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Making Sense of Verbal Bullying in Early Childhood: Preschool Teachers' Perspectives and Reported Practices in Athens, Greece

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ABSTRACT

This study explored preschool teachers' beliefs, interpretations, and reported practices regarding verbal bullying in early childhood settings in Athens, Greece. A qualitative research design was adopted, and fourteen preschool teachers employed in public and private nursery schools participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings revealed substantial variability in teachers' conceptualizations of verbal bullying, particularly in relation to intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance. Although most participants recognised the emotional harm associated with verbal aggression and expressed strong willingness to intervene, definitional ambiguity appeared to influence how incidents were identified and addressed. Teachers predominantly attributed verbally aggressive behaviors to family environment, emphasizing parental modeling and relational climates at home. Empathy-based dialogue and classroom discussion emerged as the principal reported forms of intervention. At the same time, although all participants acknowledged the importance of school–family cooperation, many described reluctance to engage parents because of anticipated defensiveness or denial. The study highlights the need for enhanced professional development focused on conceptual clarity, early identification of repeated victimization, and structured communication frameworks between schools and families. Given the formative importance of early childhood in shaping peer relations and social behaviour, strengthening prevention strategies at this stage may contribute meaningfully to reducing later bullying trajectories. Research on bullying has focused mainly on primary and secondary education, leaving verbal bullying in Greek preschool settings under-explored. Verbal aggression warrants particular attention because it can be subtle, mistaken for developmentally typical conflict, and become embedded in early peer relationships. This qualitative study examined how 14 preschool teachers from public and private schools in Athens conceptualised verbal bullying and described their responses to it. Semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis were used to obtain context-sensitive accounts from teachers with varied professional experience. The findings represent participants' reported perceptions and practices rather than independently observed classroom behaviours. Teachers recognised the emotional harm caused by verbal aggression but applied the defining criteria of intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance inconsistently. They primarily attributed such behaviour to family influences and reported using empathy-based dialogue and classroom discussion. Although school–family cooperation was considered important, anticipated parental defensiveness often discouraged communication. The study extends understanding of how verbal bullying is interpreted within the specific cultural and educational context of Greek preschools. Despite the small, geographically limited convenience sample and reliance on self-report, the findings identify a need for clearer institutional protocols and prevention-oriented professional development addressing bullying recognition, inclusive intervention, documentation, and constructive family engagement.

INTRODUCTION

School bullying constitutes a persistent and multifaceted challenge within contemporary educational systems. Although extensive research has examined bullying in primary and secondary education, comparatively less attention has focused on early childhood settings, where foundational patterns of social behaviour, group dynamics, and emotional regulation are established. Early scholars such as Olweus (1994) posited that bullying involves intentional harm, repeated aggressive behaviour, and an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim. While this framework has provided conceptual clarity and methodological consistency for decades,

its application in preschool contexts raises distinct developmental and interpretive challenges, because preschool children's socio-emotional competencies are still forming.

Early childhood is a critical period for the development of empathy, peer negotiation strategies, and self-regulation. Longitudinal evidence suggests that early aggressive or exclusionary behaviours, if unaddressed, can persist and generalise into later schooling, influencing broader social adjustment and peer relations (Vlachou et al., 2011). Furthermore, recent international frameworks emphasise the importance of early intervention for bullying and peer conflict, positioning teachers as central actors in

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creating safe and inclusive classroom environments that promote socio-emotional development (UNESCO, 2019). The capacity of teachers to interpret, identify, and respond effectively to bullying behaviours is therefore indispensable for prevention.

Verbal bullying occupies a uniquely complex domain within the broader typology of bullying behaviours. While physical aggression is visible and tends to elicit immediate adult intervention, verbal aggression—such as name-calling, taunting, exclusionary language, and derogatory comments—may be minimised, misinterpreted, or treated as normative peer conflict. However, research indicates that verbal victimisation can have profound psychological consequences even in early childhood, including elevated anxiety, diminished self-worth, and compromised peer relationships, particularly when repeated over time. Contemporary studies in school settings note that teachers often report verbal bullying among the most common forms encountered, yet they may feel least prepared to address it effectively due to its subtlety and complexity (O'Brien, 2024).

