Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology

WILEY

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Harry Potter and the SPELL Against Bullying

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Received: 9 December 2024 | **Revised:** 22 January 2025 | **Accepted:** 29 January 2025

Funding: This work was supported by Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia. Consortia name: CRUI–CARE 2024.

Keywords: adolescents | bullying intervention | bystander intentions | empathy | Harry Potter | moral disengagement | self-efficacy

ABSTRACT

The Harry Potter saga has been—and still is—a worldwide phenomenon, attracting the interest of millions of people. Leveraging this success and the potential for the storyline to act as a moral guide, we developed and tested the SPELL, a scientifically-driven anti-bullying intervention based on the Harry Potter novels. The main goal of this intervention was to foster children and adolescents' willingness to intervene in response to bullying episodes. Participants were middle-school students ($N = 343$, $M_{age} = 12.18$ years), who engaged in four sessions designed to raise awareness about bullying, including its forms, roles of the different bullying actors, its consequences and ways to address it. The sessions also focused on psychological constructs identified in the literature as crucial in fostering bystander intervention, namely empathy, moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy. Results revealed that the intervention, when compared with a control condition, was successful in fostering intentions to counteract bullying, with greater empathy and lower moral disengagement being the psychological processes underlying this effect; evidence for self-efficacy was weaker. Our findings suggest that the powerful magic of Harry Potter can help to create a better world for children and adolescents, as future generations. Please refer to the Supporting Information section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

> No sooner were they out of earshot than Malfoy burst into laughter. 'Did you see his face, the great lump?' The other Slyhterins joined in. 'Shut up, Malfoy', snapped Parvati Patil. 'Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?' said Pansy Parkinson, a hard-faced Slytherin girl. 'Never thought you'd like fat little cry babies, Parvati'. 'Look!' said Malfoy, darting forward and snatching something out of the grass. 'It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him'. The Remembrall glittered in the sun as he held it up. 'Give that here, Malfoy', said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch. Malfoy smiled nastily. 'I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to collect – how about – up a tree?' 'Give it here!' Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt on to his broomstick and taken off.
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> Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Rowling 1997).

Bullying is defined as an intentional, repeated aggressive behaviour performed by an individual or group—perpetrator(s)—towards a less powerful target—victim(s)—(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2014; Olweus 1978) and is a pervasive global issue (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation 2018). It is often wide-spread in school environments, with detrimental and long-lasting consequences on children's well-being (Moore et al. 2017; Olweus 1994; Reijntjes et al. 2010).

Note: If you want to replicate the intervention or just "play" with SPELL, please refer to the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

The opening quote refers to a bullying episode in the Harry Potter saga, where a vulnerable child is being made fun of by a number of peers within a larger friendship group. There are at least two notable features of this passage that differentiate it from what might be understood as a typical bullying episode. First, the bullying victim is defended by some of the bystanders: this type of intervention does not occur often in bullying episodes (Craig and Pepler 1997). Second, the bullying occurred at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the main setting of the events narrated in the Harry Potter saga[1], which seems to suggest that even magic cannot prevent the occurrence of bullying. Or can it?

The present research examines whether Shielding Pupils from Early buLLying (SPELL), an anti-bullying intervention that we designed on the basis of the Harry Potter novels, can encourage children and adolescents to intervene in bullying behaviour. It aims to achieve this through raising awareness of what bullying is and its consequences. In 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix' (Rowling 2003), Dumbledore affirms 'Indifference and neglect often do much more damage than outright dislike'. In this sense, bystanders have a key role in reducing instances of bullying (Frey et al. 2014). Bystanders, however, rarely intervene, which is why several anti-bullying interventions focus on encouraging bystander action to support victims (Salmivalli et al. 2021), generally with good results among both children and adolescents (Polanin et al. 2012). In the present research, we examine both SPELL's potential in encouraging bullying bystander intervention intentions and the processes through which it might achieve this. Here, we focus specifically on the psychological processes of empathy, moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy, which are some of the main mechanisms identified in the bullying literature.

Our research offers important theoretical advancements with potential to inform practice. At a theoretical level, we investigate—for the first time—whether an intervention based on popular fantasy fiction can help counteract bullying by adopting the framework of social cognitive theory (Bandura 2001). At a practical level, SPELL provides a useful and replicable tool that can be freely utilised across various educational contexts, including schools, community programmes and other learning environments, to educate young people on how to fight against bullying, using their favourite characters as role models.

1 | The Harry Potter Saga

The Harry Potter saga, with its seven books translated into eight movies, undoubtedly represents one of the greatest successes in the history of literature and cinematography, with a brand estimation surpassing $25 billion USD (Meyer 2016). Although the last book of the series was released in 2007, Harry Potter continues to inspire a wide range of products and events, from toys and video games, to clothing and theme parks, attracting the interest of millions of people.

Harry Potter novels are not just intended for children; they are enjoyed by readers of all ages (Patrick and Patrick 2006), particularly because of the complexity and richness of the storylines as well as the nature of the characters themselves (Ciaccio 2009; Welsh 2004). The wide range of themes covered has inspired extensive discussions at psychological, moral–theological, philosophical, psychoanalytic, pedagogical and technological levels (Heilman 2009) stimulating religious, moral and educational debates (Senland and Vozzola 2007).

1.1 | The Storyline

The Harry Potter saga follows Harry and his friends across their development from childhood to late adolescence. Harry is an orphan whose parents were killed by Lord Voldemort—the darkest and most dangerous wizard of all time—when he was just a baby. When Voldemort attempted to kill Harry, his mother shielded him, providing him with long-lasting protection (the power of love), causing Voldemort to disappear for more than 10 years. After living 11 years of 'Muggle' (non-magic) life, Harry discovers he is a wizard, and that he has a place as a student at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Upon arrival at the school, he is sorted into the Gryffindor House with his newly-made friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. The other school houses, within which all students are sorted at the beginning of the first year, and which will become their 'family' throughout their school years, are Slytherin (the house hosting Draco Malfoy, Harry's school rival), Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Over the school years, helped by his friends and by Dumbledore (the Hogwarts headmaster and greatest wizard of all time), Harry Potter faces Voldemort's return several times, using powerful weapons that Voldemort does not possess like friendship and love to make him disappear, until the final Voldemort's defeat at the end of the seventh and last school year.

1.2 | The Educational Relevance of the Harry Potter Novels

Our intervention focuses on the Harry Potter saga for three main reasons. First, there is evidence that engagement in literary fiction promotes a range of individual-level benefits related to empathy, such as theory of mind development, that is, the ability to understand others' mental states (Kidd and Castano 2013). Second, through transporting readers into appealing imaginary worlds (Dubourg and Baumard 2021), the Harry Potter novels are engaging and stimulate curiosity, as well as enthusiasm (Engel and Levin 2006; Knapp 2003), all of which are key ingredients for the success of a psychological intervention (Oskamp 2000). At last, given the many moral themes presented in the novels (Whitney et al. 2005), it stands to reason that reading the novels could impact children's moral development, for example by helping them to face developmental challenges (Goldberg 2008; Jennings 2017; Nylund 2007) and enabling them to better deal with age-appropriate moral dilemmas (Binnendyk and Schonert Reichel 2002; Knapp 2003), like how to react to bullying (Orpinas and Horne 2006). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the Harry Potter novels have been recognised as stimuli for encouraging children and adolescents' growth (Thunnissen 2010), allowing them to deal with emotional dilemmas and to negotiate the challenges of identity development (Frank and McBee 2003; Lake 2003; Markell and Markell 2008; Mulholland 2006).

