

“We’ve Never Studied Bullying at University:” Bullying-Related Beliefs, Training, and Strategies Among Physical Education Preservice Teachers

Xènia Ríos,¹ Carles Ventura,¹ and Maria Prat²

¹National Institute of Physical Education of Catalonia (INEFC), University of Barcelona (UB), Barcelona, Spain;

²Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain

Purpose: To examine beliefs about bullying in physical education (PE) among PE preservice teachers and to examine opinions about training received in this area and the strategies they would use to deal with this phenomenon. **Method:** We interviewed 44 PE-PSTs ($M_{age} = 23.91$; $SD = 2.96$) from six Spanish universities in semistructured focus groups. The data collected were analyzed using hierarchical content analysis. **Results:** PE preservice teachers believed that while PE may favor the occurrence of bullying, with proper management, it could also be used to educate students and create a positive climate that could help prevent this behavior. The trainee teachers stated that they had not received any training on bullying at university. Overall, they lacked confidence to deal with this problem, and their proposed strategies lacked depth. **Conclusions:** Our findings highlight the need for universities to include bullying in their PE teacher training programs.

Keywords: trainee teachers, perceptions, focus group, knowledge, prevention, curriculum

Bullying can be defined as aggressive behavior by one or more people toward a peer; it is an intentional behavior that involves an imbalance of power and is designed to cause harm (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Bullying therefore occurs in a group context where witnesses have a key role in deterring or encouraging it (Salmivalli, 2010). Traditional forms of bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, stealing), verbal (e.g., name calling, teasing), or social (e.g., alienation, rumor spreading; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Cyberbullying is a more recent phenomenon in which victims are bullied through the internet or other digital technologies (Smith, 2019). Although bullying occurs in a range of social contexts (Monks & Coyne, 2011), it has been most widely studied in schools, where victimization rates of 35% and 15% have been reported for traditional bullying and cyberbullying, respectively (Modecki et al., 2014). Victims may experience numerous adverse health effects, such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation and/or suicide attempts, substance abuse, reduced academic performance, social isolation, and psychosomatic disorders (Moore et al., 2017).

Teachers play a crucial role in the overall development and education of children (Montero-Carretero & Cervelló, 2020). In addition to facilitating cognitive development, they are responsible for addressing social issues that arise in the classroom and can affect the well-being of their students, such as bullying (Oldenburg et al., 2016; Veenstra et al., 2014). How they tackle the particular problem of bullying is influenced by a number of factors, including beliefs and attitudes about this phenomenon, perceived seriousness, perceived self-efficacy for intervening, and empathy (Mazzone et al., 2020). Training teachers about what bullying entails and how to respond is thus crucial. Sairanen and Pfeffer (2011) found that

teachers who had been taught about bullying intervened more effectively than those who had received no training. In addition, teachers who underestimate or downplay the seriousness of bullying tend either not to act (e.g., by ignoring incidents) or to act passively (e.g., by asking the students to deal with the problem themselves; Craig et al., 2000). Considering the important role that teachers play in child development, teachers should receive proper training on bullying before embarking on their teaching career (Pérez-Carbonell et al., 2016). Preservice teachers (PSTs) feel ill-prepared to deal with bullying. They need training to feel sufficiently confident to respond effectively to suspected cases and to ensure the success of antibullying programs in place at their schools (Lester et al., 2018; Mahon et al., 2020).

Physical education (PE) can be a breeding ground for bullying. Poor motor proficiency and performance have been identified as particular risk factors for victimization in this context (Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020; Bejerot et al., 2011), in part because students' skills are particularly visible and subject to judgment from peers in this setting (Beltrán-Carrillo et al., 2012). Overweight students (Peterson et al., 2012) and students with a disability (Healy, 2014) are also easy targets. Notwithstanding, PE also provides an ideal setting for fostering personal and social development (Fuller et al., 2013), where teachers can work on building healthy interpersonal relationships, cocreate ground rules on acceptable behavior with their students (Córdoba-Alcaide & Ortega-Ruiz, 2020), manage conflicts (Montero-Carretero & Cervelló, 2020), and promote attitudes and behaviors that will protect against a culture of aggression and bullying (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020). In a secondary school PE antibullying intervention, Benítez-Sillero et al. (2020) found a significant reduction in victimization and bullying rates among students who participated in the intervention compared with controls. Teaching styles and methodologies are also important, as inappropriate teaching of certain content in PE may actually foster attitudes that support violence and set the stage for bullying (O'Connor & Graber, 2014). There is also a tendency toward the normalization of

