

Iraklis Grigoropoulos\* 

## Gender differences among educators' perceptions of childhood aggression

**Abstract:** This study aimed to acquire a better understanding of the personal and contextual characteristics that could affect educators' reports and perceptions of student-to-student bullying behaviors. This study included two hundred and eighteen early childhood educators working in daycare centers for children from 2-and-a-half to 4- 5 years old in Greece. Preschool Peer Bullying Scale-Teacher Form (PPBS-TF) questionnaire was used to examine educators' reported student-to-student bullying experiences in Greek childcare centers. This study's results concerning student-to-student bullying involvement indicate that there were gender differences in the participants' perceptions of bullying behaviors. This information could be useful in understanding better this phenomenon and its relation to gender.

**Keywords:** *educators' gender, educators' bullying perceptions, student-to-student bullying behaviors, early childhood educational settings*

### INTRODUCTION

According to Olweus (1978, 1993, 2001), bullying is a subcategory of interpersonal aggression defined by intentionality, repetition, and an imbalance of power, with abuse of power being a basic distinctive feature between bullying and other types of aggression (Saracho, 2016; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). In particular, there is a dynamic interaction between the bully and the victim as the bully increases in power and the victim loses power (Hymel, & Swearer, 2015). Physical strength, popularity, and/ or group size (e.g. a group targeting a single person) may be factors that describe power imbalance. On the other side, power imbalance may be achieved through knowing someone's 'sensitivities' and/or 'vulnerabilities' such as family situation and personal characteristics, and using this information on him/her (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2009). Bullying can also be categorized into direct and indirect bullying. The first describes verbal and physical behaviors such as hitting or threatening while the second denotes behaviors that do not require the presence of bully/bullies such as spreading rumors and excluding from friendship groups (Olweus, 1993, 2001). Bullying can take many forms including direct physical harm (physical bullying), verbal taunts and threats (verbal bullying), exclusion, humiliation, rumor-spreading (relational or social bullying), and electronic harassment through for example e-mails (cyberbullying). Researchers note that even though social and verbal bullying is much more difficult to identify they are frequently experienced by students. Physical bullying on

the other hand is of greater concern although students are frequently reminded of rules forbidding physical harm to others (Hymel, & Swearer, 2015). Several children may be victimized by their peers chronically from an early age before school entry leading in some cases to long-lasting severe symptoms of mental health problems. Further, bullying negatively affects vulnerable children meaning children who belong to a minority group, children affected by migration, children that differ from their peer group, and children with disabilities (Arseneault et al., 2009).

### Bullying behaviors in early childhood education settings

As is clear from previous research data bullying is a usual phenomenon in early childhood education settings (Alsaker & Valkanover, 2001; Vlachou, 2011). However, even though children from a very young age acknowledge bullying and behaviors that could hurt other people research emphasizes mainly middle childhood and adolescence (Vlachou et al., 2011). Based on the different definitions of bullying and methods of data collection the prevalence rates of bullying incidents varies (Kirves, & Sajaniemi, 2012) whereas, at the same time the limited data among preschoolers report that physical, verbal bullying (mockery), and attack on the property are more common than indirect relational bullying such as rumor spreading. This could be because very young children seem to ignore the elements of imbalance of power and repetitiveness (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2005). On the other side young children's form of peer aggression differs from older students (e.g. middle childhood) as

\* International Hellenic University, Thessaloniki, Greece

Corresponding author: Iraklis Grigoropoulos, griraklis@gmail.com

regards the frequency the victims are attacked. Further, several young children might encounter victimization for a short period instead of an extended period of time (Kochenderfer, & Ladd 1997; Monks et al., 2002). This explains why early childhood education researchers questioned the use of the conventional definition of bullying with young children taking into account that this definition prohibits the identification of risky bullying behaviors among other behaviors communicating aggression (Hanish et al. 2004). Thus, according to Saracho (2016) researchers need to use suitable definitions of bullying for early childhood educational settings. Early childhood educators' crucial role in detecting bullying behaviors and children at risk has been already highlighted by previous research findings (Pochtar & Del Vecchio, 2014; Vlachou et al., 2011) along with their tendency to intervene to prevent this phenomenon despite their reported lack of training regarding bullying incidents in their classrooms (e.g. Psalti, 2016). However, despite the fact that early childhood educators' role is crucial in dealing and coping with bullying at their school (Pochtar & Del Vecchio, 2014) their responses, views and reactions are scarcely investigated (Psalti, 2016)

