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Conceptualization, literature review, methodology, implementation, data analysis, translation, and writing.

Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore preschool teachers' experiences with bullying behaviors in the classroom, their strategies for managing such behaviors, and to provide recommendations for addressing peer bullying in the classroom. Key findings from the research include: A high percentage (90.3%) of teachers reported encountering peer bullying in their classrooms. The most frequently observed types of bullying were verbal (65.6%), followed by physical (16.9%), and psychological (17.4%) bullying. Female students tended to engage more in psychological peer bullying, whereas male students were more inclined toward physical bullying. The incidence of physical and verbal bullying increased as children grew older. One of the primary approaches employed by teachers in dealing with bullying was changing classroom management practices and promoting empathy among students. Implementing a values education program within classroom activities was suggested as a way to enhance the effectiveness of anti-bullying efforts. These findings highlight the importance of addressing peer bullying in early childhood education and fostering positive classroom environments that promote empathy and values education. The study also emphasizes the need for teacher training and support to effectively manage and prevent bullying behaviors among young children.

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Research Article**Peer Bullying Experiences and Management Strategies of Preschool Teachers***Derya KAYIRAN¹ **Abstract**

The objective of this study was to explore preschool teachers' experiences with bullying behaviors in the classroom, their strategies for managing such behaviors, and to provide recommendations for addressing peer bullying in the classroom. Key findings from the research include: A high percentage (90.3%) of teachers reported encountering peer bullying in their classrooms. The most frequently observed types of bullying were verbal (65.6%), followed by physical (16.9%), and psychological (17.4%) bullying. Female students tended to engage more in psychological peer bullying, whereas male students were more inclined toward physical bullying. The incidence of physical and verbal bullying increased as children grew older. One of the primary approaches employed by teachers in dealing with bullying was changing classroom management practices and promoting empathy among students. Implementing a values education program within classroom activities was suggested as a way to enhance the effectiveness of anti-bullying efforts. These findings highlight the importance of addressing peer bullying in early childhood education and fostering positive classroom environments that promote empathy and values education. The study also emphasizes the need for teacher training and support to effectively manage and prevent bullying behaviors among young children.

Keywords: Peer bullying, preschool education, teacher, educational program, values education

1. INTRODUCTION

Socialization commences in the early years of life through interactions with the family and environment. As early as the end of the first year of infancy, children begin to engage with their peers through activities like sharing and conflicts. Positive or negative experiences encountered during the socialization process in childhood can leave a lasting impact on a child's future interactions with peers (Hay, Caplan & Nash, 2009).

The first scientifically recognized research on peer bullying was conducted by Dan Olweus in 1970 (Olweus, 1980). Prior to this research, bullying was often regarded as a natural part of the developmental process (Finnegan, Hodges & Perry, 1998). Various studies have consistently highlighted bullying as a prevalent and significant problem in today's world (Çarkıt & Bacanlı, 2020; Gündoğdu & Yaşar, 2021).

Peer bullying can be defined as the intentional infliction of pain and distress by the aggressor on the victim, often deriving pleasure from it (Finnegan et al., 1998). It can also be characterized as the persistent, systematic, and deliberate harassment or disruption of a more dominant individual or group by a less powerful individual or group. To qualify as bullying, a behavior must be purposeful, ongoing, and involve an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the targeted individuals, distinguishing it from mere aggression (Perren, 2000).

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The preschool period is an educational phase during which children engage in increased interaction with their peers, fostering valuable social experiences. Preschool education institutions provide environments that facilitate and enhance this socialization process (Bakkaloğlu, Eryılmaz & Sapsağlam, 2019; Darga, 2021). It is well-established that positive interactions with peers during the preschool years significantly contribute to children's social and emotional development (Mendez, 2002). Behaviors that can be classified as peer bullying may first surface during the preschool period as children initiate peer relationships (Hanish, Ryan, Martin & Fabes, 2005)