Ríos  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2357-0669>

Prat  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3811-9205>

Ventura (carlesventura@gencat.cat) is corresponding author,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0429-2605>

certain aggressive behaviors in PE that in other school contexts might be considered bullying (Mierzewski et al., 2019).

In short, PE teacher attitudes toward bullying may be decisive, as they could contribute to preventing this behavior or to perpetuating or encouraging it (Benítez-Sillero et al., 2020; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020). Although research has been carried out on bullying-related knowledge, attitudes, and skills among PSTs (Lester et al., 2018; Mahon et al., 2020), studies are lacking in the field of trainee PE teachers. The aims of this study, therefore, were to (a) examine beliefs about bullying among PE-PSTs, (b) analyze opinions about training received in this area, and (c) identify strategies they would use to deal with this phenomenon.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were selected by convenience sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The inclusion criteria were (a) students registered in a fourth (final)-year primary school teacher training degree specializing in PE (primary school PE-PSTs) or a master's degree in teacher training specializing in PE (secondary school PE-PSTs) and (b) students from different universities in Spain. We contacted 10 Spanish universities who taught either or both of these degrees. Six of the universities confirmed their interest in participating in the study. After contacting the students from each of these universities, 44 PE-PSTs ($M_{age} = 23.91$; $SD = 2.96$) agreed to participate in the study. There were 21 primary school PE-PSTs (11 women and 10 men) and 23 secondary school PE-PSTs (eight women and 15 men). They all signed an informed consent form, which guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity (Beck et al., 2004).

Data Collection

A semistructured focus group (FG) method was chosen to collect the study data. Six FGs were held (one at each university): three of the groups were formed by primary school PE-PSTs (FG1, FG2, and FG3) and three by secondary school PE-PSTs (FG4, FG5, and FG6). The interview script was prepared following a systematic review of the study themes as recommended by Beck et al. (2004).

Procedure

The FGs were held online due to COVID-19 restrictions, but this format has been found to generate remarkably similar data content to in-person groups (Woodyatt et al., 2016). The sessions were held between March 2021 and April 2021 and were facilitated by the first author, whose role was to create a supportive atmosphere conducive to the sharing of personal opinions and to encourage participation by all members of the groups. At the start of each session, the facilitator outlined the procedure that would be followed and reminded the students about the purpose of the study; they were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To ensure a common understanding of the discussion topics, the facilitator provided a definition of

bullying according to the literature and gave some examples (Olweus & Limber, 2010). The discussion was then started, following the predesigned, semistructured script. The FGs lasted an average of 77.7 min (range: 51–98 min), giving ample time to discuss the main study themes. All the sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the Catalan Government's Sports Council (009/CEICEGC/2021) and complied with relevant guidelines and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data Analysis

Following the guidelines of Sparkes and Smith (2014) on qualitative research methods in sport, exercise, and health, we performed a hierarchical deductive–inductive content analysis of the data generated in the FGs. To do this, we (a) read and reread the FG transcripts to become familiar with the data, (b) searched for and identified raw data themes characterizing each participant's responses and tagged these data to obtain a series of concepts that represented the information generated, (c) grouped the raw data themes into meaningful categories and classified them into higher order themes, (d) reread the original transcripts in detail to check that all the themes and categories were represented, (e) had the analysis confirmed by an external expert in qualitative research, and (f) hierarchically ordered the themes generated (see Table 1). This analysis was performed in Atlas.ti (version 9).

