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Bullying in Physical Education: Awareness of Physical Education Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigates how physical education (PE) teachers make sense of peer bullying, which types of behaviors they associate with peer bullying, their opinions about these behaviors, and methods for preventing bullying. The study group consisted of 18 PE teachers. The interview technique was used as a qualitative research method in the study. The data obtained after one-on-one interviews were analyzed through content analysis. According to the data obtained, PE teachers are the most important variable in the decrease or increase of peer bullying in classes. However, PE classes provide a suitable environment for the emergence of peer bullying. Additionally, bullying caused by the individual characteristics of students and environmental reasons can increase in schools, and there are generally no collective intervention programs within schools to prevent it. According to the teachers' opinions, some of the important results are that students who are exposed to bullying experience the same fear every week in PE lessons, and although it is known that the majority of them do not want to participate in the activity in order to avoid being bullied, no solution can be found.

Keywords: Bullying, physical education lesson, teacher awareness, physical education teacher

Introduction

Today, students spend most of their time at school. This situation increases the importance of schools in the eyes of society. Students are likely to experience many positive and negative situations during their time at school. Compared to the past, schools are making a greater effort to provide students with a safe educational environment. Peer bullying is undoubtedly one of the issues that schools have difficulty coping with and represents an increasing problem (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Bullying is a deliberate and aggressive action or behavior that can occur in the form of exclusion from a social group or ridicule which is carried out repeatedly over time by a student, group, or person against a victim who cannot easily defend themselves (Roland, 2002).

Although being involved in bullying is more common among adolescents (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; Sigurdson, Undheim, Wallander, Lydersen, & Sund, 2015), today it has descended into preschool years (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003). Data obtained from research reveals that 30% to 80% of school-age youth experience personal victimization from their peers, and 10% to 15% may be chronic victims

(Hymel & Swearer, 2015). In a study examining the prevalence of bullying victimization among secondary school students in 19 low- and middle-income countries, it is shown that bullying rates in some countries reach up to 60% (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010).

Children exposed to bullying experience physical (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009) and emotional (Reijntjes et al., 2010; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999; Roland, 2002) health problems. In longitudinal studies, children who are bullied during adolescence have an increased risk of developing panic disorder, depression, and anxiety disorder in young adulthood (Copeland et al., 2013; Sigurdson et al., 2015; Wolke et al., 2013).

It is thought that physical education (PE) could be an interesting environment for encouraging attitudes and behaviors against bullying (Benítez-Sillero et al., 2020). Studies have also revealed that peer bullying can be combated through intervention programs added to the PE curriculum and through the creation of appropriate environments (Montero-Carretero, Barbado, & Cervelló, 2020; Montero-Carretero & Cervelló, 2020). However, PE classes are the leading environments in which peer bullying is likely to be experienced if care is not taken (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Uğraş, Sağın, & Güllü, 2020). Although these courses are extremely challenging environments physically, socially, and emotionally, they also offer students the opportunity to progress in developmental areas (Smith & Biddle, 2008). If appropriate environments are not created, students may deal with deficiencies (such as poor physical skills, weak social skills, and special needs), and the probability of these students experiencing victimization may increase (Fittipaldi-Wert & Mowling, 2009). Of course, creating appropriate environments can help develop a positive attitude and promote the value and enjoyment of both the PE course and lifelong physical activity (Hand, 2016). However, it is also possible that PE courses can lead to the development of negative attitudes and teach negative behaviors. Participation in PE classes is unlikely to provide direct educational benefits to students, anyway (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gould & Carson, 2008). During adolescence, when children receive models and feedback from their peers that they cannot receive from adults, peers play an important role in promoting psychological and social development (Frisén & Bjarnelind, 2010; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). If a child is bullied by friends or bullies themselves during adolescence, they may have a hard time during the school period (Frisén & Bjarnelind, 2010). The enjoyment of PE lessons among children who are exposed to peer bullying may also be affected, and bullying may lead to negative physical and emotional consequences (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020).

While students should be active during PE lessons, peer bullying can affect their active participation in PE classes involuntarily and negatively (O'Connor & Graber, 2014). While any student may be bullied in these lessons, vulnerable and sensitive students are more likely to encounter bullying more frequently (Frisén & Bjarnelind, 2010). In PE lessons, students are associated with bullying victims for reasons such as body size and weight (Garrett, 2004; O'Connor & Graber, 2014), weak motor skills (Bejerot, Edgar, & Humble, 2011), and a lack of social skills (Olweus, 1994). PE activities generally require physical contact, which can make it difficult for teachers to realize that some physical contact is actually bullying. It is known that 50% of bullying occurs most frequently during team sports (Fuller, Gulbrandson, & Herman-Ukasick, 2013).

