

Module 12- Discussion Post: Disrupting Early Childhood Care and Education Research

Zahra Rahbari

ECED 508B 62A 2020 W2 Review of Research in Early Childhood Education

Dr. Iris Berger

March 15, 2021

Bullying: My Inquiry and Early Childhood Education Context

As an early childhood educator, I daily reflect and “re-search” many areas in my profession. I constantly ponder children’s social, cognitive and literacy development and achieving a holistic curriculum in a routine program. The discussion we hear a lot, particularly these days, is social justice and all children’s equity regardless of their social status, race, abilities, and capabilities. However, the least discussed is “bullying”, a topic we all are familiar with, and no effective action is taken about it. How many of the individuals in our society were assumed losers at school or victimized by a bully?

As early childhood educators, we always witness young children who treat their friends unfairly and harshly. My concern is whether this could form a habit, and later in school, these children become the bully out of habit and not being aware of the damage they cause their peers. This blog post will probe more into bullying and ideas to deal with individuals who are involved in bullying (the bully, the victim, the school staff and the parents).

Objective of This Discussion: Bullying’s Who, Why and How

Lund, Helgeland and Kovac (2016) define bullying as a manner in which the child who is being bullied or victimized is repeatedly exposed to undesired actions. Moreover, bullying could be explained as actions of more powerful persons against helpless individuals (Lund et al., 2016). Being bullied impacts children’s development at all levels and leads to the victim’s depression, anxiety, withdrawal and low self-confidence.

Interestingly, Lund et al. (2016) state being a bully might be due to aggression, depression, low self-esteem and being antisocial. According to Perren and Alsaker (2006; as cited by Lund et al., 2016), in order to prevent bullying in older children in higher grades, both bullying and being victimized have to be stopped in the early years. Lund et al. state children’s rights, and postmodern perspectives view children as social construction:

knowledgeable, competent, and strong society members. By having this mindset, children are not in the process of becoming adults anymore; rather, children are social members whose ideas should be recognized and heard. Lund et al. (2016) explain further that in a democratic society, citizens, including children should be recognized by love and right. Children's emotions and rights being validated results in the children's secure attachment and self-confidence development. On the other hand, lack of being loved and not being heard in the early learning years play a critical role in a child's insecure attachment development and, in turn, growing a sense of being either a bully or victim.

Bullying Through a Research Lens

According to Cecil and Molnar-Main (2015), bullying is the main focus of US schools due to its high frequency and negative impacts on students' mental, physical and psychological health. Lund et al. state (2016) "social exclusion" and other bullying forms cause students' anxiety. Bullying and peer victimization are widespread at schools and are not limited to some individuals. Therefore, Cecil and Molnar-Main (2015) suggest preventing them by developing and implementing evidence-based, antibullying Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) in the education system. OBPP is a commonly implemented program originally developed in Norway and adapted to the US school system. The OBPP goals are to decrease bullying behaviour, prevent such behaviour, and improve students' positive interactions. OBPP in Norway and the United States address bullying behaviours at the school, classroom and individual level. Cecil and Molnar-Main (2015) elaborate further on the activities at different levels:

- School-level activities include forming a committee of school administration, guidance, nursing and security; staff training; monthly staff meetings; antibullying rules workshops; close supervision of students; and parental involvement.

- Classroom-level key element is posting antibullying rules: holding regular classroom meetings discussing bullying-related issues, and meetings with parents.
- Individual-level focuses on bullies, victims and their parents.

As a result of such an antibullying program in Norway, schools reported lower bullying rates and antisocial behaviours. On the other hand, the US research did not show any change or decrease in bullying. The most important failure factor in the US bullying implementation program was that the school systems did not follow the program's exact guidelines affecting the strength, quantity, and frequency of critical intervention issues. Cecil and Molnar-Main (2015) note that current studies explain the negative correlation between school violence and bullying rates, and high antibullying program implementation levels. Some main elements related to bullying decrease are the program duration (at least two years) implementation and program intensity for students and teachers (Cecil and Molnar-Main, 2015).