#### **Individual and contextual factors influencing educators' reports of bullying behaviors**

According to Liu et al. (2018), individual factors such as age, gender, and teaching experience significantly influence educators' perceptions of school bullying. In addition, previous research data report that the context of the school setting influences the increase of bullying involvement as well as the effectiveness of preventive interventions (Bradshaw et al. 2009; Grigoropoulos, 2020a,b). Specifically, past research data challenge the notion that class size may be a significant factor in increasing bullying incidents in the classroom. In contrast to what might be logically expected in terms of classroom management problems leading to bullying incidents research shows that there is not a clear association between class size and the prevalence of bullying in the class (Tarinkulu, 2018). Paradoxically, results were antithetical to those commonly expected reporting more bullying in smaller than bigger classrooms (Ersilia, & Salmivalli, 2017). Interestingly, research findings also report that educators' higher educational level is associated with more bullying incidents reported in preschool classrooms (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Tarinkulu, 2018). On the other hand, students' gender was found to have a profound impact on bullying incidents. The number of boys in a classroom was found to increase the reported incidents (e.g. Camodeca et al., 2014). Research findings show that boys were usually more engaged in bullying episodes than girls (Monks et al., 2011). Data from Spanish adolescents confirmed that bullying involvement was stereotypically linked with characteristics of masculinity. Traditionally boys were expected to exhibit more aggressive and violent behavior (Navarro et al., 2011). Acknowledging the significance of gender differences in bullying situations is crucial in observing features that

contribute to the perpetuation of violence. In brief, studies provide evidence that boys engage in bullying behaviors more frequently than girls (Hong, & Espelage, 2012). These gender differences are in many ways legitimized by the socialization process which departs from the school and family context (Steinfeldt et al., 2012) However, there are limited research data regarding the impact of educators' gender on the perceived bullying incidents. Since preschool educators are mostly women this could influence the ways bullying is perceived as differences may exist between female and male educators in relation to their perceptions of bullying incidents (Tarinkulu, 2018).

#### **Theoretical background**

The current research is based on the ecological psychology perspective and the 'gender habitus' concept. More specifically, grounded on an ecological psychology point, meaning that biological differences (nature) can provide a theoretical understanding of gender role behavior but social and environmental factors are also significant (nurture; Clark and Uzzell, 2006) this study examined gender differences in evaluating bullying behaviors. In addition, the current study uses the 'gender habitus' (gender socialization) concept as used in previous studies concerning children's rough-and-tumble play (RTP). Specifically, female educators' gender socialization had a profound influence on the type of games their students were allowed to play. In addition, RTP forms that involved competition and fighting were suppressed under the notion that they foster violence (see Coplan et al., 2015; DiCarlo et al., 2015). Thus, educators influenced by their own gender habitus seem to have a significant impact on the types of games and interactions children are allowed to have. Moreover, RTP is considered a male action area since more boys than girls join RTP (Jarvis, 2006; Tannock, 2005). Bourdieu (2006, p. 88) considers habitus as a 'system of continuous and transferable dispositions' that shape (as an internal compass) an individual's way of thinking, acting, talking, and feeling (see Asimaki & Kostourakis, 2014, p. 125). Overall, past research findings show that early childhood educators misinterpret children's play as aggressive resulting in intervening and stopping the play (Jarvis, 2007; DiCarlo et al., 2015). Based on this discrepancy Bosacki et al. (2015) argue that gender may influence female and male educators' perceptions of childhood aggression while Koustarakis et al. (2015) report that educators' gender-based dispositions influence educators' perceptions of children's play. Accordingly, female educators might perceive children's behaviors as student-to-student bullying behaviors more frequently than male educators.

