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Books and Bullies: Responses to Bullying in Preschool Students

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Abstract
Bullying begins in the preschool years and presents a public health concern for children of all ages with negative outcomes observed for victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. With an eye on intervention, research suggests that reading and discussing books may help to encourage perspective taking and compassion for others, even at an early age. The current study presented preschoolers with *The New York Times* bestselling storybook featuring an active bystander in a bullying situation and examined definitions of and responses to bullying both before and after reading the storybook. At the end of the study, participants reported what they learned from the storybook. Responses were categorized as direct defending (e.g., confronting the bully), indirect defending (e.g., supporting the victim), and inaction (e.g., remaining quiet). Participants included 89 children recruited from preschools in the Southwestern United States. When asked to consider themselves in the role of a bystander, results indicated that children were more likely to engage in an active response to bullying after reading the storybook. Findings suggest that educators may be able to use books highlighting active bystanders to discourage bullying behavior among preschool students.

Keywords Bullying · Preschool · Bystander · Defending

Bullying affects even the youngest of learners as children enter social contexts away from their home environment (Camodeca et al., 2015; Reunamo et al., 2015; Vlachou et al., 2011). Beginning with the preschool years, bullying can be observed in nearly every classroom setting (Tanrikulu, 2020). Although statistics vary, one national survey reported that nearly one in five children under the age of 6 had been bullied at least once (Finkelhor et al., 2015). In elementary school, nearly one in ten children (8.1%) report being bullied on a weekly basis (Diliberti et al., 2017). Parents identify bullying as one of their top health concerns for elementary school-aged children (Shetgiri, 2017). Across childhood and into adolescence, bullying behaviors can become more complex (Swearer & Hymel, 2015a), and bullying behaviors may peak during the transition to middle school (Biggs et al., 2010; Rosen et al., 2017). Although bullying behaviors may be at the highest levels during sixth grade, early intervention is important as these behaviors first become evident in early childhood (Tanrikulu, 2020). Moreover, preschoolers are positioned to engage in lasting prosocial behavior, namely empathetic understanding and action to support their bullied peers (Nickerson et al., 2015).

While research has addressed bullying from the perspective of parents and preschool teachers, the present study investigates definitions of and responses to bullying in preschool-aged children. The objective of the study was threefold. First, researchers were interested in the overall difference between pre-test and post-test interviews of how preschoolers, acting as both victims and bystanders, respond to instances of bullying; specifically if a storybook intervention yielded changes in these responses. Second, researchers were interested in how preschoolers' overall understanding of a bully changed after being exposed to a book-based intervention. Third, researchers were interested in what preschoolers reported learning following a storybook intervention. Finally, researchers explored how the above three considerations were impacted by age, if at all.

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Theoretical Approaches to Bullying in Preschool

Scholars have proposed many theoretical approaches to understand bullying. One central factor of bullying in early education settings is that it always takes place in a social setting. Through a social ecological lens, this group setting is influenced by intersecting systems stretching from a child's home and school environment to larger cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Espelage et al., 2014; Holt et al., 2013). Researchers postulate preschoolers may become aware of bullying at such a young age because of exposure through family members and even media consumption, emphasizing the importance of broad framework encompassing various spheres of influence (Monks et al, 2009; Raisor & Thompson, 2014). As such, there is "growing recognition that effective bullying prevention programs should be situated within a social-ecological framework" (Holt et al., 2013, p. 239) as bullying behaviors may be influenced by factors including peer attitudes toward bullying, school policies, and larger societal influences (Espelage et al., 2010; Swearer & Hymel, 2015b).

Bullying and Aggression

Aggression is a phenomenon that begins early in life and is intimately linked with bullying. Both bullying and aggression hold an intent to harm another individual and are social in nature. However, "bullying is a subtype of aggression so all bullying behavior is aggression but theoretically not all aggression is bullying" (Ostrov et al., 2019, p. 2572). Bullying differs from aggression in that it is characterized by an imbalance of power and is repeated or may be repeated (Monks & Smith, 2006; Ostrov et al., 2019). Although the distinction between aggression and bullying is important, given the limited research in early childhood, we extended our review of the literature beyond bullying to include aggression in preschool.

Aggressive behaviors are ubiquitous, embedded in a larger social network (Card & Hamby, 2011). Multiple forms of aggression are evident as early as the preschool years (Card et al., 2008; Crick et al., 1997). In a meta-analysis of aggression-related constructs drawing on studies conducted primarily in the USA, where preschool education is a combination of private and government-subsidized, researchers found broad support for dividing aggression into physical and relational forms (Card et al., 2008). Physical aggression in the preschool years often manifests in overt forms such as hitting, punching, kicking, and biting (Casper & Card, 2017; Raisor & Thompson, 2014; Rose et al., 2016; Tanrikulu, 2020). Relational aggression can be best described as a manipulation of relationships or social statuses (Card et al., 2008).