Bullying in preschool educational institutions can have a ripple effect on the entire class, with children potentially reinforcing each other's bullying behaviors (Peren, 2000). During this period, it's evident that peer bullying has become a common aspect of children's lives, and they may find themselves taking on roles such as the bully, victim, or bystander in the face of peer bullying (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2009). It is observed that children who engage in or are subjected to peer bullying at a young age may continue this behavior into their future lives (Gillies-Rezo & Bosacki, 2003). From this perspective, peer bullying is regarded as a troubling social issue (Gültekin-Akduman, 2012). It is crucial to address peer bullying during the early years of preschool education. Implementing preventative measures against peer bullying in the early stages of a child's life can be effective in mitigating bullying behaviors that might persist in later years (Koyutürk-Koçer & Gültekin-Akduman, 2016). Research on peer bullying in the literature primarily focuses on primary education, high school, and university periods. It is evident that the preschool period is comparatively underrepresented in terms of peer bullying studies (Gültekin-Akduman, 2012). Peer bullying, which typically begins to manifest around the ages of 4-6 in early childhood, differs from the bullying behaviors observed in children during their primary or high school years in terms of aggression (Monks, Smith & Swettenham, 2005). Given our current age and the impact of visual and digital media on our lives, it can be argued that children are exposed to more violence than in the past. Considering that peer bullying during the preschool years can influence a child's future behavior, it is essential to conduct in-depth investigations into peer bullying during the preschool period to prevent it effectively.

When reviewing the relevant literature, it becomes evident that the majority of studies on peer bullying are primarily conducted at the primary education level, with fewer studies focusing on peer bullying during the preschool period compared to other stages (Özözen-Danacı & Çetin, 2019). This research aims to examine peer bullying in the preschool period and provide insights into potential preventive measures and intervention strategies for the future. Additionally, it seeks to serve as a foundation for a preschool education program designed to instill values in children and help prevent bullying.

1.1 Research Questions

The study's objective was to investigate preschool teachers' experiences regarding bullying behaviors within their classrooms and to explore their strategies for managing such behaviors. Additionally, the study aimed to provide recommendations for addressing peer bullying in the classroom. The research sought to address the following questions:

1. What are the most common forms of bullying observed among preschool students?
2. What are the attitudes of preschool teachers towards bullying, and what types of management strategies do they employ?

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Model

The research is conducted as a cross-sectional descriptive study. To gather information regarding teachers' experiences and strategies for handling peer bullying, a questionnaire technique was employed. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, with interview forms including questions related to the teachers' socio-demographic characteristics and their experiences with and management of peer bullying.

2.2. Participants

The research was conducted among preschool teachers employed in preschool education institutions situated in the city center of Southern Turkey. The study aimed to encompass the entire population, and no sampling method was used. Data were collected from a convenience sample of 195 preschool teachers who work with children aged 36 to 72 months. All teachers who volunteered to participate were included in the study.

2.3. Limitations

This study involved a limited number of preschool teachers who volunteered to participate. There is a total of 385 preschool teachers in the city center of Southern Turkey, and approximately half of them, or 195 teachers, were included in the study.

2.4 Instruments

The "Questionnaire Form" used in this study was developed by the researcher as the primary data collection tool. In constructing the interview form, the initial step involved conducting a thorough review of relevant literature (Çarkıt & Bacanlı, 2021; Tanrikulu, 2020). Following this literature review, draft questionnaire items were created. These draft items then underwent a content validity assessment, which included feedback from 10 experts. Subsequently, the internal validity of the questionnaire questions was determined and confirmed.

To assess the internal validity of the questionnaire items, a preliminary pilot study was carried out by interviewing 15 preschool teachers working in a district that was not part of the main research scope. During this pilot study, the questions were evaluated in terms of their feasibility, comprehensibility, and clarity. The questionnaire received its final form after considering the expert opinions and the outcomes of the pilot study.

The interview form covers various aspects, including the teachers' gender, age, educational background, the age group they teach, class size, their experiences with peer bullying behaviors in the classroom, and the strategies they employ to manage such bullying incidents.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0, and the results were presented as percentages. When comparing data, categorical data were analyzed using chi-square analysis. Significance levels were determined at a 95% confidence interval with a 5% margin of error, denoted as $p < 0.05$.

2.6. Procedure

The research received ethical approval from the Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University Social Sciences Ethics Committee on 03/12/2020 Date (Reference Number: 46422). Furthermore, written consent was obtained from the participating teachers, confirming their willingness to take part in the research in compliance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The data for the research were gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers during the fall semester of 2021, specifically between November 1 and December 1.

