

Greek Preschool Teachers' Perceptions about the Effective Strategies for Bullying Prevention in Preschool Age

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Abstract: The aim of the present research is to explore preschool teachers' perceptions about the effective strategies for bullying prevention in preschool context. The sample of this research study was 164 preschool teachers from Greece. Data were collected by a questionnaire that was based on previous research. The findings show that teachers regard that classroom activities for diversity acceptance, the development of empathy, the cooperation between school and family, the implementation of socio-emotional learning programs in school context and teacher training, are among the most effective strategies. They also value the cooperation between school, family, and community services for bullying prevention as well as peer support and the creation of prevention activities and material such as videos. Research findings may be utilized for designing teacher training and professional development programs aiming at preventing school bullying at an early age.

Keywords: Preschool Teacher Perceptions, School Bullying, Strategies, Prevention.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a prevalent concern among all the members of school community. It represents a social phenomenon and it is common in preschool age. Overt and relational victimization is observed in preschool settings (Monks, Smith, and Swettenham 2005). Prevention of bullying at an early age is crucial as bullying occurrences have enduring negative consequences in student lives. Adjustment problems such as internalizing problems and peer rejection are among the negative consequences of bullying (Crick, Casas, and Ku 1999). Moreover, victimization in preschool age is regarded as a precursor to school avoidance (Kochenderfer and Ladd 1997), as it interferes with academic achievement. In addition, children need to experience safety at an early age in their school environment. The United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child, (Article, 29, 1989) highlights the importance of children's physical and psychological safety. Children need to be valued within the school community and develop a sense of belonging.

Bullying has been investigated in many countries as it gained international attention. There is a plethora of research conducted on bullying among primary school children and adolescents. However, there is a limited amount of published literature on bullying in preschool

age and in particular on preschool teachers' perceptions about preschool bullying. Teachers are expected to play a significant role in prevention and interventions. Teachers responses also guide their behavior (Yoon and Kerber 2003).

DEFINITION OF BULLYING

Bullying has been defined as the intentional harm or injury that is repeated over time. (Olweus 1993). The distinctive features of bullying are the repeatedness, the intention to harm and the asymmetry in power between the victim and the perpetrator. It also emerges without provocation. Bullying roles can form at preschool age (Davis 2015). Preschool, behavioral, emotional and motor problems, socioeconomic status and family breakup are related to involvement in bullying at an early age (Jansen, Veenstra, Ormel, Verhulst, and Reijneveld 2011). According to Perren (2000), victims and bully victims have fewer playmates, less often have a best friend, which is considered a risk factor. Victims are submissive and withdrawn with low social status. Children display both direct and indirect bullying such as relational bullying, which refers to excluding children from peer activities. Research data assert that the psychological forms of bullying, such as verbal and social exclusion are the prevalent forms of bullying in preschool age (Perren, 2000; Repo, 2015).

The goal of present research is to investigate preschool teachers' perceptions regarding the bullying occurrences in preschool education, the way they define bullying, and their perceptions about the effective strategies for bullying prevention. The present

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research article presents only a part of the research that has been conducted. Perceptions are associated with decision making and the willingness to intervene in bullying incidents (Rigby 2002). Furthermore, teachers attitudes are associated with the effectiveness of anti-bullying efforts (Olweus 1993).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Davis (2015) highlights the need for early childhood education interventions. A review of the literature indicates that educating preschool children about the several forms of bullying, the effects of bullying and ways of addressing bullying incidents is part of the prevention efforts. Discussions within the classroom, and development of attitudes and values, such as empathy, is vital for countering this phenomenon. Empathy toward victimized children, a sense of responsibility for helping them as well as education for diversity tolerance can contribute to bullying prevention. In addition, conflict resolution and the control of negative emotions is considered crucial (Rigby, 2003; Levine and Tamburrino, 2014).