In PE lessons, students have the opportunity to directly observe their friends' skills, abilities, successes, or failures during games and activities. At this point, students who are less capable or skillful than their peers may not want to participate in games and activities and may be bullied and excluded (Peters & Bain, 2011). Although themes such as respect, love, and fair play have been added to the PE and sports lesson curriculum prepared by the Ministry of National Education of Turkey (MEB, 2018), studies show that PE lessons offer a suitable environment for bullying (Gibbone & Manson, 2010; Bejerot & Humble, 2007). In a study by Hurley (2009), 18.3% of students were exposed to physical bullying, 23.7% to verbal bullying, and 20.4% to social bullying in PE classes. In turn, Bejerot et al. (2013) state that weak motor skills may be an important factor in exposure to bullying; their study revealed that 48.6% of the students who were exposed to bullying had below average motor skills.

Teachers can contribute to a favorable or deterrent school climate with their attitudes and behaviors against peer bullying (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Teachers are most likely to intervene when bullying occurs within the school (Gano-Overway, 2013), and PE teachers in particular can play a key role in preventing bullying (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020). A moderate classroom climate created in PE classes can reduce peer bullying (Gano-Overway, 2013), as can the teacher's attitude, classroom management, and choice of teaching method (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). Knowing the sensitive subjects and student characteristics that may cause bullying helps prevent bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007).

Instead of relying solely on punitive strategies against peer bullying or routinely referring perpetrators to authorities, teachers should facilitate classroom discussions about bullying and ensure that class rules and norms are internalized (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). However, students believe the bullying situations that teachers intervene

in become worse (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). As a result, students do not find teachers supportive, which decreases their probability of reporting the bullying behaviors they experience during lessons (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). According to a study by Demaray and Malecki (2003), victims of bullying receive insufficient teacher support. Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, and Wiener (2005) state that teachers have difficulty dealing with bullying, especially indirect bullying.

PE teachers have the greatest responsibility in preventing peer bullying that occurs in PE classes. In this context, how PE teachers define peer bullying, their awareness, and their strategies for preventing bullying gain importance. This study aims to examine the thoughts of PE teachers in Turkey about peer bullying. The research problem concerns the opinions of PE teachers about peer bullying, and the research question inquires about the role of PE teachers in the emergence and prevention of bullying.

Methods

Research design

To fulfill the research aim of examining the thoughts of PE teachers about peer bullying, phenomenology, a qualitative research design, was used in this study. Phenomenology studies are based on how people make sense of their experiences (Patton, 2014). According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2011), it is the definition of their reactions to the phenomenon as a result of in-depth interviews with people who have a common experience. The required legal permission was obtained from the Inonu University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Ethics committee decision no. 2020/9-6). In addition, the purpose of the study was mentioned to the participants; they were told that participation in the study was voluntary, and it was stated that it would only be used for scientific purposes. Then, the participants were asked to review the informed consent form prepared for the research and approve it if they accepted it.

Study group for participants

Eighteen PE teachers formed the study group for the research; 10 of these teachers worked in secondary schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education (MEB), and 8 worked in high schools in the central districts of Malatya, Turkey. Because the data obtained from the interviews started to be repeated and it was thought that satisfaction had been achieved (Merriam, 2013), the study was restricted to 18 teachers. In the study, maximum diversity sampling was preferred from the purposeful sampling methods in order to learn more about the different thoughts of PE teachers about peer bullying in schools. With this method, the intention is to determine common aspects and similarities in relation to diverse situations rather than generalizing (Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2011). Individual differences such as age, gender, school type, and professional experience were taken into account to ensure diversity. The study included both a 27-year-old teacher in the first years of his profession and a 55-year-old teacher with 30 years of experience. The wide selection of participants offered opportunities for different perspectives. In addition, the convenience sampling method was used when choosing the sample group in the study. This method was chosen to ensure the study group would be close and easy to access. Code names were given to the participants.

