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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to examine the attitudes and beliefs of preschool workers with respect to the phenomenon of bullying in preschool. Participants comprised 694 employees in private and municipality run preschools who responded to an internet-based survey in Norway. The largest group of participants in the study were qualified preschool teachers with at least 3 years of tertiary education (45.4%). The survey instrument included approximately 25 questions with 90 underlying items and examined attitudes towards bullying and the children involved, definitional aspects of bullying, and professional experience with the phenomenon. Multiple items were combined into single measures when theoretical justification and internal reliability (i.e. Cronbach's alpha) were acceptable. Data analysis was based on a straightforward approach using mainly descriptive statistics. We found strong agreement among participants that practitioners believe that bullying occurs among young children in this context. Many preschool workers (42%) indicated that children as young as 1–2 years of age are capable of bullying. However, responses suggest that participants' understanding of bullying is not congruent with established definitions in the literature, namely related to the areas of intentionality, chronicity, and objectivity. Overall, participants did not hold negative or devaluing attitudes towards children involved in bullying or the need to address this issue. These findings are positive given that professionals' beliefs and attitudes about bullying are likely to influence their willingness and ability to address incidences of bullying in the preschool context.

Although researchers have noted a paucity of empirical evidence concerning the manifestation and development of bullying in early childhood (e.g. Camodeca et al., 2015), the topic has nevertheless attracted considerable attention over the last few decades (Tanrikulu, 2018; Vlachou et al., 2011). Notwithstanding various methodological, conceptual and ideological concerns that may delay the progression of knowledge within this area, the research on bullying in preschool is clearly expanding (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010; Alsaker & Nägele, 2008; Ey & Spears, 2018; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012).

In comparison to previous tendencies to describe negative social behaviour among pre-school children in terms of poor social competence, it is increasingly common to use the concept of bullying to describe complex social conflicts and negative interactions in these settings. However, there has also been a degree of hesitation among researchers and practitioners with respect to using the term "bullying" to label the behaviours of young children rather than focus on challenging behaviours as an opportunity for social learning (Farrell, 2010; Green et al., 2017). There are several potential reasons for this reluctance.

First, given the fact that many early definitions of bullying explicitly include the concepts of intentionality and aggression (e.g. Olweus, 1994; Randall, 1997), there are concerns about the potential negative impact associated with labelling young children as "bullies" (Campbell & Morgan, 2018; Swit, 2018). Emphasis on aggressive or socially excluding behaviour is in conflict with the perception of young children as inheritably virtuous, innocent, and kind. Second, bullying among preschool children differs from bullying among older children due to differences in developmental and social abilities that change with age, and indeed across a life course (Green et al., 2017). For example, Monks et al. (2003) found that compared to older children (>8 years), four- to six-year-olds were more likely to nominate themselves and their peers as aggressors or victims than more peripheral roles such as "assistants" or "outsiders." Third, perceptions of bullying in early childhood and its reported prevalence are clearly influenced by different understandings of the concept held by children, educational professionals, and adults (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2019; Younan, 2019). For example, young children often conflate all forms of aggression with bullying (Smith et al., 2002) and many teachers also have difficulties distinguishing bullying from other types of conflicts (Vlachou et al., 2013). Research suggests that adults tend to focus and intervene on physical bullying that is directly observable compared to more concealed or indirect forms of bullying involving various forms of social exclusion (Iraklis, 2020; Veenstra et al., 2014).

Thus, there is reason to believe that the preconceptions, attitudes, and beliefs adults have about bullying might directly influence whether various forms of conflicts among children are taken seriously (DeOrnellas & Spurgin, 2017). Commonly held truisms based on superficial or dismissive understandings of bullying may lead to more passive attitudes and a lack of intervening measures that could improve relations among children (Horne et al., 2004). In short, there are clear challenges related to the conceptualization, identification, and measurement of bullying in the preschool context (Bistrong et al., 2016). It is therefore not surprising to find that perceptions of preschool workers are not congruent with dominant definitions, given the young age of children in preschool and the possibility that social conflicts in early childhood are conceptually different from similar situations among school-aged children (Monks, 2011).