Teachers' perceptions and beliefs about bullying significantly influence whether and how they intervene. Past research has shown that educators are more responsive to overt forms of aggression than to relational or verbal forms, partly due to challenges in recognising less tangible behaviours as bullying (Landers, 2024). Moreover, teachers' definitions of bullying often vary across the core criteria of intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance, leading to inconsistencies in identification and response. These interpretive differences can contribute to underreporting or misclassification of bullying incidents, thereby hampering efforts to protect vulnerable children and implement effective interventions. Recent international research has expanded our understanding of teacher perceptions in more diverse contexts. For example, an international investigation highlighted that teachers' attitudes toward bias-based bullying and their willingness to intervene are influenced by cultural, contextual, and identity-related factors, underscoring the need for culturally responsive anti-bullying programs (Khanolainen, 2025). Such findings emphasise that teacher preparedness cannot be understood as universal but must be contextualised within local educational systems, professional development practices, and socio-cultural norms.

In addition to conceptual challenges, the increasing prevalence of bullying-like behaviours in varied educational modalities, including online and hybrid learning environments, has introduced new complexities. Educators in virtual schooling contexts report that while physical bullying is rare, verbal and relational forms persist and remain under-recognised, highlighting gaps in teacher training and awareness (Landers, 2025). These developments reflect broader shifts in peer interaction patterns among children and suggest that teacher education must adapt to emerging forms of bullying that extend beyond traditional physical spaces.

Family context and school–family cooperation further complicate teachers' interpretive frameworks. While ecological models of child development emphasise the influence of home environment on social behaviour, exclusive attribution of bullying behaviours to family factors may inadvertently diminish perceived professional responsibility to intervene meaningfully at school. Recent policy initiatives have sought to strengthen systemic responses to bullying by integrating family engagement components, recognising that sustained collaborative approaches may amplify preventive impact. Finally, recognition of diversity-related vulnerability remains crucial. Children perceived as different due to physical characteristics, disability, or socio-cultural backgrounds are at elevated risk of verbal victimisation, illustrating the intersection between identity, peer dynamics, and teacher perceptions. Contemporary international research underscores the importance of developing teacher competencies that sensitively address bias-based peer harassment and support inclusive classroom climates (Khanolainen, 2025). This study addresses the following questions: 1) How do preschool teachers conceptualise verbal bullying in early childhood classrooms? 2) What forms of verbal aggression do teachers report encountering in preschool settings? 3) How do teachers interpret the causes of verbal bullying among preschool children? 4) What intervention strategies do teachers report using to address verbal bullying? 5) How do teachers perceive the role of school–family cooperation in responding to verbal bullying?

