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## Preschool Teachers' Perspectives on Guidance Provided to Children Who Cause Classmates Physical Harm

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Vangalene Frinks

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Preschool Teachers' Perspectives on Guidance Provided to Children Who Cause  
Classmates Physical Harm

by

Vangalene Frinks

MA, Walden University, 2017

BS, USC-Coastal Carolina College, 1989

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2022

## Abstract

Approximately 10% of preschool children cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. Aggressive behavior can lead to suspension or expulsion from childcare centers and disrupts student learning. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports and identify actions teachers take to manage and guide children who show aggressive behavior. The study's conceptual framework was Bandura's social cognitive theory of human behavior. Ten lead teachers with at least one year of experience were interviewed to address (a) teachers' perspectives of children who cause classmates physical harm, and (b) techniques they used to manage and guide children with aggressive behavior. Interviews were then analyzed for themes. The findings indicated that teachers believed that children's aggressive behaviors were often linked with home factors and the lack of prosocial skills. Teachers indicated that they used strategies and techniques like behavioral plans and intervention programs to help children develop prosocial skills and modify children's behaviors. Teachers suggested additional training and more assistance from outside behavior specialists would improve their ability to help children who exhibit intensely challenging behavior. The findings from this study may lead to a solution to the problem of aggressive behavior initiated by children in preschool settings and inspire positive social change in improved child management and guidance, improved child behavior, and fewer occasions for child suspension or expulsion from preschool.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, two daughters, son-in-law, granddaughter, and family. Thanks for encouraging me to complete this journey that seemed to be so far away. I spent long hours during this process and I thank you for all your support, encouragement, prayers, and love. This is a dream of mind that came true. I hope I have set an example for you and someone else's dream to come true and follow in my footsteps.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In early childhood classrooms, it is common for preschool children to display aggressive behaviors towards their peers. Turkoglu (2019) stated that aggressive behavior is a problem that occurs repeatedly in preschool settings. According to Googe and Knopf (2018), some children who harm other children are suspended or expelled from childcare facilities. Teachers may have difficulty with children who exhibit aggressive behaviors (Miller et al, 2017). In this qualitative study, I explored the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and the actions they take to manage and guide these children. Results from this study may inspire positive social change in improved child management and guidance, improved child behavior, and fewer occasions for child suspension or expulsion from preschool. In this chapter, I describe the background of this study, the study problem and purpose, the research questions that guided this study, and the study's conceptual framework. I also describe the study scope, delimitations, assumptions, and limitations that shaped this study.

### **Background**

Some preschool children have issues communicating and interacting with their peers, which can lead to aggressive behaviors. According to Clifford et al. (2020), when children cannot communicate verbally or express themselves, they may physically harm other students. Aggressive behavior occurs in the classroom among preschool children (Clifford et al., 2020). They may hit, kick, and throw items at their peers, resulting in

bodily harm (Turkoglu, 2019). Huitsing and Monks (2018) stated that when children are angry, they can lash out at any children that are near them without any discernable purpose.

Children who harm their peers have poor social skills and have a difficult time coping with social environment of the childcare, where children are playing, socializing, and creating an cohesive environment. They have negative aspects of social interactions and short-term social skills with their classmates (Ostrov et al., 2019). Preschoolers who display aggressive behaviors often demonstrate low academic skills in the classroom resulting from problems in focusing and maintaining attention (Krygsman & Vaillancourt, 2019). When preschoolers display aggressive behaviors, teachers find it hard to teach and control children's behaviors. However, Connors-Burrow et al. (2017) indicated that teaching children how to socialize and get along with their peers is part of a teacher's job. Ersan and Tok (2020) stated that when teachers support children's social and emotional development, they can decrease children's anger and physically aggressive behaviors. However, according to Miller et al. (2017), many teachers are unprepared and lack the necessary skills to manage and guide children who cause other children in the class physical harm. My study was needed because it addressed the gap in practice that existed regarding teacher perspectives of children who caused physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that was the focus of the study is that 8% to 10% of preschool children causes classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident

reports (Markelz et al., 2020). In the year prior to the beginning of this study, a local childcare facility in one community in the Southeastern United States reported 15% of the enrolled 215 preschool children displayed aggressive behaviors that required filing of an incident report and suspension from the center for one or more days (Center Director, personal communication, October 10, 2020). Googe and Knopf (2018) found that preschool suspension is a national issue, and children with aggressive behaviors were three times more likely to be expelled from preschool than children in K-12 programs. Googe and Knopf (2018) found that the rates of suspension and expulsion in one state in the target region of this study were 6.2 suspensions or expulsions per 1,000 children in public schools, 11.9 per 1,000 in for-profit childcare programs, and 12.5 per 1,000 in faith-based childcare programs.

According to Turkoglu (2019), aggressive behavior is a problem that occurs often in preschool classrooms. Aggressive behavior includes attempts or actions that inflict physical, verbal, or psychological harm to others (Douvlos, 2019). Miller et al. (2017) found that preschool teachers lack training and resources needed to manage and guide children with aggressive behaviors. A gap in practice existed regarding teacher perspectives of ways to manage and guide children who caused physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they

take to manage and guide these children. In this study, I explored preschool teachers' perspectives of children who displayed aggressive behaviors and how they managed and guided children who caused other children in the class physical harm. The research paradigm I followed was the basic qualitative tradition, as described by Caelli et al. (2003), because I used the structured interview method to gather preschool teachers' description of their experiences and stories regarding children who exhibited aggressive behaviors that caused others physical injury. The concept of interest was preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they took to manage and guide these children.

### **Research Questions**

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do teachers describe their perspectives on children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do teachers describe techniques they use or actions they take to manage and guide children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of self-regulation. Bandura emphasized that self-regulation is the ability to control one's actions and thoughts. According to Bandura, when teachers support children with self-regulation and forethought, they can better control children's aggressive behaviors in

the classroom (Bandura, 1991). This support consists of monitoring the behavior, identifying its causes, and taking action to reduce aggressive behaviors (Bandura, 1991). Bandura explained that human behavior is influenced by a person's ability to exercise forethought or planning. Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-regulation was appropriate for my study because it describes ways a person might explain another's behavior and then take steps to help that person manage their behavior (Bandura, 1991). Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-regulation informed my process of understanding teachers' descriptions of supporting children in learning to self-regulate their aggressive behaviors to reduce the incidence of physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this study, I used a basic qualitative design with interviews to explore the perspectives of preschool teachers in the Southeastern United States regarding children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they take to manage and guide these children. A basic qualitative design was instrumental to my research study because it supported the purpose of the study. The main purpose of interviews is to obtain specific information on a topic for recording and evaluating data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews allowed me to look at a group of participants' perspectives and thoughts on the target topic and share their experiences, feelings, opinions, and other data. The key concept I investigated in this study was preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children who caused classmates



physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they took to manage and guide these children.

Interviews were more beneficial for my study than observations would have been, because it would have been difficult to observe teachers' perspectives, and how they were affected by children's challenging behavior. Also, the act of observation can change the dynamic in the observed site (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and children may not repeat during an observation the events or aggressive behaviors teachers have witnessed in the past. Similarly, surveys would not have suited my study because they are appropriate in quantitative research that includes numeric data (Queirós et al., 2017), rather than data from personal perspectives. Another method that would not have benefited my study was examining documentation of a child's behavior. Such information may not include the teacher perspectives that were the focus of this study, and unlike in an interview, I would not have been able to ask questions of informants (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, in this study I interviewed 10 teachers who work with children ages 3 to 5 in a childcare setting in the Southeastern United States. I analyzed interview data using thematic analysis.

### **Definitions**

*Aggressive behavior:* A behavior that is intended to harm oneself or another person (Ersan & Tok, 2020).

*Guidance:* Assistance provided to an individual to help them be more aware of their actions and understand the impacts of their behavior in relation to their personal goals (Oniye & Durosaro, 2009).

*Intense behavior:* Aggressive behavior that seems to occur with little or no provocation, appears to be sudden, uncontrolled, excessively long lasting, and inappropriate to the situation (Connor et al., 2019).

*Management:* A multi-dimensional view of decision-making that takes each person's differences into account (Karakaya & Tufan, 2018).

*Physical aggression:* Physical contact, actions, gestures, or threats that are intended to harm someone (Baker et al., 2020).

*Prosocial behavior:* A willing and intentional behavior to share, help, and cooperate with others (Bulić & Pinkas, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that the teachers I interviewed were honest and complete in their reports of their perspectives regarding children's aggressive behaviors and their efforts to manage these children. I also assumed that teachers who participated in this study had experience with children's aggressive behavior that inflicted physical harm on other children, and that they took action to manage these children, including the filing of incident reports. These assumptions were necessary because the quality of interview data depends on the veracity and understanding of informants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this qualitative study was preschool teachers' perspectives of children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. Theories that might have been included as a conceptual framework but were not included in my study were the ideas of Eron (1987), who suggested that severe

antisocial aggression is a learned behavior related to conditions that frustrate a child, reinforcement of aggression by the child's parent, parental modeling of aggressive behavior, and sociocultural norms that validate harsh childrearing practices and attitudes. Similarly, according to Bateson's (1941) frustration-aggression hypothesis, childhood aggression is derived from sequences of culturally modified acts that include actions and attitudes of parents. The work of Eron and Bateson provide information on children's aggression but does not address teachers' perspectives regarding these children or how teachers manage such behavior.

The study was delimited to interviews of 10 preschool teachers who work with children ages 3 to 5 in general education classrooms in childcare centers in the Southeastern United States. The geographic delimitation addressed the possibility that behavior expectations of preschool children are dependent on regional norms. Excluded from this study were providers of childcare in family-based care settings, teachers of children of other ages, and teachers in other regions of the United States. Family-based care settings typically enroll a small number of children in multiage groups, often with just one caregiver (the owner). Filings of formal incident reports may not be part of the practice of a family-based caregiver; therefore, caregivers in family childcare homes were excluded from this study. Also excluded were preschool teachers who work in therapeutic settings or classrooms designated for children with special needs, because teachers in such settings have a different classroom population than is typical in general education classrooms. These exclusions may limit transferability of the results to settings characterized by the excluded factors.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the fact that this study was conducted during or immediately subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted childcare practice across the United States. Many childcare centers instituted remote learning via the internet for a time during the pandemic, and when in-person attendance resumed, many centers asked children to socially distance and wear protective face masks. These changes to ordinary childcare operation may have affected children's behavior in unknown ways. To support transferability, I provided clear and complete descriptions of the study parameters and verbatim interview selections, to aid a reader in determining transferability to their own context.

The personal perspectives and experiences of a qualitative researcher may affect all aspects of a study, as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016). To manage my own biases and preconceived notions required reflection, both before and during the interview process, according to Sutton and Austin (2015). I monitored my thoughts, so I could limit their influence, by keeping a reflective journey throughout the data collection and analysis process (see Sutton & Austin, 2015).