Moreover, there is scientific evidence for the role of the Harry Potter novels in improving youth well-being and behaviours. Klim-Conforti et al. (2021), for example, found that a 3-month teacher-led intervention based on Harry Potter reading (vs. a control group) reduced suicidality and improved the well-being of pre-adolescents. Further, Seroczynski et al. (2011) found that youth within a juvenile justice centre demonstrated behavioural improvements (as assessed by pre-post self-reports) after reading Harry Potter novels (Seroczynski et al. 2011). There is even evidence that reading Harry Potter can foster broader social equality. Starting from the observation that Harry Potter novels are deeply engaged in intergroup conflict and tensions (Beers and Apple 2006), Vezzali et al. (2015) found across three studies that reading Harry Potter was associated (among individuals more identified with Harry Potter and its values, or less identified with Voldemort, the antagonist of the saga) with reduced generalised prejudice towards a range of disadvantaged groups, including immigrants, refugees, gay and lesbian people (see also Ol'hová et al. 2023, who extended findings to Roma and Muslims, and Vezzali 2016, who also found improvement of attitudes towards individuals with disability; see also Vezzali and Stathi 2021).

Drawing on this established research, we argue that Harry Potter and his friends, who are at the core of our intervention, portray moral and ethical values, behave as agents of social justice (Satterly 2017) and can act as role models (Delzescaux 2009). The novels themselves incorporate powerful metaphors through which readers can learn about themselves, vicariously overcome adversities and transcend a sense of helplessness when confronted with seemingly insoluble dilemmas (Hook 2006; McNulty 2008). It is also important to note that readers can find meaning and real elements from reading fiction, such as Harry Potter (Das 2016), making it a potential tool for offering parasocial experiences that can provide guidance for real-life adversities. In the novels, Harry and his friends stand by each other and empower others to fight unjust social influence (Green 2006), such as that of passive bystanders in the presence of a bullying episode.

1.3 | Bullying in Harry Potter

The Harry Potter novels address a series of complex moral issues, and we argue that bullying is one of these. A recurrent theme in the novels, for example, is the distinction among *pure-bloods* (wizards and witches who have both magic parents), *muggles* (persons without magic powers, born from non-magic parents) and *halfbloods*, sometimes derogatorily referred to as *mudbloods* (wizards and witches either with only one magic parent or *muggle-born*). Being a *halfblood* is one of the reasons why Hermione is bullied by Slytherins, whereas other characters are bullied because they are clumsy (Neville Longbottom) or look unconventional (Luna Lovegood; in this case, even Harry and his friends are not immune to it until awareness of the consequences of bullying is met). Many passages in the novels depict bystanders' reactions to instances of bullying, showcasing different types of bystanders, such as passive or active bully supporters (other Slytherins), as well as active bystanders supporting the victim (among Gryffindors).

Different ways to face bullying are also depicted in the novels. An example is when the character Neville is consistently defended against bullies by his friends and, over time, finds the strength to react himself, whereas the character Luna generally ignores derogatory comments about her and remains isolated until she finds true friends in the protagonists. These, however, are not the only examples of bullying behaviour and intervention (or lack therefore) in the novels. Others include: where it was outlined that professor Snape was bullied when he was a Hogwarts student by Harry's father and his friends (while being defended by Harry's mother); and, in the way that house elves (magical creatures presented in a humanised way, like disadvantaged group members; see Wang et al. 2015) are bullied by wizards and witches, but Hermione stands up for them. In these and other examples throughout the novels, several bullying forms (verbal, physical, relational, interpersonal, bias-based, which is bullying motivated by prejudice against a social category; Earnshaw et al. 2018; Vezzali et al., In press) are depicted; all bullying roles (bully, victim, bystanders) are described, and several types of consequences (e.g., social exclusion) are shown.

It is also worth noting that even the main protagonists in the novels themselves act as bullies, or close to on occasions. For instance, Harry's and Ron's (not)funny remarks towards Luna, before their friendship develops, allow the reader to develop an awareness that none of us are immune to bullying. The main characters' transition towards recognition and understanding can then become the reader's transition towards a new self, in line with the characters' changes in the self towards greater maturity.

In sum, we believe that the Harry Potter novels are ideal stimuli for an intervention to raise awareness among children and adolescents of what bullying is and its consequences, as well as to encourage them to stand up and support others who are being bullied by promoting key psychological factors such as empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy.

2 | Anti-Bullying Interventions

Bullying can be especially harmful to well-being and health during the period of adolescence. It has been found, for example, that bullying is associated with increased anxiety and depression (Stapinski et al. 2015; Ttofi et al. 2011), suicidal thoughts (Holt et al. 2015) and psychosomatic issues (Gini and Pozzoli 2009), which cause disruptive behaviours, such as drug use (Ttofi et al. 2016). There is also an evidence that bullying can result in lower school achievement (Strøm et al. 2013) and negatively impact the overall development of personal identity (van Hoof et al. 2008), as well as social relations within peer groups (Salmivalli 2010). Bullying, therefore, is something that needs to be addressed to ensure more positive outcomes for children and adolescents and is the target of a significant number of intervention programmes globally.

Recent reviews and meta-analyses allow cautious optimism on the effects of anti-bullying programmes, showing reductions in bullying perpetration and victimisation, with also positive

outcomes on related variables like school climate, health and well-being (Fraguas et al. 2021; Gaffney, Farrington, et al. 2019; Hensums et al. 2023; Jiménez-Barbero et al. 2016; Lee et al. 2015; Ng et al. 2022). Results are, however, often modest and heterogeneous, with variation among studies (Gaffney, Ttofi, et al. 2019).

2.1 | Popular Anti-Bullying Programmes

There are a significant number of anti-bullying programmes, each with varying foci and techniques. Many draw on a socio–ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Swearer and Espelage 2004), targeting different actors, such as peers, teachers and parents, and focusing on varied policies such as promoting a positive school climate. In their meta-analysis of bullying interventions, Lee et al. (2015) differentiated four main approaches used in anti-bullying programmes: (1) curriculum-based (including student activities such as lectures and videos); (2) social skill modification (training to improve skills such as coping); (3) emotional training (to control negative emotional reactions to bullying [e.g., anxiety and anger]) and (4) peer counselling (where students are provided with emotional support and active listening). These approaches are not mutually exclusive and most programmes include more than one of them.

Whilst there are many anti-bullying programmes globally, some stand out for their wide use and evidence-base. Arguably the most popular anti-bullying intervention is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme (Olweus 1993; Olweus et al. 2007), developed in the 1990s. This specific programme identifies the importance of parents acting as good role models and providing consistent justice norms to their children. The programme is not only preventive but also targets children already involved or at risk of being bullies or victims, together with their families.

A further example is the NoTrap! programme, which was originally developed in Italy after 2010 to face cyberbullying (see Menesini et al. 2012) and has now been expanded to intervene in more traditional forms of bullying (Palladino et al. 2016). It is delivered by both psychologists and trained peer educators, and it is largely based on student collaboration and peer education to foster bystanders' defending/supportive behaviour.

Another popular intervention is the PRIMA programme, which was developed in The Netherlands. It focuses on the individual, the class, the school and includes curriculum-based activities and teacher training.