Considering the potential for disagreement in perspectives towards bullying in early childhood, several areas of research deserve further attention. Among the most central of these is whether it is meaningful to use the term bullying to describe the behaviour and interactions of children under the age of four or five years (Monks, 2011). The answer to this question is linked to conceptualizations of bullying that are held by children, parents, and the professionals who work with children on a daily basis. Research

has documented that the nature and quality of relationships between childcare professionals and children during the preschool years is associated with children's behavioural, cognitive, and affective development (e.g. Coplan et al., 2015; Dobbs & Arnold, 2009). Furthermore, and without minimizing the importance of the child's perspective in understanding the phenomenon (Gillies-Rezo & Bosacki, 2003), it is fair to say that the manner in which children's behaviours are defined and consequently labelled is largely steered by adults. Relationships among children are to a high degree regulated and categorized by adults and their understandings and beliefs about how social interactions should occur. This is particularly true in a preschool setting, where learning, play, social development and many other elements are purposefully guided by the structures, goals, and actions of adults.

The current study is explorative in nature and the conceptual framework draws on multiple sources. The study builds on previous research in which we began the process of clarifying how conceptualizations of bullying vary across parents and practitioners in preschool and asking how these beliefs and perceptions might impact practices (Cameron & Kovač, 2016, 2017). The intention is to explore how these understandings are constructed and maintained, rather than determine whether a specific theoretical perspective is the most appropriate or effective for bullying intervention or prevention in preschool. While problematizing the concept of bullying is not new (e.g. Monks, 2011), the lack of conceptual clarity with respect to operationalizing negative social behaviours in early childhood demonstrates a need for attention to the responses of adults to bullying behaviour in "everyday" contexts (Cameron & Kovač, 2017). It is possible that different criteria or assumptions can be used to describe "bullying" at different stages of development or social contexts, signalling multiple, and even simultaneous theoretical conceptualizations. This challenge reflects a largely uncharted area that deserves greater attention.

Thus, in order to gain a fully accurate picture of bullying in preschool, it is necessary to explore the perspectives of adults working in this context. Given this background, the current study aims to examine the beliefs, views, and attitudes of preschool workers concerning the phenomenon of bullying in preschool. To achieve this objective, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Do employees in Norwegian preschools believe that bullying occurs in preschool? In association with this question, we explore the level of consensus among participants regarding the existence of bullying, the age at which bullying is likely to begin, and whether adults in preschool engage in bullying behaviour.
2. Are preschool workers views consistent with prominent descriptions of bullying in the research literature? This question explores early childhood professionals' understanding of bullying in light of common definitional aspects of the concept.
3. To what degree do preschool workers' hold dismissive attitudes and preconceptions about bullying in preschool and the children who are involved in it? To answer this question, we examine the propensity of employees to dismiss or downplay concerns about bullying, as well as possible preconceptions about the nature of children perceived as being "bullies" and "victims."

Methods

Participants

Participants comprised 694 preschool workers who responded to an internet-based survey. Their average age was 41.3 years (SD = 10.2, range = 18–69), 90.1% were female, and they held between 1 and 44 years of experience working in the field (*M* = 12.9, SD = 7.9). The largest proportion of participants were qualified preschool teachers with at least 3 years of tertiary education (45.4%), whereas 26.7% were early childhood workers with vocational training at the secondary school level, and 21.7% worked as assistants with no formal training in the field. The remaining 6.1% held other positions, including administrative and leadership roles. Approximately two-thirds of participating preschool workers were employed in private preschools (60.8%) and 38.3% were employed in municipality run preschools. These percentages are representative for the existing ratio between private and municipality run preschools in the given geographical region. To protect the anonymity of participants, we did not collect additional identifiable information on the individual preschools (e.g. number of children or employees).

On a national basis, approximately 38% of adults working in Norwegian preschools have completed preschool teacher education at the university or college level (3 years), 20% have vocational training to work in the field, and 30–40% have other educational backgrounds or no formalized training in early childhood education (NDET, 2018). Thus, with respect to educational background, the sample for this study largely resembles that of the country as a whole.

Preschool teacher preparation in Norway follows a national curriculum and there are 19 institutions in the country that provide this education. It is recognized as a 3-year bachelor's degree and therefore qualifies for relevant master's degree studies. The national curriculum for preschool teacher preparation emphasizes key aspects of early childhood and the institution of preschool, such as the spontaneous "here and now" character of learning and development, the importance of attentiveness to small children's many-sided forms of expression, and encouraging children's social and communicative competence (NDER, 2020).

