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Chinese children’s perceptions of aggression among peers at school

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ABSTRACT
Recent research suggests that children may encounter aggressive behaviour during the transition from preschool to school. Yet, relatively few longitudinal studies have been conducted on children's perceptions of aggressive behaviour in the transition from preschool to school. This study aims to fill a major gap in the literature by exploring Chinese children’s perceptions and experiences of aggressive behaviour, and their ways of coping with aggression, at three points in time: during the last month at preschool (Time 1), the first three months of Year 1 at school (Time 2) and the last month of Year 1 (Time 3). The present study also examines the role gender plays in 79 Chinese children's perceptions of aggressive behaviour, as depicted in their drawings and accompanying narratives. The children mainly reported physical and verbal aggression rather than relational aggression. The findings provide robust data for understanding how children cope with aggression at school.

Introduction

Even though research has shown that aggression (hitting, pushing, kicking, taking away others’ belongings, threats and teasing) occurs in the preschool years (Monks, Smith and Sweeney 2003, 2005; Repo and Sajaniemi 2015), research on aggressive behaviour among children under eight-years old is a relatively underdeveloped area (Bosacki, Harwood, and Sumaway 2012; Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012; Repo and Sajaniemi 2015). Most of the studies have explored aggressive behaviour among older children (aged eight and above), using questionnaires and surveys of teachers or parents’ reports (Menesini, Fonzi, and Smith 2002; Smorti, Menesini, and Smith 2003). In both Western (Repo and Sajaniemi 2015) and Asian contexts (Arndt and Luo 2008; Lee and Wong 2009; Wong et al. 2008; Yang et al. 2006), relatively few studies (e.g. Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012) have interviewed three- to six-year olds in order to gain their perceptions of aggressive behaviour among their peers. This is largely due to a lack of appropriate tools and methodology. Moreover, longitudinal studies on aggression at school are limited (Liu, Bullock, and Coplan 2014). Research on aggressive behaviour in children’s early years tends to examine the discipline methods used by teachers or how teachers have provided programmes with which to handle cases of aggressive
behaviour, without exploring the strategies used by children to cope with aggressive behaviour at school (Arndt and Luo 2008; Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012). Kirves and Sajaniemi argue that young children’s perceptions of offensive behaviour might be different from the perceptions of parents, teachers or researchers; therefore, ‘[i]t is important to take the victim’s own personal experience of the situation into account’ (2012, 385) so that aggressive behaviour in the early years will not remain unnoticed and ignored. In light of that argument, we directly interviewed young children in order to understand their own perceptions or experiences of aggressive behaviour at school.

Monks and Smith’s study (2006) showed that preschool children (four- to six-year olds) define bullying differently from older children. Monks and Smith asked 4- to 6-year olds, 8-year olds, 14-year olds and adults to sort 17 cartoons into bullying or non-bullying scenarios. The findings showed that four- to eight-year olds can distinguish between aggressive and non-aggressive behaviour, including aggressive but non-bullying behaviour (such as fighting). In contrast, 14-year olds and adults can use more than one dimension to identify bullying behaviour (e.g. considering imbalance of power relations and repetition in their definition). Monks and Smith also found that, in response to the open-ended question ‘What do you think bullying is?’, a third of the 4- to 6-year olds in the study were not able to define bullying; 52% of the children mentioned something related to bullying; 34% associated bullying with aggressive behaviour, such as hitting, without necessarily considering the intention of the actor; 12% mentioned verbal forms of bullying; and only 4% mentioned relational forms of bullying. In summary, previous studies have found that four- to seven-year olds perceive bullying as aggressive behaviour or nasty actions, but without clearly identifying the aggressive, nasty and bullying actions where a child persistently and repeatedly causes harm or distress to another child (Monks and Smith 2006; Smith and Levan 1995). Monks and Smith (2006) argued that young children’s concepts of bullying may be affected by either their cognitive development or their experiences in their early years. Since Monk and Smith’s research has shown that children may not fully understand the concept of bullying, this study focuses on exploring young children’s perceptions of aggression among their peers. This study is intended to fill the gap in the literature by not only exploring young Chinese children’s concepts of aggression but also asking children to report the coping strategies that they have used to cope with aggressive behaviour from their peers during the transition to school and during the last month of Year 1.