Data collection for instrument and procedure

The data were collected using the one-on-one in-depth interview technique. A semi-structured interview form was used as a data collection tool. As the participants described the peer bullying situations they observed in their lessons and extracurricular activities, a semi-structured interview form, which has a flexible structure, was preferred to allow for new situations occurring outside of the questionnaire to be examined in depth (Merriam, 2013). During the development process of the interview form, a literature review was conducted and similar studies were examined. Then, a pool of questions was created based on the literature. The researchers came together and expanded the pool of questions through brainstorming. The prepared questions were presented to three experts who had previously taught in public schools and worked in the field of PE pedagogy. The experts stated that the questions in general were similar and should not be repeated. In addition, one of the experts stated that two questions on the interview form were outside of the research context and could thus be removed. Furthermore, one of the experts stated that the questions should be asked systematically. Finally, the researchers presented the interview questions in their final form in line with the experts' suggestions. Then, a pilot interview was conducted with two PE teachers, one of whom worked in a high school and the other in a secondary school. At the end of the interview, the order of the questions and the concepts in the question items were changed. Some question statements were rearranged,

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants

Teacher Code	Gender	Age	Professional Experience	School Type
Mehmet	Male	44	20	Secondary School
Mustafa	Male	32	5	High School
Murat	Male	55	30	Secondary School
Orhan	Male	33	9	High School
Ali	Male	28	2	Secondary School
Necla	Female	27	3	Secondary School
Elif	Female	29	4	Secondary School
Oğuz	Male	35	10	High School
Ayşe	Female	35	11	Secondary School
Nedim	Male	46	21	High School
Kazım	Male	29	2	High School
Rıza	Male	36	11	High School
Merve	Female	43	17	Secondary School
Feride	Female	30	5	High School
Dilek	Female	27	3	Secondary School
Sinan	Male	40	15	Secondary School
Hakan	Male	36	10	Secondary School
Erol	Male	38	15	High School

and a question item that was thought to be useless was removed from the interview form. The interviews from the pilot study were not included in the analysis. There are 12 questions on the interview form. Questions were asked in different ways when the participants misunderstood the questions (Shenton, 2004), and drill questions were also included in order to better understand how the participants formed and interpreted the concepts in their minds (Kabapınar, 2003). Examples of these drill questions include "Can you elaborate on this subject a little more?" and "What did you try to say at this point?" For the interview, the participants were asked for an interview beforehand, and then a face-to-face interview was held at the place and time of their choice. The interviews were held between October 10 and November 22, 2019 and lasted between 20 and 45 minutes on average. The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder with the permission of the participants.

Data analysis

After the interviews, the voice recordings were uploaded to the computer without any changes being made, and each interview was given a number. The obtained data were analyzed using the inductive approach method. The general inductive approach was chosen because it provides a convenient and efficient way of analyzing qualitative data (Thomas, 2003). During the coding phase, two academic researchers who worked as PE and sports teachers in public schools for 12 and 17 years worked simultaneously. At the beginning of the process, the encoders first encoded approximately 15% of the transcripts. Then, the codes were organized by one of the researchers and gathered together. The team then got together and discussed different or similar codes. At the end of the discussion, the codes were organized and a code book was created. After this stage, the researchers began to examine all of the transcripts. They carefully read and analyzed the organized data and coded statements that were meaningful in the context of the study. In the next step, in order to combine the coded participant expressions under similar categories and collect the combined categories under themes, the coders compared the codes and the categories, and themes were discussed during the independent coding process of each coder. In the process, themes were created using the research questions. The resulting codes, categories, and themes were arranged in a suitable manner for the reader and were supported by descriptive analyses (Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2011). While the expressions of the participants were conveyed with direct quotations, the coding was expressed in a manner showing the participants' code name, age, and school type.

Validity and reliability of the study

According to Creswell (2016), for a qualitative study to be reliable and valid, the conditions of consistency, credibility, verifiability, and transferability must be met. Consistency is about the repeatability and reliability of the research. In order to ensure the reliability of the data obtained in the study, the data obtained after the interviews were presented to the readers in the form of direct quotations. An attempt was made to present all stages of the research in the method part. In addition, the data obtained from the study were coded separately by the researchers, and there was a consensus among the researchers in general. Persuasiveness is related to the internal validity of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). In this study, participant confirmation was preferred to increase internal validity. Not long after the data were collected, the participants were asked for their opinions on the accuracy of the statements. The participants confirmed that they made the statements, and some participants even added different information at this time. The accuracy of the data obtained was confirmed by the participants. Confirmation emphasizes the objectivity of the work. In order to ensure objectivity, an effort was made to deliberately select different school types and different genders and ages. Transferability is about the external validity and generalizability of the study. In this study, the purposeful sampling method was preferred in order to achieve transferability, and an attempt was made to explain the characteristics of the participants and the process of data collection in simple, understandable language (Sharts-Hopko, 2002).