### **Significance**

This study holds significance because I explored the perspectives of preschool teachers in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions teachers take to manage and guide these children. The findings from my study increase understanding of teachers' experience with intensely aggressive children and contribute

new knowledge to the field. The results may lead to a solution to the problem and inspire positive social change that improves child management and child behavior and reduces occasions for child suspension or expulsion from preschool. This study contributes to positive social change in that findings support efforts to aid children's social-emotional development in ways that may increase their school success.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I described the introduction, background, study problem, purpose, and research questions related to the study purpose of exploring preschool teachers' perspectives working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they took to manage and guide these children. I presented the study's conceptual framework, the nature of the study key definitions, and assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations inherent in this study. I also suggested the possible significance of the study. In my study, I addressed a gap in practice regarding teacher perspectives working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they took to manage and guide these children. In Chapter 2, I provided an explication of the conceptual framework, and a review of current literature relevant to the study focus.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Approximately 8 to 10% of preschool children cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports (Markelz et al., 2020). The purpose of my study was to explore the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they take to manage and guide these children. According to Turkoglu (2019), preschool children frequently interact negatively to perceived slights from their peers and exhibit aggressive behavior such as hitting and kicking. Aggressive behavior has an effect on preschool children's ability to socialize and communicate with their peers (Clifford et al., 2020). According to Krygsman and Vaillancourt (2019), children with aggressive behaviors have short attention span and low academic skills that can have a major effect on their school success. Miller et al. (2017) indicated that preschool teachers feel underprepared to manage children with aggressive behaviors and lack training and resources to deal with children who cause physical harm to their classmates. Therefore, a gap in practice existed regarding teacher perspectives of children who caused physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports.

In this chapter, I begin by describing how I searched for literature relevant to my study's focus. I then present an expanded explication of the study's conceptual framework, in which I described why this framework was appropriate to this study's purpose. Most of this chapter is devoted to a review of current literature pertinent to an

understanding of preschool children's aggressive behavior and teachers' response to this behavior.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used the following databases and sources to lead the study: Walden Library, ERIC, Education Source, SAGE, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar. These databases and sources assisted with finding the terms and phrases to support the study. Some terms that I used in the literature research study included *contributing factors*, *descriptive analysis technique*, *direct observation*, *external factors*, *guidance*, *in-training services*, *internalized behavior problems*, *intervention strategies*, *physical aggression*, *self-efficacy*, *semi-structured interview technique*, *social emotional difficulties*, *social learning theory*, *self-regulation*, *guidance*, *prosocial development*, *preschool*, and *social emotional difficulties*. The majority of the literature search was spent researching aggressive behaviors and contributing factors. Literature search topics that arose in an iterative search process included topics such as *childcare centers and learning theories*, *preschool physical aggression*, *teachers' interviews*, and *teachers' perspectives*. I focused on research conducted in the United States and published within the 5 years prior to completion of my study in 2022.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study was based on Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of self-regulation. Bandura (1991) indicated that human behavior is motivated and regulated through self-influence or what they observe in others. Self-regulation operates from three concepts of human behaviors: its determinants, its effects,

and its self-reaction. Self-regulation reflects one's thoughts, affect, motivation, and actions. Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-regulation suggests that most human behaviors are regulated through forethought. This process is demonstrated when humans motivate and guide their own actions in proactive ways. They are able to control their actions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Bandura, 1991). In addition to self-regulation, social cognitive theory of self-regulation suggests that individuals use social learning core concepts as part of learning. For example, people learn by copying or modeling what others do. Preschool children imitate others' behavior, verbally follow descriptions of behaviors, and symbolically follow real or fictional media characters (Shahaeian et al., 2017). According to Shahaeian et al. (2017), preschool children imitate, observe, and model from others in a social context.

According to Bandura (1977), behavior is influenced by observational learning, intrinsic reinforcement, and modeling. Observational learning occurs when a live model, verbal instructions, or a symbolic model demonstrates behavior, such as in a video. Intrinsic reinforcement occurs when individuals experience positive feelings about their behavior, such as pride, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment. However, Bandura (1977) cautioned that not all observed behaviors are effectively learned. For observational learning to be successful, the modeled behavior and the learner must be intentionally engaged in the process of modeling and observing. This suggests that, in the current study, teachers' perspectives regarding children who caused classmates physical harm, and how they engaged those children in mediating such behavior, affected their ability to reduce the incidence or intensity of the behavior. Bandura (1977) described



steps in the observational learning and modeling process. The steps include attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation. Bandura (1977) emphasized that teachers should ensure that these steps exist in the classroom, and they model appropriate behaviors among children.

Zimmerman (1989) used Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-regulation to explain children's use of self-regulation to become active participants in their own learning process. Zimmerman (1989) agreed with Bandura that to have self-regulated skills in the classroom, children need direct assistance and strategies from teachers to improve their behaviors and set academic goals. Zimmerman (1989) used teachers' perspectives to rate children's self-regulation skills during classroom learning.

Zimmerman determined that children's use of self-regulated learning skills was related to teachers' instructional strategies and to how well they performed academically in the classroom. According to Schunk and Zimmerman (2007), Bandura's social cognitive theory, including elements of self-regulation and self-efficacy, impacts the way children learn and achieve. From a teachers' perspective, children who receive persuasive feedback from their teachers may influence their self-efficacy to engage in activities that have a positive social and academic effect (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).

Bandura's social learning theory of self-regulation was relevant to my study because I explored teachers' perspectives regarding children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. Using Bandura's theory, I increased understanding of teachers' perspectives of children's behaviors and

the guidance teachers use to manage children with aggressive behaviors. The theory provided insight on teachers' perspectives regarding children's challenging behaviors.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts**

In this section, I discuss literature relevant to the study topic of preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they took to manage and guide these children. I present literature regarding children's development of social and emotional competence; physical aggression as an expression of social, emotional, physical, and language development, physical aggression in the preschool classroom; and teacher guidance in managing physical aggression in preschool.

#### **Children's Development of Social and Emotional Competence**

Young children from birth to 5 years of age learn how to express their emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways within their environment (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016). According to Alzahrani et al. (2019), children develop their social and emotional skills as they interact and build positive relationships with others. As children develop social and emotional skills with their parents, peers, and teachers, they learn about their own feelings, express their feelings, and show empathy for others (Alzahrani et al., 2019). A child's social and emotional developmental is shaped by different mechanisms, including innate temperament, infant attachment, and early relationship quality (Edet, 2020). Carr et al. (2018) added another social-emotional mechanism, theory of mind, that children develop as they build social skills and relationships with their parents and others. I explore each of these in the sections below.

### *Innate Temperament*

Innate temperament is a concept of social and emotional development among young children. According to Thomas and Chess (1986), temperament refers to a child's preset ways of responding to the world, and these responses can be organized into three general response patterns: easy, difficult, and slow-to-warm-up. The child who exhibits an easy temperament presents a regular schedule of eating, sleeping, and elimination, is not easily upset, and responds cheerfully to others (Thomas & Chess, 1986). The child with a difficult temperament has unpredictable patterns of eating, sleeping, and elimination, seems fussy and demanding, and is resistant to interactions with others (Thomas & Chess, 1986). Thomas and Chess (1986) described the slow-to-warm-up child as generally quieter and more reluctant to engage with others than other children are, and fearful in new situations and with unfamiliar people and objects. According to Thomas and Chess (1986), temperament is an innate quality, present from birth, likely inherited from a child's parents, and lifelong. A child's preset ways of responding to the world continue to shape their interactions with others into the preschool years and beyond.

A child's temperament affects how others respond to the child. Hipson and Séguin (2016) stated that children's interactions with their peers are shaped by their temperament, and by peer responses to their interactions. Peers may find the easy child friendlier and more open to play schemes than the difficult or slow-to-warm-up child (Hipson & Séguin, 2016), which may affect the child's social skill development.

According to Acar et al. (2018), when children of any temperament interact with others in

positive relationships, they feel validated and accepted for who they are. Feelings of acceptance are important to a child's development of social and emotional competence (Coelho et al., 2017). According to Rudasill and Rimm-Kaufman (2009), when a teacher supports children's temperament, they help children develop social and emotional competence in classroom situations.

### ***Infant Attachment***

Unlike temperament, infant attachment is not innate but develops in the first year of life through interactions between a child and their caregiver, usually described as the child's mother (Bowlby, 1969). Infant attachment describes the social and emotional relationship between the infant and their mother and depends on the infant's appraisal of the mother's provision of a sense of security and a willingness to meet the infant's needs (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby and Ainsworth (2013) described three infant attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and ambivalent or resistant. Secure attachment is created when infants feel loved by their mothers, and that their mothers are attuned and responsive to the infant's needs and wishes (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013). Infants develop the avoidant attachment style when they feel their mothers are distracted, unsafe, uncaring, or self-centered, so that the child is uncertain that the mother will meet the child's needs. The ambivalent style results when an infant feels uncertain about the level of attention and support provided by the mother, whom the child may perceive as unpredictable (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013). Infants whose mothers are sensitive to the child's needs, and provide responses attuned to the child's temperament and interaction style, tend to be more securely attached than infants whose mothers are less sensitive (Bowlby &

Ainsworth, 2013). Infant attachment is established by about the age of 10 months and affects an individual's social and emotional competence throughout their lives.

Attachment can be developed through interactions with other caregivers than the child's mother (Woodhouse et al., 2020). Adults whom the child perceives as responsible for the child's safety and for meeting the child's needs create for the child a sense of security that results in an attachment that can be secure, insecure, or ambivalent. The child develops an attachment relationship with their other parent, their grandparents, family friends, and their teachers, depending on the child's assessment of the trustworthiness of each adult. The child who feels distrustful of an adult, including their mother, and with who they have an insecure or ambivalent attachment, may struggle to develop social and emotional competence (Girme et al., 2021).

### ***Early Relationship Quality***

Relationships that support the child's feelings of self-worth, autonomy, and competence increase children's ability to get along with others in mutually satisfying ways (McCurdy et al., 2020). The first of these relationships is the one a child has with their parents. Baumrind (1971) identified three parental styles that affect the quality of the child-parent relationship: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. Authoritarian parents demonstrate low warmth with their children and high levels of control. Children raised by authoritarian parents may reenact the authoritarian model by becoming bullies, or may become rebellious (Tatiani, 2021). Permissive parents demonstrate high warmth and low control (Baumrind, 1971). In a dissertation, Gefroh (2017) found that children raised by permissive parents may continually test boundaries or be demanding of others.

Authoritative parents demonstrate high warmth but also high control. Children raised by authoritative parents often are diligent, well adjusted, and goal oriented (Sahithya et al., 2019). When parents demonstrate an authoritative parenting style, children are supported in their social and emotional competence (Juffer et al., 2017). Such children are able to develop positive relationships with people outside the family, form friendship bonds, and show empathy towards others (Juffer et al., 2017).

In addition to developing a relationship with their parents, children form relationships with others outside the family. Bistrong et al. (2016) mentioned that when children enter childcare, this is their first formal social environment. In this environment, they learn to interact with their teacher and their peers and develop social skills. Just as the quality of children's relationship with their parents depends in large part on parenting style, the quality of children's relationship with their teachers depends on the same style elements of authoritarianism, permissiveness, and authoritativeness, communicated by their teachers (Omdal, 2018). Children form positive relationships with their teachers when those teachers are available to children and are responsive to their needs, when they create for children a safe, secure, and supportive atmosphere, and when they support positive peer interactions among children (Sullivan, 2017).