Meta-analytic evidence, including over 100 independent evaluations, identifies the Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme and NoTrap! as the most effective in reducing bullying perpetration or victimisation, respectively (Gaffney, Farrington, et al. 2019). These programmes consider a wide range of actors (such as students, teachers and parents) and activities for students (especially bystanders), including class lessons, games, group discussions, forums and collective tasks with a strong focus on training and raising awareness of bullying. Through these approaches, the programmes tend to target the important psychological processes that are associated with tackling bullying behaviour.

3 | Main Psychological Constructs: Empathy, Moral Disengagement and Self-Efficacy

Based on the foci of anti-bullying programmes and what is evidenced in the broader bullying literature, we focus on three of the main psychological constructs shown to be effective in counteracting bullying and predicting bystanders' responses, namely empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy.

3.1 | Empathy

Empathy can be understood as the ability to recognise or understand the feeling of others and is a widely investigated construct that is typically associated with more prosocial and less aggressive behaviours (e.g., Eisenberg et al. 2010). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that empathy is one of the core components associated with bullying prevention and is often used in interventions aimed at preventing aggression in school contexts (Malti et al. 2016). A recent meta-analysis identified affective empathy, the emotional reaction to the emotions experienced by others (Feshbach 1978), as being most strongly associated with bystanders' defending behaviour (Deng et al. 2021).

3.2 | Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement is a socio-cognitive process used by individuals to justify their (immoral) actions, such as violent and aggressive behaviour against others, without experiencing negative psychological consequences for the self (Bandura 1999; Bandura 2002a). Specifically, moral disengagement consists of a set of strategies (such as cognitive restructuring, minimising one's role or the consequences of the behaviour and dehumanising others) that individuals can take advantage of to perceive immoral actions as moral, to feel justified in committing these immoral acts and to reduce or remove feelings such as guilt and shame. Several studies have demonstrated moral disengagement to be positively associated with aggressive behaviour and negatively associated with prosocial behaviour (Bandura et al. 2001; Bandura et al. 1996; for a meta-analysis, see Gini et al. 2014). Evidence also demonstrates a positive association of moral disengagement with bullying behaviour (Bjarehed et al. 2021; Camodeca et al. 2019) and passive, unconcerned bystander behaviours (Obermann 2011), as well as a negative association between moral disengagement and bystanders' defending behaviour (Eijigu and Teketel 2023; Thornberg and Jungert 2013).

3.3 | Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, individuals' beliefs that they can successfully act and achieve their desired goals (Bandura 1997), is directly relevant to bystander behaviour: if children and adolescents feel that their actions can be effective in countering bullying, then they

are more likely to engage in actions to defend others against bullying. Several studies have empirically supported this reasoning, showing a positive association between defender self-efficacy (i.e., perceiving to be able to stop bullying or to help a victim) and bystanders' reactions to bullying (e.g., Gini et al. 2008; Thornberg et al. 2020).

Research exploring two or more of these psychological processes simultaneously shows that they have independent and additive effects on both bystanders' pro-bullying and defending behaviour (Eijigu and Teketel 2023; Gini et al. 2022). A meta-analysis testing the three above factors, for example, including 172 reports from 155 studies and an impressive total sample of 150,978 children and adolescents from four continents, revealed the positive associations of empathy (both affective and cognitive) and of self-efficacy with defending behaviour and a negative association between moral disengagement and defending behaviour (Ma et al. 2019). These findings strongly support our assertion of the importance of each of empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy to help counteract bullying by encouraging bystander intervention intentions.

4 | Anti-Bullying Story Reading Interventions and Popular Fiction: Theoretical Foundations

Although several anti-bullying programmes may appear rather a theoretical, some are underpinned by social cognitive theory which posits that observation of others (accompanied by observing rewards and punishments for their actions) provides individuals with attitudes, beliefs and behavioural patterns that can be applied to other contexts (Bandura 2001). This observation of others also provides observers with social norms, an unwritten guide as to how to think and act in social situations (Bandura 1986). An example of a programme using a sociocognitive approach is KIVA, developed in the 2000s in Finland (see Kärnä et al. 2013). This programme focuses on the role of peers as the main actors in bullying contexts and consists of curriculum materials that are broadly intended to create anti-bullying norms and target bystanders. In doing so, it reduces social rewards associated with bullying and therefore instances of bullying behaviour.

Particularly relevant to the present research, a social cognitive approach can be applied to mass media and more generally to story reading (including both published or unpublished stories). Specifically, the indirect experience of parasocial interactions with story or media characters can encourage people to observe and learn, and through the process of abstract modelling translate learnt attitudes, beliefs and behaviours to everyday life (Bandura 2002b). Observing successful interactions (i.e., observing rewards associated with story and media characters' behaviours) represents a relevant source of information that can shape individuals' behaviour (Bandura 2004). An example of applying this approach to intervention is found in the Bullying Literature Project which uses children's storybooks to reduce moral disengagement (Wang and Goldberg 2017) and foster bystander intervention in primary school children (Wang et al. 2015). Ad-hoc created stories and fairy tales have been also found to foster bystanders' willingness to intervene in bullying episodes and to promote empathy and anti-bullying social norms among children (Cocco et al. 2022, 2023).

Parasocial experiences achieved through engaging with ad-hoc created stories or media such as books, tv and movies, involve psychological processes including experience-taking and narrative transportation (Green and Brock 2000; Green and Appel 2024; Kaufman and Libby 2012; Oatley 2016). These allow for an immersive experience where the reader/viewer can simulate and adopt the character mindset. These processes, which can lead to a fusion with characters, may encourage individuals to activate trait characteristics similar to those displayed by the characters, impacting the individual's self-concept and potentially leading to self-transformations (Green et al. 2004; Sestir and Green 2010). In other words, there may be a spillover effect from the narrative to the readers'/viewers' self-concept (Green and Brock 2002).

When considering the potential effects of parasocial experiences, it is important to differentiate between parasocial interactions—namely the perception of mutually interacting with the character during media exposure; Dibble and Rosaen 2011—and parasocial relationships, which refer to stronger emotional and cognitive experiences, where the reader/viewer experiences a sense of intimacy that does not end with media exposure but can continue into daily contexts. There is evidence that the latter produces stronger media involvement (Tukachinsky et al. 2020) which suggests, then, that interventions capitalising on parasocial relationships would have greater chances of success in reducing bullying behaviours.

4.1 | The Relevance of Harry Potter Novels to Empathy, Moral Disengagement, Self-Efficacy and Bystanders' Reactions

Not all storybooks are created equal, some are more engaging and facilitate transportation more easily than others (Fisher 1984). We argue that parasocial relationships rather than parasocial interactions characterise the fruition of the Harry Potter novels (Ingram and Luckett 2019) and using popular fiction as a tool to fight bullying likely represents the greatest novelty of the present work. There are indications that the Harry Potter novels promote narrative transportation and an immersive experience (Gabriel and Young 2011; Hsu et al. 2014; Ol'hová et al. 2023). Therefore, we argue that a further advantage of using Harry Potter passages is that it may evoke a stronger and more vivid emotional response to bullying incidences associated with important psychological processes such as greater empathy, lower moral disengagement and more perceived defender self-efficacy.

Within the Harry Potter novels, being narratively transported into the story and identifying with the main actors who defend victims may facilitate the adoption of the characters' perspective to understand others and experience their emotions. This includes both understanding the perspective of the characters who support bullying victims, as well as the perspective and the emotions experienced by victims, who often are main characters (for evidence that reading fiction can foster transportation and empathy, see e.g., Bal and Veltkamp 2013; Johnson 2012). It is likely, for instance, that a focus on Hermione's suffering at

being bullied by the Slytherins produces similar emotions in the reader as observing Ron's reaction to Hermione being bullied by Draco can produce reactive empathy, a form of empathy connected to the emotional reactions experienced by another person (Stephan and Finlay 1999)—in this case, anger.