Results

The findings that emerged as a result of the interviews were presented with the themes and sub-themes that were created in accordance with the research purpose and research questions. In this context, the thoughts of PE teachers about peer bullying in PE classes represented five themes: teachers' awareness of bullying, sports activities triggering peer bullying, struggling with peer bullying, inviting bullying, and getting away from PE class and sports.

Teachers' awareness of bullying

The theme of teachers' awareness of peer bullying allows for the examination of which behaviors the PE teachers regard as bullying, what kind of bullying they encounter and how often they encounter it, and the causes of bullying.

The PE teachers stated that in PE lessons, peer bullying can occur in the form of name-calling, insults, mocking, ignoring or not passing in the game, pushing, pulling, and other actions. In addition, it was determined from the participant statements that peer bullying could differ between genders. For example, physical bullying is more common among boys than girls. PE teachers who worked in both middle and high school at different times stated that bullying occurs in different ways in middle and high school. For example, deliberate bullying is more common in high school. Regarding this situation, the PE teachers made the following statements:

– "Peer bullying, students' efforts to dominate one another… In secondary schools, students are more emotionally exposed to exclusion in the game." –Mehmet, 44, Secondary School

– "It is a person's disturbance to another person, whether verbally, physically, or psychologically. … When we look at high schools, we can see all types of bullying. Students are more prone to violence against each other." –Mustafa, 32, High School

– "In sports high schools, peer bullying is mostly verbal. Bullying activities lead to a grouping among students." –Oğuz, 35, Sports High School

The participants stated that bullying is seen in all age groups and that the frequency and type of bullying can vary according to the conditions and the type of activity. It is understood from the expressions of the participants that they mostly faced emotional bullying.

– "We do not encounter much physical bullying during the lesson. For example, boys play football matches, they do not want to let their friends who are not playing well into the game… in an educational game, they mock and make fun of it." –Necla, 27, Secondary School

– "They act without thinking about the feelings of their friends, who do not play well according to them, in the matches or competitive events they play among themselves. For this reason, they are not even aware of the damage that has been done to their friend." –Murat, 55, Secondary School

– "In my opinion, in young age groups, while the child is bullying with the current atmosphere, perhaps unwittingly, the intention of the student may intentionally increase as the age increases…" –Nedim, 46, High School

Sports activities triggering peer bullying

Under this theme, the reasons for peer bullying in PE classes according to PE teachers were examined.

Most of the participants stated that during sports activities, students can easily show their feelings and thoughts without suppressing them. Furthermore, they stated that in any environment where there is a sense of competition and winning, there will be both a bully and a victim, and this cannot be prevented.

– "Peer bullying can occur among students in PE classes…In other words, the child, who normally hides his feelings and thoughts, has the opportunity to show them comfortably during sports activities. When I ask the student, 'Why you are talking to your friend this way?' the student says, 'Teacher, I did not say such a thing.'…The child is telling his friend, but maybe he is not even aware of the incident." –Dilek, 27, Secondary School

Teachers state that students suppress their behavior both at school and at home, and that they often have to do so unwillingly. Participants stated that students may display some unwanted behaviors towards their friends due to the desire to win or adrenaline in PE classes, competition-based activities, and matches among themselves. While Cafer (26, High School) thinks the *"PE lesson is the most comfortable environment in which students can relieve the drive of aggression they already have,"* Merve (43, Secondary School) thinks the following:

– "Our children take lessons at school, study lessons at home, study lessons on weekends, take private lessons if they are in the last year, go to courses, so when will this child move?
Does this situation cause peer bullying? ...So in the 2-hour lesson, the child wants everything to be the way he wants. When they are most comfortable and relaxed, they react to something they do not want and want to prevent it. In fact, PE class creates an environment where students are discharged in a way."

Another participant, Necla (27, Secondary School), expressed her thoughts as follows:

– "I think that some of the events that some students experienced in their homes led them to these behaviors. For example, children who experience physical or emotional violence act more aggressively in PE classes. When I learn from school counselors or classroom counselors what some students lived through in their homes, I can understand why they were bullied in PE classes. I think peer bullying is a reflection of the events the student experiences at home or at school in PE class."