Some preschool behaviors take the form of relational aggression, such as exclusion from play or refusing to listen to a peer who has made them angry (Crick et al., 1997). In a study of 3-year-olds to 6-year-olds in Turkey where preschool education is non-compulsory and performed in private and government-subsidized settings, researchers found that in addition to physical aggression, rejecting a classmate who wanted to join in a game (i.e., relational aggression) was the most common form of aggression (Tanrikulu, 2020). Moreover, bullying can be an enactment of dominance, including controlling play through pushing and verbal commands to play a certain game (Lee, 2020). These data were collected in South Korea, where most 3–5-year-old children are in daycare or kindergarten settings in collectivistic context. In teacher-nominated reports of bullying roles, kindergarteners who were identified as bullies also enacted the majority of dominating behavior when compared to those who held both bully/victim roles and bystanders (Lee, 2020).

There is broad support for addressing all forms of aggression, though physical aggression may be most easily identifiable to early childhood professionals and thus better understood at present. In a recent study, 132 preschool teachers in the USA completed the Bullying Attitudes Questionnaire. Results indicated that preschool teachers perceive physical bullying to be more serious than verbal and relational bullying (Davis & Grere, 2018). However, it is important to note that victims report feeling hurt by all forms of bullying. While there may be a paucity of research on non-physical forms of bullying in early childhood, research demonstrates that verbal and relational bullying can appear in children as early as 3 years old and have lasting implications for psychosocial maladjustment for both the bully and the victim (Crick et al., 1997; Rosen et al., 2020). As such, it is critical to extend focus beyond physical bullying.

Early Conceptualizations of Bullying

To examine the effects of bullying among preschoolers, both caregivers and children must have similar understandings of bullying as a social phenomenon. This understanding is informed by development; therefore, definitions vary depending on age (Monks & Smith, 2006). From a cognitive perspective, more sophisticated definitions of bullying may develop in late elementary school, with explicit mention of power dynamic involved in bullying more evident in middle school populations (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). However, preschool-aged children can identify basic elements bullying behavior (i.e., someone who is generally aggressive toward

someone else; Monks et al., 2005). Researchers found that among a group of 30 ethnically diverse 4–6-year-olds in the USA, all participants had a self-reported rudimentary understanding of bullying (e.g., provided a characteristic such as *mean*) and half of participants reported an excellent understanding of bullying when compared to a common list of bullying characteristics (i.e., acts unkindly; Griffin Freeman, 2014). Additionally, preschool-aged students can identify different roles held in bullying situations. In a study conducted with 3–6-year-old children, researchers were interested in seeing if students could identify the bully, follower, active bystander, outsider, and victim (Camodeca et al., 2015). Results indicated that many children could identify these specific roles. The recognition of bullying and bullying roles could help teach students how to navigate these situations more successfully. Although sometimes these roles are clearly defined, there is often overlap between roles and various motivations for enacting certain roles (Casper & Card, 2017).

Preschool-aged children utilize a more simplistic definition of bullying (e.g., aggressive behavior) than older children and adults who can distinguish between physical and non-physical behaviors and incorporate power in their conceptualization of bullying (Monks & Smith, 2006). Adults who work in childcare settings do not typically consider bullying to be a set of fixed traits that an individual possesses, but rather certain behaviors that negatively affect another child (Kovač & Cameron, 2021). Further study of how preschoolers conceptualize bullying can assist with research and intervention efforts in early childhood as it is important to better understand whether youth, researchers, teachers, and parents "are talking about the same thing" (Vaillancourt et al., 2008, p. 502).

Key Role of Bystanders

Bystanders play a central role in bullying situations because their interventions can dramatically attenuate victimization, either by stopping the bully's behavior or by offering support to the victim (Monks & O'Toole, 2020; Nickerson et al., 2015). Particularly in early childcare settings, bullying most often occurs when bystanders are present (Monks et al., 2021). In a study of 4- and 5-year-old students, at least one bystander was present in nearly two-thirds of bullying situations (Monks et al., 2021).

Active bystanders who engage in defending behaviors are broadly conceptualized as direct or indirect defenders (Fredrick et al., 2020). Direct defending involves bully-oriented behaviors, such as verbally or physically confronting the bully. Indirect defending involves victim-oriented behavior, such as attending to emotional/physical needs or seeking the help of an adult (Fredrick et al., 2020).