### ***Theory of Mind***

The child's experience with adults who are attuned to their needs serves as a model for the child's development of the ability to understand and anticipate the perspectives of others. The theory of mind describes this ability, which is based on the idea that each person's mind is private to them, so that others can only extrapolate what a

person is thinking from the context of the situation and knowledge of the person (Baron-Cohen, 1999). Baron-Cohen (1999) explained that children's development of theory of mind is an important part of their social and emotional competence. Theory of mind typically develops during the preschool years and is established by about age 6 (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). According to Wimmer and Perner (1983), children's ability to understand another person's beliefs, how a person reacts to these beliefs, and their understanding of deception are based not only on an increase of memory but on the development of the ability to mentally represent relationships with other persons, a skill that seems to emerge between the ages of 4 to 6 years.

According to Lane et al. (2010), the development of a theory of mind permits children to apply moral reasoning and decision-making to social problems. The development of theory of mind contributes to the child's growing understanding of social relationships and reciprocal norms, leading to a greater acceptance of the guidance of authority figures and increased desire to behave according to social expectations (Lane et al., 2010). Children who have acquired a theory of mind understand social interactions and are able to adjust their behavior to suit the needs of others, as they infer those needs to be.

Children's development of social and emotional competence depends on their innate temperament, their development of infant attachment, the quality of their early relationships with parents and teachers, and their development of theory of mind. Each of these factors have implications for children's behavior and may inform perspectives of

children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports.

### **Physical Aggression and Children's Development**

Physical aggression in young children is a way to express themselves (Ersan & Tok, 2019). According to Ersan and Tok (2019), children use physical aggression because they lack social, emotional, physical, and language skills. Jambon and Smetana (2020) stated that children express their anger by using physical and verbal attacks when they lack social skills and cannot express themselves during interactions with their peers. According to Wilson and Ray (2018), young children use physical aggression such as hitting and kicking their peers as a way of getting what they want. As children struggle with self-regulatory skills and the lack of ability to express their feelings, they may display physically aggressive behaviors (Wilson & Ray, 2018). In the next sections, I explore literature that described how physical aggression is used as an expressive action.

### ***Physical Aggression and Physical Development***

As children develop, they become more able to hurt others. An infant cannot hurt anyone because an infant lacks physical strength, balance, and coordination (Hay, 2017). Aggression begins in infancy between the ages of 6 to 12 months when they have the ability to reach out to make contact with others with their mouth or limbs. At this point, infants use their teeth to bite, and their hands to grab and push others. Infants have the capacity to use force against others in their first year of life (Hay, 2017). As infants develop their muscle strength and motor skills, they gain the ability to hit and kick (Lorber et al., 2018). Hay (2017) mentioned that toddlers display physical aggression as



they interact with their peers that may lead to problematic levels of aggression in later childhood years. As toddlers interact with their peers, they display physical aggression by taking toys and using bodily force (Hay, 2017). Preschool children express social, emotional, and physical aggression while interacting with their peers during group or free play (Hay, 2017). When children cannot get what they want, they will take objects, hit, or push other children (Mulvey & Jenkins, 2020). Turkoglu (2019) stated that physical aggression among children ages 2 to 3 is a normal stage of development. According to Mulvey and Jenkins (2020), physical aggression is the most common type of aggression used by preschool children. Turkoglu (2019) mentioned that preschoolers are described as “damaging friends” when they display physical aggression when they kick, bite, slap, hit, and push (p.172). When children lack the ability to express themselves using language, they display aggressive behaviors.

### ***Physical Aggression and Language Development***

Language development starts during the prenatal period and develops throughout a lifespan; early childhood is a key period in that development. Infants learn the concept of language through sounds of objects, familiar voices, and by recognizing their own native language (Perszyk & Waxman, 2019). By 12 months of age, children can communicate verbally and nonverbally (Turkoglu, 2019). Yogman et al. (2018) stated that infants between the ages of 6 to 8 months began to smile, coo, and respond to songs. This leads to social communication before they develop language skills. By age 2, children begin to understand and use language to communicate (Yogman et al., 2018). During the preschool age, children are able to express themselves, understand others’

feelings, and show empathy (Mulvey & Jenkins, 2020). Preschool children use language to develop relationships and negotiate conflict with each other (Mulvey & Jenkins, 2020). Jenkins et al. (2017) mentioned that when preschool children develop social and language skills, they can solve problems, share, take turns, and engage in pretend play. However, when children cannot express themselves and become angry, they may kick, bite, slap, hit, and push their friends (Turkoglu, 2019).

### ***Physical Aggression as an Expressive Action***

Physical aggression is an expressive action that children use when they lack the ability to express themselves through language. Physical aggression is an adaptation of physical skills to compensate for developmental lapses in effective social communication (Shahaeian et al., 2017). According to Shahaeian et al. (2017), as children try to express themselves through communication, they may have poor language skills that lead to frustration which results in physical aggression. Shahaeian et al. (2017) mentioned that children who exhibit physical aggressive behavior also have a low level of prosocial skills. By 12 months of age, children's anger and use of force increase. Children began to take their anger or frustration out on peers by biting, hitting, and shoving (Hay, 2017). Children between the ages of 2 and 3 may harm other children and cause harm to themselves when they become angry or their request is not granted (Swit et al., 2018; Yogman et al., 2018). By age 3, children may intentionally harm their peers and this behavior may be repeated from day to day (Swit et al., 2018). According to Swit et al. (2018), physical aggression can be age appropriate and instrumental in shaping children's feelings and behaviors. However, physical aggression, low language skills, and poor

social skills are intertwined and reflect the level of development of children's social and emotional competence (Qi et al., 2019).

### **Physical Aggression in the Preschool Classroom**

Physical aggression is the most common type of aggression seen in preschool classrooms (Gürer, 2019). Gürer (2019) stated that the preschool years are a key period for socialization because many children have problems adapting to their new environment and have problems communicating. In addition, Gürer (2019) stated that aggression is most common in children who are exposed to violent or harsh parenting. According to Al-Thani and Semmar (2017), children who exhibit physical aggression lack prosocial skills, lack motivation, and have a difficult time following classroom rules. When children are antisocial, they lack the ability to share, take turns, cooperate, show empathy, and collaborate with their peers, which may lead to physical aggression (Al-Thani & Semmar, 2017). Children display physical aggression while they are interacting and socialization with their peers (Laurent et al., 2020). Hoffman and Kovalanka (2019) stated that children demonstrate physical aggression more during lunchtime and when transitioning from activity to activity. Hoffman and Kovalanka (2019) suggested that boys exhibit more physically aggressive behaviors than do girls. According to Laurent et al. (2020), physical aggression in children is defined as physical acts intended to harm others using direct actions such as pushing, in contrast to Al-Thani and Semmar (2017), who attributed physical aggression to lack of prosocial skills and difficulty in following classroom rules.

### ***Prevalence of Physical Aggression***

As children interact with their peers, they exhibit more aggressive behavior during peer interaction and free play (Acar et al., 2018). Turkoglu (2019) stated that physical aggression takes place most frequently when preschoolers are engaged in group activities. According to Acar et al. (2018), children display 85.82% aggressive behavior among their peers inside the classroom and 14.12% outside the classroom. As children interact with their peers, they demonstrate more negative peer interactions when their teacher is not involved with the children than when the teacher is present (Yoder et al., 2019). Yoder et al. (2019) stated that physical aggression is a natural occurrence behavior among preschool children when they are in an unstructured setting and when teachers are inattentive to children's activities. According to Rios-Gonzalez et al. (2019), most children demonstrate physical aggression against their peers occasionally and this is a common behavior in the preschool classroom.

### ***Incidence of Physical Aggression***

According to Krygsman and Vaillancourt (2019), who observed 198 preschool children over a 5-month period, 16.6% of children displayed physical aggression such as hitting or kicking their peers at least once. Kemple et al. (2019) reported that among children between the ages of 3 and 5 the incidence of physical aggression such as hitting and pushing ranges from 14 to 52%, indicating that physical aggression is not rare in preschool classrooms. According to Rios-Gonzalez et al. (2019), 70% of children between the ages of 2 and 3 hit other children, and 25% of children between the ages of 17 months and 30 months bite other children. According to Lorber et al. (2018), 42% of

children of all ages display some form of physical aggression, which can start as young as 6 to 8 months of age. Children who are exposed to physical aggression are more likely to mimic the same behaviors of hitting or pushing other children (Gürer, 2019). Physical aggression is a problem in the classroom because children may cause injuries to others (Gürer, 2019).

### ***Physical Aggression that Causes Injury to Others***

According to Cuartas et al. (2019) 95% of children between the ages of 2 and 4 years of age have been exposed to some type of physical aggression capable of harming them. According to Rios-Gonzalez et al. (2019), children in this age group may be the victim or perpetrator of physical aggression. Some of these aggressive acts, such as biting and scratching, cause bodily harm to peers (Zeng et al., 2019). According to Swit (2019), physical aggression is serious when a child uses physical force to hurt or injure another child.

Teachers intervene when they hear a child crying due to being hurt by a peer's physical aggression or to the perceived threat of hurtful behaviors (Swit, 2019).

According to Koch (2018), children who inflict physical injury typically are sent out of the classroom to the administrator's office. There are few data on types of non-fatal physical injuries that occur in preschool classrooms; however, hitting, biting, pushing, kicking, and throwing objects at other children may cause an aggressive child to be expelled (Zeng et al., 2019). According to Zeng et al. (2019), when children exhibit aggressive behaviors towards their peers or teachers, they may be sent home early or expelled for a day, several days, or permanently from their childcare. In addition, Zeng et

al. (2019), using the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health dataset of over six thousand 3- to 5-year-old children, stated that 174,309 preschoolers (2%) were suspended in a single year and 17,248 preschoolers (0.2%) were expelled because of challenging and violent behaviors. This suggests that, assuming children attend childcare every week of the year, an average of 3352 children in the United States is suspended each week for physically aggressive behavior, and each week 332 children are expelled. Clearly, physical aggression is a problem in many preschool classrooms, a problem that teachers must try to manage.

### **Teacher Guidance in Managing Physical Aggression**

Jones and Doolittle (2017) emphasized that social and emotional learning can be taught and nurtured in children, and that doing so increases their ability to think and express their emotions in ways that lead to positive outcomes. Social and emotional learning involves children using their ability to manage their emotions and interactions (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). The management of their emotions requires a combination of cognitive and self-regulation skills. It takes time for children to develop these skills, and teachers could help them through teacher-child interactions using various activities (Hipson & Séguin, 2016). When teachers interact with children, it enhances children's sense of security and social and emotional development. According to Hipson and Séguin (2016), as teachers attempt to reduce physical aggression, it helps to use different management strategies.