3. FINDINGS

The socio-demographic characteristics of the teachers included in the study and their encounters with peer bullying are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison status of encountering with peer bullying and some variables

Variables	Status of encountering peer bullying			X ² /p***
	No n(%)*	Yes n(%)*	Total n(%)**	
Teachers' Gender				
Women	17(9.7)	158(97.3)	175(89.7)	0.967/0.607
Men	2(10.0)	18(90.0)	20(10.3)	
Teachers' Age				
20-24 years	12(9.4)	114(90.6)	126(65.1)	2.136/0.546
25-29 years	5(14.3)	30(85.7)	35(17.9)	
30-35 years	0(0.0)	12(100.0)	12(6.2)	
35 years and above	2(9.5)	19(90.5)	21(10.8)	
Teachers' Education				
Associate degree	12(9.2)	109(90.8)	121(62.1)	0.043/0.979
Bachelor Degree	6(9.9)	59(90.1)	65(33.3)	
Masters degree	1(11.1)	8(88.9)	9(4.6)	
Working experience				
0-5 Years	16(10.4)	138(89.6)	154(79.0)	0.359/0.836
6-9 Years	1(6.7)	14(93.3)	15 (7.7)	
10 Years and above	2(7.7)	24(92.3)	26(13.3)	
Working age group				
3	1(2.9)	34(97.1)	35(17.9)	3.978/0.264
4	3(9.4)	29(90.6)	32(16.4)	
5	7(9.1)	70(90.9)	77(39.5)	
6	8(15.7)	43(84.3)	51(26.2)	
Class size				
Less than 20	8(5.6)	136(94.4)	144(73.8)	10.995/0.004
21-30	7(21.2)	26(78.8)	33(16.9)	
31 and above	4(22.2)	14(77.8)	18(9.2)	
Type of Bullying Encountered/Witnessed				
Psychological (Indirect)	4(11.8)	30(88.2)	34(17.4)	0.562/0.755
Verbal	11(8.6)	117(91.4)	128(65.6)	
Physically	4(12.1)	29(87.9)	33(16.9)	
Need for In-Service Training in Coping with Bullying				
Yes	17(10.2)	150(89.8)	167(85.6)	0.251/0.616
No	2(7.1)	26(92.9)	28(14.8)	
Total	19(9.7)	176(90.3)	195(100.0)	

*Row percent, ** Column Percent, *** Chi Square test

In the research, the majority of the participating teachers were female, making up 89.7% of the sample, while 10.3% were male. A significant proportion of teachers fell within the 20-24 age group and held an associate degree. Approximately 79% of the teachers had a professional experience ranging from 0 to 5 years, with 39.5% of them having served for 5 years or more.

When it comes to peer bullying, a high percentage of teachers, 90.3%, reported encountering such behavior. Concerning the types of bullying frequently witnessed, it was observed that 65.6% of teachers reported instances of verbal bullying, 16.9% experienced physical bullying, and 17.4% encountered psychological bullying.

Table 2. Comparison peer bullying types and some variables

Variables	Types of Bullying			Total n(%)	X ² /p*
	Psychological n(%)	Physically n(%)	Verbal n(%)		
Student Gender					
Female Students	136(69.7)	11(5.6)	48(24.6)	195(100.0)	13.915/0.008
Male Students	11(5.6)	160(82.1)	24(12.3)	195(100.0)	12.793/0.012
Student Age					
3 years	0(0.0)	5(3.9)	4(12.1)	9(4.6)	16.912/0.010
4 years	6(17.6)	38(29.7)	3(9.1)	47(24.1)	
5 years	18(52.9)	38(29.7)	12(36.4)	68(34.9)	
6 years	10(29.4)	47(36.7)	14(42.4)	71(36.4)	
Teachers' Attitude towards bullying					
Speaking with family	2(5.9)	15(11.7)	3(9.1)	20(10.3)	3.494/0.744
Reporting to the school administration and guidance service	2(5.9)	14(10.9)	3(9.1)	19(9.7)	
Changing Classroom Management System	19(55.9)	56(43.8)	13(39.4)	88(45.1)	
To Build Empathy	11(32.4)	43(33.6)	14(42.4)	68(34.9)	
Peer Bullying Feature					
Bullying with the intent to harm	19(55.9)	24(18.8)	15(45.5)	58(29.7)	23.357/0.000
Chronic bullying	3(8.8)	23(18.0)	6(18.2)	32(16.4)	
Power imbalance bullying	12(35.3)	77.1(63.3)	12(36.4)	105(53.8)	
Effective Method to Prevent Peer Bullying					
Education for Families	10(29.4)	24(18.8)	3(9.1)	37(19.0)	13.869/0.031
Psychological Counseling Practices at School	1(2.9)	13(10.2)	0(0.0)	14(7.2)	
In-Service Training	2(5.9)	3(2.3)	2(6.1)	7(3.6)	
Classroom Activities	21(61.8)	88(68.8)	28(84.8)	137(70.3)	
Status of Teachers' Competency					
Never	4(11.8)	11(8.6)	4(12.1)	19(9.7)	2.874/0.942
Rarely	10(29.4)	31(24.2)	9(24.2)	50(25.6)	
Sometimes	16(47.1)	58(45.3)	15(45.5)	89(45.6)	
Usually	3(8.8)	24(18.8)	4(12.1)	31(15.9)	
Always	1(2.9)	4(3.1)	1(3.0)	6(3.1)	

*Chi-Square test, $p < 0.05$

The findings suggest that female students tend to use psychological bullying more frequently, while male students tend to engage in physical bullying. Moreover, as students grow older, they are more inclined to resort to physical and verbal bullying.