Results

Beliefs About Bullying and PE

Some PE-PSTs were of the opinion that bullying at school was not limited to PE: "I think bullying happens everywhere, in all subjects. Bullies have no preference for whether they bully in PE or Math" (PE-PST FG2). Others, by contrast, considered that bullying was more likely in PE: "I think most cases of bullying at school happen in PE" (PE-PST FG2). They offered numerous explanations for why they thought this was the case: "PE is not like Catalan or Math. There are a lot more factors in PE that can give rise to bullying situations" (PE-PST FG4). The main factor mentioned was that PE involves close interpersonal interactions: "PE is where bullying is most likely to happen as it's where children interact most. They play with each other, do more activities, and the activities are not as individual as they are in the classroom" (PE-PST FG3). The PE-PSTs, however, also believed that these closer interactions made it easier to detect bullying: "I think that PE teachers are able to see a lot more interactions between students and therefore a lot more possible cases of bullying" (PE-PST FG2). Another difference mentioned between PE and other subjects was related to the physical space where classes are held:

We go outdoors to do PE, we're not in the classroom. It's a completely different style of teaching to what the students are used to, as they are in the classroom for 6 hours and, on top of that, sitting down. Students interact much more in PE. (PE-PST FG6)

Table 1 Study Themes and Categories

Beliefs about bullying and PE	Training on bullying	Strategies for dealing with bullying in PE
Features of PE	Perceived training received on bullying	Strategies for preventing bullying
Risk factors for being bullied in PE	Perceived needs for training on bullying	Strategies for intervening in bullying

Note. PE = physical education.

This differential context would therefore make it easier for a potential bully to target his or her victim: “Things are less likely to happen in a classroom. But in PE, where the students are in much closer contact, if I’m a bully, I can get close to someone and hurt them” (PE-PST FG1). Similarities in this respect were drawn with being in the playground during recess: “Being in the playground or doing PE are moments of risk, because this is where the closest relationships are made” (PE-PST FG3). The PE-PSTs also considered that teachers may have less control over their students than in other subjects: “PE teachers usually hold their classes in the playground or in the gym, which are more open spaces, where there might be less control and this may make it easier for bullying to happen” (PE-PST FG2).

Locker rooms were also considered to be vulnerable spaces, as PE is the only subject where students are in a shared, communal space with little supervision from their teachers:

There is a very important time in PE: locker room time. Teachers don’t normally go in when students are changing, and the students have privacy and are free to do what they want because there are no adults present. This is also when bullies can take advantage to do whatever they want and we may never find out. (PE-PST FG2)

The PE-PSTs also mentioned that competitive activities in PE could give rise to tension and situations of risk: “When you play, you want to win. You end up doing whatever to win, even if this is wrong or inappropriate” (PE-PST FG5).

They also recognized that bullying in PE could be linked to a series of risk factors for victimization, as it is where differences in skills and physical attributes are most evident: “It’s one of the areas where differences in motor skills are most noticeable” (PE-PST FG3). Poor motor skills were highlighted as one of the main risk factors for being bullied: “In PE, children with the worst sporting skills are an easy target” (PE-PST FG6). The PE-PSTs also thought that having good motor skills might protect against bullying: “Being good at a particular sport can serve as a shield” (PE-PST FG3). Overweight was also identified as a risk factor for victimization and was linked to motor skills: “In PE, you can fall into the trap of exposing an overweight student. If this student tends to be made fun of and we organize a race, then we might be setting him up to be teased or talked about” (PE-PST FG4). Disability was also mentioned as a risk factor for being bullied: “A disabled person, for example, a person with an intellectual disability, also often ends up being a target for bullies” (PE-PST FG5). While some PE-PSTs made reference to specific risk factors for victimization, others were of the opinion that was no one risk profile: “I don’t think we can say that there’s one profile, there are 20,000 profiles” (PE-PST FG1).