To work with children with physical aggressive behaviors, teachers need behavioral management and guidance strategies to meet children's social and emotional

needs (Zinsser et al., 2019). According to Brock and Beaman-Diglia (2018), strategies that are available for teachers who wish to increase the behavior management skills include one-on-one coaching, modeling techniques, implementing new practices, and observing other teachers to improve their teaching practices. Teachers also use video recording, role-play, and examples of classroom situations to assist in mastering effective strategies and their ability to implement evidence-based practices for children with challenging behaviors (Reinke et al., 2018). In addition, Reinke et al. (2018) mentioned that teachers could use games like the Good Behavior Game™ as a strategy to help children limit their antisocial behavior and engage in positive play. Training programs for teachers include things like the Reaching Educators and Children™ (REACH) program, described by Conners-Burrow et al. (2017). According to Conners-Burrow et al. (2017), this coaching program is intended to assist teachers in supporting children's social and emotional development and solve problems. Cook et al. (2017) discussed another strategy known as the 5:1 ratio strategy, in which a teacher delivers five positive interactions with a child for every one negative interaction. This strategy encourages teachers to give attention to children through positive interactions (Cook et al., 2017). Brock and Beaman-Diglia (2018) mentioned that when teachers use available strategies, it helps children reduce physical aggression. These strategies have been somewhat effective, but children still harm each other and still are at risk for being suspended or expelled.

### **Prior Approaches to Studying this Problem**

Several prior studies examined the problem of preschool children who exhibit intense physical aggressive behaviors in the classroom. For example, Türkoglu (2019)

conducted a qualitative study in Turkey using semi-structured interviews to gather preschool teachers' perspectives of children with aggressive behaviors. Teachers mentioned several factors they believed contributed to aggressive behaviors, such as the environment in which the child lives, gender, parental attitudes, and the extent to which children imitated what they observed (Türkoglu, 2019). The weakness in this study is that only three teachers were given pre-applications to evaluate whether the interview questions were clear and understandable. A larger amount of pre-application participants could have strengthened this study. The strength in this study is that a maximum diversity sampling was used, with the result that participants worked in different types of schools and socio-economic regions, with children of different age groups, and represented diversity in gender and race. In contrast to Türkoglu's study conducted in Turkey, my study was conducted in the United States.

Hartz et al. (2017) compared independent observations of teacher interactions with children to teacher ratings of the degree of closeness they felt in individual relationships with each child. A range of both positive and negative teacher-child interactions was reported, resulting in a finding that teachers' relationship perceptions were affected by children's use of aggressive behavior in everyday situations, such as a child's response during turn-taking. A weakness of this study is the difficulty in isolating the effect of the closeness of a teacher-child relationship in interactions to individual children's behavior, since teacher interactions often are complicated by involvement of multiple children in an event, such as in a physical altercation between classmates. A strength to this study is relatively large sample size of 223 teacher participants.



In this study, I explored teachers' perspectives of children who caused physical harm to their peers intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. The examination of teacher perspectives in the Southeastern United States was not part of the two studies just described. My study fills a unique niche in the field of early childhood education, and so offers a significant insight into teachers' perspectives of children who display aggressive behaviors and the strategies they describe using to assist children to develop prosocial skills and communicate with their peers.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I first examined how my framework of Bandura's cognitive social learning theory of self-regulation was relevant to my study of teachers' perspectives of children who caused physical harm to their peers intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. I then reviewed literature that was appropriate to the focus and purpose of the study. I described the development of children's social and emotional competency, how physical aggression is related to children's social, emotional, physical, and language development, physical aggression in the preschool classroom, and teachers' management of physical aggression in children. In Chapter 3, I describe the method by which I conducted my study, by presenting the research design, participant recruitment process, instrumentation, and data analysis plan, as well as other key steps in conducting my study.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they take to manage and guide these children. I conducted structured interviews of 10 preschool teachers for data collection and analysis. The conceptual framework was based on Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of self-regulation. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale, the procedures for recruitment and participation, explain the data collection method and analysis process, my role as the researcher, and the instrument for exploring teachers' perspectives.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

Two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do teachers describe their perspectives on children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports?

RQ2: How do teachers describe techniques they use or actions they take to manage and guide children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports?

The central concept I explored was preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children who caused classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they took to manage and guide these children. The research paradigm I followed was the basic qualitative tradition as described by Caelli et al. (2003), because this design permitted me to better understand participants' thoughts,

experiences, and work-life situations. I used the structured interview approach to collect preschool teachers' experiences with children who caused physical harm to their peers sufficient to require the teachers to file an incident report. The interview questions were vetted by an outside expert to ensure their clarity, neutrality, and validity and to avoid confusion, as recommended by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017). Interviews allowed teachers to describe their experiences with challenging children, and the actions they took to manage and guide them, and so provided me with information necessary to fulfill the study's purpose.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role in this research was as an observer, as described by Ciesielska et al. (2018). According to Ciesielska et al. (2018), an observer is a nonparticipating researcher who does not engage directly in the phenomenon under study (Ciesielska et al., 2018). My role as an observer was to get insight into participants' perspectives of preschool children who displayed aggressive behaviors and generated and to analyze results (see Ciesielska et al., 2018). Ciesielska et al. (2018) suggested that through semi structured interviews, an observer could ask questions regarding situations with which participants are familiar and with which they have had experience over a period of time.

I selected this topic because I am currently an assistant director of a childcare center. As an assistant director, my duties are to assist the center director, supervise teachers, identify and provide training needs to staff, have oversight of the facility, and provide services to children and families. I develop, implement, and supervise the curriculum and age-appropriate activities for the program and ensure that it promotes

social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth of children from age 6 weeks to school age. I ensure that parents are kept abreast of policy changes and program activities. I interview and select center staff. I have over 27 years of experience in the education field as a training and curriculum specialist and assistant director. I have seen how children with physically aggressive behaviors affect teachers and other children. In this study, I interviewed participants with whom I had no supervisory role or prior relationship, to avoid ethical conflicts.

To prevent my biases, prejudices, and assumptions from intruding on my interviews with participants and my data analysis, I was mindful of my personal experiences, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Therefore, I used a journal and took notes during the interviews and during the data analysis process as a way to manage my perspectives and personal opinions, as suggested by Sutton and Austin (2015). I was objective as I collected and recorded data (see Clark & Vealé, 2018).

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

The population of interest in this study was teachers of preschool-age children (children ages 3 to 5 years). This population was appropriate to my study because preschool children are physically capable of inflicting harm on their classmates but also are expected to control their actions to some extent, neither of which younger children typically are able to do. I used the snowball sampling method to recruit participants. I began snowball sampling by asking preschool teachers whom I knew to share my flier with other preschool teachers whom I did not know. This initial group that started the

snowball was not included in my study. As prospective participants responded to the flyer, I emailed them the consent form. As teachers responded to the consent form with “I consent,” I scheduled interviews to be conducted via Zoom or telephone. At the end of each interview, I asked the participant to share information about the study with other teachers they knew, to keep the snowball recruiting method going. I continued to use snowball sampling to recruit participants, and followed the above processes to set up interviews, until I had interviewed 10 teachers. Each interview took 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded. I transcribed the audio for each interview and sent the transcription to each participant, so they could review it for accuracy. This review I anticipated to take participants about 15 minutes. All participants were assigned a number that I used on transcripts and all study files and documents, to protect their identity. I was the only one who knew who participated in the study.

I used purposeful sampling to identify participants for my study, as described by Campbell et al. (2020). Purposeful sampling helped me identify prospective participants who had knowledge, experience, and understanding of the phenomenon of children’s injurious behavior, which was the focus of this study (see Alase, 2017). The criteria I used to identify suitable participants included the work role of lead classroom teacher of children ages 3 to 5, and at least one year of experience working with children in a general education setting. I used lead teachers because they were responsible for behavior management and for filing incident reports. I used teachers of children ages 3 to 5. Children of this age are physically capable of inflicting harm on another child and are expected to have developed some ability to control their actions. I did not include infant

or toddler teachers for my study. Infants and toddlers are less physically able than older children to inflict harm on their classmates and are less amenable to behavior guidance than older children. Preschool children are developing their social, emotional, physical, and verbal skills. Preschool teachers were appropriate participants in my study. They typically use techniques and strategies to assist children with behavior issues in the classroom and communicate with preschool children when they display physically aggressive behaviors. I recruited teachers who work in general education classrooms, and so excluded teachers in therapeutic or special needs settings, and teachers of special subjects like music or physical education. I excluded assistant teachers. Assistant teachers typically do not have responsibility for filing incident reports. These criteria were described in my recruitment message and on the consent form. I confirmed with volunteers that they met these criteria when I scheduled each interview.

I interviewed 10 teachers. According to Hagaman and Wutich (2017), 10 participants are sufficient to reach data saturation in an interview-based study. To locate my target number of participants, I used the snowball sampling method to recruit participants. I started the snowball method by giving flyers to teachers whom I knew and asked them to pass them on to teachers that they knew but who were unknown to me. The flyer informed the participants that I was seeking volunteers for my study, the study purpose, participant eligibility criteria, and my contact information. I replied to the first 10 preschool teachers who responded to my invitation by emailing them the consent form. The consent form described the criteria of eligible participants. After I received

notice of their consent, I contacted volunteers to set up our interview session and confirmed that they met the criteria for the study prior to the interview process.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument I used for data collection was a set of 10 open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A). I created these questions based on my two research questions, which stemmed from the literature review and from Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of self-regulation, which suggested that teacher responses and children's behavior produce interaction effects that remedy or exacerbate a shared problem, such as challenging behavior. After I produced the 10 interview questions, I submitted them to two Walden professors who hold doctoral degrees in education, for their expertise and feedback. I asked them to determine if my interview questions could fulfill the study purpose and were sufficient to answer the study research questions. They responded that the 10 interview questions were fine with minor wording changes. The validity of my interview instrument was supported by their positive review.

Interview Questions 1 through 4 were associated with RQ1, regarding how teachers described their perspectives on children who caused their other children in the class physical harm. In this series of questions, a participant was invited to recall a time when a child caused another child harm intense enough to require the filing of an incident report, their thoughts and feelings at the time, and their thoughts about children who exhibited this behavior. Interview Questions 5 through 8 were associated with RQ2, regarding how teachers described the actions they took to manage children who physically harm their classmates. In these questions, a participant was asked to continue

thinking about a time when a child caused another child intense physical harm, and to recall what they did in response to the behavior, how the child responded, how the teacher knew what to do, and what happened after the incident report was filed. Interview Question 9 asked about the frequency of intense physical harm, which helped me understand the scope of the problem, as teachers perceived it. Interview Question 10 provided teachers with an opportunity to tell me anything else that they wanted me to know about children who use physically aggressive behavior against other people and how they managed that. Each participant was asked the same 10 questions throughout the interview process.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

After I received permission (11-12-21-06396660) from Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct my study, I proceeded with participant recruitment. I used the snowball sampling method by asking preschool teachers whom I knew to share my flier with other preschool teachers whom I did not know. I only recruited preschool teachers whom I did not know, so the initial group that started the snowball was not included in my study. The flyer included my contact information, the topic of my study, and participant criteria. As prospective participants responded to the flyer, I emailed them the consent form. As teachers responded to the consent form with "I consent," I scheduled the interview, to take place via Zoom or telephone, according to each participant's preference.