#### **Gender differences among educators' perceptions of childhood aggression**

Previous research data emphasize the role of gender in early childhood educators' acknowledgment of aggression and RTP (Storli & Sandseter, 2017). Storli and Sandseter (2017) report the lack of early childhood

educators' gender differences in allowing children's RTP. Specifically, educators acknowledged the positive and negative sides of RTP and allowed this kind of play, especially in outdoor environments. Female and male educators' attitudes and practices were influenced by their own gender-based inclinations and experiences (Storli & Sandseter, 2017). In addition, Koustourakis et al. (2015) showed that female kindergarten teachers in Greece were more favorable toward calm sorts of RTP while prohibiting wilder types of play (e.g. fighting/wrestling, grappling) due to their own gender-based predispositions. Stori and Sandseter (2017) propose women's lack of experience in these types of play as a possible explanation for their restrictive attitudes. On the other hand, Sak et al. (2015) report no significant difference between female and male early childhood educators' beliefs and self-reported practices regarding the use of behavior management (BM) strategies. The absence of any differences was explained as an impact of participants' undergraduate education that rendered participants' beliefs and practices about BM strategies more similar across genders (Sak et al., 2015). Taking into account that through the lens of the ecological psychology perspective and the 'gender habitus' concept female and male early childhood educators' attitudes and practices are significantly influenced by their own gender-based dispositions this study examines gender diversity among early childhood educators' perceptions of childhood aggression. All in all, the current study examines if there are differences concerning participants' perceptions of bullying as a result of their gender.

### The current study

Most of the bullying incidents occur in school settings where children spend a large proportion of their time. Hence, schools and educators in particular have a crucial role and responsibility in dealing with bullying (Arseneault et al., 2009; Smith & Shu, 2000). As more and more children go to daycare centers and spend more time there it is most significant to study the factors influencing early childhood educators' perceptions of bullying behaviors. This becomes even more important as educators play a crucial role also in the implementation of bullying prevention programs (Pochtar, & Del Vecchio, 2014). In contrast with common beliefs, research data indicate that being bullied can have a detrimental impact on a child's life. Bullying involvement in early childhood may have a profound influence on future development since each developmental stage influences greatly the next one (Hayslip et al., 2006). Little research attention has been afforded to the study of early childhood bullying (Alsaker & Valkanover, 2012). Mirroring the findings of previous work there is a polemic concerning the best method for assessing student-to-student bullying behaviors and victimization (Cornell & Cole, 2012; Cornell, Sheras, 2006). Even though several researchers recommend the use of multiple informants to achieve psychometric adequacy, evaluating a complicated behavior including multiple participants and affected by various factors is problematic (Juvonen et al., 2001). In addition, children's descriptions

of bullying scarcely take into account the standard definitional criteria (Vaillancourt et al., 2008), directing researchers in this field to use definitions of bullying in their surveys (Hymel, & Swearer, 2015). On the other side, early childhood educators have the opportunity to observe incidents of bullying in the classroom or on the playground and they usually are present in their student's environments where bullying may take place (Arseneault et al., 2009). This study aimed to examine if certain individual and contextual characteristics might play a significant role in influencing early childhood educators' reports of student-to-student bullying behaviors. Also, this study examined Greek early childhood educators' perceptions of children's bullying behaviors from a gendered perspective. In Greece, day-care centers operate from September 1st to July 31st and from 7.00 am to 4.00 pm, five days a week. Within, day-care centers children are usually divided into mixed gender and separate age groups (Grigoropoulos, 2022, 2021b). They have mixed educational personnel including early childhood educators/ childcare workers and teachers (kindergarten- university graduates) offering custodial care and education services (Grigoropoulos, 2021a, 2020c, 2019a). The contribution of this study includes an attempt to address the limited research data regarding factors influencing early childhood educators' reports of student-to-student bullying episodes and behaviors. The role of these factors may be used as a significant source of information contributing to our understanding of bullying in early childhood school settings.