Cecil and Molnar-Main (2015) investigated the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) implementation in 88 elementary schools located in Pennsylvania. Results revealed that the majority of teacher participants attended the speeches and explained the rules later to students. Interestingly, the least taken action was involving parents in this research. Moreover, the more self-efficient and familiar the teachers were with a bullying situation, the more they followed the OBPP program activities compilation guidelines.

Bullying Prevention Program Failure

Research (Bender & Emslie, 2010; Glasner, 2010; Molnar-Main, 2015) shows parents' involvement in the antibullying program is between %30-%39. The reason is that school staff fail to implement parental communication regarding bullying and getting parents involved in such a program. However, studies reveal that engaging parents in bullying prevention need skills that some school personnel are often unprepared for or lack those

skills. Since studies suggest the rate of victimization decreases as far as parents are involved, Cecil and Molnar-Main recommend training school staff to engage parents. Cecil and Molnar-Main emphasize training school staff, such as enhancing communication skills, prompting cooperation with parents, and effective discussions with parents should happen before working with parents and getting them involved in bullying prevention efforts.

In sum, “parental involvement” and “staff training” are the most critical factors that decrease bullying. Therefore, in the coming paragraphs, I would like to suggest a research method that enhances the quality of antibullying program delivery. Through such a method, school staff and parents are responsive and recipients of children’s voices.

Early Learning Context, Revisiting Research Methods and Bullying Prevention

According to Blaise, Hamm and Iorio (2017), to have an effective bullying policy, revisiting traditional research methodologies in early childhood education is inevitable. Through this shift, teacher-researchers should reformulate “children’s behaviours examining methods” and “educators’ perspectives on methods’ implementation”.

Early childhood education research through a different perspective

Blaise, et al. (2017) emphasize the critical role early childhood education plays in the connectivity of common world pedagogies moving from matters of “fact to concern” or moving from a clinical way of children’s observation to a “universal child” perspective. Through this shift from a matter of fact to a matter of concern, early childhood educators, families and children turn to political actors and are not over-regulated anymore. Many traditional observational practices in early learning focus on “matters of fact” such as behaviour checklists and whether a child either has the skills or does not. In this paradigm, the “context” is overlooked. On the contrary, “matters of concern” are specific and interdependent while open-ended.

Teachers normally follow traditional practices and matters of fact according to their own perspectives. Therefore the scope of the investigation and the outcome are limited to the teachers' observation and comparing children. Blaise et al. (2017) further explain that "witnessing" the concerns enables us to examine the phenomena in a logic of interconnectedness of place, political and material aspects of concerns in early childhood learning. Therefore, witnessing is active, engaging and connected to the response-ability process.

A paradigm shift is necessary, though not easy, to enable us to leave the cause-and-effect scenarios and to go towards the matters of concern in addressing bullying in the education system. In doing so, I found Fincham's (2016) article precisely enlightening, which I will elaborate on in the following paragraph.

Overlooked Narratives in Early Learning Classroom Research

According to Fincham (2016), narratives could serve a variety of research purposes, make meaning, and shape our experiences. According to traditional research, the researchers seek to make sense of data, words and knowledge that only deal with language. Fincham explains further that to widen our understanding of young children's experiences, the best is to shift our attention to the children's stories and far away from traditional teacher research and narrative inquiry.

By moving from adult-centric narratives and opening spaces for young children, children's voices and words come along the research and help the research expand and cultivate meanings around classroom experiences. Fincham elaborates on children using their words and bodies to communicate beyond the standard developmental discourse we have in mind. Analyzing the classroom with Fincham's model gives teacher-researchers investigating bullying the opportunity to create alternate theories and perspectives for investigation and

instruction, which is deconstructing traditional notions of childhood and early learning classroom.