Workers who hold vocational training in early childhood have typically completed three years of upper-secondary school (normally, ages 16–19), in addition to one year working as a trainee in preschool. This course of study includes standard academic requirements (i.e. general studies) that also qualify students for university or college education. However, these students begin a specialized track in health and development already in their first year of upper-secondary education, followed by increasing emphasis on working with children and youth, and finally towards solely working in early childhood by the last year of their studies.

Survey instrument

The survey instrument was designed to cover a range of issues related to bullying in preschool, including attitudes towards bullying and the children involved, definitional aspects, and professional experience with the phenomenon. It included approximately 25 questions or prompts and 90 underlying items that incorporated a seven-point Likert scale. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement (strongly disagree

= 1, strongly agree = 7) with a given item in response to each question or prompt (e.g. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements).

Development of the instrument involved a review of the research on bullying in early childhood as well as review and feedback from researchers, preschool professionals and parents of children in this age group. In addition, the instrument was piloted with students in their second year of preschool teacher education. Several items in the survey were adapted from previous investigations that applied similar approaches (e.g. Cameron & Kovač, 2016; Boulton, 1997). All procedures of the study were in accordance with ethical guidelines required by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), the national agency responsible for overseeing social science research. Information provided to participants included a statement that participation was anonymous, and that consent was indicated by completing and submitting the survey.

Data collection

Participants were drawn from urban and suburban municipalities in southern Norway. With the support of local municipality leadership, information about the study was provided via e-mail to the directors of all preschool facilities within the region (ca. 150). A link to the on-line survey was then sent via email to these administrators, who then ensured that it was posted on the password protected on-line communication platforms used by the preschools and/or sent by email directly to employees. Access to the survey was given from the beginning of October to the end of November. A reminder notice was sent out approximately 2 weeks prior to the close of data collection.

Analysis

We used a straightforward approach to data analysis and presentation of results. When internal reliability across multiple items (Cronbach's alpha, α) was sufficient and there was theoretical justification for doing so, we combined items into a single measure. We present descriptive statistics for each measure as either percentage of responses above or below a rating of four, the theoretical neutral (i.e. midpoint) of the seven-point scale, and provide the means and standard deviations for these, such that an indication of the "strength" of a particular construct can be assessed. The percentage of participants who "agree" or "disagree," based on responses on either side of the theoretical neutral are also reported to illustrate tendencies in responses. In addition, we performed principal component analysis (PCA) on 8 items measuring participants' overall attitudes towards bullying. Considering that these items are clearly theoretically similar, our aim was to obtain psychometric grounds for dividing 8 items into 2 scales as separate instruments.

Results

Existence of bullying

Beliefs about the existence of bullying among children in preschool were assessed using five items: (1) "It is possible for children in preschool to bully one another," (2) "Children

in preschool are capable of bullying other children", (3) "Bullying among children is something that occurs in preschool," (4) "Bullying among children occurs in my pre-school," and (5) "I have seen situations in my preschool that can be described as bullying among children" ($\alpha = 0.87$). The mean for all 5 items was high ($M = 5.80$, SD $= 1.29$), indicating that participants strongly believe bullying to be a phenomenon that occurs in preschool. For example, 74% of participants rated high levels of agreement (6–7 on the scale) for the item "bullying among children is something that occurs in preschool." This pattern was apparent across the other items as well, although it was slightly lower when participants described the situation in their own preschool. For example, 51% of employees strongly agreed (6–7) that bullying "occurs in my preschool" and 55% strongly agreed (6–7) that they had witnessed incidents of bullying.

Two items examined the views of participants concerning the age at which children engage in bullying: (1) "How old must a child be to be able to bully others?" and (2) "Children must have reached a certain age before their behaviour can be called bullying." With regard to the first item, participants were required to choose only one option among integers ranging from 1 to 6 years, or alternatively "older than 6 years of age" or "don't know". One hundred and five participants (15.1%) reported that they did not know the answer to the question, while only 3 participants (0.4%) indicated that a child had to be older than 6 years of age. Among the remaining 551 responses, the mean was 2.29, or about 28 months. Approximately 90% of participants chose one of the first three years of age, (42% chose ages 1 or 2), while less than 3% indicated that a child must be 5 years of age or older. Responses to this question are represented graphically in Figure 1.