It is important to understand how and why someone may intervene during peer victimization. While there is little consensus regarding who is most likely to be an active bystander, some developmental patterns exist. Researchers observed aggression in preschool settings to determine what the most common form of intervention was during a bullying scenario (Rose et al., 2016). Bystanders were overwhelmingly unlikely to intervene (90%), whether it be defending the victim or encouraging the bully. There are some potential explanations of the lack of bystander support in young children. Children themselves often do not know how to respond after being bullied and may choose inaction or withdrawal. This inaction may be due to developing language skills and lack of ability to clearly communicate about the bullying situation (Reunamo et al., 2015). Another potential explanation for lack of bystander support is the peer group's appraisal of the victim. Many victims may have low peer status and experience rejection (Lee, 2020).

Consistently, elementary school-aged children are more likely to defend in instances of bullying than those in middle and high school (Meter & Card, 2015). Some have posited that older bystanders (i.e., middle- and high-schoolers) who defend their victimized peers may experience an increased loss of social capital, thus making the defending behavior riskier (Casper & Card, 2017). School-aged children with higher awareness of self and social capital are the most likely demographic to engage in defending behaviors (Meter & Card, 2015). These youth may feel more confident to intervene effectively, and self-efficacy has been associated with bystander intervention (Monks & O'Toole, 2020). Reading storybooks in which characters model defending may also encourage active bystanding behavior in early readers.

Early Educational Interventions in Bullying

There are many effective ways to educate preschool-aged children about the impacts of bullying. As bullying is inherently a relational phenomenon, interventions to counteract bullying should also be relational in nature (Swearer & Hymel, 2015b). Researchers often point to strategies such as modeling prosocial behavior, creating open channels of communication about bullying, and allowing children to engage in cooperative play (Griffin Freeman, 2014). From a social-ecological perspective, utilizing these strategies to facilitate a positive classroom environment can have a significant impact on bullying behavior (Espelage et al., 2010). Because of the important role that bystanders play in bullying prevention, many educational settings in elementary, middle and high schools have bystander programs aimed at helping students intervene. Focusing on younger students,

researchers in Finland found that among 3- to 6-year-old learners, students were more likely to intervene if their classroom environment had established common agreements against bullying behavior (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015). These common agreements can foster social-emotional skills because they focus on instilling empathy. In a meta-analysis of school-based intervention programs for 4 to 11-year-olds, researchers found that developmentally appropriate, targeted interventions can encourage prosocial behavior and discourage aggression (Malti et al., 2016). Because empathy and emotional responsiveness have been implicated in bystander intervention, social-emotional learning is critical to foster these skills in young children (Barhight et al., 2013).

Books have been used to foster social-emotional learning across all ages of students and can be easily integrated into curriculum by selecting age-appropriate texts (Ciecierski & Bintz, 2020). Within the preschool setting, this intervention consists of sharing storybooks that address social topics and discussing both the book's text and illustrations (Mankiw & Strasser, 2013). By engaging in whole-classroom discussions of sensitive topics, children's books can cover social skills, inter and intrapersonal emotional needs, and social-emotional group learning (Heath et al., 2017). Using educational storybooks in preschool classrooms can generate conversations around bullying and serve to emphasize the harmful outcomes and prosocial interventions to prevent bullying in the future (Mankiw & Strasser, 2013). These dialogue-based interventions also foster relationships between students, thus increasing the likelihood of a student later intervening on behalf of a peer (León-Jiménez et al., 2020). However, the outcomes of such programs are not consistent, and additional research is needed (Barhight et al., 2013).

Many storybooks feature bullying and could be incorporated into bullying prevention curriculum (Ciecierski & Bintz, 2020). Oppliger and Davis (2016) found that among 55 books dealing with bullying, the most prevalent form of bullying displayed was teasing and name-calling (62%), followed by verbal intimidation (56%), destroying property (51%), and physical bullying (50%). Additional research supports the claim that verbal bullying is the most common in picture books, with 80% of books analyzed in a meta-analysis depicting verbal bullying and over half depicting physical bullying (Moulton et al., 2011).

Importantly, Wee and colleagues report on a series of recent studies employing bullying-related books in three classrooms in South Korea (see Wee et al., 2022a, b; Wee & Lee, 2020). In these studies, researchers collaborated with teachers to select storybooks with bullying themes and integrate these into a larger curriculum for 5-year-olds that included teacher-led discussions and other activities. Across these studies, children developed a better understanding of bullying and indicated they would use more direct strategies in response to bullying (e.g., telling the bully to stop the behavior). However, Wee and colleagues do mention the need for further research to ensure generalizability; all 20 participants were from families with high socioeconomic backgrounds in which parents had been college educated (Wee et al., 2022b). Further, Wee and colleagues note that their findings "are specific to the particular case" and "may not extend directly to other social and cultural contexts… to fully understand the trajectory of early aggression habits, including bullying" (Wee et al., 2022a, p. 108). Given the variety of countries and contexts in which preschool bullying has been studied, more research is needed in diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural settings (e.g., Lee, 2020; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Tanrikulu, 2020). The current study seeks to help answer this call for further research.

