might not know what bullying is exactly. Thus, primary school students who might not be aware of what constitutes bullying may undergo the same experience.

The current findings corroborated those of Paul, Jehom, and Fadzil (2021). Although this study did not record the number of *Orang Asli* children bullied in school, this phenomenon is prevalent among primary school students from an indigenous background. They perceived bullying behaviour as a form of playful interactions (Parsa, 2023). Notably, some of these students considered that forcing them to join smart student groups is a type of bullying. This perception was formed due to the use of coercion rather than voluntary participation. As the role of perception was not explored in this study, further research is warranted to substantiate the claim.

### *Implications of the study*

Several implications can be derived from this study. First, the present study advances the knowledge and understanding of bullying in primary schools within Malaysia and how students view the underlying causes of this behaviour. An innovative data collection approach was used to gather the respondents' narrative. In essence, the sampled students' low awareness of what constitutes bullying behaviour have led them to accept verbal bullying as a normal part of their lives. Consistent with the knowledge

component of the KAB model, the first step would involve eradicating bullying among primary school students by increasing their awareness about bullying behaviour.

Second, the study findings demonstrate an urgent need for persons of authority, such as school teachers and counsellors, to take measures to prevent school bullying. Teachers play a key role in imparting knowledge about appropriate behaviour to primary school students (Foon et al., 2020). Educators, who are often the first to notice signs of bullying, can establish a culture of respect and kindness in a safe classroom environment. They may also incorporate anti-bullying lessons in the classroom while illustrating positive behaviours. Meanwhile, school counsellors can assist in identifying the specific needs of an anti-bullying programme appropriate for the school environment. They must be open in receiving reports or complaints of bullying cases from students and take appropriate action. Alternatively, the students can report bullying incidents to the headmaster or trusted teacher.

Third, the current outcomes could assist in developing anti-bullying initiatives that target specific bullying patterns based on the Ministry of Education's *Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia Bilangan 12 Tahun 2023* guidelines. As illustrated in the current work, innovative programmes such as educational games would allow students from different backgrounds to better understand bullying behaviour and provide insightful data for reporting purposes.

## CONCLUSION

School bullying remains a prevalent issue that must be seriously considered by key stakeholders. Such behaviour denies children's rights to education in a safe environment, as stipulated by the UNCRC. The Ministry of Education has called for actions to eradicate school bullying. Notwithstanding, these measures require a more holistic understanding of school bullying incidents. This study aimed to elucidate on bullying behaviour, which is prevalent among primary school students. The sampled students experienced different types of bullying, including physical bullying, verbal bullying, extortion, and ostracism. Counsellors, teachers, and school administrators must consider implementing tailored interventions and preventive strategies in school systems to advance students' understanding of this phenomenon.

Several limitations were encountered in this study. First, empirical data were collected from a public primary school in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, Malaysia. Although the data evidenced the prevalence of bullying among primary school students, it could not be generalised to other settings. Future works could replicate this study using other primary schools located in different Malaysia states and primary school students of all age groups. This extension would provide a sound understanding of bullying and its prevalence among primary school students in Malaysia.

Second, the data collection method, which resembles the social experiment approach, allows more students to participate voluntarily and provide the required data. This approach fulfills the first research objective, but lacks the true property of a social experiment. Potential scholars who intend to measure the cause and effects of primary school bullying could extend this study by refining the present method with a quasi-experiment approach. Researchers could develop a causal hypothesis, manipulate specific conditions, use random assignment, and observe responses (Cook & Shadish, 1994). Innovative game-based techniques could also be used during the social experiment. Such approaches allow respondents to easily share their feelings and experience while facilitating researchers to yield accurate data on bullying frequency.

Third, the study instrument was adapted from the assessment instrument of the Malaysian Ministry of Education's Handbook for Managing Bullying in Schools (2014). Only physical bullying, verbal bullying, gesture bullying, extortion, and ostracism were examined in this study. As the original instrument does not include any item on gesture bullying, further research should consider including more items, such as cyberbullying, which is relevant in the current digital world. The insights gained from such studies could facilitate policymakers to enforce and update anti-bullying laws to address new bullying issues.

Lastly, the study sample primarily comprised of Semai indigenous children, who experienced school bullying. These students may be at risk of falling behind their studies due to such acts. Hence, a systematic data collection proves necessary to document bullying cases among *Orang Asli* school children and develop robust anti-bullying interventions. Future researchers should replicate this study by investigating bullying among primary school children from different groups of indigenous people.

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