When it comes to moral disengagement, evidence demonstrates that themes of morality are often central in media storylines and, consequently, fiction can act as a moral guide for individuals (Raney and Janicke 2013, 2014). Within Harry Potter there are a series of passages that we argue act as a moral guide for readers. An example is when Hagrid makes clear that Hermione being called a 'filthy little Mudblood' is something dangerous and worth consideration. Here Hagrid debunks the idea that the consequences of name-calling are minimal and in turn raises awareness of the need for morally responsible behaviour.

Finally, self-efficacy, which can provide individuals with motivation and agency to act, can be increased by observing others being effective and rewarded for their moral behaviour (Bandura 1997). We argue that when it comes to reading Harry Potter, consistent with the process of symbolic learning, what is acquired in a given situation (e.g., through reading or media watching) can be generalised across contexts (Bandura 1986) to impact upon behaviour. For example, observing Harry successfully defending Neville when he is robbed of his Remembrall could provide children and adolescents with a behavioural guide and suggest that victims can be successfully helped or emotionally supported, tangentially producing popularity of the defender (social reward).

Taken together, there are theoretical premises to suggest that reading Harry Potter may be associated with encouraging intentions to engage in anti-bullying bystander behaviours, through fostering empathy, reducing moral disengagement and promoting self-efficacy. And it is this assertion that we explore in the present research through our implementation of the SPELL intervention.

5 | The Present Research

We designed and empirically evaluated SPELL, a 4-week intervention aimed at providing awareness of bullying and fostering bystanders' reactions to bullying episodes among children and adolescents. The intervention uses passages from the Harry Potter novels and is delivered across four sessions. In line with other bullying programmes (e.g., PRIMA; see Van Verseveld et al. 2021), it provides awareness of: (a) the different forms of bullying (physical, verbal and relational bullying; interpersonal and bias-based bullying); (b) the main bullying actors (bully, victim and bystanders); (c) the consequences of bullying and (d) the ways to counteract bullying. SPELL was also designed to facilitate the main psychological processes deeply involved in bullying established in the research literature that is empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy.

We argue that SPELL makes several advances to existing literature. First, to the extent that intervention effects are often modest and heterogeneous, it is important to identify motivating and engaging ways to discuss bullying. To achieve this, we use popular fantasy literature, with the belief that SPELL can be motivating for children (Gaffney, Ttofi, et al. 2019). Second, the activities included in most psychological anti-bullying interventions are often not specifically designed to impact on key constructs as identified by the literature. In contrast, SPELL draws on the findings from the bullying literature, identifies a main dependent variable (bystanders' intentions to intervene) and three main psychological processes (empathy, moral disengagement, self-efficacy), designing programme activities to directly address on these constructs. Finally, many programmes include a high number of sessions targeting multiple actors (e.g., teachers, parents), whereas SPELL uses a rather short intervention (four sessions) targeting children. Although wider programmes have greater chances of obtaining broader effects, it is important to test the effectiveness of shorter interventions, which may be more easily adopted by schools (which often suffer of organisational and temporal constraints).

In the *experimental condition*, in each of the four sessions, participants read selected passages from the Harry Potter novels and engaged in discussions and activities related to these passages. Specifically, Session 1 focused on the actors of bullying; Session 2 focused on the different forms of bullying; Session 3 was concerned with the consequences of bullying and Session 4 considered about the possible ways to counteract bullying behaviour. Each session also focused specifically on one of the main psychological processes investigated. Specifically, Session 1 targeted self-efficacy; Session 2 discussed moral disengagement; Session 3 focused on empathy; and Session 4 resumed the three processes in relation to bystanders' ways to counteract bullying. In the *control condition*, participants did not engage in any activity except completing a questionnaire.

We expect that the anti-bullying conduct of protagonists of the Harry Potter novels will contribute to changing participants' beliefs about bullying and their behavioural intentions to react to it. Specifically, we expect that participants in the experimental (vs. control) group will display greater intentions to react to bullying episodes. We also expect that participants in the experimental (vs. control) condition will display greater empathy and self-efficacy, and lower moral disengagement. Finally, we predict that the effect of the experimental (vs. control) condition on greater intentions to react to bullying episodes will be mediated by an increase in empathy and self-efficacy, and a decrease in moral disengagement.

6 | Method

6.1 | Participants

Participants were 346[2] Italian students from two middle schools located in a Northern Italian province. Two participants who showed difficulties in understanding the questionnaire, as assessed by the researchers, were excluded from the data analysis; 1 participant was excluded because the child did not fill it with attention and selected more than one response option in most items. No participants withdrew from the questionnaire; all respondents completed it in its entirety. The final sample includes 343 children and adolescents (162 females, 2 who selected 'other', 1 who preferred not to declare gender) aged between 10

and 15 years old (M_{age} = 12.18 years, SD_{age} = 0.91). Results of a sensitivity power analysis ran on G*Power (Faul et al. 2007) for a one-way between-subjects design with two conditions revealed that with $\alpha = 0.05$ and $1-\beta = 0.80$, the minimum detectable effect size was $f = 0.15$, which can be considered a small effect (Cohen 1988)[3].

Classes in each school were randomly assigned to the experimental or the control condition. The experimental condition included 179 participants; 164 participants were assigned to the control condition. Overall, participants reported having previous knowledge of the Harry Potter saga: on average, they watched 4.27 out of eight ($SD = 3.52$) Harry Potter films and read 0.90 out of 7 ($SD = 1.83$) Harry Potter books[4].

The study was conducted under the Declaration of Helsinki, and IRB approval was obtained by the Ethics Committee of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (protocol number: 0297421, 22nd February 2024). Before data collection, all parents of the participants received a letter depicting the intervention and the research and asking them to provide informed consent for their child to participate. Students were informed about the study's purposes, the anonymity of their responses and the possibility to withdraw at any time during data collection. The intervention and data collection took place between February and June 2024.

6.2 | Procedure

Researchers who conducted the intervention were university students trained by the third and last authors of the present article. In the *experimental condition*, participants took part in 75-min sessions once per week for four consecutive weeks. In each classroom, they were divided into small groups of about five members, each one supervised by a researcher. Every week, participants read, together with the researcher, selected passages from the Harry Potter saga depicting episodes of bullying and showcasing how they were handled by the protagonists. Each session included the collective reading of one or more passages, followed by reflection activities to be implemented on either tablets or computers and a prompt-led discussion. The four sessions are summarised below, see Supporting Information for full details of the intervention.

Session 1's theme was 'The actors of bullying', and the target psychological construct was bystander self-efficacy. After a brief introduction to the Harry Potter saga, participants were read a passage in which Neville Longbottom, a clumsy fellow Gryffindor of Harry's, is targeted during a flying lesson by Draco Malfoy, who steals his 'Remembrall' (a magical object sent to him by his grandmother) and flies away with it where Neville is unable to retrieve it. Harry faces Malfoy and manages to retrieve Neville's Remembrall by flying skilfully; afterwards, he is celebrated by his friends. Following reading the passage, the researcher explained the different social roles within this bullying scenario and presented students with a digital matching game, in which they had to match each story character (i.e., Draco, Neville, Harry, other schoolmates) with a role (bully, victim, ally, bystanders). Students were also asked to discuss what happened in the passage with questions aimed at reflecting on bystanders' self-efficacy, such as 'What are the consequences of Harry's actions?', 'How does he feel at the end?', or 'Will he behave like this again in the future?'[5].