The PE-PSTs believed that PE classes were not so clear-cut in terms of bullying, as while they provide ample opportunities for this behavior, they also offer a perfect setting for countering it: “Just as PE gives rise to situations where bullying is a risk, I also think it’s one of the areas where you can work most on this issue” (PE-PST FG3). In short, they considered that if handled properly, PE was a subject where you could educate students about bullying:

PE can be a very powerful weapon for fighting bullying because sport has a very important educational value. If the teacher does things properly, he or she can work on different values and also help fight bullying. (PE-PST FG2)

Training on Bullying

The PE-PSTs interviewed considered that they had received practically no training on bullying: “We’ve never studied bullying at university” (PE-PST FG5). They expressed some concern about their lack of preparedness, particularly in terms of how to detect cases:

It’s very difficult to see something you don’t know anything about. And if we, as future teachers, don’t have this training ... we won’t see it when it happens. Bullying is sometimes very obvious, but there are other situations that aren’t so clear. If no-one tells you about them or if you’ve never seen them ... you might overlook them, not see them. (PE-PST FG6)

The PE-PSTs also felt that they lacked training on how to respond to different situations: “I really wouldn’t know how to react” (PE-PST FG4). They also mentioned that they would need outside help:

I have zero training. If I found myself in a situation during a PE class where I needed to take action, the only option I think I have would be to ask a specialist for help. I would need outside help from a person who would tell me “you have to do this or that,” because I have no idea. (PE-PST FG4)

Because of this lack of training, the PE-PSTs were afraid they would not respond properly: “I feel that I have very few tools and I’m afraid of doing the wrong thing, the opposite of what I should. It scares me” (PE-PST FG1). The PE-PSTs called for more training: “I really want to know how to deal with a situation like this, I want tools, I want to know how to respond, I want to be in a position that when this happens I will know what to do” (PE-PST FG5). Some of the participants mentioned that they would like this training to be practical, with role-play activities based on real-life situations and applicable to their future work:

It would be interesting to do role plays, with spontaneous, real-life cases. I mean with somebody describing a situation to you and you have to think about how you would act as a future teacher. In other words, put us in the shoes of a real teacher, as this is what we will come up against when we are teachers. This would provide us with training with much stronger potential and I think we have shortcomings in this regard. (PE-PST FG5)

Strategies for Dealing With Bullying in PE

Despite their perceived lack of training, the PE-PSTs came up with a number of potentially effective strategies for preventing bullying during PE. One option mentioned was to use team-building activities: “One way of preventing bullying could be to favor cooperative activities to increase group cohesion. If we organize activities where everyone has to work together, we will foster values that might prevent bullying” (PE-PST FG2). They also referred to the positive correlation between cohesion and bullying prevention: “I think that cooperative games and activities where students have to search for solutions as a group is a great way of increasing group cohesion. And if the students feel part of a group, these bullying situations will not be created” (PE-PST FG3). Nonetheless, the PE-PSTs mentioned some limitations they felt in relation to cooperative games and activities: “It’s all very well to say we need to work on cohesion, but my resources in this area are quite limited. I would need to be familiar with different dynamics or

activities to prevent bullying and I'm not" (PE-PST FG3). The PE-PSTs also stated that cooperative activities could help detect potential cases of bullying: "We might see, for example, somebody who never gets passed the ball. And that would also help us suspect that something is up" (PE-PST FG3).

Another strategy suggested by the PE-PSTs for preventing bullying was to give less skilled people a greater role: "It would help to propose activities that did not boost the ego of people with great motor skills, but rather favored those with fewer skills to involve them more" (PE-PST FG6). They were of the opinion that student assessment should focus on progress rather than results: "We shouldn't reward good motor skills or good physique, but rather how students progress in relation to where they were at the beginning of the session" (PE-PST FG6). Another suggestion was for teachers to pick teams to prevent the same students from being continually left out:

I also think that group formation is important. The teacher can create groups so that no-one is excluded or left on their own. When you let the students pick their own teams, the victim is normally left out. As teachers, we should prevent this. (PE-PST FG3)

The PE-PSTs, however, acknowledged that allowing students to pick their own teams could help detect possible cases of exclusion: "Team picking by students is an interesting moment. Because the same people tend to be left out" (PE-PST FG5); "You can see straight away who they don't want and who they exclude" (PE-PST FG3). They also mentioned that creating some basic rules or codes of conduct could be a good way of achieving good group dynamics and possibly preventing bullying: "We could create coexistence rules and not allow anyone to make a comment about or criticize another person. It is important to put a stop to and redirect any aggressions by having everyone follow the rules that are agreed and decided by everyone" (PE-PST FG3).