Struggling with peer bullying

Under this theme, the emergence of peer bullying in PE and sports classes and what PE teachers do to prevent peer bullying in classes was examined. Teachers state that certain students are systematically exposed to and suffer from peer bullying in PE classes. While the participants stated that students who were victims in secondary schools made an effort to avoid being bullied under the supervision of teachers in PE classes, they also stated that the victim was exposed to social bullying (being ignored in a game or not being passed to during a match) even if they were not verbally or physically bullied. Teachers stated that they are sometimes insufficient for students who are excluded from games or activities and cannot prevent them from being bullied. High school teachers, on the other hand, stated that bullying increases during competitions in which everyone participates, although students generally do not participate in the activity if they think they will be bullied.

– "Compared to other lessons, the activities in our lesson are more group-oriented and combat content. Therefore, students who are not as good at activities as others may be exposed to bullying." –Necla, 27, Secondary School
– "I often notice peer bullying when the student does not want to participate in activities. The student who has shown a desire to participate in activities before does not want to participate in time. When I talk about this with the student, I understand that they did not participate in the activity because they were being bullied. But in this process, I can sometimes intervene in the incident by noticing it early. However, sometimes there are also some situations that I don't notice at all. It is very difficult to motivate the victim student to go back to PE class again, sometimes it doesn't happen at all." –Merve, 43, Secondary School
– (Answer to the question *"Is bullying less common in individual activities?"*) *"Actually it still happens, this time they make fun of it. As a simple example, we were doing gymnastics last week. Half of the class did not get on the mat. I just couldn't convince them. This is because they know that they will make fun of them when they fail and they know that they have friends who do it all the time." –Sinan, 40, Secondary School*

PE teachers stated that as a solution to preventing peer bullying that occurs during the lesson, they warn the students before the lesson and keep the class under control during the lesson and during the activity. At the same time, they stated that they also try to prevent bullying by punishing the students (such as by not including the bully

in the activity for a certain period of time), by giving responsibility to students who act as bullies, or by meeting one-on-one during the lesson.

– "Obviously I'm preventing the student from doing what he likes." –Necla, 27, Secondary School
– "I'm taking action before the incident occurs. I warn them beforehand to prevent any bullying behaviors that may occur." –Merve, 43, Secondary School

In order to answer the questions of "What kind of programs are carried out collectively in the school to prevent peer bullying?" and "What kind of works are you doing?" the majority of the teachers stated that there is no collective work in the school, and they try to find solutions individually before and during the lesson.

– "My ninth year in my profession, I worked at three different schools. I have not seen such a cooperation environment, or if it is being done, I do not know." –Riza, 36, High School
– "Believe me, in schools, everything is academic success oriented and the rest is not very important. They are all my friends, but neither the school counselor nor the administration care unless it is a serious event." –Orhan, 33, High School
– "We also are guilty, you are right, we only focus on our lesson. The child has reached this age, believe me, we are trying to save the day at school. As long as the child is not a victim for the family, it's okay. ... There is a problem in family education. How do we fix it?" –Murat, 55, Secondary School

Inviting bullying

Under this theme, the causes of peer bullying that occurs in PE and sports classes specific to PE teachers are examined. The participants stated that not only are students, parents, the administration, the school climate, and environmental factors effective for observing peer bullying in lessons, but PE teachers are as well. At the same time, they stated factors that could be determinants in the decrease or increase of bullying behaviors such as how PE teachers speak with students during the lesson, their relationship with students, their consistency and determination, the behavior they model for students, and their choice of activities.

– "Some teacher friends are not attentive to students in their style and behavior during the lesson. After all, the children take us as a model." –Ali, 28, Secondary School
– "... we must stick the needle ourselves first." –Nedim, 46, High School
– "... For example, if a discipline or authority gap occurs, it can lead to bullying behaviors in students." –Ayşe, 35, Secondary School

The participants stated that education about peer bullying that occurred in PE classes in the past was inadequate or forgotten, that they learned by doing in this process, and that they were not aware that some of their behaviors constituted a negative example for children.