Regarding teachers' primary attitudes towards bullying, it appears that they are focused on modifying classroom management practices and fostering empathy among students as possible solutions. More than half of the students involved in bullying activities had the intention of causing harm.

Additionally, the research highlighted that nearly one-third of the teachers do not feel adequately competent when faced with bullying incidents. This underlines the need for further support and training to help teachers effectively address and manage such situations.

Table 3. Manage strategies of teachers against peer bullying

Strategies	n	%
Problem should be resolve by administration	185	80.5
No opinion	10	19.5
Total	195	100.0

According to the teachers' perspectives on developing and implementing strategies to address peer bullying, nearly all of them (out of a total of 185) emphasized that it is essential for the school administration to play a role in resolving the issue. Furthermore, they indicated that both the child engaged in bullying and their family should be directed to the psychological counseling and guidance unit for support and intervention. There were 10 participants who did not express a specific opinion on this matter (Table 3).

4. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

In the study, the incidence of encountering peer bullying was compared with various variables. It was found that classrooms with fewer than 20 students had a higher incidence of peer bullying ($p < 0.05$). The number of adults in a classroom, which includes the classroom teacher and teaching assistants, could potentially influence the relationship between class size and preschool bullying. In Turkey, crowded classrooms with more than 20 students typically have one preschool teacher and one teaching assistant. These crowded classrooms tend to have a higher number of teachers, and increased adult supervision can potentially reduce the risk of bullying incidents in such settings. It's important to note that in the literature, some studies have reported no significant relationship between class size and bullying (Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann & Jugert, 2006).

Regarding other variables such as age, gender, education level, years of working experience, working age group, type of bullying, and the need for in-service training to address bullying, no significant correlations were found (Table 1). However, in another study, it was reported that a higher incidence of bullying incidents was associated with preschool teachers' higher educational levels (Tanrikulu, 2020). This suggests that the relationship between educational level and bullying incidents may vary across different studies and contexts.

Based on the research findings, it appears that female students are more likely to engage in psychological peer bullying, while male students are more inclined toward physical bullying during the preschool period. This aligns with previous research (Gillies-Rezo & Bosacki, 2003) which has shown that physical bullying is more common in boys than in girls. Additionally, girls tend to prefer engaging in verbal and psychological forms of aggression more frequently than boys do. These findings are consistent with the broader literature on the gendered patterns of bullying behavior.

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that as students age, they tend to engage more in verbal and physical bullying rather than psychological bullying. This trend aligns with the findings from Akduman's study conducted in 2012, which suggested that preschool children often experience conflicts related to sharing toys, establishing games, and defining roles during play, which can lead to peer bullying. According to Akduman (2012), children in such situations predominantly exhibit physical peer bullying behaviors like kicking, hitting, pinching, and punching, but they also resort to verbal peer bullying behaviors such as threats, teasing, name-calling, and insults. Akduman's study also noted that physical peer bullying is most commonly encountered in the 3-4 and 5-6 age groups during the preschool period. Therefore, it can be inferred that the findings from the current research are consistent with the previous study's results, reinforcing the idea that the nature of peer bullying behavior evolves with age in preschool children.

The research findings indicate that one of the primary attitudes teachers have regarding bullying is to modify classroom management strategies and foster empathy among students. This aligns with the conclusions drawn by Çarkıt and Bacanlı (2020), who found in their study that preschool teachers

regarded empathy as one of the most effective approaches in preventing peer bullying within the school environment. Similarly, [Atış-Akyol, Yıldız and Akman \(2018\)](#) stated that the most common attitude among preschool teachers when dealing with peer bullying is to meet with the students' families, counselors, and school administration to address the issue. These findings underscore the importance of promoting empathy and implementing effective strategies in managing and preventing peer bullying in preschool settings.