Current Study

The current study focuses on preschool students because of the deleterious effects of aggressive behavior on children, which can continue and worsen into the adolescent and young adult years (Swearer & Hymel, 2015b). This supports a call for prevention programs, starting in early childhood, as a key factor for promoting positive learning environments aimed at emotional well-being (Saracho, 2016). Moreover, prevention programs such as educational read-alouds of storybooks may allow for children to explore the emotionally charged nature of being a bystander in bullying situations. More research is needed to examine the effectiveness of storybook interventions in addressing bullying (Wee et al., 2022a).

As literature not only reflects what is happening in society but has the potential to influence society (Ismali, 2008), the current study examines how preschool students can learn about bullying using storybooks. Although the importance of exploring and using fiction as an intervention for bullying in the classroom has been suggested, research has not yet fully examined the potential application of books portraying bullying during the preschool years (Lowe, 2009). The present study seeks to fill this important knowledge gap. Specifically, the researchers pose the following research questions: (1) How do preschoolers' responses as victims and bystanders change after being exposed to a storybook-based intervention? (2) What do preschoolers learn about bullying after engaging in a storybook read-aloud intervention? (3) What are the effects of a storybook read-aloud intervention on preschoolers' conceptualizations of a bully? (4) Given developmental changes among preschoolers, how are these research questions impacted by age (i.e., 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds)?

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited from five area preschools and daycare centers in a Southwestern metropolitan area. Schools included Head-Start daycares that provide social support to children from low-income families to support continued academic success (Yale School of Medicine Child Study Center, n.d.), Montessori schools that strive to promote social and emotional learning through discovery (Association Montessori Internationale, n.d.), and religiously-affiliated daycares situated in Christian churches. Of the 89 participants, there was an approximately equal number of boys (53%, $n = 47$) and girls (47%, $n = 42$) and 24 three-year-olds, 37 four-year-olds, and 27 five-year-olds. Age was not reported for one child. The sample ranged in age from 3 to 5.5 years ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.79$). The sample was ethnically diverse, including 56% White, 18% Latino, 16% Asian, 6% Black, and 4% multi-ethnic participants.

Procedure

Measures

Researchers utilized a semi-structured interview format to assess preschoolers' reactions to bullying scenarios. The popular picture book *The Pout-Pout Fish and the Bully Shark* (Diesen, 2017) was selected for the classroom intervention. The 32-page book, suitable for 3-year-olds to 6-year-olds, is a part of *The New York Times* bestselling series (Macmillan, 2020). *The Pout-Pout Fish and the Bully Shark* was ideal for the target age group of the study (i.e., popular, widely accessible, demonstrated a prosocial response to a bullying scenario). The prosocial response of the book's main character, the Pout-Pout Fish, is in line with findings from a comprehensive content analysis, which found that the effectiveness of bully-related books was partially explained by how the bullying scenario was resolved (Moulton et al., 2011). Moreover, the book provides guidelines for children to follow if they encounter a bullying situation and mirrors scenarios in popular bullying-related books in which preschoolers may need to intervene if an adult is not immediately present (Diesen, 2017; Opplinger & Davis, 2016). The specific guidelines included in the book are to "be kind, be fair, and if something goes wrong, speak up!" (Diesen, 2017, p. 28).

Participants engaged in one-on-one interviews with researchers before and after the read-aloud. Preschoolers were first introduced to the puppets and allowed to touch the puppet and try the puppet on to develop comfort and familiarity with the puppets. Puppets have long been utilized in research with young children for their ability to foster dialogue (Ahlcrona, 2012). Moreover, puppets have been used to aid in discussion around topics such as exclusion and to provide basic perspective-taking skills to children (Ostrov et al., 2015). Puppets have been used in previous research focused on aggression, bullying, and peer conflict with this age group (see, for example, Camodeca & Coppola, 2019; Iskander et al., 1995; Thornberg, 2006; Zsolani et al., 2012). In these past studies, researchers presented vignettes with the puppets and coded participant verbal responses to questions about the scenarios (e.g., emotions of those involved, responses to the behavior). In the current study, researchers selected three puppets that appeared to match the child's gender and racial/ethnic identity.

Researchers asked the children if they knew what a bully was (Pre-test Bully Knowledge), and if so, the child was asked to elaborate (Pre-test Bully Definition). The interviewer then used three puppets to demonstrate a pretend bullying scenario. Specifically, this scenario began with two puppets: a bully puppet takes away a victim puppet's ball, calls the victim puppet a mean name, and pushes the victim puppet to the ground. Participants were then asked how they would feel (Pre-Feel) and what they would do in response to the situation if they were the victim (Pre-Do). Preschoolers were given a third puppet and asked to pretend that they were there and saw the bullying scenario (i.e., as a bystander). The interviewers asked students how they would feel (Pre-test Bystander Feel) and what they would do (Pre-test Bystander Do) if they saw this happen and recorded responses.