### METHOD

This study aimed to acquire a better understanding of the personal and contextual characteristics that could affect educators' perceptions of student-to-student bullying behaviors. In particular, the study aimed to address the following questions: a) if female and male early childhood educators evaluate differently girls' and boys' aggressive behaviors, and b) if certain personal characteristics and contextual factors (participants' age, level of education, years of working experience, number of children in classroom, children's age in classroom) could affect early childhood educators' perceptions of bullying behaviors in Greek child centers. Thus, based on the aforementioned theoretical perspectives and research findings we hypothesized that a) female early childhood educators would over-evaluate bullying occurrence among boys, and b) that participants' age, level of education, years of working experience, class size, and the number of girls/ boys in class, could also serve as significant predictors of participants' perception of student-to-student bullying behaviors. Preschool Peer Bullying Scale-Teacher Form (PPBS-TF) (Besnili, 2018 as cited in Tarinkulu, 2018) questionnaire was used to assess educators' reports of student-to-student bullying behaviors as in Greece research in this field is scarce and this instrument's measurements seemed to fit in with this study's aims. Cross-cultural adaptation of the questionnaire took place before its distribution.

## Procedure

This study adhered to all ethical guidelines of the institution to which the researcher belongs. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were informed about the aims of the study to ensure informed consent. On completion, the researcher debriefed those who participated. No other information was requested from participants. Data collected from this study were confidential. Participants were provided with an envelope to assure that their answers were anonymous along with a copy of the consent form. The procedure lasted approximately 7-10 minutes. All data were collected from June 2019 to September 2019.

## Measures

The basic demographics questionnaire included questions on gender, age, level of education, years of working experience, and the number of children in the classroom (see Table 1). Preschool Peer Bullying Scale-Teacher Form (PPBS-TF) (Besnili, 2018 as cited in Tarinkulu, 2018) questionnaire was used to examine educators' reports of student-to-student bullying behaviors in the Greek child care centers (e.g. 'Ridiculing a classmate/s for weight, height, clothes, wearing glasses or speech accent', 'Rejecting a classmate/s joining in a game', 'Hitting, slapping, punching, pinching or kicking a classmate/s'; see Besnili, 2018 as cited in Tarinkulu, 2018). The PPBS-TF was translated from English into Greek by the researcher and back-translated into English by another colleague researcher holding a Ph.D. in English literature. The two versions of the questionnaire were compared. There were not any major discrepancies between the original and the back-translated versions and those identified were corrected (Van Widenfelt et al., 2005). The items of the PPBS-TF were rated on a five-point scale, 0 (never), 1 (rarely), 2 (sometimes), 3 (often), and 4 (always). With a single-factor structure, PPBS-TF is a 14 – item self-report inventory. For the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.81. On completion of the PPBS-TF, the participants were given the following definition of peer bullying: Bullying is unfavorable, repetitive, and persistent behaviors acted by an individual or a group of individuals to a less powerful individual or a group of individuals. These behaviors are deliberate but not incidental or jokes (e.g. Tarinkulu, 2018).

## Participants

Two hundred and eighteen early childhood educators were recruited for this study. Mean age was 32.53 (SD = 8.03) for women and 30.11 (SD = 7.23) for men. Most participants held a bachelor's degree (17 men and 116 women), even though women mostly held a bachelor's or a post-graduate degree (master's degree or Ph.D.) as opposed to men ( $\chi^2_3 = 15.95, p = .001$ ) who appear to hold mostly bachelor's degree. In all, women and men were matched in all variables except for education and the number of girls in class. For detailed demographic characteristics, see Table 1.