During the interview process, Zoom disconnected, causing me to reconnect and restart the interview. During one of the telephone interviews, the participant's children in



the home interrupted the participant. I did not have her undivided attention for the interview. Despite these difficulties, all interviews were completed and data were collected as planned. Ten teachers volunteered. I thanked everyone who inquired about the study or who volunteered.

I conducted one interview per participant using Zoom teleconferencing platform or telephone, if the participant preferred. I scheduled interviews at the convenience of each participant, but avoided scheduling interviews during participant working hours (including avoiding lunch breaks). I advised each participant to attend the interview from a quiet, private space with good Internet or cell phone coverage; I conducted the interviews from a quiet room in my home. At the beginning of each interview, I confirmed the participant's consent and I confirmed that they consented that I audio-record the interview. I then launched the record function of Zoom, or a recording application on my cell phone (for telephone interviews). I interviewed each participant for 45 minutes to an hour. The participants were asked the same 10 open-ended questions; however, I asked clarifying questions as needed and probed for more detail if more detail was warranted. I also used a journal for taking notes about participant's vocal tone, hesitations, body language, or facial expression (for Zoom interviews), and my own thoughts and ideas that arose during the interview. I used these notes to aid my memory of details that were not captured by the audio recording. I did not use the video recordings generated automatically by Zoom interviews.

After each interview was completed, I downloaded the audio file to my computer, identified it with a code number I assigned to participants in lieu of using their name. I

then transcribed the audio file verbatim using the recording application Otter.ai. I then reviewed these transcriptions by listening to each audio file while editing the Otter.ai file. I ensured that the transcribing was accurate and useful for coding. I emailed each participant their interview transcript, so they could review it for accuracy or make any changes they wish to what they told me. Only one participant made a correction to their transcript, elaborating on the original response of “Training and experience helps a lot,” to make it include “Our trainer at our center gives our training and assist us in the classroom with children with behaviors problems. If the trainer can't come, the assistant director comes and assists us." After the interview process was completed, I sent each participant a “Thank You” note by email or text. This note informed participants that I appreciated their detailed information, time, effort, and willingness to participate in my study.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I began my data analysis by creating transcripts of each audio file, and shared each transcript with the corresponding participant, so they could review their responses. Then I read all transcripts a second time. I then created a three-column spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel to display transcripts from each participant and my coding. The middle column of the spreadsheet contained all the participant transcripts, one after the other. In the right-hand column, I inserted my journal notes at the point in each transcript when I made the note. The left-hand column was where I inserted codes as I identified them from the transcripts. Once I organized the data in this way, I began coding.

The first step to begin the process of coding was to read and reread the transcripts. According to Saldana (2021), a researcher has to read and study the transcripts. Next, I began the initial coding. I used vivo coding, which was based on participants' actual words or phrases (Saldana, 2021). I looked for nouns, verbs, and phrases that seemed relevant and important to this study. I copied those elements and pasted them into a single column of an Excel spreadsheet. I then reread the transcripts and made any necessary additions or refinements of this first coding.

Next, I transitioned to categorizing the codes. I cut and pasted rows containing transcript elements and associated codes to position rows that contained similar codes one under the other. In this way, I condensed the many codes generated from the data into fewer categories, as described by Saldana (2021). I inserted category labels in a fourth column, to the right of the codes column. I then repeated this process of cutting and pasting rows of data, this time focusing on grouping similar categories, one under the other. Through this process of consolidating categories, I identified overarching themes that emerged from the data. I inserted labels identifying themes in a final column to the right of the categories column, following the process described by Saldana (2021). In this way, I used verbatim responses from participants and distilled from the themes that ran through my data. I then used the data and resulting themes to answer the two research questions. I was alerted to the possibility of discrepant data.

## **Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

According to Alase (2017), credibility refers to having confidence that the given information is true and reliable. I ensured that information gleaned from interviews was transcribed correctly. The participants were able to correct any misinterpretations I made or challenge anything they perceived as incorrect. Member checking was supported by Natow (2020). To support the credibility of my findings, I used each participant's verbatim responses to validate findings, using their words and phrases to develop codes, categories, and themes during data analysis, as described by Hagaman and Wutich (2017). In addition, I triangulated data by gathering information from different teachers who work in different childcare facilities. According to Natow (2020), triangulation is a way to create credibility by crosschecking and comparing results among informants. Although teachers had knowledge of the same phenomenon, they shared different views from their experiences, thoughts, and ideas from different time periods, locations, and perspectives, as described by Natow (2020). I achieved saturation in that the final interviews did not reveal new information not received previously.

### **Transferability**

Another criterion of trustworthiness is transferability, which refers to supporting the application of results to other contexts or settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I supported transferability by providing detailed and thick description of the process of the research and my results. My use of in vivo coding contributed to rich, thick data to support transferability. Because transferability is situated in specific contexts, the reader

alone will determine if the findings are transferable to their setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018); I described the context of this study to assist the reader in making that determination.

### **Dependability**

Dependability, according to Korstjens and Moser (2018), refers the idea that information is consistent with the described research procedures and allows others outside the research to follow those procedures. The strategy that I used to ensure dependability was an audit trail. I explained the research steps from the beginning of the study so the reader could see how I arrived at the results I claimed. I kept a running record of my research path, using a reflective journal, as described by Korstjens and Moser (2018). I kept notes during the research process of decisions I made and my thinking as I collected and analyzed data. I ensured dependability by ensuring that my evaluation of the findings and my interpretations were supported by the data analysis that I reported.

### **Confirmability**

In qualitative study, confirmability refers to other researchers' ability to confirm data findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I ensured that I did not use my own viewpoints or judgments to interpret data but instead used participants' viewpoints that were grounded in the data to process for analysis. I kept my viewpoints to myself and did not include them in the research study (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To establish trustworthiness in qualitative research, these four criteria of credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability ensured that the findings have value for the reader and support transferability of the results (see Johnson et al., 2020).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Before I began collecting data, I sought approval of Walden's IRB. After I received IRB approval (11-12-21-06396660, I followed the recruiting process described previously, including being certain to obtain consent from all participants in the research study. I protected participants' identity by giving each participant an assigned number to identify them in data collection and analysis. According to Surmiak (2018), participants' identity must be protected in a research study to avoid abusing the trust of participants, causing him or her to feel discomfort, and putting them at risk of harm. The interviews took place at locations of each participant's choosing, but away from their work site, to protect their privacy. After each interview, I recorded the data information in a Microsoft Excel file protected by a secured passcode. All paper copies were secured in a locked file cabinet in my home; audio files and other digital files were kept on a password-protected computer or in protected cloud storage. The document that associated participants, their contact information, and their code number were kept separate from all other files. I will keep data for five years following the conclusion of my study, after which time I will destroy all study files. I will shred all paper documents and I will wipe study files from my computer using a tool like Eraser™.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I justified the research study design and rationale, and described the research questions, my role as researcher, and the methodology for data collection,

including participant selection, instrumentation, and my procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. I provided a description of my data analysis plan. I explained how trustworthiness would be supported in my study, and I explained the procedures I followed to ensure preserve participant's privacy and follow ethical guidelines. In Chapter 4, I describe the results of my study.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they take to manage and guide these children. I used two research questions to guide my study. The research questions asked how teachers describe their perspective on children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and how teachers describe techniques they use or actions they take to manage and guide children who cause classmates this physical harm. In Chapter 4, I describe the setting and data collection as they actually happened, the data analysis, and the results of the study. I also establish evidence of trustworthiness and offer a summary.

### **Setting**

Except for the ongoing pandemic, described in Chapter 3, I was not aware of any issues that might have affected participants or their experiences at the time of data collection and no participants mentioned any. I did not gather participant demographic information in the study, but all participants confirmed they worked as lead teachers, with at least 1 year of experience working with preschool children ages 3 to 5. The participants were nine women and one man.

### **Data Collection**

I interviewed 10 people, one person by Zoom and nine by telephone. One participant via Zoom used her own personal laptop and nine participants were telephone interviews using their personal cell phones. The participants chose their own location,



including their home or vehicle. All interviews were conducted away from participants' job site, during participants' lunch breaks, after work, or on weekends. I conducted all the interviews from my home using my personal laptop or cell phone. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour and all were conducted over the course of 4 weeks. Interviews were recorded using Quick Time Player on my personal laptop. As described in Chapter 3, the one Zoom call disconnected, causing me to reconnect and restart the interview. Also, during one of the telephone interviews, the participant's children in the home interrupted the participant. As such, I did not have her undivided attention for the interview. Despite these difficulties, all interviews were completed and data were collected as planned.

### **Data Analysis**

From the audio recordings of the interviews, I created transcripts using Otter.ai. I printed the transcripts, and then I listened to the audio. I made edits on the printed transcripts, such as eliminating filler sounds like "um" and "ah," and deleting small talk about such things as the weather that were not part of the actual interview. I sent the resulting transcripts to each participant by email to confirm their accuracy. There was one participant who made changes to her transcript, expanding on her previous statement of "Training and experience helps a lot," by saying, "Our trainer at our center gives our training and assist us in the classroom with children with behaviors problems. If the trainer can't come, the Assistant Director comes and assist us." I used the confirmed and revised transcripts for data analysis.

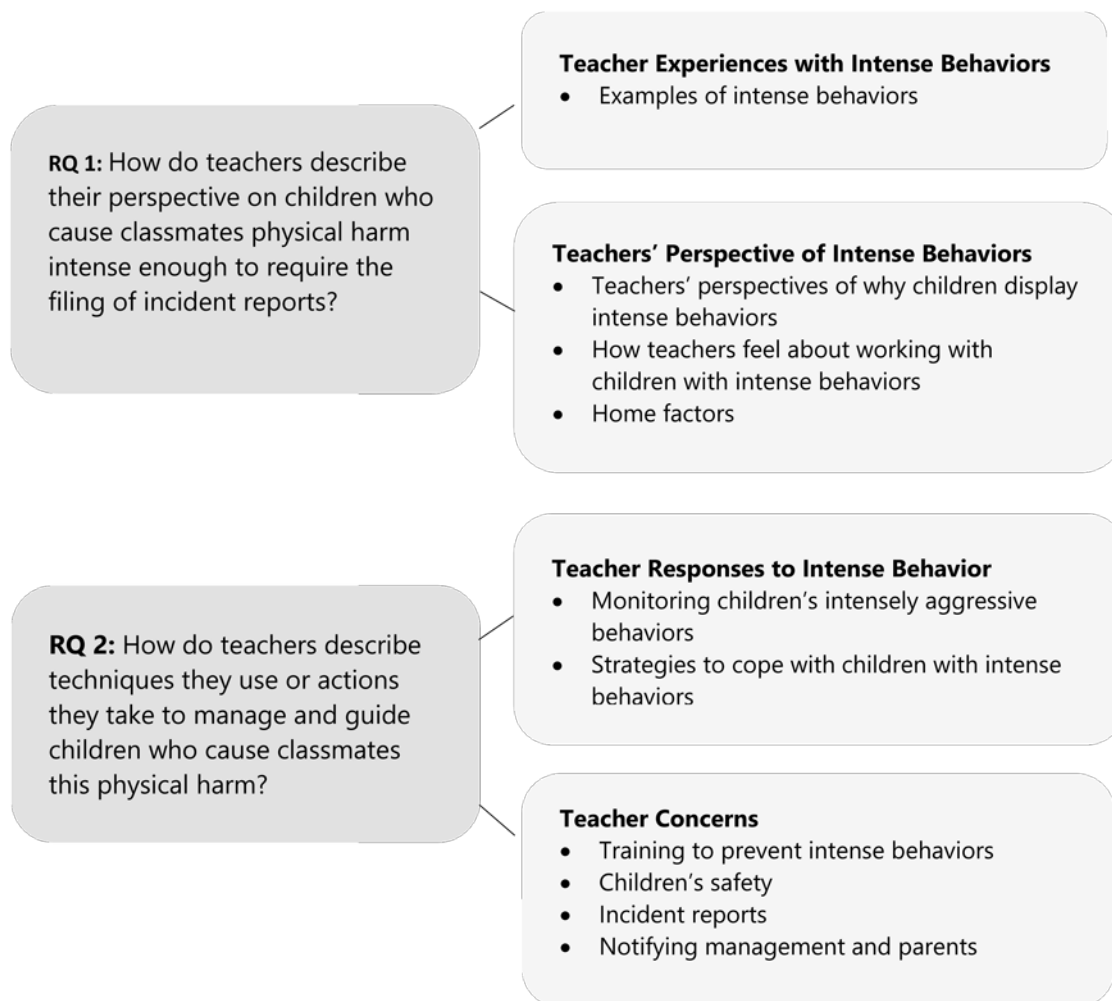
After receiving confirmation of transcript accuracy from the participants, I copied the transcripts verbatim into a single column in Excel. I separated the transcripts across