After all participants engaged in the pre-test, research assistants read Diesen's (2017) *The Pout-Pout Fish and the Bully Shark* to the entire preschool classroom. The number of students ranged from 8 to 15. To increase awareness of the emotions communicated through the story and highlight prosocial behavior, checks for understanding were included throughout the reading (e.g., What is the Bully-Bully Shark doing that is not nice? (Brownell et al., 2013)). All responses were generated by preschoolers based solely on the book's content without any teaching from researchers. At the end of the story, researchers reviewed the book's central messages about bullying with the students, having them repeat the guidelines presented in the book. This included speaking up to a bully if they are doing something that is unkind and/or unfair (Diesen, 2017).

Participants then met individually with the same research assistant to complete the post-test. The interview began with asking if they knew what a bully was (Post-test Bully Knowledge), and if so, what is a bully (Post-test Bully Definition). Due to a clerical issue, participants at one site were not asked what a bully was during the post-test so their data were not included in analyses examining pre-post comparison of

defining a bully. Participants were then asked what they learned from the book, which was an assessment of lessons they learned from the book. Preschoolers were introduced to three new puppets. For consistency, researchers acted out a nearly identical scenario from the first scenario, only changing the puppet names. Participants were then asked how they would feel (Post-Feel) and what they would do in response to the situation if they were the victim (Post-Do). Again, preschoolers were given a puppet to represent a bystander in the same bullying scenario and after the scenario being re-enacted, the participant was asked what they would feel (Post-test Bystander Feel) and do (Post-test Bystander Do) if they saw this happen, (i.e., as a bystander).

Coding

Trained research assistants coded the responses provided by preschool students. Researchers coded how participants would respond as a bystander and victim in a bullying encounter. For both the pre- and post-test interviews, responses for victim and bystander were grouped into categories informed by previous research (Card et al., 2008; Fredrick et al., 2020; Wee et al., 2022a; Wee & Lee, 2020). Responses were collapsed into three main categories: (1) Direct (to indicate any kind of direct confrontation with the bully, including physical and verbal confrontation), (2) Indirect (to indicate self-oriented, support-seeking behavior, e.g., telling the teacher or parents what they had experienced), and (3) Inaction (to indicate a lack of response or uncertainty in how to respond the situation). Examples of each response were direct defending (e.g., "I would tell the bully to be nice"), indirect defending (e.g., "I would tell the teacher"), and inaction (e.g., "I wouldn't do anything). Thus, for each participant, we coded victim direct intervention, victim indirect intervention, victim inaction, bystander direct intervention, bystander direct intervention, and bystander inaction both before and after the storybook intervention. Each of these categories were dichotomously coded (0 = no, 1 = yes) such that if the children demonstrated the strategy they received a code of 1 for that particular response.

Researchers separately calculated interrater reliability for participant responses as the victim and bystander by averaging the interrater reliability of the three categories (direct, indirect, and inaction). Interrater reliability was strong for victim responses (Cohen's $K = 0.80$) and bystander responses (Cohen's $K = 0.83$; McHugh, 2012).

Coders also analyzed themes of lessons learned after engaging in the storybook read-aloud and determined three distinct categories created by the authors. This coding was generated from the question "What did you learn from the story?" asked during the post-test. Responses included learning about strategies to combat bullying (e.g., "Make sure you speak up"), learning what bullying behavior was (e.g., "The shark was mean to his friends," "the shark ate someone's lunch," "the shark pulled his friends off the swing"), and no reported learning (e.g., "Nothing"). Interrater reliability for lessons learned was calculated by averaging the interrater reliability for the three categories (strategies, learning, and no learning) and was acceptable (Cohen's $K = 0.79$).

Results

Changes in Responses to Bullying Among Victims

Data were analyzed via a McNemar's test to examine differences between the pre-test and post-test responses to determine if the read-aloud storybook intervention yielded significant differences in the incidence of direct confrontation, indirect confrontation, and inaction when the participant responded as a victim. Results showed a significant change ($p = 0.001$) in the category of inaction. Participants were less likely to display inaction (e.g., "I would do nothing," "I would cry," "I would be sad sad sad,") in response to experiencing bullying after being read a book featuring a bullying intervention. Researchers also analyzed results by specific age groups to determine if there were meaningful differences between responses to bullying scenarios among 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds. Significant results were found among 4-year-olds. Within the category of inaction, 4-year-olds were less likely to display inaction during the post-test when compared to the pre-test ($p = 0.021$).