Analysis of the second item further supports this trend towards consensus, for which 60% of participants completely disagreed (1 on the 7-point scale) that children must reach a certain age before their behaviour can be called bullying ($M = 1.9$, SD $= 1.5$). In summary, results show strong consensus among participants that use of the term bully-ing in the preschool context is meaningful and that the vast majority perceive bullying to be something that can occur among children 3 years of age or younger.
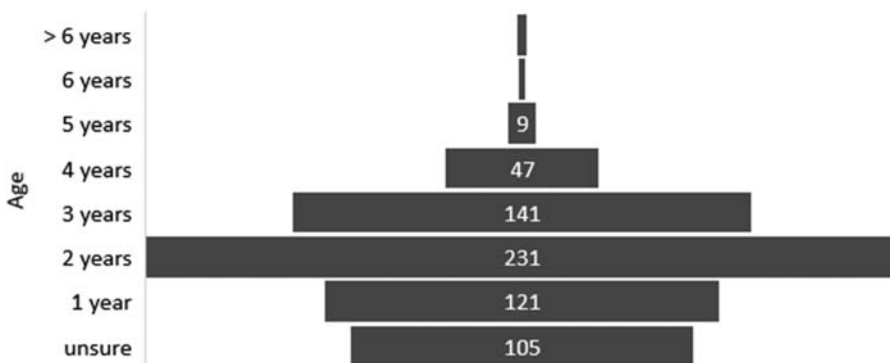
Figure 1. Number of participants reporting "the age a child must be to be able to bully others" ($n = 659$).

Note: Only 5 participants indicated 6 years of age or older.

Lastly, participants' views on the degree to which adults engage in bullying of children were assessed using the following 3 items: (1) "Bullying of children by adults occurs in preschool", (2) "It is common that adults bully children in preschool", and (3) "I have seen instances of adults bullying children in my preschool". Cronbach's alpha was 0.67 and the mean across all items was 2.69 (SD = 1.35), indicating that, overall, participants tend to disagree that "adult bullying" of children is common in preschool.

In order to gain better insight into this variable, we chose to examine the items individually. The mean for the first item (bullying by adults occurs in preschool) was near the theoretical neutral for the scale (M = 4.19, SD = 2.18), yet 47.4% "agreed" to some extent (5–7 on the scale) with this statement. In fact, 27% of participants reported very strong agreement with this statement, responding with a 7-rating. On the other hand, responses reflect a relatively low level of agreement on the other 2 items (M = 1.72, SD = 1.11 and M = 2.09, SD = 1.72 respectively). Thus, overall results show that while a large proportion of participants report that "adult bullying" does occur, it is rarely witnessed and perceived as generally uncommon.

Defining aspects of bullying

The second research question considered participants' understanding of bullying in light of elements that are commonly used to define the concept in contemporary literature. More specifically, we asked participants to report their views on statements intended to represent the following "definitional aspects" of bullying: intentionality, chronicity, subjective experience, role distinction, and collective action. The following items were used: (1) "It is only bullying if the child does it on purpose" (intentionality), (2) "If it happens just once, it's still bullying" (chronicity), (3) "It is bullying as long as the victim perceives it to be bullying" (subjectivity), (4) "When bullying occurs, the bully is also a victim" (role distinction), and (5) "A bully never acts alone" (collective action).

Results and standard deviations for the five items are presented in Table 1. Results indicate that participants are in relative agreement that (a) bullying behaviour does not have to be intentional or "on purpose" (M = 2.34, SD = 1.77), (b) a single incident can also be considered bullying (i.e. it is not necessary that incidents repeat over time) (M = 5.24, SD = 2.11), (c) subjective experience is more important than objective circumstances (M = 5.31, SD = 2.12), (d) a "bully" can also be seen as a victim (M = 4.74, SD = 2.00), and (e) bullying can be an individual act (M = 2.80, SD = 1.81). It is noteworthy that the intercorrelation between these 5 items was very low, never exceeding r = .29. This seems to indicate that these definitional aspects are not associated with one another, underlining the difficulty in describing bullying in a manner which encompass such a wide range of elements.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for ratings of items related to common definitional aspects of bullying (n = 569).