Emotional learning was also proposed as a strategy for preventing bullying: "It is very important to work on emotions and to teach students how to manage these emotions" (PE-PST FG6).

Poor management of more negative emotions, such as anger, fear, not feeling loved . . . can cause a person to become a bully. And this is when they feel at their best, when they are stepping on or hurting other people. I think we could prevent this by working on emotions. (PE-PST FG2)

The PE-PSTs also believed that it was important to cultivate empathy: "We could do different role-playing activities so that everyone could experience different feelings. Working on assertiveness or empathy could be a way to prevent bullying" (PE-PST FG2). The importance of increasing knowledge and awareness was also mentioned: "We need to teach them what bullying is and what different roles there are, because a lot of students might come to believe that what is happening isn't bad" (PE-PST FG6). Some of the students believed that observation could help detect bullying:

The most important thing is to be on the lookout at all times, and to never treat anything as unimportant. Because sometimes, there are small details that we might think are trivial, that we shouldn't ignore as they are really important for detecting bullying. (PE-PST FG1)

They PE-PSTs also stated that it was important to take a holistic, continual approach to support the cultivation of positive values across subjects, not just in PE:

Prevention shouldn't be done in isolation. It should involve all the teachers and be done repeatedly. It's not a one-off thing [. . .] it can't just be done in PE, it has to be done in more subjects, to create values in the classroom. Values that need to be worked on daily . . . and if these values are gradually adopted, this will help prevent bullying. (PE-PST FG2)

The PE-PSTs proposed a wide range of strategies for responding to cases of bullying, including seeking support from different members of the school community: "I'd go and speak to the management team" (PE-PST FG2); "I'd first talk to the tutor and management" (PE-PST FG3); "I suppose I'd talk to the head of studies or the school psychologist" (PE-PST FG4). Some of the PSTs said they would talk directly to the main parties involved: "The first thing I would do would be to talk to the person being bullied and the bully" (PE-PST FG1). Others said that they had never considered what they would do: "I had never thought about it . . . I had never thought about what I would do" (PE-PST FG5). The PE-PSTs were largely unaware of the existence of school protocols on bullying: "I don't know if schools have protocols to deal with bullying, I have no idea" (PE-PST FG2). They also did not know who was responsible for designing these protocols: "To be honest, I don't know if all schools have an anti-bullying protocol. I don't know . . . I suppose that each teacher designs their own protocol . . . I don't know . . . I've never come across that situation, so I've no idea" (PE-PST FG2).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine beliefs about bullying in PE among PE-PSTs; opinions about training they had received in this area; and strategies they would use to prevent, detect, and deal with this phenomenon.

The PE-PSTs had varying opinions about whether or not bullying was more common in PE than in other subjects. This may be because people's perceptions of bullying are possibly influenced by their experiences (Slattery et al., 2019). Some of the trainee teachers believed that PE, unlike other subjects, generated more opportunities for bullying because of the multiple interactions that took place between students. They also, however, recognized that these interactions provided an opportunity to detect possible cases and mentioned that it was more difficult to monitor behavior in PE because classes were usually held in large spaces (outdoor courts or gyms). These observations are consistent with reports by Seang-Leol (2016), who found that 76% of bullying takes place during recess or PE. Victims of bullying have also reported that where classes are held can have a significant influence on the occurrence of bullying (Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020). The PE-PSTs believed that locker rooms were environments where bullying could occur due to a lack of adult supervision (Zych et al., 2019). Locker rooms have been identified as one of the spaces where bullying is most likely to occur in PE (Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020) and sport (Herrick & Duncan, 2020; Nery et al., 2020; Ríos et al., 2022). Competitive situations that arise in PE were also mentioned as possible sources of tension and conflict. If not used for educational purposes, competition can lead to alienation and bullying, as has been observed in youth sport (Nery et al., 2020; Ríos et al., 2022).