The session was concluded by reading another passage from the saga's last book, where Neville, after many vicarious and personal self-efficacy experiences, is able to stand up to the ultimate bully, the villain of the saga, Lord Voldemort.

During Session 2, the different 'Forms of bullying' (i.e., physical, verbal, relational, as well as interpersonal vs. bias-based) were used to present and deconstruct the moral disengagement mechanisms established in the research literature. First, a series of passages depicting various forms of bullying were presented to the group, such as a young Snape being attacked by the 'Marauders' group (Harry's father and his friends), Luna Lovegood being called 'lunatic', or Ron calling Hermione a know-it-all behind her back. Following this, students were asked to work together to identify, in each passage, the type of bullying and the moral disengagement mechanisms enacted by the bullies (e.g., in the Marauder's case, the diffusion of responsibility among the group and blaming Snape who 'had it coming'). A discussion took then place on the importance of recognising and avoiding these disengagement mechanisms.

Session 3 aimed to foster student's empathy by focusing on the 'Consequences of bullying'. Again, a series of passages were read with the students, depicting some dangerous long-term consequences of bullying, such as self-harm (Dobby, the house elf who self-flagellates if he speaks ill of the Malfoy family for whom he works), social isolation and depression (Moaning Myrtle, the ghost of the girls' bathroom, who died while hiding from bullies), normalisation of violence (Charity Burbage, Hogwarts Muggle Studies professor, killed by Voldemort amidst the laughter of his followers), or ghettoisation (as showcased by the Muggle-Born Registration Commission, aimed at separating them from 'pure blood' wizards). After explaining what happened in the passages, students played a digital game in which they had to correctly identify the consequences depicted in each passage and were then engaged in a discussion on the emotions experienced by each victim, to foster empathy towards them.

In Session 4, students actively worked on how bystanders can counteract bullying by taking into account empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy, all encountered in the previous sessions. A famous passage was read in this session, when Draco Malfoy calls Hermione (one of Harry's best friends), 'filthy Mudblood', alluding to the fact that she is born from Muggle parents. Ron reacts violently to defend Hermione but ends up hurting himself with a spell. Other characters react differently, by verbally facing Malfoy or comforting Hermione. The subsequent activities aimed at showing students the difference between defending a victim and payback ('What happens when resort to violence to fight violence?'), and identifying possible strategies to support a victim, based on empowering self-efficacy ('How can bystanders become allies?'), showing empathy ('How do bystanders feel when they do nothing?') and/or deconstructing the moral disengagement mechanisms ('Why do you think the bystanders do not intervene? How can we overcome these thoughts?'). At the end of

the last intervention session, students were administered a questionnaire.

Students in the *control condition* completed the questionnaire at the same time as the intervention group without engaging in additional activities. However, to ensure that all participants had access to the potential benefits of the intervention, these participants were provided with the intervention in the weeks after completing the questionnaire.

6.3 | Measures

All student participants were administered a questionnaire assessing: (1) bystander empathy; (2) moral disengagement; (3) self-efficacy and (4) intentions to defend victims of bullying. The measures were as follows:

Empathy was assessed via Olweus' Empathic Responsiveness Questionnaire (ERQ: Olweus and Endresen 1998), which measures the affective empathic responsiveness of students with specific reference to bullying. The ERQ consists of 12 items (e.g., 'When I see a girl/boy who is hurt, I wish to help her'; 'I feel very sorry for a student who is being bullied by others') to which the participant answered on a scale from 1 ('*not at all*') to 5 ('*very much*'). The twelve items were averaged into one score ($\alpha = 0.86$). Higher scores indicate stronger empathic responses.

To assess *Moral disengagement* (in bullying), students were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) with six items (Thornberg and Jungert 2013; Thornberg et al. 2017). For example, 'Bullying is okay in certain cases'. The six items were averaged into one score ($\alpha = 0.72$), with higher scores reflecting higher moral disengagement.

To test *bystander self-efficacy*, students were asked to express their agreement towards statements from the five-item Defender Self-Efficacy Scale (Thornberg et al. 2017). Examples of items included: 'I feel that I'm very good at telling off/standing up to students who are mean towards another student'; 'I feel that I'm very good at helping students who are bullied'. Participants responded by using a five-point scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The average of these five items was computed for each student (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$) with higher scores indicating higher bystander self-efficacy.

Lastly, the *bystanders' intentions to intervene* were assessed with an adapted version of the Intentions to Victim Support Scale (Marx et al. 2023). In the original version, three items measure the intentions to (a) console the victim ('In the future, when I witness a peer who is being bullied, I will comfort him/her'), (b) address the bully ('In the future, when I witness a peer who is being bullied, I will try to stop the bullies from doing it') and seek adult help ('In the future, when I witness a peer who is being bullied, I will get an adult to help him/her'). In line with our intervention, we added two further items ('In the future, when I witness a peer who is being bullied, I will try to make him/her understand that she/he has the resources to get out of it' and 'In the future, when I witness a peer who is being bullied, I will try to explain to him/her that she/he should not listen to bullies'). Items were scored on a 5-point scale from 1 ('*not at all*') to 5 ('*very much*'). Items were averaged in a composite score of willingness to support a victimised peer in the future ($\alpha = 0.86$).

7 | Results

All analyses were performed on R. First, we ran a one-way MANOVA to test whether, consistent with our predictions, participants assigned to the experimental (vs. the control) condition reported greater intentions to intervene when witnessing episodes of bullying against a peer, greater empathy and self-efficacy, and lower moral disengagement. In line with our hypotheses, results showed a significant multivariate effect of the experimental condition on the variables, $V = 0.04$, $F(4, 338) = 3.54$, $p < 0.01$. A separate univariate ANOVA revealed a significant difference in participants' intentions to intervene, $F(1, 341) = 11.30$; $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.032$, with participants assigned to the experimental condition ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.65$) reporting greater intentions, compared with those in the control condition ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.78$). Consistently, students reported fewer moral disengagement strategies when assigned to the experimental ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 0.42$) compared with the control condition ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.54$); $F(1, 341) = 5.23$; $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2_p = 0.015$, as well as greater empathy in the experimental ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.65$), than in the control condition ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.72$); $F(1, 341) = 7.01$; $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2_p = 0.020$. As for self-efficacy perceptions, despite the ANOVA not reaching the conventional threshold for significance, $F(1, 341) = 3.11$, $p = 0.079$, $\eta^2_p = 0.009$, the pattern of results aligned with previous findings: participants in the experimental condition ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.72$) revealed a tendency to report greater self-efficacy perceptions, compared with those in the control condition ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.83$). See Figure 1 for a graphical representation of the results.

Finally, we employed the *lavaan* package (Rosseel 2012) to test our hypothesised mediation model—that the effects of the intervention on bystander intentions would be mediated by empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy. Indirect effects were assessed with bootstrapping (10,000 resamples). The experimental condition (reference category: control condition) was entered as the predictor variable in the model; our measures of empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy were entered as the mediators; and finally, intentions to intervene was entered as the dependent variable. See Table 1 for the regression models (for a graphical representation of mediation, see Figure 2).