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative research design in order to explore in depth preschool teachers' perceptions, interpretive frameworks, and reported practices regarding verbal bullying. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research aimed not to measure prevalence or test predetermined hypotheses, but to understand how educators construct meaning around a socially complex phenomenon in their everyday professional context. Qualitative inquiry allows for the examination of subjective experiences, implicit assumptions, and contextual nuances that may not be captured through structured quantitative instruments (Creswell, 2008). Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited existing qualitative research focusing specifically on verbal bullying in Greek preschool education, an interpretivist epistemological orientation guided the research process. This orientation assumes that social reality is co-constructed through interaction and interpretation, and that participants' accounts provide valuable insight into the meanings they attribute to their experiences. Semi-structured interviews were therefore selected as the primary data collection method, as they allow for flexibility, depth, and clarification while maintaining thematic focus.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study involved fourteen preschool teachers employed in public and private nursery schools located in the southern region of Athens, Greece. All participants were female, reflecting the gender distribution typically observed in early childhood education in Greece. Their ages ranged from 27 to 56 years ($M = 42.64$), and their professional experience varied between two and thirty-three years ($M = 17.07$). Eight participants held a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, while six had completed postgraduate studies at master's level. A convenience sampling strategy was employed. Participants were recruited based on accessibility and willingness to participate, following initial contact with school administrators and direct communication with teachers. Although convenience sampling does not allow for statistical generalisation, it is frequently utilised in qualitative research where the primary aim is depth of understanding rather than representativeness (Creswell, 2008). Effort was made to ensure variation in age, professional experience, and school sector (public versus private) in order to capture a range of perspectives. The inclusion of teachers with differing years of service was particularly important, as previous research suggests that professional experience and educational background may influence teachers' perceptions of bullying and intervention strategies (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). While the sample size was relatively small, it was considered sufficient for thematic saturation within the scope of this study, as recurring patterns became evident during the later stages of data collection.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted between May and June 2024. Each interview lasted approximately thirty to forty minutes and took place in a quiet and private setting within the school premises or via a secure online platform, depending on participant preference and scheduling constraints. The interview guide was developed based on the study's research questions and relevant literature on school bullying and teacher perceptions. It included open-ended questions addressing: (a) teachers' definitions and conceptualisations of verbal bullying, (b) perceived frequency and typical forms of verbal aggression in preschool classrooms, (c) perceived causes and contributing factors, (d) intervention practices and strategies, and (e) experiences and attitudes toward school-family cooperation in addressing incidents. Probing questions were used to encourage elaboration and clarification where necessary. A pilot interview was conducted prior to the main data collection phase in order to assess the clarity, relevance, and sequencing of the interview questions. Minor modifications were made to enhance comprehensibility and flow. This procedure contributed to the credibility and methodological rigor of the study. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently

transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were checked against recordings to ensure accuracy. Identifying information was removed, and participants were assigned anonymised codes (e.g., I1, I2) to protect confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants received detailed written and verbal information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. They were also informed that they could request removal of their data within 48 hours following the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. All audio files and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussing bullying incidents, participants were assured that the study focused on professional perceptions rather than evaluation of individual performance. No identifiable information about schools or students was included in the final report.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This analytic approach was selected because of its theoretical flexibility and its suitability for exploring patterns of shared meaning while remaining attentive to participants' subjective accounts and the interpretive role of the researcher. Reflexive thematic analysis does not assume that themes simply emerge from the data; rather, themes are actively developed through the researcher's engagement with the dataset, analytic decisions, and theoretical sensitivity. The analysis followed six recursive phases. First, the researcher engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts in order to achieve familiarisation with the data. Initial observations and interpretive notes were recorded throughout this stage. Second, initial codes were generated across the dataset, with coding conducted inductively so that meanings were developed from participants' accounts rather than imposed through a predetermined coding frame. Third, codes were examined and grouped into broader candidate themes on the basis of conceptual coherence and patterned meaning. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined in relation to both the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole. Fifth, themes were defined and named, with attention given to their internal coherence, distinctiveness, and analytic relevance to the research aims. Finally, the analytic narrative was produced through the integration of thematic interpretation and representative excerpts.

In line with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher's subjectivity was understood not as a source of bias to be eliminated, but as an analytic resource that required ongoing reflexive engagement. The researcher therefore maintained continuous critical reflection on personal assumptions, interpretive positioning, and the

ways in which meaning was constructed throughout the analytic process. For this reason, inter-rater reliability was not pursued, as reflexive thematic analysis does not treat coding agreement as the primary marker of quality. Instead, analytic rigor was supported through transparency of analytic decisions, reflexive documentation, and discussion of developing themes with an experienced qualitative researcher to enhance interpretive depth and thematic coherence.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study. Credibility was enhanced through pilot testing of the interview protocol, verbatim transcription, and close adherence to participants' language during analysis. Thick description of participants and context allows readers to assess transferability to similar educational settings. Dependability was supported by maintaining detailed records of analytic decisions, coding processes, and theme development. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive awareness and documentation of interpretive steps. While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisation, these procedures increase confidence that findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives rather than researcher imposition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis yielded interrelated findings that illuminate preschool teachers' perceptions, interpretations, and intervention practices regarding verbal bullying. Although participants demonstrated awareness of the emotional impact of verbally aggressive behaviours, significant variability emerged in how they conceptualised and identified verbal bullying, particularly in relation to intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance. The findings are presented below in a coherent analytical synthesis.