Definitions of aggression

‘Aggression’ refers to an aggressor intentionally hurting or harming another person (the harm includes physical, verbal, psychological and relational harm) (Zsolnai, Lesznyák, and Kasik 2011). In physical aggression, physical force is used to harm the victim, such as by hitting, pushing or kicking the victim or by taking his or her belongings by force. Verbal forms of aggression include name calling, teasing, threatening or shouting (Bosacki, Harwood, and Sumaway 2012; Ostrov, Gentile, and Crick 2006). Aggression may also include relational aggression aimed at damaging the peer relationships of the victim (Monks and Smith 2006). Previous research has also shown that aggression in young children (aged four to five) tends to be short-lived (Monks, Smith, and Swettenham 2003), while aggression in middle childhood and adolescence can be relatively stable (Liu, Bullock, and Coplan 2014).
Gender structure of aggressive behaviour

Our study also explores the gender structure of aggression (cross-gender interactions and gender-homogenous interactions that relate to aggression) among young children. Studies regarding preschool children have found that girls are more likely to use verbal aggression and relational aggression than physical aggression. As regards children aged five to six, physical aggression is dominant among boys (Crick, Casas, and Ku 1999; Ladd 2005). However, research regarding children aged six to seven has found no gender difference when children define aggressive behaviour among their peers (Monks and Smith 2006; Smith and Levan 1995). One study concerning 4- to 9-year-olds’ perceptions of teasing (Bosacki, Harwood, and Sumaway 2012) found that 80% of the boys’ drawings involved male-to-male teasing; much less cross-gender teasing (20%) was depicted in the boys’ drawings. In contrast, the girls’ drawings involved a large proportion of cross-gender teasing (45%) and female-to-female teasing (54%).

Very few studies of young children’s perceptions and experiences of aggression and the strategies they use for coping with aggression – especially among five- to seven-year olds – have been conducted in the Asian context. This study will help to remedy a significant gap in the literature by showing how, in the Asian context, aggressive behaviour among their peers emerges in children’s early years.

Aims of this study

(1) To explore five- to six-year olds’ perceptions of aggressive behaviour among their peers during the last month at preschool, during the transition to school and during the last month of Year 1.
(2) To explore the forms and gender structures of the aggression encountered by Chinese children (cross-gender interactions and gender-homogenous interactions related to aggression).
(3) To examine Chinese children’s use of different coping strategies to cope with aggression during their transition to school.

Ethics

This study was conducted after gaining ethical approval from the Human Research Ethical Committee (HREC) of the Hong Kong Institute of Education. This study followed the HREC guidelines for undertaking research with young children. Written consent from the participating schools, teachers and parents – and verbal consent from the participating children – was obtained before the data collection.

Method

Procedure and participants

The draw-and-tell method has been widely used by psychologists to explore children’s perceptions of their intellectual, emotional and mental experiences (Campbell et al. 2010). Recent studies have proven that this method is a useful tool with which to explore 5- to
7-year olds’ stress and coping at school (Wong 2015a, 2015b) and teasing in childhood (Bosacki, Harwood, and Sumaway 2012) as well as for exploring 6 to 13-year-olds’ perspectives on violence in urban neighbourhoods (Carvalho 2012). Children generally find it fun to participate in a draw-and-tell session and they spontaneously talk about their experiences. Moreover, Eldén (2012) has argued that this method minimises the power disparity in the relationship between researcher and child since children are in control of the contents of the drawings. For these reasons, the draw-and-tell method was used in this study.

The participants were children who had attended the Zippy’s Friends (ZF) Programme at preschool in Hong Kong; the programme teaches children to identify and talk about their feelings and to cope with common problems, such as peer conflicts and bullying (Wong 2015b). A total of 212 children (95 male and 117 female) participated in Time 1 (during the last month at preschool); 113 (53 male and 60 female) children and 117 (53 male and 64 female) children from the original sample participated in Time 2 (during the first three months of Year 1 at school) and Time 3 (during the last month of Year 1), respectively. The children’s ages ranged from 66 to 86 months in Time 1 ($M = 6.04$ years; $SD = 3.88$). All the children were drawn from six preschools and were Han Chinese. The children who participated in Time 1 were interviewed again in Times 2 and 3, when they attended 24 different schools.