Common aspects	Items	Mean (SD)
intentionality	(1) *It is only bullying if the child does it on purpose.*	2.34 (1.8)
repetition	(2) *If it happens just once, it's still bullying.*	5.24 (2.1)
subjectivity	(3) *It is bullying as long as the victim perceives it to be bullying.*	5.31 (2.1)
role distinction	(4) *When bullying occurs, the bully is also a victim.*	4.74 (2.0)
collective action	(5) *A bully never acts alone.*	2.80 (1.8)

Attitudes towards bullying

The third research question concerned participants' overall attitudes towards bullying in preschool and the roles of those involved in bullying. Regarding the first of these, we developed 8 items to assess two theoretically connected dimensions, which we have termed "devaluing" and "discrediting" attitudes. A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of the 8 items was used to confirm the structure of the two measures. The PCA with varimax rotation identified two components with eigenvalues greater than 1 (3.41 and 1.32) accounting for 42% and 17% of the variance, suggesting a distinct two-component structure. As shown in Table 2, the items belonging to the "devaluing" dimension consistently loaded more strongly on the first component, while the items in the "discrediting" dimension consistently loaded more strongly on the second component. Loadings under .40 are not reported in order to facilitate interpretation.

Both of these dimensions portend to measure the degree to which individuals trivialize or downplay the importance of bullying in the preschool context. Whereas "devaluing attitudes" represent a tendency to downplay the need to be concerned about bullying in general, "discrediting attitudes" indicate a propensity to doubt the risks associated with the behaviour. Overall, results show that participants in the study tend to disagree with virtually all items from the two dimensions. More specifically, the mean value for the "devaluing" dimension was 2.51 (SD = 1.10) and 1.36 (SD = .62) for the "discrediting" dimension, considerably lower than the theoretically neutral value (4) for the 7-point scale.

We were also interested in assessing participants' attitudes towards bullying by examining possible preconceptions about the roles and attributes of "bullies" and "victims" in the preschool context. Attitudes related to the "bully" role were assessed with the following items: (1) "Bullies enjoy harassing others", (2) "A child who bullies others becomes an adult who bullies others", (3) "It is difficult to change the behaviour of someone who bullies," and (4) "Bullying is related to one's personality" ($\alpha = 0.78$). Together, the four items are intended to represent critical or judgmental attitudes towards children who bully others in that they reflect a preconception that such behaviour is a "fixed" aspect of the child's disposition or inherent nature. In addition, three items were used to examine preconceptions about the role of the "victim" in bullying: (1) "I think that children who are bullied are themselves a bit to blame," (2) "Many victims of bullying deserve to be bullied sometimes," and (3) "Children who are bullied are not always totally innocent when bullying occurs" ($\alpha = 0.74$). This variable was intended to isolate potentially

Table 2. Varimax component rotated loadings for "devaluing" and "discrediting" items.

Items	Component 1	Component 2
Devaluing		
(1) *Children should be able to deal with a bit during play.*		0.71
(2) *Innocent teasing is often confused with bullying.*		0.83
(3) *I think all of this focus on bullying is exaggerated.*		0.60
(4) *We are too quick to call all conflicts bullying.*		0.80
Discrediting		
(5) *A little bullying never hurt anybody.*	0.80	
(6) *Bullying is a normal part of childhood.*	0.68	
(7) *Being bullied can make a child stronger.*	0.68	
(8) *Bullying is a harmless form of children's play.*	0.81	

Note: Loadings under .40 are not reported.

negative attitudes or the tendency to blame the victim for their involvement in bullying. Means for the "bully" and "victim" variables were 2.69 (SD = 1.17) and 1.32 (SD = .66), respectively, indicating largely non-judgmental attitudes towards the bully role, and extremely low agreement with the idea that blame should be assigned to victims of bullying.

Discussion

The current study sought to explore the beliefs and attitudes of preschool workers with respect to the phenomenon of bullying in preschool. The first research question considered preschool workers' beliefs about the existence of bullying among this age group. We argue that this question is important given limited research on the topic in early childhood education and the many challenges with respect to identifying bullying in practice (Monks, 2011). In general, we found overwhelming agreement among participants that use of the term bullying in preschool is meaningful and that practitioners believe that bullying occurs among young children in this context. Indeed, many preschool teachers and staff (42%) indicated that children as young as 1–2 years of age are capable of bullying.