Conceptual Ambiguity: Intentionality and Developmental Interpretation

A central theme concerned teachers' divergent interpretations of whether preschool children engage in verbal bullying intentionally. Approximately half of the participants expressed the view that children of this age are capable of understanding the harmful implications of their words. These teachers described situations in which children appeared aware that specific insults or exclusionary remarks would cause emotional distress. In their accounts, intentionality was inferred from children's avoidance of responsibility or from repeated use of specific words directed at the same peer. In contrast, other participants interpreted verbal aggression primarily as an expression of emotional immaturity or imitation of adult speech. According to these teachers, young children often repeat words heard at home without fully comprehending their meaning. Such behaviours were framed as

impulsive or playful rather than deliberately harmful. This divergence reflects longstanding debates within developmental psychology regarding children's capacity for moral intentionality in early childhood (Monks & Smith, 2006). While young children's executive functions and perspective-taking abilities are still developing, research indicates that by preschool age many children demonstrate emerging awareness of others' emotional states (Vlachou et al., 2011). The variability observed in the present study suggests that teachers' developmental assumptions significantly influence their identification of bullying behaviours.

Notably, while intentionality was frequently discussed, the criteria of repetition and power imbalance were less consistently articulated. Teachers often described isolated incidents of name-calling or teasing but did not systematically assess whether these behaviours were repeated over time or embedded within asymmetric peer dynamics. The limited reference to power imbalance may indicate conceptual simplification of bullying definitions in practice, a phenomenon previously observed among educators (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). As a result, behaviours that potentially meet formal bullying criteria may be interpreted as transient conflicts rather than systematic victimisation.

Perceived Frequency and Forms of Verbal Aggression

Participants reported varying levels of exposure to verbal bullying during the previous academic year. Some described frequent occurrences, ranging from weekly to daily incidents, whereas others reported only occasional episodes or none at all. The most commonly mentioned forms of verbal aggression included insults related to intelligence (e.g., calling a peer "stupid"), comments about physical appearance (e.g., weight or wearing glasses), and statements of exclusion such as refusing friendship or denying participation in play activities. Although adult profanity was frequently cited, teachers did not consistently distinguish between general use of inappropriate language and targeted verbal victimisation. This distinction is critical, as not all profanity constitutes bullying unless directed repeatedly toward a specific individual within a context of power imbalance (Olweus, 1994). The blending of general classroom misconduct with bullying behaviour suggests that conceptual precision may be limited. The reported estimate that approximately three to four children per classroom systematically engage in verbal aggression is noteworthy. Even allowing for interpretive variability, this proportion indicates that verbal aggression represents a meaningful phenomenon within preschool settings. International research has shown that verbal victimisation often exceeds physical forms in frequency, even in early grades (Veenstra et al., 2014). The findings of this study align with this broader pattern, highlighting the centrality of verbal interactions in shaping peer relationships during early childhood.

Vulnerability and Difference as Risk Factors

Another prominent theme concerned teachers' perceptions that children perceived as "different" are at heightened risk of verbal victimisation. Participants referred to cases involving children with disabilities, learning difficulties, physical differences, or minor developmental challenges (e.g., toileting issues). Teachers frequently noted that teasing appeared to target visible or socially salient differences. This perception aligns with empirical findings indicating that children who deviate from perceived group norms—whether due to disability, ethnic background, or physical characteristics—are more vulnerable to bullying (Nikolaou & Samsari, 2016). In early childhood classrooms, where peer identities are still forming and social comparison processes are emerging, visible difference may serve as a salient basis for teasing or exclusion. Importantly, teachers' awareness of this vulnerability suggests potential readiness for preventive inclusion practices. However, systematic strategies to counteract bias-based teasing were not consistently described, indicating an area for further professional development.