The effectiveness of bullying prevention is associated with the participation of the whole kindergarten group and the whole school. It is also linked to a system-wide approach. This approach includes interventions at community level (school-community partnership), and community awareness through discussing issues of bullying. School level approaches involve anti-bullying policies and the establishment of clear rules. School-wide interventions include changing the school culture, raising awareness on the nature of bullying, and heightened monitoring. The individual level interventions incorporate targeted interventions for children at risk (Gorsek and Cunningham 2014).

Pepler and Craig (2014) argue that all stakeholders should participate in bullying prevention and intervention. They support that an effective school plan for countering bullying consists of interventions for bullies, such as developing empathy and controlling emotions and behaviors, as well as interventions for victims, such as social skills training and targeted interventions for vulnerable children. It also includes training in peer intervention, class components (discussion of bullying), parent engagement and school staff learning opportunities. Prevention efforts also contain designing videos and newsletters for promoting a positive social climate. They also posit that the school plan describes clear interventions for students that

bully others and clear responses for victims and children who witness bullying behaviours as well as clear roles and responsibilities for school staff. It is essential that educators are aware of group dynamics, observe peer interactions and model healthy relationships.

Moreover, classroom based discussions of bullying increase the awareness of the social nature of bullying and involve students in constructing rules (Olweus 1993). Bullying should be openly discussed in the kindergarten group and clear rules against bullying should be established (Alsaker and Valkanover 2001). Olweus (2003) argues that teachers should set consistent limits on unacceptable behaviour, provide consistent consequences, exhibit a genuine interest, and embrace the diversity within school environment. Newman, Horne, and Bartolomucci (2000) highlight that it is important that the teacher be a positive role model, understand the different forms of bullying and have a high self-efficacy. In addition, Vreeman and Carroll (2007) support that socio-emotional learning programs and teacher training are key features of effective interventions.

Furthermore, Pepler (2006) maintains that bullying is a relation problem which requires relationship solutions. She points out the importance of enhancing children's capacity for healthy relationships. Social interactions within the central contexts in which children are embedded is also vital for developing healthy relationships. Therefore, transforming the systems in which children are developing, is of the utmost importance (Hadzigeorgiou & Konsolas 2001). The cultivation of positive relationships within school community can serve as a buffer for bullying prevention. Building positive relationships between children, between teachers and children, as well as between teachers and parents etc. can contribute to bullying prevention.

Previous research has investigated teachers strategies for handling bullying incidents among other variables (Repo 2015). Asimopoulos *et al.* (2013) found that Greek teachers underestimate the psychological forms of bullying and they rarely discuss the issue of bullying in class. They also identify the following barriers for countering bullying. These barriers include the lack of support of the educational system for dealing with bullying, the indifference of parents, the lack of cooperation among teachers, the lack of specific knowledge about bullying, and the absence of mental

health professionals at school. Greek teachers report that family factors are the most common etiological factors for school bullying (Katsigianni and Xanthakou, 2002).

Gkougkoudi (2016) also found that Greek teachers consider physical bullying more serious than verbal bullying and they do not differentiate bullying from conflict. Their preferred methods of dealing with bullying were to discipline the bully and have a discussion with the victim. They reported bullies to principal or parents and discussed bullying behaviors within class. They also used methods on the individual level and they did not consider peer involvement. Repo (2015) found that preschool teachers used strategies such as discussion with the child, confronting or reprimanding as well as consequences for bullying behavior. Stamatis and Nikolaou (2013) research findings indicate that teachers support that collaboration between school and family is crucial for addressing bullying, as it is linked to children's positive attitudes toward school, improvement of their behavior and gradual reduction of bullying occurrences. In addition, they pointed out that cooperation with school counselor or social services is the most effective strategy for counteracting bullying as well as giving advice to children involved in bullying.

METHODOLOGY

The sample of this research study was consisted of 164 preschool teachers in Greece. As Table 1 shows, 23,2% of the participants were aged between 22 and 30 years. 35,4% of the participants were aged between 31 to 40 years, 32,9% between 41 and 50 years and 8,5% of them were above fifty years. In terms of years of experience, 44,5% of the respondents had taught 1 to 10 years, 28,7% had taught 11 to 20 years and 14% more than 21 years.