Excel rows, by significant sentences and narrative units. For example, the sentence, “I felt frustrated because I always talk to the child about taking turns with the swings,” and that narrative unit, “It’s frustrating when the child continues hurting others. I have to correct the behavior, redirect the behavior,” were each accorded a row in the spreadsheet. I then highlighted in each row what appeared to be significant words or phrases. For example, I made these highlights in the sentence cited above: “**I felt frustrated** because I **always talk to the child** about **taking turns with the swings**,” because these represented significant elements of teacher feelings, teacher actions, and problem situation. Similarly, I made these highlights in the narrative unit cited above: “**It’s frustrating** when **the child continues hurting others**. I have to **correct the behavior, redirect the behavior**,” because these represented significant elements of teacher feelings, the ongoing nature of aggressive behavior in a particular child, and two methods of dealing with the behavior. Each of these elements and in vivo statements constituted a code; there were 710 codes so identified. Once the codes were created, I moved elements and rows on the spreadsheet so similar ideas followed one after the other. These groups of similar codes became categories. There were 11 categories labels generated from the codes, including examples of intense behaviors, teachers’ perspectives of why children display intense behaviors, how teachers feel about working with children with intense behaviors, home factors, monitoring children’s intense behaviors, strategies to cope with children with intense behaviors, teaching children prosocial skills, training to prevent intense behaviors, children’s safety, incident reports, and notifying management and parents.

The next step was to create themes. I moved categories and their constituent codes so similar categories followed each other in Excel. From these category groupings, I created four themes: of teacher experiences with intense behaviors, teachers' perspectives of intense behaviors, teacher responses to intense behavior, and teacher concerns. The theme of teacher experiences with intense behavior was formed from the single category "examples of intense behaviors." The theme of teachers' perspectives of intense behaviors was derived from three categories: teachers' perspectives of why children display intense behaviors, how teachers feel about working with children with intense behaviors, and home factors. The theme of teacher responses to intense behavior was derived from three categories: monitoring children's intense behaviors, strategies to cope with children with intense behaviors, and teaching children prosocial skills. The theme of teacher concerns derived from four categories: training to prevent intense behaviors, children's safety, incident reports, and notifying management and parents. I aligned themes teacher experience with intense behavior and teacher perspectives of intense behavior with RQ1 and themes teacher responses to intense behavior and teacher concerns with RQ2. The relationship among categories, themes, and RQs is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Themes and Categories Associated with RQs*



Data saturation was indicated by the fact that the final two interviews generated no new information or unique perspectives, compared to the first eight interviews.

## Results

### Results for RQ1: Teacher Perspectives

RQ1 asked how teachers describe their perspectives on children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. This RQ

was aligned with themes of “teacher experience with intense behavior” and “teacher perspectives of aggressive behavior.” The data indicated that all teachers in this study had experience with children who cause harm to other children in the class intense enough to file an incident report. The teachers indicated that some children demonstrate hitting, fighting, scratching, punching, kicking, biting, and throwing objects at their peers and sometimes lashing out at the teachers. For example, Teacher 1 stated, “One child took a plastic vehicle from another child in the block center and they started to fight. Before I could intervene, the other child hit the child with a wooden block on the forehead.”

All 10 teachers described experiences with intense aggressive behavior. Teacher 2 recounted, “One child slapped the child in the face and pushed the child off the swing. The child got up with a bleeding lip.” Teacher 3 said, “One child even threw a chair and hit a child. I had to grab the chair from the child. He kept kicking and attacking another child.” Teacher 4 described a situation in which “Children were fighting over a scooter. A child hit the child with a toy in the face leaving a bruise and a cut.” Teacher 5 recounted, “A child pushed another child. The child was pushed down and bumped his head on the corner of a table, leaving a knot.” Teacher 6 offered this incident:

We were outside on the playground. The child actually pulled out another child braid leaving a bleeding red spot. The child was upset and crying. The child wanted a particular color shovel. He scratched the child. The child came to one of the teachers. The child still had the child’s braid in his hand. I had to call the parent. Explain to the parent what happened. The child is so aggressive.

Teacher 7 added,

Two preschoolers were playing with a toy and they got into a little conflict over a toy. One child pulled the toy from the other and another child was sitting behind them. When he pulled the toy, the toy hit the child behind in the face. The plastic toy hit the child above the eye leaving a cut. The same child [later] hit another child on the playground with the swing leaving a cut on his forehead.

Teacher 8 said, “A child with autism hit and kicked another child. He hit a child with a block. It left a cut that was bleeding. He was kicking and tried to stand on the child.”

Teacher 9 stated,

Children were building with Legos and one child grabbed the Legos. One child whacked the child with a Lego. They became like a little struggle. When I looked, a child was on top of the child biting him. I could not believe a preschooler was biting the child. The same child bit another child when we were lining up to go outside.

Teacher 10 stated,

We just received a child who was kicked out of another childcare center. The child was put into my class and I introduced the child to his new friends. The very first day, the child was kicking, pushing, and hitting almost every child. There were situations where the child was hurting others. He hurt one child by hitting a child with a toy leaving a bruise or knot on the head..

The fact that every teacher could recall violent incidents between children that happened in the classroom validates the need for this study. Despite that every teacher reported

these incidents, teachers described feeling disbelief that such aggressive events could happen.

Teacher perspectives regarding such aggressive behavior included their own feelings of dismay and frustration, children's motivation for engaging in aggressive behavior, and speculation about children's home experiences that might contribute to aggressive behavior in the classroom. For example, teachers expressed feeling frustrated in dealing with children with aggressive behavior. Teacher 2 stated, "I felt frustrated because I always talk to the child about taking turns with the swings." Teacher 3 said, "I feel frustrated sometimes as the same children who are physically hurting others. These children can become a big issue." Teacher 4 echoed this sentiment, saying, "It's frustrating when the child continues hurting others. I have to correct the behavior, redirect the behavior. If the child is repeatedly hurting others, I ask for more intervention."

Other teachers expressed a variety of emotions. Teacher 6 stated, "Oh, my goodness. We have multiple toys so a child can choose his own toys. The child got mad. I was so surprised. I felt sorry for the child. I felt so bad." Teacher 7 indicated,

I feel like I could have done more to prevent it from happening. You want to make sure you see everything but you can't see everything. These accidents happened really fast. I feel like I should have seen it coming or something like that.

Teacher 5 reiterated the sense of failed responsibility, by saying, "I have mixed emotions about children with aggressive behaviors. I don't know how parents are going to take

things. They may feel like you're not being responsible or watching children closely, providing the best possible care." Some teachers stated that working with children is a challenge and it makes their job harder. T4 described this when she said,

It makes the job harder because you are pulled from a group of children. I had to address the issue. You wonder how the parents are going to react to their child's injury. Extra work when you have to deal with an incident, it makes the job harder.

Teacher 6 simply stated, "I felt worried." At the same time, Teacher 1 remarked, "I will say that this is a normal behavior when children are coming from the toddler classroom."

Many teachers concluded that young children do not know how to play with their peers and lack social skills. Teacher 1 stated,

Children don't have any social skills. They feel that hitting their friends is all right. They don't understand how to play and get along with others yet. They get upset when they cannot get their way or the toy that they want.

Teacher 5 stated, "He had an issue with playing with his friends. He does not know how to play with his friends without being aggressive."

Teachers also attributed aggressive behavior to strong feelings of anger and jealousy. Teacher 10 recounted,

When another child came over to play with him later, they got into an altercation, the child starting hitting and kicking the child. I explained to the child that he cannot hit and kick the children. This child is four years old and is very possessive over certain toys. He will not share.



Teacher 8 offered,

The child got really angry because he did not receive that immediate attention that he was looking for. So, then he immediately stood on a table. He got in the construction site and hit another child in the head. Because he was still seeking attention from the teacher, the child got hit in the head had to get their attention because the child required attention to be consoled.

Teacher 5 stated, “Children act out for different reasons. He was angry. He was upset. The child did not want to play with him.” Aggressive behavior itself can contribute to children’s poor social skill development if other children will not play with them.

Teacher 3 said, “Children are scared of some children.” These children can intimidate even teachers. Teacher 3 reported, “Children will even fight the teachers. Children will lash out at a caregiver when you are trying to keep them from hurting another kid. They hit and kick teachers.”

The teachers expressed the idea that children’s aggressive behavior may be linked to home factors. Teacher 2 stated, “I wonder what’s going on at their home. I wonder if children see things at home to make him aggressive.” Teacher 4 stated, “Find out if something is going on at home. Get to the root of the problem. Find the triggers.”

Teacher 8, stated, “The child came in upset for that day and was aggressive to children. I wish the parent had told us what made the child upset before she dropped off and left the room.” Teacher 10, stated, “I think this is a reflection of the home environment.”

In summary, I found that some intense behaviors that teachers cited were fighting, hitting, throwing objects, biting, kicking, and scratching their peers. Teachers described

reasons they believe why children display aggressive behaviors and how they felt about working with children with aggressive behaviors. Teachers suggested that children display aggressive behaviors in part due to lack of prosocial skills and they described different emotions such as frustration, worry, and regret. Some teachers felt that home factors contributed to children with aggressive behaviors. All teachers in this study had experience working with children with aggressive behaviors who caused bodily harm to their peers intense enough to require the filing of incident reports.