– "When there are things that we do not want during the lesson, we can get angry and use expressions that should not be used for children. The child also does not hesitate to react similarly when their friend does something they do not want." –Erol, 38, Secondary School
– "Children really go beyond their limits from time to time… There are moments when we cannot control our nerves. Unpleasant situations arise when we do not use child-friendly pedagogical language." –Elif, 29, Secondary School

They also stated that they were exposed to bullying during their student years, but they did not realize that it was bullying at that time and regarded the bullying behavior as normal at that time. Therefore, they stated that the definition of bullying behavior and its negative effects on students should be understood very well by PE teachers.

– "PE teachers invite students to engage in peer bullying with their behaviors." –Feride, 30, High School
– "The teacher should not create an environment where the student can display bullying behavior. If the teacher beats the student in the lesson, gets angry and insults the student, the student can get angry and insult when their friend makes a mistake. When an athlete of a teacher who insults an athlete who made a mistake in school competitions comes to PE class, they can do the same to their friends in the class. I think this is because they take the behavior they saw from their own teacher as an example." –Nedim, 46, High School

Getting away from PE class and sports

Under the theme of getting away from PE class and sports, the consequences for children who are exposed to peer bullying in PE classes are examined alongside the characteristics of children who are most often exposed to bullying.

The participants stated that as a result of the bullying behaviors experienced by some students in PE classes, their willingness to participate in sports activities decreased over time.

– "Some of my students don't want to attend PE classes. There are even children who brought reports. They sit on the sidelines for the entire lesson." –Sinan, 40, Secondary School
– "Children at this age can be very cruel in class and cannot tolerate their friends who play badly. Therefore, students with poor skills may not want to participate in the activity." –Ayşe, 35, Secondary School

The participants stated that although they tried to prevent bullying, some of the students who were bullied had a negative attitude towards PE lessons, and they had trouble including these students in activities. The participants stated that they could not notice the problems of the bullied students concerning their participation in and alienation from PE lessons in the process very well.

– "When a child in 5th or 6th grade is bullied, they immediately come and tell the teacher. But in the 7th or 8th grade, the child does not complain, because they think they will be excluded by their friends because of this also. They stand on the sidelines saying, 'I do not want to participate in activities.'" –Hakan, 36, Secondary School

Discussion

In our study, how PE teachers make sense of peer bullying, which types of behaviors they associate with peer bullying, their opinions about these behaviors, and methods for preventing bullying are investigated. As a result of the interviews conducted in this context, the findings of the study were grouped under five themes: teachers' awareness of bullying, sports activities triggering peer bullying, struggling with peer bullying, inviting bullying, and getting away from PE class and sports.

The participants stated that peer bullying in PE and sports classes can occur verbally, physically, or emotionally. They emphasized that bullying can change by gender (e.g., physical bullying is more common among boys) and school type (e.g., bullying occurs during events in secondary school, while students intentionally bully their target peers in high school). It is understood from the expressions of the participants that they mostly encountered social bullying (such as ignoring peers or not including them in the game). While there is a consensus in the literature that peer bullying can be seen in all age categories (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003; Nansel et al., 2001; Sigurdson et al., 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015), the studies that have been conducted share the opinion that peer bullying at school is mostly verbal and physical. These behaviors include pushing (Kepenekci & Çınkır, 2006; Pottinger & Stair, 2009), name-calling (Hunter & Boyle, 2002; Kepenekci & Çınkır, 2006), humiliation (Kepenekci & Çınkır, 2006; Roland, 2006), and beating or hitting (Hunter & Boyle, 2002). Although these studies suggest that verbal and physical bullying are more common, most of the participants in our study stated that while physical bullying such as hitting and pushing can be seen in PE classes, social bullying is also a major problem in this context. In this sense, it can be stated that the bullying experienced in PE classes differs from the bullying experienced in the school environment. While the participants stated that students who are exposed to bullying in PE classes do not have a normal physique compared to their peers (they are overweight, too thin, too tall, or too short) and that males are exposed to bullying more often than females, they generally expressed conclusions in line with the results of the studies that have been conducted. Although bullying is common among boys (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003), overweight girls are just as likely to be victims of bullying as boys (Puhl & Luedicke, 2012; Puhl, Luedicke, & Heuer, 2011). As body size and weight increase, victimization in PE classes also increases (Garrett, 2004; O'Connor & Graber, 2014).