A questionnaire was designed to collect information on teachers' perceptions about bullying in preschool age which was based on previous research. It included demographic information and survey questions using a five-point Likert scale. This instrument included items regarding teachers' perceptions about the effective strategies for bullying prevention in preschool age. A pilot study was conducted to assess the readability, clarity and comprehensiveness of the questions and it was revised based on their feedback. The data presented in this research paper are a part of a wider research.

Table 1: Distribution of Frequencies of the Demographic Factors of the Sample

Gender	Frequency N=164	Percent (%)
Male	16	9,8
Female	148	90,2
Age		
22-30	38	23,2
31-40	58	35,4
41-50	54	32,9
> 50	14	8,5
Work experience		
1-10	73	44,5
11-20	47	28,7
> 21	23	14,0

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows that classroom activities for diversity acceptance are regarded as highly effective by 88,40% of the respondents. 7,30% of the respondents have a neutral stance, whereas 3,70% of the sample regard classroom activities as ineffective. These activities can address diversity issues. Stereotypes and prejudices sustain bullying behaviors. Therefore, school is expected to enhance diversity acceptance and promote equity and social justice (Mishna 2008). Respect for diversity is of fundamental importance for bullying prevention, as diversity is among the risk factors for bullying behaviors. In addition, teaching tolerance to preschool children combats gender and racial differences.

87,80% of the sample considers that the development of empathy in preschool settings is a very effective strategy. 11% of the participants have a neutral stance and only 1,20% consider the development of empathy ineffective. Pepler and Craig (2014) suggest that the interventions for bullying include the development of empathy, social skills training and emotion management. A whole-school approach as well as individualized support is advocated. Empathy skills promote positive relationships. Prevention programs at preschool age often comprise empathy skills such as the program "Roots of Empathy".

Moreover, 85,30% of the participants in this study regard that teacher training is very effective in preventing bullying, 7,3% have a neutral stance and 6,1% regard teacher training as ineffective. Therefore,

Table 2: Distribution of Participants' Responses Regarding the Most Effective Strategies for Children about Bullying Prevention

Which of the following strategies do you regard as most effective for preventing the behaviors described in the vignette ?				
Likert scale	Not at all effective		Most Effective	
	1	2	3	5
1. Cooperation between school and family	3,00%		15,20%	81,70%
2. Cooperation between school, family and community services	13,40%		13,40%	72,60%
3. Implementation of socio-emotional learning programs	6,10%		14,60%	79,30%
4. Peer counseling	12,20%		17,10%	70,70%
5. Classroom activities for diversity acceptance	3,70%		7,30%	88,40%
6. Prevention activities such as creation of materials	10,30%		17,70%	70,70%
7. Teacher Training	6,1%		7,3%	85,30%
8. Development of empathy	1,20%		11,00%	87,80%

school staff learning opportunities and professional development are highly valued. Sairanen and Pfeffer (2011) argue that teachers' anti-bullying training is associated with the implementation of interventions. Dake, Price and Telljohann (2003) point out that pre-service and continuing education is essential to improving teacher knowledge about effective classroom based-prevention activities.

The cooperation between parents and teachers is considered as an effective strategy for the prevention of school bullying by the 81,70% of the respondents. 15,2% of the sample has a neutral stance. Only 3% considers this strategy little effective. This finding aligns with previous research (Stamatis and Nikolaou, 2015). Parent engagement is crucial. Raising parents' awareness is a vital part of a systemic approach to preventing bullying. The socio-ecological framework points out the interactions between the key contexts of children's development (Pepler 2006). Parents are suggested to participate in school safety committees as well. Ttofi and Farrington's (2011) meta-analysis contends that parent meetings and training, parent-teacher conferences and information for parents can reduce bullying incidents. Moreover, effective programs include school-family collaboration (Olweus 2001).