### **Results for RQ2: Teacher Techniques**

RQ2 asked how teachers describe techniques they use or actions they take to manage and guide children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. Themes associated with this RQ were “teacher responses to aggressive behavior” and “teacher concerns.” The results for RQ2 indicated a wide array of techniques or actions to guide children who harm their classmates, including monitor children’s aggressive behaviors, use strategies to cope with children with aggressive behavior, teach children prosocial skills, protect and ensure children’s safety, file incident reports, notify management and parents of the incidents, and develop additional skills through training. I will present results in each of these areas in the following subsections.

#### ***Monitor Children’s Aggressive Behaviors***

Several teachers mentioned that they have to monitor children with aggressive behaviors. For example, Teacher 2 stated,

Sometimes, I have to stand back and start watching their behavior. Watch the behavior at different days and times. I mean at different times of the day to see how children act with each other. It gives me an insight or a little bit of how children respond to each other.

Teacher 3 recommended that a teacher “Sit where you see children all of the time.... I watch closely and monitor them. I shadow children to watch their behavior.”

Teacher 1 added,

I keep an eye on the child who was bitten and the child who did the biting. I make sure that the incident does not escalate and continues. I keep my eye on the biter to make sure he doesn't bite another child.

Teacher 5 stated, “I have to monitor him closely, have him alongside me, keep his frustration level down. I have to deal with him.”

### ***Use Strategies to Cope with Children with Aggressive Behavior***

As teacher monitor children's aggressive behaviors, they looked for ways to reduce aggressive behaviors among children who are harming their peers. Nine teachers used strategies to cope with children with aggressive behaviors. Teacher 2 stated, “We have to reroute them to other behaviors. I think that it changes their behavior over time.”

Teacher 4 recounted, “I had to separate the two children from fighting. I checked the child for injuries. I had to calm the aggressive child down.”

Teachers emphasized that they talk to children about feelings and how their friends feel when they are hurt. For example, “I give them words to use to express themselves. I tell children that it is not nice to hurt their friends.” Teacher 8 added,

A teacher will speak to the child and teach them how to use their words. If a child is playing in an area, and they're not able to use their words, the teacher will usually give them words that they can use to communicate with, give them the words that they can use to talk to their friends.

Teacher 1 recounted,

I show them when they hurt their friends, how they friends show sad faces and crying. This cuts down on aggressive behaviors. They understand the impact of their behavior. They can see the differences in emotions.

Teacher 1 also described relying on children's literature as a way to guide children's appreciation of others' feelings. She said,

Teachers can read books about emotions and feelings when someone hurts them which I found to be helpful...I will show children how their feelings or emotions look by showing them pictures of children crying, sad, happy, upset, etc. I explain their feelings to the child with the aggressive behavior.

Teacher 9 stated, "We read books about different behaviors, feelings, and how to interact and play with each other."

Teachers emphasized that they have to talk to children about their behavior, give them words to use to express themselves, interact with them, and ensure that the environment is equipped with duplicate toys to decrease aggressive behaviors. For example, Teacher 2 stated, "New toys in the environment help children play with others and it reduces their aggressive behaviors. They are so excited by the new toys that they don't think about hurting their friends." Teacher 7 stated,

We have changes to the environment. I make sure the environment is not over stimulating. I make sure that there are enough toys that they do not have to fight over them. I put out duplicates of toys so they don't fight over one toy. The children know where to go and get more toys if they like. I make sure that there are other things available for play.

Teacher 3 advised, "Keep children organized in groups to reduce the behavior."

Another strategy that a teacher mentioned was to involve the parents. Teacher 1 stated,

We try to make sure that we have parent involvement. I sit down with the parents and let them know what is going on. And kind of come up with a plan that they could use at home and then we can use at the center.

Teachers described a wide range of strategies to assist children in reducing their aggressive behaviors, and to help children develop prosocial skills.

### ***Teach Children Prosocial Skills***

During the preschool years children develop prosocial skills, but it takes teachers working with them to develop these skills. Teacher 1 stated, "As teachers, it's our job to show them how to communicate without hitting or hurting their friends. We have to teach them how to share, use their words with each other, and communicate skills." Teacher 8 added,

You provide the child with the words to use to make them more social, and then have activities going to let them find friends to play with that gives them

opportunities to be social with the other children in the classroom and in their group.

Teacher 2 stated, “Once I learn each child, I introduce them to new things to try and get them to play and socialize with their classmates.” Teacher 6 stated, “I have to show children how to share and have empathy, how to engage in play, and demonstrate feelings. We encourage children to share.” Teachers also described modeling prosocial play with the children. Teacher 7 said, “I help children develop social skills by role play. We do puppet show and reenact a conflict. It shows children how to work things out. It teaches them problem solving skills and how to socialize.” All teachers taught children how to communicate and develop prosocial skills with their peers.

### ***Protect Children and Ensure their Safety***

Ensuring the safety of all children is an important aspect in childcare. Teacher 1 stated, “The parents are depending on us to keep their children safe while they work. They want their kids to feel safe and secure.” Teacher 5 stated, “We have to protect children totally, their spirit, mind, body, and soul.” Teacher 7 described aggressive behavior that causes physical harm as unacceptable. “I have to keep everyone safe.”

The teachers agreed that it is their responsible to keep children safe and free of harm from aggressive children in the class. For examples, Teacher 1 indicated,

And I was afraid that the block hit the child in the eye, although thankfully it didn't. I have to make sure the child is okay and safe. It's the teacher's responsibility to keep children safe at all times at our childcare center and in the classroom.

One teacher mentioned, not only did she have to keep the children being hurt safe, but she had to keep the aggressive child safe from hurting himself. The aggressive child would bite his wrist or bang his head on the table. The teacher had to stop the child from hurting himself.

### ***File Incident Reports***

Even though teachers try to keep children safe, occasionally children do harm their classmates and teachers have to file an incident report. During the interviews, all teachers had filed out incident reports on children who were harmed by their peers and the child who harmed their peers. For example, Teacher 4 said, “Once a child is injured, you have to document. Inform the parents and supervisor. Keep record of all documentations. Keep record of the aggressive child.” Teacher 1 added, “We fill out incident reports if the behavior continues and how often the incident occurs. We have to keep track of the incidents.” Teacher 3 reiterated, “The child who did the injury will get a write up.” Teachers described needing to file two incident reports, one for the aggressive child and another for the victim. Teacher 6 said, “I had to write an incident report, monitor the staff, fill out two incident report on both children.”

The filing of incident reports creates a paper trail that can help in seeing behavior patterns. Teacher 8 noted, “Every incident, we have to fill out in incident report for our records, it gives a report of how often the child is aggressive.” In addition, incident reports are used to inform parents, because they are shared with the parents of the aggressive child and the parents of the victim. Teacher 7 stated, “I had to make sure I had the incident reports ready when the parents picked up their children that day.”

### ***Notify Management and Parents of the Incident***

After teachers file out incident reports, they have to notify management and the parents of the children who were harmed and children who harmed their peer. For example, Teacher 2 stated, “I let the manager know what’s going on. They go over the incident report and sign it. I contact the parents and give them the incident report when they come to pick up their child.” Teacher 9 stated, “I had to call for management to come down to see it. I wrote the incident report. I prepared a copy to the parent, and my supervisor has to sign it or another manager.” Teacher 1 recounted, “The parent was notified. Management was notified. Management has to read and sign the report, which basically verifies that they are aware of the incident.” Teacher 4 reiterated, “If a child is threatened in the classroom, we contact management and the parent.” Teacher 6 stated, “I call parents and explain what happened before the parent comes.”

When a child is harmed and teachers have to notify the parents, one teacher stated that she hopes the parent understands that this is a normal behavior when preschool children hurt each other. For example, Teacher 8 stated, “I hoped the parent of the other child that was injured is understanding. I called to speak to the parent.” If a child had severe injuries, the parents will be asked to leave work and come check on the child. For example, Teacher 10 stated, “During lunchtime, the parent did come and check the child’s injury. The child was crying and upset. I felt nervous because a child hurt another child.” Teacher 3 stated, “You have to face the parent at the end of the day.”



### ***Develop Skills Through Training***

Teachers in this study seemed confident of their ability to deal with very aggressive children because of prior experience and explicit training. Teacher 1 stated,

I know what to do based on my experience working with aggressive children with aggressive behaviors. We take training courses every year. The trainings focus on inappropriate behavior and guidance techniques and the appropriate ways to manage these kinds of situations.

Teacher 2 agreed, saying, “I know what to do from experience, modules, and trainings. It will gradually teach you how to deal with situations.” Teacher 3 stated, “Have trainings on children’s behavior.” Teacher 8 stated,

We have an intervention program. We’re supposed to follow the behavior support plan for the child and do the methods as described in the behavior support plan.

We’re supposed to approach the child slowly. We’re supposed to have activities ready to go with at least two or three options for this was a behavior support plan.

We’re also supposed to have a calm down area for this child, so that the child can go into this area and try to calm down using the calm down post.

Teacher 9 said, “We take training about biting and aggressive behaviors. We use our training to try and prevent preschoolers from biting, hitting, and fighting.” Teacher 10 stated, “Training and experience helps a lot.” Teacher 7 remarked, “I try to [take] all the training I can get.” .All teachers emphasized that they had some type of training, experiences, or intervention program to assist them in the classroom as they work with aggressive children.

## **Summary of Results**

No discrepant data, different from the trends across interviews, were found in the transcribed data. The interviews were related only to the research study and interview questions. The teachers focused on the interview questions and the conversations were related to the study. Teachers readily responded to questions about intense behavior without expressing confusion; all data were relevant to the study purpose.

In summary, teachers in this study reported that they monitored children's behavior by keeping a close watch on children, sitting close to children, and separating children when they begin to be aggressive. Teachers described being engaged in children's play, and to teach children how to share and play with each other as a way to socialize children. Teachers described the need to file incident reports for both the aggressor and the victim in an event, and the need to notify management and parents. All teachers described training and prior experience that assisted them in managing children with aggressive behaviors. All teachers felt responsible to keep children safe. These findings described the techniques teachers use or actions they took to manage and guide children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports.

## **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Credibility is having confidence that given information is true and reliable to use for data collection (Alase, 2017). I used the structured interview method for interviewing participants and trusted that the participants provided true information to use for correct data results. The given information from participants was safeguarded to protect their

identity and provide privacy to express their views and perspectives of the study without any type of restrictions. To increase credibility, I used the participants' responses to validate findings, using vivo coding, so their actual words or phrases formed the data for this study. I recruited participants from different childcare facilities who had experience and knowledge relating to the study. I crosschecked and compared participants' results to detect any errors of transcription. Also, I used member checking of transcripts to create credibility in which the participants were able to make any changes to their responses.

Transferability refers to the ability to apply qualitative findings to other contexts or settings. It is accomplished by using thick and rich descriptions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I reached transferability by providing detailed and thick description throughout the process of my data collection method, data analysis, and research results. I used vivo coding of participant's actual words and phrases to create codes, categories, and themes, which contribute to rich, thick data to support transferability.

Dependability is the idea that information is consistent with the described research procedures and allows others outside the research to follow those procedures (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). The strategy that ensured dependability in this study was an audit trail. I explained the research steps from the beginning of the study so reader can see how I arrived the results. I kept a running record of my research path, using a reflective journal as described by Korstjens and Moser (2018). I kept detailed notes during the research process as I collected and analyzed data. This enabled an auditor to study a transparent path of the research. I confirmed dependability by ensuring that my evaluation of the findings and my interpretations were supported by the data analysis.