After obtaining consent from the preschools, schools and parents concerned, in Times 1, 2 and 3 trained interviewers individually interviewed the children in Cantonese for 20–25 min in a quiet location at their preschools/schools. The present study focuses on children’s perceptions of aggressive behaviour at school. The procedures for the draw-and-tell sessions were the same across Times 1, 2 and 3. The children were first given an A4 sheet of paper on which to draw a picture about unhappy things at school. They were then asked to explain and talk about their drawings. The children’s conversations were tape-recorded for later transcription, and notes were taken during the interviews. The following questions were asked as the children were drawing their pictures:

1. ‘Will there be any unhappy things that will happen when you start school?’ or ‘Were there any unhappy things that happened when you started school?’
2. ‘Can you explain to me what you have drawn in the picture? (Who is in it? What had happened? What are they doing?)’
3. The interviewer repeated any unhappy things mentioned by the child and asked the child to suggest coping strategies. For example, ‘Can you do something to prevent being hit by others? What would you do if someone hit you?’

The findings of a study of children (from 24 primary schools) regarding the strategies they used to cope with different types of unhappy things (e.g. coping with difficulties in learning or difficulties with a new teacher or rules) during the transition to school were reported in our previous paper (Wong 2015a). In this current study, we focused on analysing qualitative data that reflected children’s strategies for coping with aggression from their peers during the transition to school and during the last month of Year 1 at school.

The children were asked to explain and talk about their drawings. We included in this study all the children’s drawings and narratives that depicted or mentioned an individual exhibiting aggressive behaviour towards another person; the aggressive behaviour mainly consisted of physical and verbal aggression (Monks and Smith 2006; Ostrov, Gentile, and
Crick 2006; Repo and Sajaniemi 2015). Examples of the aggression they mentioned are the following:

(i) physical aggression (the children referred to ‘hitting’, ‘kicking’, ‘pushing’ others and the forceful taking of others’ belongings in describing other children’s behaviour at school);
(ii) verbal aggression (the children talked about peers shouting at them or saying ‘I will hit you to death’);
(iii) general bullying (the children used general expressions, such as ‘boys will bully girls’); and
(iv) other types of aggression (e.g. they mentioned that children may stop other children doing things they want to do or force them to do things they do not want to do).

The drawings and children’s narratives were coded according to the practice in previous studies (Bosacki, Harwood, and Sumaway 2012; Ostrov and Keating 2004; Repo and Sajaniemi 2015; Salmivalli 2001), taking into account the following:

(1) the depiction of facial affects of the aggressor and the victim (happy, angry, sad or neutral);
(2) the form of aggression (physical, verbal or general aggression);
(3) the location of the aggression (e.g. classroom or playground);
(4) the gender structure of the aggression (cross-gender interactions – male-to-female or female-to-male aggression – and gender-homogenous interactions – male-to-male or female-to-female aggression);
(5) quarrels (between the children depicted in the pictures) that had been mutually initiated were not to be counted as aggression (Repo and Sajaniemi 2015).

The children’s coping strategies were coded according to the Children’s Coping Strategies Checklist-Revision 1 (CCSC-R1; Programme for Prevention Research 2004) and were coded as:

(1) direct problem-solving (‘My classmate has taken away my pen and refuses to give it back to me – I ask him to return the pen to me and not to do it again’);
(2) avoidance strategies (‘If a boy hits me during break, I just hide away’); and
(3) support-seeking strategies (I told the teacher that ‘I was pushed by a naughty classmate’).