The research findings indicate that more than half of the students involved in bullying do so with the intent to cause harm. This aligns with the findings of [McGinnis and Goldstein \(2003\)](#), who suggested in their study that students may engage in peer bullying to achieve personal desires, demonstrate their power to others, or seek attention. Furthermore, [Özdemir \(2014\)](#) noted in his study that children often exhibit aggressive behaviors and engage in actions aimed at asserting dominance within their peer groups. These findings shed light on the motivations and behaviors of students involved in peer bullying, highlighting the multifaceted nature of this issue.

In the present research, the participating preschool teachers indicated that the most effective methods for addressing peer bullying are in-class activities and family education. These findings are consistent with the conclusions reached by [Çarkıt and Bacanlı \(2020\)](#), who also studied preschool teachers' perspectives on peer bullying and found that the most effective method, according to teachers, is to provide training for students' families as a preventive measure. Similarly, [Atış-Akyol, Yıldız, and Akman \(2018\)](#) found in their study on peer bullying that the most commonly used practice by teachers to counter peer bullying is classroom interventions. These results emphasize the importance of a multi-faceted approach involving both classroom activities and family engagement in addressing and preventing peer bullying.

The research findings highlight that almost one-third of the teachers do not feel competent when faced with bullying situations. This aligns with the observations made by [Mercan \(2020\)](#), who noted in their study that teachers often lack the necessary coping skills to address peer bullying, and they may not possess a clear understanding of how to effectively manage such situations. Teachers may not be well-versed in strategies for handling peer bullying, and they might not allocate sufficient attention to implementing anti-bullying practices. On the other hand, according to [Rodkin and Hodges \(2003\)](#), teachers may not always play a significant role in peer relationships. Additionally, [Özdemir \(2014\)](#) found in their study that aggressive behaviors related to peer bullying tend to be more intense during unstructured and routine activity times, when teacher control and supervision are reduced. These insights emphasize the need for teacher training and support in addressing peer bullying effectively, especially during times when teacher supervision is limited.

The study conducted by [Gündoğdu and Yaşar \(2021\)](#) demonstrated that teachers' behaviors towards peer bullying have an indirect impact on peer bullying by influencing the power dynamics among children. Teachers' use of constructive language and positive interaction styles in their relationships with students can serve as a positive example for children. It underscores the importance of teachers and families being aware that they are constantly seen as role models in their interactions with children. These findings underscore the significance of fostering positive teacher-student relationships and providing a supportive, non-coercive classroom environment to address and mitigate peer bullying effectively.

Based on the literature review and the evaluation of the current research results, it becomes evident that teachers may not have sufficient training and resources to effectively address and control peer bullying ([Tanrikulu, 2020](#)). While the Ministry of National Education of Turkey (MoNE) provides training for guidance counselors regarding peer bullying, it appears that this effort may not be sufficient ([MoNE, 2021](#)). Focusing solely on counselors and neglecting other educational branches may not fully address the issue of peer bullying. Therefore, it is believed that implementing an education program that involves preschool teachers, students, and their families is essential,

particularly considering the crucial role of the preschool period in human development. Furthermore, a study with 538 participants has shown that prosocial behaviors are negatively associated with bullying and that prosocial behaviors play a significant role in reducing school bullying (Fu, Li, Shen, Zhu, Zhang, Liu & Zhang, 2023). Also it is stated that values education plays a significant role in the social and emotional development of children (İnan, 2011). Developing a program that incorporates values and prosocial behaviors such as empathy, friendship, love, respect, and sharing in classroom activities can enhance the effectiveness of anti-bullying efforts and reduce bullying behaviors among students. In addition, adopting an official anti-bullying policy and implementing regulations can be beneficial in preventing peer bullying. These policies and regulations can create a framework for addressing and preventing bullying within educational institutions. It is evident that preschool teachers often lack confidence in dealing with peer bullying, and they emphasize the importance of family education and programs for families. To enhance the effectiveness of education and prevention efforts, creating an educational program that involves families, teachers, and children is recommended.

Preschool teachers frequently stress the importance of promoting empathy in addressing peer bullying. Developing a values education program for preschool, which incorporates the value of empathy along with the 10 core values defined by the Ministry of National Education, such as love, respect, friendship, self-control, patience, and helpfulness, can be a valuable approach in combating peer bullying during the preschool years. In addition, it's worth noting that academic research on peer bullying has predominantly focused on primary and high school years, with relatively less attention given to the preschool period. There's a need for increased research on peer bullying in the preschool period, as it can provide valuable insights into addressing this issue and inform both national and international studies in the future. Expanding research in this area can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of peer bullying across different age groups.

Ethics Committee Decision

Ethical approval and written permission for this study were obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University with the decision dated 03/12/2020 and numbered 46422

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