Partially in line with our hypothesis, results demonstrate that the effect of the intervention on intentions to intervene was mediated by increased empathy (point estimate = 0.07, 95% CI [0.018, 0.133]) and decreased moral disengagement (point estimate = 0.03, 95% CI [0.003, 0.063]); the indirect effect of increased self-efficacy, however, was only marginally significant (point estimate = 0.03, 90% CI [0.002, 0.069])[6].

A series of Wald tests were conducted to compare the indirect effects estimated in our model. Across all comparisons, the Wald tests did not reveal any significant differences between the pairs

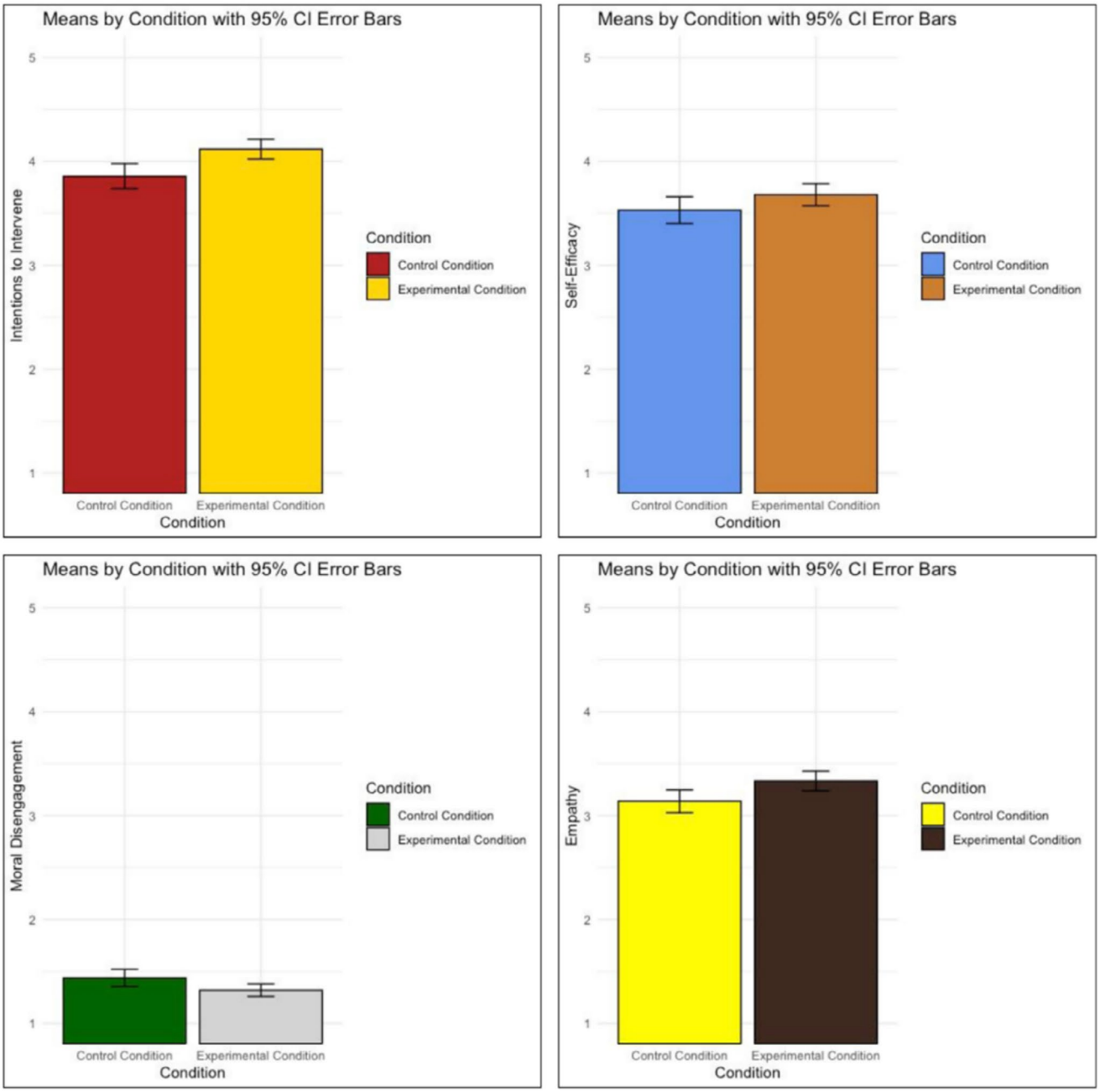

FIGURE 1 | Mean values with 95% CI error bars for 'control' versus 'experimental' conditions for intentions to intervene, empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy. Magic note: See the Social Impact Statement to solve a riddle and get the spell to fight bullying.

of indirect effects, suggesting that all mediators contribute similarly to the relationship between the experimental (vs. control) condition and the dependent variable.

8 | Discussion

Bullying represents a risk factor for children and adolescents both in terms of their well-being (Reijntjes et al. 2010) and reactive anti-social behaviour (Farrington and Welsh 2013). Designing engaging and effective anti-bullying and prevention programmes is therefore a priority in schools globally. Aligning with previous research on the beneficial effects of engagement in literary fiction (Kidd and Castano 2013) in general, and of the Harry Potter saga in particular (Thunnissen 2010), in the present research we designed and evaluated the effectiveness of SPELL, an intervention based on the Harry Potter novels to counteract bullying, aiming to provide awareness on bullying and foster bystanders' intentions to react to bullying episodes instead than being passive bystanders.

Results were generally consistent with our hypotheses. First, the intervention (vs. control) was effective in fostering bystanders' willingness to intervene in bullying situations. Second, we found support for the mediating role of empathy and moral disengagement, two of the main factors associated with reactions to bullying (Ma et al. 2019), on intentions to intervene. This suggests that the intervention not only encouraged bystanders to

TABLE 1 | Relationships among the variables in the mediation model.

	Mediators			Outcome variable
Predictor	**Empathy**	**Moral disengagement**	**Self-efficacy**	**Intentions to intervene**
Experimental condition	**0.14 [0.051, 0.341]**	**−0.12 [−0.224, −0.016]**	0.10 [−0.017, 0.318][a]	0.09 [−0.002,0.254]
Mediators				
Empathy				**0.37 [0.256, 0.487]**
Moral disengagement				**−0.18 [−0.418, −0.089]**
Self-efficacy				**0.26 [0.132, 0.324]**

Note: Effects are standardised. Statistically significant effects (in bold) determined by 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (10,000 bootstrapped samples).
[a]The direct effect of the experimental condition on self-efficacy was marginally significant, 90% CI [0.010, 0.288].