Factors associated with an increased risk of bullying according to the PE-PSTs were poor motor skills (Bejerot et al., 2011), overweight (Peterson et al., 2012), and disability (Healy, 2014). Motor skills are an important component of PE, and certain

activities can accentuate difficulties experienced by less-skilled, overweight, or disabled students, possibly causing feelings of humiliation (Shehu, 2009), failure, embarrassment, unease, and rejection (Beltrán-Carrillo et al., 2012). Good motor skills were mentioned as having a potentially protective effect against victimization, possibly because being good at sport increases the chances of being popular (Collot & Dudink, 2010). The PE-PSTs made no reference to the association between victimization and belonging to the LGTBIQ+ community and/or an ethnic minority, two risk factors that are discussed in the review by Menesini and Salmivalli (2017). Our findings highlight the need for PE-PST training on how to recognize vulnerable groups (Mahon et al., 2020). Supporting findings by Avilés et al. (2011), some of the PE-PSTs believed that while certain risk factors must be borne in mind, there are multiple victim profiles in the world of bullying.

The PE-PSTs acknowledged that PE has certain characteristics that could favor bullying, but they also believed that it could be used to work on socialization and antibullying strategies, with teachers playing a key role (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Melim & Pereira, 2015).

Those interviewed confirmed that they had received little or no training within their university studies on bullying or strategies to prevent, detect, or deal with this problem. A similar lack of training was observed by Lester et al. (2018) in a study of trainee teachers and Pérez-Carbonell et al. (2016) in a study of active teachers. Ventura et al. (2016) also found that the word “bullying” was largely absent from teacher training curricula at several public universities in Spain and Portugal. These findings highlight the little attention that is paid to bullying within teacher training programs and the need to address this shortcoming (Mahon et al., 2020). Similar to Lester et al. (2018), the PE-PSTs called for more training and suggested activities based on role play and real-life cases to equip them with the necessary skills to respond effectively to bullying in their work as teachers. Ihnat and Smith (2013) found that PSTs who participated in workshops on bullying intervened more effectively when confronted with a possible case of bullying; training in this area has been found to provide teachers with greater self-confidence and perceived competence (Acquadro et al., 2017).

The PE-PSTs also mentioned the importance of cooperative learning in PE. Creating dynamics that foster cooperation could help improve interpersonal relationships (Dyson et al., 2021) and also include students with special learning needs (Healy, 2014). Cooperative learning activities could minimize physical and motor skill differences between students (Martínez-Baena & Faus-Boscá, 2018) and contribute to bullying prevention (Medina & Reverte, 2019). Oliveira et al. (2017) reported a reduction in physical and verbal aggression after a 3-month intervention, consisting of cooperative games in PE classes. Although the PE-PSTs in our study recognized the potential of cooperative games, they felt they lacked the necessary resources for implementing them. They made no reference to direct opposition games, which are recommended in the literature as an effective means of training students to control their emotions (Montero-Carretero & Cervelló, 2020). PE teachers can create a climate that is conducive to fostering positive attitudes among students, thereby helping to prevent bullying (Melim & Pereira, 2015). Their actions can, however, also lead to the normalization of commonplace bullying behaviors that have traditionally been viewed as acceptable in sport (Mierzewski et al., 2019). The PE-PSTs also mentioned giving a greater role to students with weaker motor skills, although they did not provide any specific examples of how to do this. According to Coates and

Vickerman (2010), PE teachers should strive to adapt all activities to maximize everybody’s participation and success and prevent any type of exclusion. Recognition of progress rather than results was mentioned by the PE-PSTs as a possible strategy for preventing bullying. Melim and Pereira (2015) believed that teaching styles focused on performance and skills-based assessment could engender alienation and discrimination in PE.