Changes in Defending Strategies Among Bystanders

Bystanding behavior was analyzed via McNemar tests, specifically looking at differences between the pre-test and post-test responses in the incidence of direct confrontation, indirect confrontation, and inaction when participants were asked to act as a bystander. When results were analyzed among all participants (i.e., not separated by age), McNemar's tests did not yield any significant results. When results were analyzed within specific age groups, notable differences emerged among 5-year-olds. When comparing the pre-post data among 5-year-olds acting as bystanders, participants were more likely to engage in active strategies (i.e., direct confrontation of the bully) after being exposed to the storybook read-aloud ($p = 0.021$). Five-year-olds provided active strategies such as "I would say 'be nice'" and "I would say 'stop'".

Lessons Learned Through Storybooks

To further assess the impact of storybooks aimed at addressing bullying, researchers coded responses to the question "What did you learn from the story?" into three unique categories (i.e., how to combat bullying, understanding of what constitutes bullying, and lack of meaningful response). The first two categories were not mutually exclusive, with some preschoolers learning more than one lesson. Almost 40% of responses analyzed included learning how to combat bullying behavior ($n = 35$; e.g., "Be kind, be safe, make sure you speak up"). Roughly one-third of preschoolers (30%) reported learning what bully behavior was and could provide accurate examples ($n = 27$; e.g., "The shark tried to eat all the fish and eat everything"). Slightly over 60% of preschoolers ($n = 53$) provided a meaningful response. The final category was exclusive, with 40% of total respondents who did not articulate a meaningful response related to witnessing bullying ($n = 35$).

Lessons Learned and Age

The three categories of *Lessons Learned* were analyzed separately via a chi-square test of independence to examine differences between the ages of respondents and whether they learned strategies of how to address bullying behavior, accurate examples of bullying behavior within the story, or no meaningful learning reported. Results showed a significant impact of age, χ^2 (2, $N = 88$) = 9.80, $p = 0.007$, in the category of anti-bullying strategies. Five-year-olds were more likely to report learning strategies to address bullying behavior than 3- or 4-year-olds. No significant results were found within the analysis of age and identification of bully behavior within the story, though chi-square analysis approached significance, χ^2 (2, $N = 88$) = 5.13, $p = 0.078$, with 3-year-olds being less likely to report learning about bullying behavior than 4- or 5-year-olds. In the category of "no meaningful learning," 5-year-olds were statistically less likely than 3- or 4-year-olds to report not learning anything or learning nothing related to bullying or bullying responses, χ^2 (2, $N = 87$) = 6.87 $p = 0.032$.

Changes in Understanding of Bullying

Understanding of bullying was analyzed using a McNemar test. There was a significant change in understanding of bullying before and after engaging in the class read aloud, $p < 0.01$. Following the read-aloud, 26.5% of participants who did not know what a bully was before the book were able to define a bully in the post-test. Additionally, whereas only two students provided an example of a bully during the pre-test (e.g., "Someone mean who takes your toys away"), seven students were able to produce an accurate example of a bully after engaging in the class read-aloud (e.g., "Someone who takes your ball and calls you a mean name.").

Discussion

The present study investigated the effects of response differences before and after reading a story promoting prosocial behavior in response to bullying. Within the storybook, the intervention relied on a fictional shark who engaged in bullying behavior by wielding his power over his peers. The developmentally appropriate use of animals accompanied victims who are smaller species (e.g., fish) represents a power differential that is common in bullying situations and in bullying related books that feature characters like mice and foxes (Moulton et al., 2011; Wee et al., 2022b). Given the social modeling of conflict resolution strategies, it is possible that observing peers' responses to the readings (i.e., sharing the park rules within the book of being kind, being fair, and speaking up about bullying) could have created a more confident response in the post-test bullying scenario (Ostrov et al., 2015; Raisor & Thompson, 2014). Moreover, prosocial peer responses within the larger classroom setting (i.e., during story time) supports the importance of considering children's social-ecological environments when addressing bullying (Espelage et al., 2010). Reinforcing a positive group process within the larger classroom setting may then be replicated in bullying encounters within the school setting.

Participants were instructed to act both as the victim and the bystander using puppets to engage in a common bullying scenario. When presented with a hypothetical vignette, participants were significantly less likely to endorse inaction as a means to respond to a bullying scenario after engaging in the class storybook depicting a prosocial response to bullying. It is notable that while individuals were less likely to engage in inaction, they were not statistically more likely to engage in either direct or indirect action to confront their hypothetical bully. When results were analyzed by age, 4-year-olds were the age group who engaged in less inaction as a victim after being exposed to the storybook read-aloud than before. This does not indicate advanced age may attenuate inaction as 5-year-olds did not yield the same results.