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics

	Men, <i>n</i> = 37	Women, <i>n</i> = 181	<i>p</i> -value
Age, years	30.11 ± 7.23	32.53 ± 8.03	.085 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Education</i>			.001 <sup>b</sup>
High school	18	34	
Degree	17	116	
Master	2	30	
PhD	0	1	
Mean number of boys in class	8.86 ± .38	8.91 ± .20	.901 <sup>a</sup>
Mean number of girls in class	10.43 ± .51	9.10 ± .26	.018 <sup>a</sup>
Children's age group in participants' classrooms	3.41 ± .15	3.51 ± .07	.751 <sup>a</sup>
class size (Mean)	20.30 ± .98	18.64 ± .46	.176 <sup>a</sup>
Participants' years of experience in current position (Mean)	4.68 ± .60	6.61 ± .43	.109 <sup>a</sup>

Footnote. <sup>a</sup>Mann-Whitney U test, <sup>b</sup>Chi-square test.

## Design and Statistical analysis

A between-subject, correlational design was employed. For the PPBS-TF a single value was computed. IBM SPSS Statistics version 19 was used to analyze the data. Data screening techniques were used before the main statistical analysis. The normality of data distribution was determined using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Data were non-normally distributed. Bivariate correlation (Kendall's Tau correlation analysis) was generated to explore the associations between variables of interest. Next, a multiple regression model was employed to predict PPBS-TF from the other study measures, based on the significance of the associations. Alpha level was set at 0.05.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive results

To investigate the relationship between the variables of the research, Kendall's Tau correlation analysis was performed between all variables of interest. The results are presented in Table 2. The PPBS-TF was negatively associated with gender ( $r_\tau = .000, p < .01$ ), and positively correlated with age ( $r_\tau = .008, p < .01$ ), and level of education ( $r_\tau = .011, p < .05$ ).

### Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to examine the association between predictor variables and the PPBS-TF. The assumptions of regression analysis were tested and were not violated (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Specifically, tests to see if the data met the assumption of collinearity indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern (Gender = .89, VIF = 1.11;

age = .49, VIF = 2.12; level of education = .92, VIF = 1.07; participants' experience in current position = .49, VIF = 2.06).

**Predictors of Attitudes Towards PPBS -TF**

Standard multiple regression analysis was conducted with PPBS -TF as the dependent variable. The data met the assumption of independent errors (Durbin-Watson value = 1.86). The results showed (see Table 3) that the model was statistically significant ( $R^2 = .29$ ,  $F_{(4,212)} = 22.474$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Female gender ( $\beta = -.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), contributed to higher scores in PPBS -TF.

**CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Since there are very scarce data regarding bullying behaviors in preschool children and day-care centers the current study conducted with early childhood educators extends the limited work in this field and offers new perspectives considering the phenomenon of bullying at early ages. Most importantly this study's results support the notion that educators' gender could be considered

a significant predictor of bullying acknowledgment in day-care centers. Thus, this study's main contribution is that it provides evidence that early childhood educators' gender is expected to be highly correlated with bullying acknowledgment in a classroom. This means that female educators are more likely to acknowledge bullying behaviors according to this study's participants regardless of other personal and contextual factors such as age, level of education, and working experience. This study's findings coincide with previous studies reporting that female kindergarten teachers in Greece were more favorable toward calm sorts of R&T play while prohibiting wilder types of play (e.g. fighting/wrestling, grappling) due to their own gender-based predispositions (Koustourakis et al.,2015). This positive relationship between gender and bullying acknowledgment in a classroom can be supported by both the ecological psychology perspective and the gender socialization (gender habitus) process which highlight the fact that an individual's attitudes and practices are influenced by their own gender-based experiences and dispositions (Werner & Grant, 2009). According to Repo and Sanjaniemi (2015), bullying is