Causal Attributions: The Central Role of Family Environment

A dominant interpretive pattern involved attributing verbal bullying behaviours to family environment. The majority of teachers emphasised parental modelling of aggressive language, conflictual home dynamics, or insufficient emotional guidance as primary causes. In several narratives, participants described bullying as "originating from home" or as reflecting parenting practices. While ecological models of child development acknowledge the significant influence of family context (Bowes et al., 2010), the strength and consistency of this attribution in the present study suggest potential externalisation of responsibility. Teachers rarely referred to classroom climate, peer group norms, or institutional practices as contributing factors. This asymmetry may influence intervention approaches, potentially positioning teachers as responders to externally generated behaviours rather than proactive shapers of relational norms. Research indicates that teacher beliefs about causality influence intervention style and intensity (Yoon, 2004). When educators perceive bullying as rooted primarily in family factors beyond their control, they may feel less efficacious in implementing change within the classroom context. The present findings therefore highlight the importance of strengthening teachers' sense of agency in cultivating positive peer cultures.

Intervention Practices: Dialogue and Empathy

Despite conceptual ambiguities, all participants expressed willingness to intervene in verbal bullying incidents. The predominant intervention strategy involved classroom discussion and empathy-based dialogue. Teachers described facilitating conversations in which children were encouraged to articulate feelings, consider others'

perspectives, and reflect on the consequences of their words. Role-playing activities and symbolic exercises were frequently employed to enhance perspective-taking. These practices correspond with socio-emotional learning approaches that emphasise empathy as a protective factor against bullying (Garandeau et al., 2016). Empathy development in early childhood has been associated with reductions in aggressive behaviour and improved peer relationships. The emphasis placed on dialogue suggests that teachers prioritise relational repair and emotional awareness rather than punitive measures. However, interventions appeared largely informal and reactive. Few teachers described structured documentation of repeated behaviours or systematic follow-up mechanisms. The absence of institutionalised monitoring may limit the capacity to identify patterns of repetition or escalation. Research on whole-school approaches suggests that consistency and clarity across staff responses enhance effectiveness in reducing bullying (Veenstra et al., 2014). The reliance on individual teacher initiative observed in this study may therefore represent both a strength and a limitation.

School–Family Cooperation: Recognition and Reluctance

Finally, a significant tension emerged regarding school–family cooperation. Although all participants acknowledged the importance of collaboration with parents in addressing verbal bullying, many reported hesitancy to initiate communication. Anticipated defensiveness, denial, or blame from parents were cited as barriers. Some teachers preferred to resolve incidents internally unless escalation occurred. This ambivalence mirrors findings from prior research indicating that teachers often experience communication with parents as delicate and potentially conflictual (Van Nijenhuis et al., 2020). Yet effective prevention frameworks consistently emphasise alignment between school and home environments. The discrepancy between recognising the importance of cooperation and avoiding engagement suggests a need for structured communication strategies and institutional support.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the results reveal a complex interplay between moral commitment, conceptual ambiguity, and contextual constraints. Teachers demonstrate strong willingness to protect children and foster empathy, yet inconsistencies in definitional understanding and limited structural support may constrain comprehensive prevention efforts. The prominence of family-based causal attribution, combined with hesitancy toward parental communication, further illustrates the multifaceted challenges inherent in early childhood bullying prevention. These findings provide an empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion on professional development, conceptual clarity, and systemic intervention in preschool education.