Researchers were also interested in responses before and after the storybook read-aloud when participants acted as the bystander in a common bullying scenario. When results were analyzed by age, results indicated that 5-year-olds were more likely to engage in direct action after reading the storybook read-aloud than before reading, which is consistent with previous work with 5-year-olds and bullying-related books (Wee et al., 2022a; Wee & Lee, 2020). These findings are notable as the book utilized in the class reading discussed both direct and indirect behaviors and presented

them both as options for dealing with a bully. However, the main character directly confronted the bully in the storybook in a kind manner, perhaps modeling this important behavior for students (Diesen, 2017; Raisor & Thompson, 2014). Within early childhood, previous findings that focused on clarifying bystander roles were inconsistent, perhaps due to less developed social cognitive skills (Monks & O'Toole, 2020). The impact of age is therefore notable in that findings support the impact of development on ability to engage in active bystander roles to confront bullies.

Researchers explored the lessons learned after being exposed to a storybook read-aloud related to bullying. When coded into three meaningful categories of learning how to address bullying, learning what bullying behavior is, and not learning anything meaningful, 5-year-olds were more likely to report learning strategies to address bullying behavior than 3- or 4-year-olds. This further supports the idea that advanced age may have an impact on preschoolers' abilities to integrate and implement positive strategies to counteract bullying (Monks & O'Toole, 2020).

Finally, researchers were interested in preschoolers' changing conceptualizations of a bully after being exposed to a storybook read-aloud addressing bullying behavior. Results indicated that participants were more likely to correctly identify what a bully was after engaging in the read-aloud, consistent with Wee and Lee's (2020) study. This indicates a rudimentary understanding of bullying behavior at a young age, consistent with other findings (Camodeca et al., 2015; Monks et al., 2005; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). These findings suggest that preschoolers are developing an understanding of bullying that is similar to that of researchers and teachers (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Moreover, when children can identify bullying, they can seek support from parents and teachers who can help by intervening (UNICEF, n.d.).

Limitations

While the current study had many strengths, findings must be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. Although researchers selected a developmentally and thematically appropriate book for the storybook read-aloud, children were only exposed to one book. The book used illustrated a clear case of bullying, whereas actual patterns and relations in children's social environments may be more complex. Still, this approach of relying on a single text is consistent with past research on storybooks (Dixon-Krauss et al., 2010; Neumann, 2020). Studying how just one book influences students is important given the demands on teachers and the limited resources of schools (Flores-Koulish & Smith-D'Arezzo, 2016). Moreover, just one book can make an impact as noted by Flores-Koulish and Smith-D'Arezzo, who used Wiesner's *The Three Pigs* to examine how postmodern storybooks contribute to critical media literacy as well as raise awareness of social justice issues. In describing their study, Flores-Koulish and Smith-D'Arezzo (2016) shared that "although the students' interest in and positive reaction to the text did not surprise us, their ability to take this single exposure and critically engage with it, incorporating many elements of critical media literacy, led us to make a connection between postmodern picture books and critical media literacy" (p. 350). Similarly, in a study of critical literacy and bully-related storybooks, Wee and colleagues focused on one book of bullying related to race and one book of bullying related to disability (Wee et al. 2022b).

The current study adds to this growing body of research, but future research should incorporate a wider variety of books that feature both human and animal characters. In a comprehensive content analysis of depictions of bullying in children's literature, about half to the storybooks featured animal characters (Wiseman & Jones, 2018; see also Moulton et al., 2011). Past research studies examining the impact of bullying-related storybooks have used books featuring animals (e.g., mouse, giraffe, snake, fox; Wee et al., 2022a; Wee & Lee, 2020), but future research is needed to determine whether human characters are more influential than animal characters. In terms of promoting prosocial behavior, books featuring humans may be more likely to encourage sharing than books featuring animals. Initial support comes from Larsen and colleagues' (2018) work, in which children read *The Little Raccoon Learns to Share* in its original form or in an altered format in which Photoshop was employed to transform the original characters into humans. To our knowledge, this finding has not been replicated or extended to bullying-related books and thus is an important area for future research given the popularity and widespread availability of books featuring animal characters.

Further, it is important to note that the intervention featured in the current study was limited in that it was researcher led. Recent intervention research has involved a single classroom and collaboration with the teacher to select bullying-related storybooks and create a broader curriculum that includes teacher-led discussion with opportunities for reflection and roleplaying (Wee et al., 2022a, b; Wee & Lee, 2020). Such research is of critical importance as it is likely that the most successful intervention programs incorporate multiple components that persist over the school year (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). However, with these multi-component interventions, it may be difficult to determine whether it is the storybook, the teacher's contribution, or a combination of the two that are effective. For instance, Wee and Lee (2020) found that children began to express more "active ways" of responding to teasing (p. 273), but it is challenging to pinpoint whether this was the result of storybooks and/or the actions of the teacher. In an interview with the researchers, the teacher (Ms. Kim) indicated, "the participating