According to the PE teachers who participated in the interviews, students can easily show their feelings and thoughts during the sports activities without suppressing them, and in any environment where there is a sense of competition and winning, there will be both a bully and a victim, and this cannot be prevented. In PE lessons, students may encounter environments that are challenging physically, socially, and emotionally. When factors such as weak motor skills, a lack of social skills, and general difficulties with emotion and hyperactivity (Bejerot, Edgar, & Humble, 2011; Johnson et al., 2002; Olweus, 1994) are added to body size and weight, the deficiencies in the students come to light (Fittipaldi-Wert & Mowling, 2009). The competitive environments created in PE classes cause such students to be exposed to bullying (Méndez, Ruiz Esteban, & Ortega, 2019; Shannon, 2013).

PE teachers stated that as a solution for preventing peer bullying that occurs during lessons, they warn students before the lesson and keep the class under control during the lesson and the activity. They also stated that they try to

prevent bullying by punishing students (such as by not including the bully in the activity for a certain period of time), by giving responsibility to students who act as bullies, or by meeting one-on-one during the lesson. In studies, teachers see bullying that occurs especially in young age groups as normal and even argue that it offers an opportunity for students to solve their own problems during their youth (Horne, Orpinas, Newman-Carlson, & Bartolomucci, 2004; Migliaccio, 2015). As an intervention strategy against bullying that occurs during lessons, teachers prefer solutions such as having a serious conversation with the bully, sending the bully to the school administration, or punishing them, regardless of the type of victimization (Duy, 2013; Yoon & Bouman, 2014). These interventions may not be good solutions because students who are exposed to bullying often encounter it repeatedly (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). In such a situation, the student who is bullied by the same people every week may try to solve the problem on their own later because they think that the problem cannot be solved by others. As a result, they may be harmed again or become chronic victims. In a study conducted by Bradshaw et al. (2007), victims stated that teachers did not support them. Yoon and Bauman (2014) reported in their study that victims received insufficient teacher support. In such an environment, teachers are likely to have difficulty coping with bullying (Mishna et al., 2005). As a matter of fact, the participants complained about the lack of a planned and systematic program in the fight against peer bullying in their schools. This may be an indication that bullying prevention programs in Turkey do not work efficiently.

The participants stated factors that could be determinants in the decrease or increase of bullying behaviors such as how PE teachers speak with students during lessons, their relationship with students, their consistency and determination, the behavior they model for students, and their choice of activities. Teachers' behaviors in the classroom context can have simultaneous results on students' behaviors and play an important role in creating a positive or negative classroom environment (Hawley, Little, & Pasupathi, 2002; Hein, Koka, & Hagger, 2015). Similarly, the perspective of coaches or PE teachers, who are central figures in the eyes of athletes, about winning at all costs, using force to control others, and dominating and using a hierarchical authority structure may cause athletes to adopt bullying behaviors (Kowalski, 2017). Fuller et al. (2013) stated that physical contact can be experienced in PE classes, that it can be difficult to notice bullying that occurs, and that 50% of bullying occurs most frequently during team sports. Teachers can play an important role in preventing bullying in PE classes (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020), a moderate classroom climate can mitigate peer bullying (Gano-Overway, 2013), and the teacher's attitude, classroom management, and choice of teaching method can reduce bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). However, it was revealed in the interviews that some teachers may underestimate the types of bullying that occur during lessons. As a matter of fact, in Duy's (2013) study, teachers perceived social exclusion to be less serious than verbal and physical bullying in the context of peer bullying. This situation is likely to cause existing problems to increase.