Blaise et al. (2017) mention “lively stories” as another medium of connection to the problem we investigate. Through lively stories, the teacher-researcher leans towards the matters of concern and proposes lively stories to evoke awareness into conversations. Through lively stories, teachers can address matters of concern, such as bullying in the common world we all share.

To solve parents’ involvement in bullying, I found Bray and Kenney’s (2016) article “Parents as Producers of Enduring Knowledge through Inquiry” interesting. Bray and Kenney suggest a methodology in which parents are not only consumers of information, rather are a part of collaborative research. In this context, parents are active and knowledgeable leaders who participate in problem-solving in a meaningful and productive way. Parent initiative inquiry focuses on the importance of early childhood education by connecting research, planning, parents, and community involvement. Bray and Kenney’s recommendation is a theoretical relational understanding of family and community based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model that serves the parents as the most important factor in the young child’s development. As the community will be affected by families’ problems, community involvement is necessary to address the issues as well. Therefore, community-based action research methods are crucial in question and problem identification in the process of inquiry. Bray and Kenney further explain that this cycle starts with parents as knowledge producers and parents identifying, creating, and inquiry questions. Families focus on the inquiry and the concern of the community. These inquiry questions come from within us as parents and community members based on our beliefs. Once the focus is determined, the action research will evolve. Parents support their children, organize the community, and participate in parent leadership opportunities. On a final note, this active

problem-solving process leads to a cycle of plan, action, observation, and reflection by educators and parents with hearing out the children.

Final Thoughts

In sum, as Hawkins (2014) states, research reveals that by the time children enter preschool, they are familiar with the concepts of social justice and negative attitudes towards particular groups or individuals. Bullying, most students' common pain, is almost forgotten in the social justice discourses, or the actions taken are not effective enough to solve bullying victims' problems. Since bullying persists, even if some guidelines are in place, a shift should happen to solve the bullying problem. As suggested by Dr. L. Daniels, the best practice to break the walls of diversity and move to unity is through closeness and partnership of families, schools and community. Children could benefit from listening and talking circles and achieve respect and recognition of one another (personal communication, March 24, 2021).

References

- Blaise, M., Hamm, C & Iorio, J. (2017). Modest witness(ing) and lively stories: Paying attention to matters of concern in early childhood. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 25 (1), 31-42. DOI: [10.1080/14681366.2016.1208265](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2016.1208265)
- Hawkins, K., (2014). Teaching for social justice, social responsibility and social inclusion: a respectful pedagogy for twenty-first century early childhood education, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 22:5, 723-738, DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2014.969085](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2014.969085)
- Cecil, H., & Molnar-Main, S. (2015). Olweus Bullying Prevention Program: Components Implemented by Elementary Classroom and Specialist Teachers. *Journal of School Violence*, 14(4), 335–362. Taylor & Francis Group, DOI: [10.1080/15388220.2014.912956](https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2014.912956)
- Bray, P. M., Kenney, E. M. (2016). Parents as Producers of Enduring Knowledge through Inquiry. In Parnell, W. *Disrupting Early Childhood Education Research: Imagining New Possibilities* (1st ed., p. 58-70). Routledge.
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4324/9781315733623>
- Fincham, E.N. (2016). Words and Bodies: Reimagining Narrative Data in a Toddler Classroom. In Parnell, W., & Iorio, J.M. (Eds.), *Disrupting Early Childhood Education Research: Imagining New Possibilities* (1st ed., p. 86-101). Routledge.
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4324/9781315733623>

Government of BC [@governmentofbc]. (2021, February 24). *Everyone deserves to be treated with kindness and respect. Wear pink shirt to show you don't tolerate bullying. And visit [photograph].* Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLrospysx2O/>

Lund, I., Helgeland, A., & Kovac, V. B. (2016). *Empirically based analysis of methodological and ethical challenges in research with children as participants: The case of bullying in kindergarten* Taylor & Francis.
doi:10.1080/03004430.2015.1110817