children's behaviour towards and interactions with their classmates changed as the project progressed" (p. 276). At the same time, the behavior of the teacher also changed as "Ms. Kim reported that she put an emphasis on doing at least one nice act for their friends each day, and encouraged children to share their kind act with the class at the end of the day" (p. 276). Thus, although the researcher led intervention of the current study is limited, changes can be attributed to the storybook. Examining the role of storybooks is important because even though research indicates that sustained programs that involve teachers and other key players (e.g., counselors, school psychologists, principals, nurses, coaches) in school-wide prevention and intervention efforts are likely most impactful (Rosen et al., 2017), school administrators may prefer simple, single-level interventions given their limited resources (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Incorporating bullying-related storybooks into the curriculum could appeal to teachers and administrators due to the ease of implementation, but such a universal level approach would ideally be paired with a more targeted intervention for those at risk or already involved in bullying (Biggs & Vernberg, 2010).

Future studies should encourage storybook read-alouds to promote social-emotional learning in the preschool classroom. Additionally, researchers only conducted one follow-up shortly after children engaged in the storybook read-aloud. Future students should engage in a longitudinal approach to evaluate empathetic engagement and bullying in the classroom over time following a read-aloud intervention.

The current study was also limited in that we were not able to assess and systematically analyze nonverbal responses to bullying behavior, which may indicate how intensely a preschooler may respond. Further, due to collecting data within preschool settings, researchers were not able to ask parents about reading habits and media consumption in the home. Understanding the home context in these areas is an important area for future research on bullying especially as conceptualized using the social ecological model.

Finally of note, some direct forms of bystander intervention reported were not ideal because they evoked direct physical aggression. For example, one participant responded with "I would push [*the bully*]." The range of responses do indicate that students were not trying to respond in a socially desirable fashion, but future interventions should consider how to address any unintended lessons.

Future Directions

Training and professional development around bullying is less common in preschool settings (Davis & Grere, 2018). Fortunately, researchers have compiled extensive lists of books that adeptly deal with social issues such as bullying in a sensitive and representative way (Heath et al., 2017; Oppliger & Davis, 2016; Raisor & Thompson, 2014). Future research should augment these lists with books that promote diverse, realistic forms of aggression, as well as diverse characters and backgrounds. Additionally, both books and future research on bullying should integrate discussions about why children bully (Oppliger & Davis, 2016). With increased contextual discussions about bullying, future research could explore solutions with participants (e.g., "What could have been done in this situation?") to promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Although similar puppet interviews to those employed in the current study have been used with children under 3 years of age, future studies should assess non-verbal behaviors as well as examine children's roleplaying and drawing centered on the storybooks. For instance, Wee and colleagues used an innovative approach in which 5-year-old children were able to draw pictures and write letters to characters from storybooks that featured bullying incidents (Wee et al., 2022a, b; Wee & Lee, 2020). Future research should adapt this methodology to examine younger children's responses to storybooks centered on bullying.

Though educational books are a reasonable, effective support for bullying in the classroom, implementation difficulties exist. First, books must be selected for their ability to generate conversation about bullying via characters and pictures (Raisor & Thompson, 2014). Additionally, consideration such as age-appropriateness and gender/ethnic diversity is essential (Mankiw & Strasser, 2013). The types of bullying are also important to evaluate the book's ability to mirror real life bullying situations. Bystander intervention is of great import when studying bullying behaviors in young learners. Future research should examine the nature of the relationship between the bully, victim, and bystander (i.e., the victim and bystanders are friends) and the likelihood of intervening behavior based in this relationship.

Implications for Teachers

Attention to relationships and mental health should start early in a child's academic and social journey (Heath et al., 2017). Book-based interventions are a considerably effortless way to integrate prosocial techniques into classroom curriculum. As teachers engage in read-alouds using books with bullying themes, it is important to recognize that young children might not yet be familiar with the term "bullying." Thus, in reading bullying-related books to children under the age of 5 years, teachers might focus discussion on promoting children's understanding of bullying and explaining the different bullying roles (see also Levine & Tamburrino, 2014; Wee & Lee, 2020). In the current study, 5-year-olds

were most likely to report learning strategies to address bullying. For 3- and 4-year-olds, teachers might need to employ a number of strategies beyond incorporating storybooks to encourage students to respond to bullying in an assertive fashion (see Levine & Tamburrino, 2014 for a review of strategies that preschool teachers can use in conjunction with storybooks to educate preschoolers about bullying and responding to bullying).

Many classrooms integrate story time to promote creativity, problem-solving, and personal responsibility (Raisor & Thompson, 2014). Given time constraints and limited resources, teachers and schools may not be able to initiate school-wide programs. As a first step, well-chosen books that emphasize social-emotional growth have the potential to increase defending behavior, reduce bullying, and create safer learning environments.

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Declarations

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