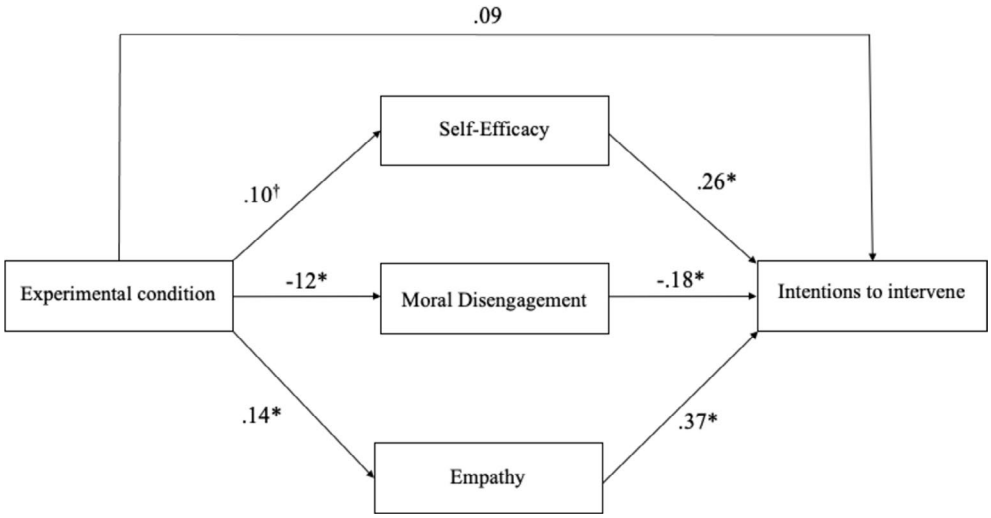

FIGURE 2 | Representation of the direct relationships among the variables in the mediation model. Effects are standardised. Asterisks (*) indicate statistically significant effects determined by 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval. Dagger (†) indicates marginally significant effect determined by 90% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals.

take action but did so by increasing their empathy towards victims and by reducing their moral disengagement, making them more likely to feel responsible and emotionally responsive to those affected by bullying. Whilst the mediational effect for self-efficacy on intentions to intervene in bullying was marginal, the association between self-efficacy and bystanders' intentions to intervene was significant, offering tentative but weaker evidence for the relevance of this specific psychological process for counteracting bullying.

It is worth noting that the indirect effects of the three mediators did not statistically differ from one another. In other words, the indirect effect for self-efficacy was not lower than the indirect effects for empathy and moral disengagement. One possibility for the weak effect of self-efficacy may be due to the strength of activities conducted: Although we devoted one session to each of the three psychological processes (plus a focus on all three aspects in the last session), such amount of time may be insufficient to significantly alter self-efficacy, and/or our activities may not have been sufficiently powerful to elicit stronger self-efficacy. Indeed, although empathy and moral disengagement can be more influenced through engagement with the narrative, building self-efficacy refers to the participants' confidence in their ability to intervene successfully, which might benefit from further experiential reinforcement (Pöyhönen et al. 2012). In this sense, the marginal effects indicate that activities were at least partially successful; future applications may need to focus on strengthening the session(s) devoted to self-efficacy. A potential addition to the intervention to further promote self-efficacy could be providing children with the opportunity to practice acting like defenders in a safe environment by incorporating role-playing scenarios ('Play as Ron or Harry and defend Hermione') or by rehearsing intervention strategies as a further session about self-efficacy.

It is also important to consider that although our three investigated underlying processes were shown to have additive independent effects, they can also interact and reinforce each other. This is in line with Thornberg et al. (2020), for example, who found that greater moral disengagement was positively associated with reinforcing bullying, but such an association was less strong in classes characterised by higher collective efficacy. In other words, self-efficacy at the collective level buffered the negative effects of moral disengagement. In another study, Thornberg et al. (2015) found that the associations of moral disengagement with lower defending behaviour and higher

bullying behaviours were stronger when empathy for the victim was low. Such findings underscore the need to act on a broad set of key factors, which represent complementary and interactive processes that together can counteract bullying more effectively.

8.1 | Theoretical Implications

We believe these findings provide substantial theoretical advancement. First, we show for the first time that popular fiction such as Harry Potter can represent a powerful tool to counteract bullying through promoting intervention intentions. Research has shown that bullying can in some cases represent a strategic-oriented behaviour, aimed at gaining social status among peers (van den Broek et al. 2016); although not ubiquitous, the association between bullying perpetration and social status sometimes occurs (Kosir et al. 2022). Popularity is distinct from likeability, and bullies can be more interested in the former than in the latter (Garandeau and Lansu 2019). Possibly, the present intervention reduced perceptions that bullying can bring popularity: based on role models from Harry Potter novels, it showed not only that bullies are disliked, but that popularity is gained when one stands for weak persons and not when they oppose or even are indifferent to them (see, e.g., the popularity gained by Harry when defending Neville, who was bullied by Draco Malfoy). In other words, such novels may allow individuals to gain popularity for acting against bullying, rather than for perpetrating it. This is something that could be tested in future research. Future research may also benefit from directly investigating constructs like narrative transportation, experience-taking, motivation, which are directly relevant to the use of popular fiction and its underlying processes.

Second, although empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy have been implemented explicitly and implicitly within several bullying programmes to varying extents, we adopted a research-informed approach by designing ad-hoc activities aimed at fostering specific changes in these core psychological constructs. This allowed for a more focused and stringent empirical test of the effectiveness of the intervention, determining whether and how effects are mediated by empathy, moral disengagement and self-efficacy. We argue that targeting relevant psychological constructs with motivating stories on one side, and ad-hoc designed activities on the other side, represents a step towards standardising effective science-based anti-bullying tools. It also allows for research-informed practice and for field research to cyclically feedback into theoretical development. It is worth noting that targeting specific psychological constructs during an intervention not only represents a practical indication, but especially a theoretical advancement: interventions that do not directly target psychological constructs cannot determine which underlying process are specifically relevant, especially if multiple constructs are simultaneously considered (like in the present research). Here, for example, we see weaker evidence for the mediational effect of self-efficacy and this is something that can be considered in more detail theoretically and empirically in future research.

It is worth noting that theoretically it is also possible that simply reading Harry Potter may reduce bullying by raising awareness, decreasing bullying behaviour and encouraging more proactive responses to bullying situations. This is in line with previous research showing that reading Harry Potter, for those highly identified with the main character, has positive social effects, like reducing prejudice (Vezzali et al. 2015). We acknowledge the possibility that a similar effect may also occur for bullying, given that Harry Potter novels focus on several aspects closely related to this construct, as well as to the psychological constructs investigated in this study (empathy, moral disengagement, self-efficacy). Future studies might explore this intriguing possibility to determine whether additional activities are required or whether simply reading the story would elicit similar effects.

8.2 | Practical Implications and Potential Developments of SPELL

Our findings also have important implications for practitioners. First of all, popular literary fiction is widely read and can interest millions of people, therefore using it may encounter scarce resistance. Although finding issue-specific engaging books may be difficult, the Harry Potter novels as an example of popular fiction may easily attract the interest of teachers and of students equally. Also, they are likely to be relevant across a range of age groups.

Second, within the context of SPELL, we combine the power of literary fiction to an engaging set of activities that teachers and educators can implement to encourage awareness of middle-school students on the topic of bullying by leveraging key psychological processes identified by the scientific literature (i.e., empathy, reduction of moral disengagement and self-efficacy). Interventions such as SPELL (or derivative from it, by considering other popular fictions) may be included in school curricula and motivate students to read while also producing effects like those we have presented here. In other words, popular fiction can serve several purposes, like encouraging school motivation and achieving social educational goals, like counteracting bullying or reducing prejudice (Vezzali et al. 2015).

A third relevant aspect of our intervention is that it addresses children and adolescents in middle-school, a period in which bullying is a particularly pervasive issue (Unnever and Cornell 2003). Although some meta-analyses have found that anti-bullying intervention effects were stronger among children than adolescents (Jiménez-Barbero et al. 2016), others have found the opposite (Ttofi and Farrington 2011). Setting aside this controversy, which may also depend on how effects have been calculated (Salmivalli et al. 2021), we believe a future direction is to adapt our intervention to younger children. Children may be highly motivated to engage in the programme also considering the popularity of Harry Potter: a replication and comparison among age groups can provide indications of the relative effectiveness of the present intervention among both children and adolescents, this way sensibly widening the scope of the programme.