In qualitative study, confirmability refers to other researchers' ability to confirm data findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I ensured that I did not use my own viewpoints or judgments to interpret data, but rather used participants' viewpoints that were grounded in the data to process for analysis. I kept my viewpoints to myself and not included in the research study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To establish trustworthiness, these four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability ensured that the findings are valid.

### **Summary**

The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they take to manage and guide these children. To achieve this purpose, I interviewed 10 preschool teachers using the structured interview method from their experiences, ideas, and knowledge as they worked with preschool children with aggressive behaviors. I transcribed the interviews, and analyzed codes, categories, and themes. I gave the results of data analyses, which included the teachers' strategies to decrease aggressive behaviors among children and develop prosocial skills. All teachers in this study described personal experience with aggressive behavior intense enough to require the filing of an incident report. I will discuss the implications of these results in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and actions they take to manage and guide these children. The structured interview method was used to examine teacher's experiences, ideas, and knowledge as they worked with children with aggressive behaviors. This study was conducted to address the problem in that 8% to 10% of preschool children cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. In this study, I found that teachers managed children's aggressive behaviors by monitoring children's behaviors, using strategies to cope with children with aggressive behaviors, teaching children prosocial skills, and taking training to learn better how to manage children's aggressive behaviors. I found that teachers felt responsible for children's safety, and for informing management and parents of incidents requiring the filing of incident reports. In the next section, I will discuss the interpretation for the findings of my study.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

A key finding in this study was teachers reported that children with aggressive behaviors were hitting, throwing objects, biting, kicking, and scratching their peers. In comparison, Turkoglu (2019) found that preschool children frequently interact negatively to perceived slights from their peers and exhibit aggressive behavior such as hitting and kicking. Turkoglu (2019) described preschoolers as damaging friends when they display physical aggression when they kick, bite, slap, hit, and push (p.172). According to

Krygsman and Vaillancourt (2019) after observing 198 preschool children over a 5-month period, 16.6% of children displayed physical aggression such as hitting or kicking their peers at least once. Kemple et al. (2019) reported that children between the ages of 3 and 5 display incidences of physical aggression such as hitting and pushing ranges from 14 to 52% which is not rare in preschool classrooms. According to Rios-Gonzalez et al. (2019), 70% of children between the ages of 2 and 3 hit other children, and 25% of children between the ages of 17 months and 30 months bite other children. All teachers in this study had experience working with children with aggressive behaviors who caused bodily harm to their peers intense enough to require the filing of incident reports. Markelz et al. (2020) found that 8 to 10% of preschool children cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports; teachers in study filed such reports, and also indicated they personally shared the incident with their managers and with the parents of both the aggressor child and the child victim of aggression.

Teachers also felt that children's behaviors might be linked to home factors by seeing things at home to make them aggressive. Teachers stated that children come in from home with aggressive behaviors, and they wondered what was going on at home prior to coming to childcare. Baumrind (1971) identified three parental styles that affect the quality of the child-parent relationship in the home: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Children raised by authoritarian parents may reenact the authoritarian model by becoming bullies, or may become rebellious (Tatiani, 2021). Gefroh (2017) found that children raised by permissive parents may test boundaries or be demanding of others. In comparison, Gürer (2019) indicated that children who are exposed to physical aggression

are more likely to mimic the same behaviors of hitting or pushing other children.

Teachers felt that they needed to get to the root of the problem and parents should communicate with them what triggered the child's aggressive behavior.

Teachers in this study felt that some children do not understand how to play and get along with each other, and struggle to express their feelings and to use words to express themselves. This aligns with the findings of Wilson and Ray (2018), who noted that children who lack skill in expressing their feelings and socializing and communicating with their peers might display aggressive behaviors. Clifford et al. (2020) found a reciprocal effect, suggesting that aggressive behavior has a negative effect on preschool children's ability to socialize and communicate with their peers. I found that teachers used strategies that helped children develop prosocial skills, such as engaging in play with children, giving children ample opportunity to socialize with their peers, and explicitly teaching children how to share, use their words, and communicate in positive ways.

Teachers in this study used many other techniques to modify children's behavior. For example, they reported closely monitoring children's behaviors, and taking steps to reduce children's frustration. Brock and Beaman-Diglia (2018) indicated that teachers use strategies such as one-on-one coaching, modeling techniques, implementing new practices, and observing other teachers to improve their teaching practices. Zinsser et al. (2019) stated that as teachers work with children with physical aggressive behaviors, teachers need behavioral management and guidance strategies to meet children's social and emotional needs.

I found that all teachers in this study indicated that their training and prior experience assisted them in managing children with aggressive behaviors. Teachers indicated that annual training along with experience prepared them with strategies to cope with children's aggressive behaviors. The trainings focused on inappropriate behaviors and techniques that guided teachers to manage children. Teachers stated that trainings such as modules, KIT trainings, and behavior support plans, and intervention programs assisted them with children with aggressive behaviors. In contrast, Miller et al. (2017) indicated that preschool teachers felt underprepared to manage children with aggressive behaviors, because they lacked training and resources. Miller et al. reported that teachers did not have enough guidance and resources to manage children to prevent aggressive behaviors.

In this study, teachers' perspectives regarding children who caused classmates physical harm, and how they engaged those children in mediating such behavior, affected their ability to reduce the incidence or intensity of the behavior. Zimmerman (1989) determined that children's use of self-regulated learning skills was related to teachers' strategic guidance of behavior. Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of self-regulation suggested that when teachers support children with self-regulation and forethought, they better control children's aggressive behaviors. Teachers in this study described their focus on developing children's ability to self-regulate their behavior by helping children manage their emotions and increase their social skills. Although preschool children imitate others' behavior (Shahaeian et al., 2017), Bandura (1977) mentioned that not all observed behaviors are effectively learned. The modeled behavior



and the learner must be intentionally engaged in the process of modeling and observing for the behavior to be successful. This supports the reports by teachers in this study that explicit modeling and guidance was effective in moderating children's behavior.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study was technical difficulties I had with the one Zoom call. Zoom disconnected, causing me to reconnect and restart the interview. Also, during one of the telephone interviews, the participant's children in the home interrupted the participant. I did not have her undivided attention for the interview. Despite these difficulties, all interviews were completed and data were collected as planned.

### **Recommendations**

There are several recommendations for future research in this study. Since this study was conducted during COVID-19 pandemic, I recommend that this study be repeated after COVID-19 pandemic is over. Disruptions to childcare operations that occurred in response to the pandemic may have affected teachers' experience with children's behavior and their ability to observe and respond to aggressive behavior intense enough to require filing of an incident report. In addition, children's social interactions after pandemic-induced restrictions are lifted may result in different behavior responses than before or during the pandemic, so a comparison of teacher perspectives following the pandemic to the findings reported in this study might yield interesting findings. In addition, a more nuanced look at the relationship among specific behaviors or classroom situations, child or teacher characteristics, and the filing of incident reports, may determine what triggers that filing, and how the filing of an incident report might be

associated with such factors as child and teacher gender, child and teacher race, teacher experience, class size, and similar variables.

A second recommendation is to interview teacher assistants, who assist lead teachers but do not have final decision-making power concerning the appropriate response to children's aggressive behavior. They may be able to provide information about what they observe of lead teacher responses to children's aggressive behavior, and how children react to these responses. Because aggressive behavior intense enough to require the filing of an incident report may not happen frequently enough to support researcher-observation of teacher responses, asking assistant teachers to describe what they see of a situation, from their perspective as a teacher less involved and responsible than the lead teacher, may provide observational information about the dynamics at play in such situations.

A final recommendation is interview or survey parents about aggressive behavior they observe in children at home or in the neighborhood. Several teachers in this study speculated that children's aggressive behavior stems from unsettled home situations, so finding out more about parents' perspectives of behavior management and the appropriateness of aggression in certain situations might be helpful in understanding why some children engage in intensely aggressive behavior in childcare.

### **Implications**

There were two implications for practice that derived from this study. First, teachers need additional training to help them manage and assist children to develop prosocial skills. Administrators should provide adequate training for teachers to assist

them to manage children with physical aggressive behaviors. Teachers reported that even though they have prior experience and training, some teachers mentioned that they still need additional training that would support and assist them as they implement strategies and techniques working with children with challenging behaviors. Second, teachers need greater access to behavioral specialists. Administrators could provide teachers with outside help from a behavioral specialist who can assist them with children who display aggressive behaviors. The behavior specialist could provide in-depth knowledge of the psychology of children who display physically aggressive behaviors and may provide teachers with insight regarding how to work with them. The behavioral specialist may also work directly with children who display aggressive behaviors to reduce the frequency and intensity of these behaviors.

The findings support positive social change by validating the need to assist preschool teachers in responding to children who exhibit aggressive behavior intense enough to trigger the filing of incident reports. Such assistance would increase the physical safety of all children in preschool classrooms, lead to a solution to the problem and inspire positive social change that improves child management and child behavior and reduce occasions for child suspension or expulsion from preschool. This study contributes to positive social change by inspiring efforts to aid children's social-emotional development and increase time-in-school, thereby contributing to children's school success. As teachers build positive relationships with children, positive social change will result as children develop prosocial skills and become successful in the classroom.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study was conducted to gather perspectives of teachers working in the Southeastern United States regarding children who cause classmates physical harm intense enough to require the filing of incident reports, and the actions they take to manage and guide these children. I interviewed 10 teachers. The findings indicated that all teachers in this study had experience working with children who exhibited intensely aggressive behaviors. Teachers in this study believed children's behaviors might be linked to home factors, to lack of understanding of how to play with other children, and to a struggle to express their feelings and to use words to convey their wishes and needs. The findings indicated that teachers used strategies that helped children develop prosocial skills, such as engaging in play with children, giving children ample opportunity to socialize with their peers, and explicitly teaching children how to share, use their words, and communicate in positive ways. Teachers reported closely monitoring children's behaviors and taking steps to reduce children's frustration. The findings showed that all teachers engaged in training, behavior support plans, and intervention programs that assisted them in dealing with children with aggressive behaviors; however, findings indicated that teachers needed additional training and guidance from behavior specialists to assist them with children who exhibit intensely aggressive behaviors. The findings support positive social change because they suggest that by providing a prosocial environment for children, teachers and administrators can reduce reliance on suspension and expulsion in managing intensely aggressive behaviors, increase child safety, and support a positive learning environment leading to greater school success.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about a time a child in your class hurt another child so seriously that you had to file an incident report.
2. What were you thinking at that time?
3. How does it make you feel when something like this happens and you have to deal with it?
4. What do you think about the children who are so physically aggressive that their teachers have to fill out incident reports about their aggression?
5. Let's continue to talk about a time when a child hurt another child seriously enough that you had to file an incident report. What did you do to stop the behavior?
6. How did the child respond to the actions you took to stop the behavior?
7. How do you know what to do in a situation like this?
8. What happened next, after the incident report was filed?
9. How often does this sort of thing happen in the classroom?
10. What more do you think I should know about children who seriously hurt other people and how teachers manage that?