A number of previous studies have also reported the existence of bullying in preschool. For example, via questionnaires given to staff and interviews with children, Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012) found that 13% of Finnish children in preschool had been involved in incidences of bullying. Additionally, an earlier Norwegian study found that 67% of preschool workers reported that bullying was common in their preschool (Cameron & Kovač, 2016). While not a direct measure of bullying, aggressive behaviour and peer victimization in children as young as three to four years of age is well documented (e.g. Ladd & Ladd, 1998; Monks et al., 2002; Monks et al., 2003). Thus, the finding that preschool workers believe that bullying occurs in preschool is not surprising. However, an unexpected finding was the high percentage of participants who indicated that adults engage in bullying of preschool children (47%). At the same time, only 11% reported that they had witnessed adults bully children, which raises questions about the basis for this belief among study participants. Given the serious, detrimental effects of bullying there is clearly reason for concern, yet, the exploratory nature of these findings offer only limited information about what actions might be taken to address this issue. Further research is needed regarding preschool workers' understanding of adult–child bullying, including the types of adult behaviours that are perceived as bullying, as well as more reliable data about the prevalence of the problem.

Findings regarding participants' beliefs about the age at which children are capable of bullying were also somewhat surprising. Approximately one-fifth of those who responded to the question indicated that children as young as one year of age can engage in bullying. However, here again, conclusions regarding participants' beliefs about the existence of bullying in preschool must be considered in relation to the study's second research question regarding how the concept of bullying is understood by these professionals. It is fair to say that bullying represents a complex phenomenon that comes in many different forms and occurs under varying circumstances. Although challenges with regard to defining bullying have certainly been acknowledged and problematized previously (e.g. Arora, 1996), the vast majority of research tends to describe

and operationalize bullying in a fairly consistent manner. Generally, there are four common elements to the definition: (a) aggressive behaviour, including verbal, physical or relational aggression, (b) the intention to cause harm, (c) an imbalance of power among those involved, and (d) that the behaviour is repeated over time (Blad, 2014; Olweus & Limber, 1999; Rigby, 2002; Sharp & Smith, 2002).

Given this background, it is noteworthy that participants in the current study did not appear to perceive intentionality (i.e. "the child does it on purpose") as a necessary aspect of bullying. Similarly, high ratings of agreement for the statement, "If it happens just once, it's still bullying" suggest that preschool workers do not place substantial weight on the idea that the behaviour must be repeated over time to be considered bullying. Moreover, while not always stated explicitly, emphasis on objective (i.e. observable) behaviour is an underlying feature of many definitions of bullying and assumptions about their application in practice (Felix et al., 2011). Thus, it is also relevant that participants rated the subjective experiences of the victim as a singly valid indicator of bullying (i.e. "as long as the victim perceives it as bullying"). In sum, it would appear that the preschool workers in this study hold views of bullying that are inconsistent with several aspects of established definitions of bullying in the scientific literature, namely, related to the following three areas: (a) intentionality, (b) chronicity, and (c) objectivity.

Taken together, findings for the first two research questions indicate that while participants believe that bullying is present in preschool, their understanding of the phenomenon differs from commonly defining elements that are perhaps more prevalent in other contexts. Indeed, there is substantial evidence that both children and adults in different positions and age groups operate with varying definitions of bullying (e.g. Harcourt et al., 2014; Smith et al., 1999). It has been hypothesized that variation in the way that children define bullying may account for part of the documented decrease in bullying as children get older and begin to apply more stringent criteria for use of the term, including the aspects of intentionality, chronicity, and the imbalance of power (Smith et al., 1999). Thus, it is possible that the broad conceptualizations of bullying held by participants in the current study, which do not include criteria such as repetition or intention, may account for their willingness to apply the term to very young children.

The study's third research question was aimed at examining attitudes and preconceptions about bullying held by preschool workers. First, we considered participants' propensity to downplay concerns about bullying on two related dimensions: (a) devaluing and (b) discrediting attitudes. The former represents a tendency to devalue the issue of bullying in general, whereas the latter is tied to disregard for the risks associated with it. Overall, results show that participants in the study do not hold negative attitudes about bullying with respect to the abovementioned dimensions. Given that professionals' attitudes towards bullying are likely to influence their willingness and ability to handle potential conflicts, these findings are certainly positive. It is reasonable to assume that preschool teachers who believe that bullying and its consequences should be taken seriously will be quick to intervene in conflicts that arise and supportive of those involved in bullying.