Relatedly, although this study focused on students as the main actors of bullying, it is worth noting that several anti-bullying programmes (e.g., the Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme, or KiVA) adopt a holistic approach, formally involving a wider range of actors, such as parents and teachers, in addition to students. On one side, our study shows that a short intervention

directed to a specific target group like SPELL can also achieve meaningful effects on main psychological constructs identified by the bullying literature. Therefore, it may be adopted by schools characterised by temporal and/or organisational constraints that otherwise would not engage in an anti-bully intervention. On the other side and considering how the Harry Potter novels showcase how adult-initiated negative attitudes can influence children's anti-social behaviours (e.g., Lucius Malfoy's prejudice against muggle-born wizards and witches is mimicked by Draco), a potential future direction for the SPELL programme could be to expand its scope. This would include other relevant actors along a unifying story, reinforcing the consistency of the programme's message. Another expansion of the programme may include readings and activities specifically tailored to other forms of bullying, like cyberbullying and bias-based bullying, to address more fully bullying in all its specific forms. Similarly, although our intervention includes several of the intervention components identified by Gaffney et al. (2021), such as peer level (collaboration among students and group discussions), teacher participation, presence of curriculum material, empowerment of socio–emotional skills (e.g., promotion of empathy), we believe that SPELL could benefit from the inclusion of additional components (by keeping attention not to merely creating a collage and maintaining a consistent message).

Finally, we argue the most relevant addition to SPELL would be the inclusion of sessions and activities specifically meant to provide anti-bullying social norms (which has not been possible in the present intervention, to keep it short and feasible for the schools involved). There is now a shared consensus that bullying represents a group-based phenomenon, with group processes coming into play during social development (Abrams et al. 2017). Key constructs are ingroup identification, social cohesion, role differentiation and group norms (Imuta et al. 2022; Jones et al. 2009; Nesdale et al. 2008; Saarento and Salmivalli 2015), which contribute to defining what is perceived as moral or immoral (Killen et al. 2013), resulting in decisions about social inclusion or exclusion (Rutland et al. 2022), beliefs about peers' pro- or anti-bullying attitudes and behaviours (Mulvey et al. 2016), and own corresponding intentions and behaviour (Charters et al. 2013). However, we also argue that merely providing children and adolescents with anti-bullying norms may be ineffective and may even result in boomerang effects. Indeed, group norms are a product of social identity, guided by more prototypical group members (Turner et al. 1987). Therefore, fostering anti-bullying group norm creation by the participants themselves may be a more effective way to create long-lasting and effective social norms (see Cocco et al. 2022). A possibility is to include a second step to SPELL: starting from bullying awareness and empowerment provided in the first step, participants can discuss and together define the norm and what is appropriate to (think and) do to be a worthy member of the ingroup.

8.3 | Limitations

Despite the important theoretical and practical strengths of the present research, there are a number of limitations that we must acknowledge. First, we used a measure of self-reported intentions to assess willingness to engage in defending behaviours rather than a measurement of behaviour itself. We believe that more objective (or even self-reported) assessments of bullying perpetration or victimisation would have provided modest effects, given that the follow-up occurred a short time after the intervention ended. Future studies should include long-term follow-ups, also using bullying perpetration and victimisation as dependent variables.

Second, whilst we focused on specific aspects of our core psychological constructs such as defender self-efficacy, we recognise that each of these constructs has wider definitions and could be targeted more broadly. As an example, we could identify social self-efficacy (i.e., efficacy in dealing with others), or collective self-efficacy (i.e., self-efficacy at the level of the group, for instance at the level of the class). The intervention may, therefore, be expanded to foster various aspects of the investigated constructs. For instance, a focus on social norms (see above) may be associated with activities aimed to foster collective self-efficacy, which in turn would likely reinforce social norms in a virtuous cycle.

Third, whilst our experimental design is a strength there are several points that could be considered in future research. As noted earlier, it is possible that simply reading the Harry Potter novels would be associated with willingness to intervene in bullying—this could be added as a third experimental condition to compare to control and experimental groups. Further, due to practicalities associated with carrying out research in schools, children were assigned to the experimental or control conditions at the classroom rather than at the individual level. Whilst this prevented potential within-class spillover effects (e.g., students in the experimental condition talking to those in the control condition about the intervention), it does mean that we do not have the most stringent form of randomisation. Relatedly, it should be noted that in such research there may also be a possibility of a spillover effect between classes; the effect of this is somewhat mitigated by the fact that we collected questionnaire responses from control students before the intervention started. Nevertheless, it is a consideration for future research.

Finally, in relation to measures used, we assessed main constructs only after the intervention. Future studies should assess measures both before and after the intervention to directly investigate pre-post changes in the experimental group. In addition, we did not assess identification with the main character. Vezzali et al. (2015) found that a prejudice-reduction intervention based on Harry Potter was more effective among individuals more identified with the main character. Indeed, for instance, participants may feel more transported into the story if they feel similar to the protagonist. It is possible that a similar effect occurs in the present intervention, such that effects may be stronger for those more identified with Harry Potter. Future studies should test this possibility.

9 | Conclusion

We do believe in magic. Not the magic of a spell (we nonetheless hide in this manuscript a novel anti-bullying spell, which even the (muggle) reader can unlock, see the Social Impact Statement). Rather, to us, the real Magic lies in finding the strength to stand up against the injustice of a peer who is bullied

and is too weak to react or cope with it. With SPELL, we hope to have taken a meaningful step in this worthy direction. After all, 'It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities'
(Albus Dumbledore, in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Rowling 1998).

Acknowledgements

Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia. Consortia name: CRUI–CARE 2024. Open access publishing facilitated by Universita degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, as part of the Wiley - CRUI-CARE agreement.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] Although attending school is the dream of millions of children and adults alike, the school (as far as we know) only exists in the saga.

[2] Of the 410 participants taking part in the program, 64 did not fill the questionnaire, because the parents did not provide informed consent, or they were not present in the classroom when the questionnaire was administered.

[3] The result of the sensitivity power analysis suggests that our study was powered enough to detect a small effect ($f = 0.15$) with 80% power. Results of the one-way ANOVAs testing the effect of the experimental condition (vs. control) showed a significantly different degree of intentions to intervene depending on the experimental condition, $F(1, 341) = 11.30$; $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.032$ (corresponding to $f \approx 0.181$).

[4] No difference emerged between the experimental and the control group in terms of Harry Potter books read ($t = 0.93, p = 0.35; M_{experimental} = 0.82$, $SD_{experimental} = 1.88$; $M_{control} = 1.00$, $SD_{control} = 1.78$) or films watched ($t = 1.29, p = 0.20; M_{experimental} = 4.04, SD_{experimental} = 3.61; M_{control} = 4.53$, $SD_{control} = 3.39$).

[5] The prompt questions were designed to favour the participants' reflection on some of the key mechanisms identified by Bandura (2008) for building self-efficacy, that is mastery experiences (achieving a goal) and states of physiology (experiencing positive physical and affective states while or after approaching a goal). This process allowed children to vicariously experience the defender's successes and develop a sense of mastery in addressing similar situations. Discussing the emotional consequences of the defender's actions (e.g., joy, accomplishment) also allows for the generation of positive emotions that reinforce the children's belief in their own ability to intervene effectively in real-life bullying scenarios.

[6] Additionally, we conducted regression analyses using age, gender, number of Harry Potter movies watched and books read as covariates. Results replicated those presented in text.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.