Discussion

The present study offers a qualitative exploration of preschool teachers' perceptions and reported practices concerning verbal bullying, contributing to an area that remains comparatively underexplored within early childhood education research. Rather than merely documenting the existence of verbal aggression in preschool classrooms, the findings illuminate how teachers construct meaning around such behaviours, how they locate responsibility, and how their interpretive frameworks shape intervention practices. In doing so, the study provides insight into the epistemological and professional assumptions underpinning early childhood responses to peer aggression. A central interpretive issue concerns the tension between developmental normalisation and recognition of harm. Many participants oscillated between acknowledging the emotional impact of verbal aggression and framing such behaviours as developmentally typical expressions of impulsivity or imitation. This tension reflects a broader theoretical debate regarding the threshold at which peer conflict transitions into bullying in early childhood. While classic definitions emphasise intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance (Olweus, 1994), preschool contexts complicate the assessment of these criteria. Young children's limited emotional regulation and fluctuating peer alliances may obscure patterns of asymmetry. However, research indicates that even in early childhood, children can demonstrate consistent dominance hierarchies and targeted exclusion (Vlachou et al., 2011). Therefore, the interpretive ambiguity observed in this study may not stem solely from developmental complexity but also from insufficient conceptual scaffolding within teacher education.

The tendency to emphasise intentionality as the primary diagnostic criterion may further contribute to under-recognition. When teachers interpret harmful language as lacking deliberate intent, they may downgrade its seriousness, despite potential repetition or emerging power imbalance. This pattern is consistent with prior research demonstrating that educators often prioritize overt physical aggression over relational or verbal forms (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). Yet verbal aggression, particularly when embedded in repeated peer dynamics, can exert cumulative psychological effects. The findings suggest that professional development initiatives should encourage a more relational lens—one that examines interaction patterns over time rather than focusing exclusively on individual intent. Another salient interpretive dimension concerns attribution of causality. The strong emphasis on family environment as the principal source of verbal bullying behaviours reflects an ecological awareness consistent with developmental theory (Bowes et al., 2010). However, when family influence is framed as the dominant explanatory mechanism, school-level agency risks being attenuated. Such external attribution may inadvertently limit teachers' perceived capacity to reshape

peer norms within the classroom context. Research on teacher efficacy demonstrates that educators' beliefs about their capacity to influence student behaviour significantly predict intervention consistency and effectiveness (Yoon, 2004). Thus, strengthening teachers' sense of collective responsibility may be as important as enhancing conceptual clarity. Importantly, the findings also reveal a moral and pedagogical commitment to empathy-based intervention. Participants consistently described dialogue, perspective-taking exercises, and restorative conversations as primary tools for addressing verbal aggression. This orientation aligns with socio-emotional learning paradigms, which posit that fostering empathy and emotional literacy reduces aggressive behaviours and enhances peer cohesion (Garandau et al., 2016). In early childhood settings, where social scripts and communicative repertoires are still forming, such dialogical approaches may have particularly enduring impact. Unlike punitive strategies, empathy-focused interventions aim to reshape internalised norms and relational expectations.

Nevertheless, while relational strategies were prevalent, the absence of structured, school-wide frameworks raises questions about sustainability and consistency. Whole-school anti-bullying approaches emphasise shared definitions, coordinated adult responses, systematic monitoring, and family engagement (Veenstra et al., 2014). In the present study, intervention practices appeared highly individualised, dependent on each teacher's personal philosophy and experience. Although this flexibility may allow context-sensitive responses, it may also produce variability in how similar incidents are addressed across classrooms. Institutionalising clear definitions and response protocols within preschool settings may enhance coherence without undermining relational sensitivity. The issue of vulnerability and perceived difference also warrants deeper consideration. Teachers recognised that children with visible physical characteristics, disabilities, or developmental differences were more frequently targeted. This awareness is significant, as early bias-based teasing can lay the groundwork for entrenched exclusionary attitudes. Research has shown that children who are perceived as deviating from peer norms face increased risk of victimisation, particularly in environments where diversity is insufficiently normalised (Nikolaou & Samsari, 2016). In this respect, anti-bullying efforts cannot be disentangled from inclusive education practices. Cultivating classroom cultures that explicitly value difference may function not only as reactive intervention but also as proactive prevention.