Team picking by students was recognized as a risk factor for bullying in PE, and like Fernández-Río (2017), the PE-PSTs recommended that teachers should be responsible for forming the groups within their classes. Because victims of bullying tend to have few friends among their classmates (Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020), the PE-PSTs considered that having students pick teams could help detect exclusionary behaviors and as a consequence, potential cases of bullying.

Another strategy proposed for preventing bullying was the cocreation of ground rules setting out unacceptable behaviors. These rules should be agreed on by all members of the group, and as stated by Mazzone et al. (2020), make it clear that bullying is intolerable. The PE-PSTs also considered that emotional learning activities could help prevent bullying. Zych et al. (2018) found that promoting emotional competencies protects against bullying, whereas Rueda et al. (2022) highlighted the need for programs designed to cultivate emotional intelligence. The PE-PSTs also mentioned the potential usefulness of empathy-building role-playing activities, which were part of the PE antibullying program proposed by Benítez-Sillero et al. (2020). Similar to the trainee teachers studied by Lester et al. (2018), the PSTs in our study referred to the importance of building awareness about bullying among their students, although did not specify how. Benítez-Sillero et al. (2020) proposed using motor stories as a means of increasing knowledge and awareness about bullying.

The PE-PSTs in our series mentioned careful observation of students during PE as a possible strategy for detecting possible cases of bullying. In a study of bullying in children’s football, Flores et al. (2020) stressed the importance of watching out for behaviors that may initially seem unimportant but with time could engender bullying. The PE-PSTs also referred to the importance of fostering civics values, not just in PE but in the school as a whole, across all subjects; concerted actions by all members of the school community have been shown to be important for tackling bullying (Ruiz et al., 2015). Although the PE-PSTs recognized that locker rooms could be high-frequency bullying zones, they did not propose any specific strategies for controlling what happened behind these closed doors; this need has been highlighted in school environments (Ruiz et al., 2015) and sport (Nery et al., 2020). No mention was made of cyberbullying, highlighting the observation by Montoro and Ballesteros (2016) that teachers needed to be equipped with the necessary skills to deal with bullying that takes place through new technologies. Although not specifically mentioned by the PE-PSTs, positive teacher–student interactions are also important to prevent bullying in PE (Bonavolontà et al., 2021). According to Montero-Carretero and Cervelló (2020), an interpersonal teaching style can help prevent bullying in PE, whereas a more controlling dictatorial style could actually favor it. Training on the role of teaching styles could be included in antibullying training programs for PSTs.

The PE-PSTs did not feel that they had the necessary tools to respond to potential cases of bullying. They expressed low self-confidence in this respect, in line with previous findings for PSTs (Lester et al., 2018; Mahon et al., 2020), secondary school PE teachers (O’Connor & Graber, 2014), and elementary school

teachers (Oldenburg et al., 2016). Some PE-PSTs said they would seek help from other members of staff at the school (e.g., management, tutors), supporting findings by Şen and Doğan (2021), but others stated that they would talk to the people directly involved. Mahon et al. (2020) also found this to be the case in a study of PSTs' knowledge about bullying at schools. One possible explanation for the assortment of intervention strategies proposed by the PE-PSTs is their unfamiliarity with the existence of school-specific protocols for dealing with bullying.

Conclusions

The PE-PSTs interviewed in this study considered that while PE could favor bullying, with proper classroom management and an appropriate teaching style, it also provided an ideal setting in which to detect cases and work on prevention. The trainee teachers largely felt ill-equipped to deal with bullying, and while they proposed several strategies for preventing this behavior, their ideas lacked depth. In brief, they perceived a lack of resources and confidence to detect and effectively deal with bullying in their future careers. Our findings highlight the importance of incorporating bullying into teaching training curricula in the field of PE.

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