79,30% of the respondents regard that the implementation of socio-emotional learning programs in school context is very effective in preventing bullying in preschool age. 14,60% of the respondents have a neutral stance, whereas 6,10% regards these programs as ineffective. The "Incredible Years" program, and "Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies" are among the evidence-based programs

for the prevention of violence in preschool age. These programs teach socio-emotional skills and therefore enhance interpersonal relationships (Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou and Didaskalou 2011). They also enhance resilience, promote friendships and restructure peer group roles in bullying (McElearney, Roosmale-Coq, Scott and Stephenson 2008).

The cooperation between school, family and community services is considered as an effective strategy by the 72,60% of the sample. 13,40% of the participants in this study have a neutral stance, and 13,40% consider it ineffective. Kolbert, Schultz and Crothers (2014) maintain that interventions at various levels, such as the development of partnership between school, family and community is postulated by the social-ecological framework. All stakeholders' participation in safety committees is crucial. It is also well established that the multiple causes of school bullying are associated with family characteristics, community factors, society and the wider culture (Espelage and Swearer 2010).

Prevention activities for school bullying, such as the creation of material (for example videos) is highly valued by the 70,70% of the respondents. 17,70% of the respondents have a neutral stance, and the 10,30% consider them ineffective. Giovazolias, Kourkoutas, Mitsopoulou and Georgiadi (2010) also contend that activities such as educational videos and theatre presentations can enhance the understanding of bullying dynamics.

Finally, peer support is regarded as a very effective strategy by the 70,70% of the participants. 17,10% of

the respondents have a neutral stance, whereas 12,20% regard this strategy as ineffective. Peer support empowers bystanders to support the victims. It can contribute to creating a safe and supportive environment. A school plan comprises clear expectations for peers who witness bullying. Participants' responses indicate that they recognize peer group's role to bullying behaviors and they have a positive attitude toward peer led interventions. Salmivalli *et al.* (1996) stress the role of peers in bullying, in providing positive peer experiences, improving relationships and shaping a positive climate. Peer helpers in counseling skills (listening, empathy etc) are trained and supervised (Cowie and Wallace 2005).

There are some limitations regarding the study's sample size, thus the above research findings cannot be generalized to the general population. Further research employing larger and more representative samples could shed more light on the investigated issues.

CONCLUSIONS

All the above strategies are regarded as effective and they are all included in a systemic approach to the prevention of school bullying. The findings indicate that teachers regard that classroom activities for diversity acceptance, the development of empathy, the cooperation between school and family and the implementation of socio-emotional learning programs in school context are among the most effective strategies. They also value teacher training, the cooperation between school, family, and community services for bullying prevention, as well as peer support and the creation of prevention activities and material such as videos. The data have practical implications for the design of interventions and training programs. Teachers perceptions regarding the effective strategies are crucial to the success of the implementation of preventive strategies, as they are among the key stakeholders of prevention initiatives. It has also been highlighted that prevention programs should be developmentally appropriate and tailored to the needs of the preschool children and contexts (Mishna 2008). Appropriate education for teachers on identifying the characteristics and the various forms of bullying should be emphasized in the educational setting. They need to be aware of what constitutes bullying and be able to recognize the indirect forms of bullying. Moreover, teachers should receive training on bullying prevention and become aware of group dynamics, as bullying is a

social phenomenon. In addition, peers are required to adopt anti-bullying roles and support victims.

In conclusion, the development of partnerships between school, family and community will contribute to the systemic approach of bullying prevention in preschool age. There is the need of well-planned interventions that incorporate a whole-school approach (Vreeman and Carroll 2007) and a formal anti-bullying policy. Anti-bullying policy is vital to include the professional development of teachers and staff training opportunities as well as their perceptions regarding prevention. Moreover, the implementation of prevention at an early age is fundamental to the prevention of behavioral and emotional difficulties and children's adjustment to their school environment.

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