**Table 2.** Cross-Scale Correlations for the study variables (n = 218)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<i>Variables</i>									
1. Gender	___								
2. Age	-.164**	___							
3. Level of education	-.246*8	.005	___						
4. Participants' experience in current position	-.094	.610**	-.038	___					
5. Class size	.078	.145**	-.047	.033	___				
6. Number of boys in class	-.005	.115*	.124*	.008	.640**	___			
7. Number of girls in class	.137*	.076	-.142*	-.008	.672**	.403**	___		
8. Children's age group in participants' classrooms	.030	.086	.266**	-.010	.257**	.337**	.235**	___	
9. PPBS -TF	-.450**	.126**	.138*	.122**	.005	.038	-.021	.039	___

Note. PPBS-TF = Preschool Peer Bullying Scale-Teacher Form, \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

**Table 3.** Regression analysis for variables predicting PPBS -TF (N=218)

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>95%CI</i>
Gender	-12.03	1.51	-.484***	-7.95	.000	-15.01,-9.05
Age	.182	.100	.153	1.824	.070	-.015, .379
Level of education	1.11	-.889	.075	1.252	.212	-.639, 2.86
Participants' experience in current position	-.074	.139	-.044	-.536	.593	-.348, .199

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .00$

a subjective concept and the objective truth about this phenomenon is very difficult to be reached. Repo and Sanjaniemi (2015) report that some members of staff might have identified a particular child as a bully while others working in the same group did not. Furthermore, in this study as in other studies reporting similar results participants were mainly women (e.g. Tarinkulu, 2018). Therefore, this might raise the question of how the participants' gender influences their perceptions of bullying involvement. However, there are not any results coming from male early childhood educators concerning bullying involvement. Nevertheless, it seems essential for educators to consider this factor when bullying involvement is acknowledged because children's applications of gender stereotypes align with stereotypical cultural and institutional expectations. Furthermore, in this way overstating their behaviors and even most importantly stigmatizing them might be prevented. Results did not support the notion that participants' level of education could be an important factor in predicting bullying involvement in the classroom. This result contradicts previous findings underlining the significance of educators' qualifications in bullying prevention (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015). In this study more than half of the participants held a bachelor's degree and this may explain the indifference of the educational level effect. Furthermore, participants' working experience did not affect bullying acknowledgment suggesting that working experience by itself might not be an important criterion.

### Limitations

This study's results relied on educators' reports concerning student-to-student bullying behaviors which entailed the possibility of providing invalid answers. Thus, participants might have underreported undesirable attitudes and behaviors (the phenomenon of social desirability bias) (Demetriou, Ozer, & Essau, 2015). As well, educators' self-reports on bullying involvement may be inaccurate because bullying is a subjective phenomenon difficult to be reached. Further, this study used a relatively small and non-diverse sample of Greek early childhood educators. In addition, a rather small number of male early childhood educators participated in the current study. Future research could emphasize samples with greater sociodemographic diversity and an equal ratio of female to male participants utilizing measures such as naturalistic observation and multi-informant data (Ostrov & Keating, 2004). Finally, the absence of convergent and discriminate validity of the PPBS –TF constitutes a significant limitation of this study. However, in the Greek context, no choices of long-established and reliable measures exist for the current study.

### Conclusions

Most importantly, this study's results concerning bullying involvement indicate that educators' gender could affect their understanding of a bullying incident. This information could be useful in understanding better this phenomenon and its relation to gender. This study

contributes to the literature by examining personal and contextual factors that could influence educators' acknowledgment of bullying involvement. It also yields useful data about preschool bullying in Greek daycare centers providing information concerning participants' gender in relation to the reported bullying involvement. This study shows that educators' gender needs to be valued when evaluating bullying involvement and actions to counteract it. Thus, as a practical implication, not only children's gender but also educators' gender should be considered when discussing bullying in early education settings. This study's results highlight the need to reflect on gender stereotypes in educational settings and the need to be removed. This study emphasizes the need for educators to reflect on their gender beliefs and attitudes since they are accurately reflected in their everyday interactions with young children.

### DECLARATIONS

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**Ethical approval:** "All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards."

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