Whereas research suggests that preschool workers are hesitant to label children as bullies and victims, studies have found that they readily identify the distinct behaviour patterns associated with the different roles. For example, Perren and Alsaker (2006) found that preschool teachers identified victims as being more socially withdrawn,

submissive, less cooperative and as having fewer playmates than their peers. In contrast, bullies were seen as more aggressive and less prosocial, but also had more leadership skills and were more often a part of social clusters than victims and non-involved children. In the current study, we developed a series of items to investigate attitudes towards the roles of "victims" and "bullies". With respect to bullies, the measure dealt first and foremost with the preconception that bullying behaviour is inherent in the child and unlikely to improve. Negative attitudes towards victims were associated with the tendency to place responsibility for bullying on the victims themselves. We found that preschool workers held low judgmental and blame attitudes, respectively, toward children characterized as either aggressor or victim. While negative attitudes were low on both dimensions, participants were particularly unwilling to support the idea that victims should be in any way blamed for being involved in bullying.

Limitations

A number of limitations to the current study should be noted. Although our approach to data collection allowed for a large number of respondents, it was not possible to know how many preschool workers received access to the survey. Thus, it is not possible to determine a response rate and difficult to assess the representativeness of the sample. It is possible that participants with an interest in the topic of bullying are overrepresented. While we did not collect data as to whether participants had received training in the area of bullying in early childhood, it is likely that they were familiar with the topic given prominent attention to bullying in the national media in recent years. In addition, the "Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergarten (i.e. preschool)" (NDER, 2017) does touch on the issue of bullying under the umbrella of building friendships and community. Thus, universities and colleges that are responsible for the education of preschool teachers should, indeed, address bullying as part of their teacher preparation. A more nuanced assessment of participants' knowledge and specific competencies with respect to bullying could provide relevant information for placing these findings within the larger context preschool teacher training and have implications for the field.

In addition, positive findings regarding participants' attitudes may be influenced by the desire to provide socially acceptable responses. Future research should examine a broader array of measures and questions to avoid social desirability bias, as well as procedures to validate findings with other data, such as observations. This study was also limited with respect to evaluating the beliefs and attitudes of participants concerning different forms of bullying (e.g. relational, physical), the social dynamics of bullying, and the roles of bystanders. For example, evidence suggests that teachers are more willing to intervene in verbal and physical bullying than relational bullying in accordance with the perception that relational bullying is a less serious concern (Duy, 2013; Yoon et al., 2016). It is also important to note that our exploration of the definitional aspects of bullying was somewhat limited and perhaps overly reliant on single items in the survey. Although these findings are revealing, the approach likely limited many of the nuances that may have been gathered via other strategies, such as qualitative interviews or inclusion of a wider range of items derived from central aspects of bullying as it is commonly defined in the literature.

Conclusion

Although the existence of bullying in preschool has been studied and documented previously (e.g. Alsaker & Nägele, 2008; Author/s, 2016; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012), little is known about how professionals who work in these settings understand and interpret the phenomenon. The title of this article asks a simple question about bullying in preschool: "Are we talking about the same thing?" Our findings suggest that the everyday perspectives of preschool workers do not correspond well with established definitions of bullying. In other words, it does *not* appear that we are "talking about the same thing."

Given this finding, it is important to bear in mind that bullying, like other social processes, is a theoretical construct that describes interpersonal and group dynamics that have "gone awry" with respect to aggression, hostility, and/or a basic sense of powerlessness. From this perspective, the question of whether bullying exists in preschool may be less relevant than whether it is meaningful to use the term to describe a particular set of social processes. Other researchers have suggested alternative terms, such as unjustified aggression (Monks, 2011) or peer victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). Indeed, some alternative views of bullying could be identified in contemporary literature portraying bullying as a general social process comparable to marginalization and inclusion/exclusion (Schott & Sondergaard, 2014), or placing bullying in the larger social (educational) context (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003) or as a social-ecological process (Swearer & Hymel, 2015; Thornberg, 2015). Thus, bullying seen from these perspectives is essentially a regularly occurring interaction between children in need of pedagogical adjustment, guided by educational professionals (Kovač & Kostøl, 2020). Nevertheless, both teachers and parents have argued that preschool professionals need to be trained in how to identify bullying and act to prevent it (Humphrey & Crisp, 2008). Thus, it seems that educational practitioners may benefit from combining traditional definitional understandings of bullying together with somewhat "softer" perspectives that emphasize the role of the larger social context, in order to systematically and effectively address negative social interactions among small children.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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