The PE teachers who participated in the study stated that as a result of the bullying behaviors experienced by some students in PE lessons, their willingness to participate in in-class sports activities decreased, and they later had difficulty including these students in the activities. PE classes take place in an environment that is extremely socially, emotionally, and physically demanding. Sports environments can increase children's chances of victimization (Flores Aguilar et al., 2021; Vveinhardt & Fominienė, 2020). Poor motor skills can lead to low performance in both individual and team games and can reduce children's sense of competence (Dewey, Kaplan, Crawford, & Wilson, 2002). This reduces success within peer groups and increases the likelihood of victimization, making students less preferred by their peers in both the game and classroom environment (Dewey, Kaplan, Crawford, & Wilson, 2002; Gasser-Haas, Sticca, & Wustmann Seiler, 2020; Wolke, Woods, Stanford, & Schulz, 2001). In the study conducted by Livesey, Lum Mow, Toshack, and Zheng (2011), teachers stated that children with poor motor skills were excluded by their peers at higher levels in the classroom environment. Students with poor motor skills may be expected to have more difficulties in PE classes. These students can be expected to be less popular in activities (Gasser-Haas, Sticca, & Wustmann Seiler, 2020) and to have lower self-esteem and self-efficacy (Losse et al., 1991). Students who do sports regularly, participate in sports activities and competitions, and have good motor skills have stronger and higher self-esteem socially and emotionally (Brunet vd., 2013; Findlay & Coplan, 2008; Peguero, 2008). In contrast, the level of pleasure of children who are subjected to peer bullying in PE classes for different reasons decreases (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Scarpa, Carraro, Gobbi, & Nart, 2012), their participation in sports is negatively affected (Kim & Craig, 2020), and they may not want to participate in optional activities (Frey et al., 2005). This situation may decrease students' motivation to participate in lessons or cause them to develop negative attitudes towards lessons. Moreover, it is likely to negatively affect their level of physical activity in adulthood.

Conclusion

Peer bullying in schools (Pottinger & Stair, 2009; Wolke et al., 2001) has always been a common problem, both in PE classes (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Scarpa et al., 2012; Kim & Craig, 2020) and outside of PE classes. Through the interviews with PE teachers conducted in our study, it is seen that there are many factors in the observation of peer bullying in lessons including the behavior of PE teachers (relationship with students, communication, and activity choices), environmental reasons (school administration, parents, and school climate), the students themselves (being physically different or having a belligerent personality), and the lack of intervention programs. Although PE teachers are willing to work to limit peer bullying, they cannot take the necessary precautions to prevent this situation. PE teachers remain inactive by not seeking any information outside the classroom environment or not attempting to protect victim students from bullying behaviors that occur frequently during lessons. In fact, according to the teachers' opinions, it is known that students who are exposed to bullying experience the same fear every week in PE classes and that the majority of them do not want to participate in the activity in order to avoid being bullied; however, a solution still cannot be found. This situation may result in the complete alienation of the students from the sports environment in the long term.

In the light of the data obtained in our study, it was revealed that a sufficient collective program has not been created for peer bullying. This necessitates the implementation of a program to prevent bullying (Strohmeier, Hoffmann, Schiller, Stefanek, & Spiel, 2012; Hand, 2016). The results show that anti-bullying programs can effectively reduce bullying in schools by about 20% (Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019). It has been revealed that there are no effective permanent strategies and methods to prevent peer bullying. It may be suggested that the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) should conduct studies to make bullying-related programs more functional and usable in schools. At this point, in-service training can be given to teachers in order to increase their knowledge and skills and provide them with direct experience. In-service training provides an opportunity for teachers to improve themselves (Kosko & Wilkins, 2009; Wight & Buston, 2003).

This study has some limitations. Firstly, only PE teachers were interviewed in this study with limited generalizability. The opinions of other stakeholders of schools were not consulted. Secondly, the schools where the teachers worked were not taken into account when choosing PE teachers for the study. Some schools were located in the slums (7-8 schools), and the number of students in the classes was high in some schools (33-40 students in 7-8 schools). Such situations may have triggered the increase in peer bullying in schools. Finally, our study is based only on teacher opinions. In future studies, the opinions of other individuals such as students, parents, the school administration, and guidance counselors could be taken into account and supported by a larger and more representative group. In addition, in future studies, peer bullying should be supported by quantitative findings specific to PE lessons in terms of generalizability for teachers and other variables.

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Annex 1: Interview questions

Specific to PE lessons

1. What do you think peer bullying is?
2. Which behaviors of students in PE classes do you consider to be peer bullying?
3. What are the factors affecting the emergence of peer bullying in PE classes?
4. Are students systematically exposed to bullying in PE classes?
5. (yes) – What do you think the reasons for this are, and are you taking any action?
6. (no) – What precautions do you take?
7. What are the characteristics of children who are bullied in PE classes?
8. How do the students act against bullying that occurs during the lesson, and in what way do they react?
9. What is the level of awareness among PE teachers about peer bullying?
10. Do you think the teacher has an effect on students who act as bullies in PE classes?
11. What are the solutions that PE teachers implement in order to prevent peer bullying?
12. Do sports activities have an effect on the occurrence of peer bullying in PE classes?
13. What are the consequences of experiencing peer bullying in PE classes?
14. What should be done about students who constantly bully others in PE classes?