A further layer of complexity emerges in relation to school–family cooperation. Although teachers unanimously acknowledged its importance, many reported hesitation in engaging parents due to anticipated defensiveness. This ambivalence suggests a relational paradox: cooperation is recognised as necessary, yet communicative barriers undermine its enactment. Prior research has documented similar tensions, noting that teachers may fear parental

denial or blame-shifting (Van Niejenhuis et al., 2020). However, avoiding dialogue may inadvertently reinforce fragmented responsibility. Structured communication frameworks, possibly supported by school leadership, may reduce anxiety and create clearer expectations for collaborative problem-solving. From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for targeted professional development in early childhood contexts. Teacher training programs frequently address classroom management broadly but may not sufficiently differentiate between normative conflict and systematic bullying. Integrating modules that emphasise longitudinal pattern recognition, power dynamics, and relational mapping could enhance early detection. Furthermore, embedding anti-bullying principles within national early childhood curricula may strengthen institutional coherence. It is also important to consider the broader cultural context. Educational norms regarding discipline, parental involvement, and child autonomy vary across countries, influencing how bullying is conceptualised and addressed. The Greek preschool context, characterised by close-knit teacher–child relationships and relatively small classroom communities, may facilitate empathy-based approaches but also heighten sensitivity to parent–teacher dynamics. Comparative research could explore how similar phenomena are interpreted in different educational systems, thereby enriching cross-cultural understanding. Methodologically, the qualitative design enabled in-depth exploration of teachers’ interpretive processes, revealing nuances that quantitative surveys might overlook. However, reliance on self-report may introduce social desirability bias, particularly when discussing intervention practices. Observational studies or multi-informant designs could further illuminate discrepancies between stated beliefs and enacted behaviours. In synthesising these findings, it becomes evident that early childhood verbal bullying occupies a conceptual grey zone—situated between normative developmental conflict and systematic peer victimisation. Teachers navigate this ambiguity through moral intuition, relational strategies, and contextual judgement. While their commitment to empathy is a notable strength, greater theoretical grounding and structural support may enhance the precision and consistency of their responses. Ultimately, the prevention of bullying in preschool settings cannot be reduced to isolated interventions. It requires cultivation of classroom cultures that discourage dominance, valorise inclusion, and model respectful communication. As Olweus (1994) emphasised, effective prevention involves reshaping relational norms rather than merely reacting to incidents. In early childhood, where social identities and behavioural scripts are still fluid, such reshaping may yield particularly transformative outcomes. The present study therefore underscores the importance of investing in conceptual clarity, teacher efficacy, and collaborative frameworks as foundational pillars of early bullying prevention.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and geographically limited to the Athens region, which restricts the transferability of findings to other educational contexts. Second, the study relied on teachers’ self-reported perceptions and practices, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Observational data or multi-informant approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of verbal bullying dynamics in preschool classrooms. Third, the use of convenience sampling may have introduced selection bias, as participants who volunteered may hold stronger professional interest in bullying prevention. Future research could incorporate larger samples, multiple regions, and mixed-methods designs in order to deepen understanding of early childhood bullying phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights both strengths and gaps in Greek preschool teachers’ understanding and management of verbal bullying. Although participants recognised its emotional impact and expressed a strong willingness to intervene through dialogue, empathy, and role-playing, they inconsistently applied the defining criteria of intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance. Interventions were largely situational rather than supported by structured, school-wide policies or monitoring procedures. Teachers frequently attributed verbal bullying to family influences and identified children perceived as “different” as particularly vulnerable. Although school–family collaboration was considered essential, anticipated parental defensiveness often discouraged communication. These findings indicate a need for targeted professional development focused on distinguishing bullying from normative peer conflict, implementing evidence-based and inclusive prevention strategies, and strengthening constructive communication with families. Clear institutional protocols may also improve early identification and consistency of response. The findings should be interpreted in light of the study’s limitations. The small convenience sample, drawn exclusively from the Athens region, limits transferability. Moreover, reliance on self-reported perceptions may have introduced social desirability bias. Future studies should include larger and more geographically diverse samples and combine interviews with observations or other informants to provide a more comprehensive account of verbal bullying in preschool settings.

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