Since some children drew more than one instance of aggression, the total number of aggression scenarios is larger than the total number of participants. The children’s narratives, recorded during the draw-and-tell sessions, were transcribed and coded. The results were analysed according to the children’s own explanations of their drawings and narratives during the interviews. A coding manual was developed for the raters; this manual was based on the author’s studies regarding children’s stress and coping during the transition from preschool to school (Wong 2013, 2015a, 2015b). A rater, who was unaware of the aims of the study, randomly selected 17 children’s drawings and transcriptions of their interviews (21% of the total sample). The author and the rater then independently coded these 17 pictures and transcriptions of the interviews. Cohen’s Kappa (Cohen 1960) was used to test the inter-rater reliability and showed excellent agreement between the raters (≧.83; see Table 1). The differences between the raters were discussed and we came to a final agreement on the coding. Subsequently, a single rater coded all the responses.
Results

The children’s narratives recorded during the interviews revealed that a total of 79 children (34 boys and 45 girls) in Time 1 predicted that there would be aggressive behaviour during the transition to school, and 89 aggression scenarios were depicted during the draw-and-tell sessions (37 of these aggression scenarios were depicted by boys and 52 of them by girls). In Time 2, during the transition to school, a total of 39 children (12 boys and 27 girls) reported that they had encountered aggression during the transition to school; and they depicted 42 aggression scenarios (12 of these aggression scenarios were depicted by boys and 30 of them by girls). In Time 3, during the last month of Year 1, 25 children (11 boys and 14 girls) mentioned 27 aggression scenarios at school (12 mentioned by boys and 15 by girls). The findings showed that fewer children had actually experienced aggression after they started school (Times 2 and 3) than the children’s predictions had anticipated during their last month at preschool (Time 1). The girls consistently reported more aggression scenarios than did the boys, across the different times.

Gender structure of aggression

A total of 17 boys and 26 girls illustrated a gender structure within aggression in the drawings made in Time 1. In Time 1, a total of 14 boys predicted male-to-male aggressive behaviour at school, 2 boys predicted cross-gender aggression at school and 1 boy predicted female-to-female aggression. Also in Time 1, a total of 14 girls predicted female-to-female aggressive behaviour, and 12 girls predicted male-to-female aggressive behaviour would occur when they started attending Year 1.

No boys reported male-to-female aggression after they went to school, but five girls in Time 2 and three girls in Time 3 mentioned male-to-female aggression. Female-to-male aggression was mentioned only by two boys in Time 2.

No boys mentioned female-to-female aggression after they went to school, but three girls in Time 2 and four girls in Time 3 mentioned female-to-female aggression at school. Only one girl mentioned male-to-male aggression in Time 2. In contrast, one boy in Time 2 and six boys in Time 3 reported male-to-male aggression at school.

In sum, regarding the children who had (in the interviews) indicated a gender structure within aggression, in Time 1 most of the boys (82%) predicted male-to-male aggression at school; and more boys reported male-to-male aggression at school after they started going to school (having left preschool). In contrast, during their last month at preschool the girls predicted that there would be both female-to-female (54%) and male-to-female aggression at school (46%). Only girls reported male-to-female or female-to-female aggression in Times 2 and 3 (Figures 1–3).

Table 1. The Cohen’s Kappa of the children’s perceptions of peer aggression during the transition to school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Cohen’s Kappa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s depictions of aggressor’s facial affect</td>
<td>.916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s depictions of recipient’s facial affect</td>
<td>.844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of aggression</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of the aggression encounter</td>
<td>.824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of characters in the picture</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender structure of the aggression</td>
<td>.833</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Drawing of male-to-male aggression. ‘A boy from another class is hitting me in the playground,’ said a boy (eight-year and one-month old).

Figure 2. Drawing of female-to-female aggression. ‘We were going to the toilet – a child [the girl in the middle] jumped the queue and the girl behind her pushed her down,’ said a girl (six-year and three-months old).
Most of the drawings and children’s narratives did not depict or mention the location of the aggressive behaviour they expected to witness/experience after they started to attend Year 1 (34 children in Time 1, 9 children in Time 2 and 10 in Time 3 did indicate the location of the aggression). The children who did mention a location explained that the aggressive behaviour happened either in the classroom (14 children in Time 1, 4 children in Time 2 and 4 children in Time 3) or the playground (11 children in Time 1, 5 children in Time 2 and 4 children in Time 3). Other locations of the aggression events depicted or mentioned by the children included the school bus and the school corridors, stairs and tuck-shops.

Most of the boys and most of the girls who depicted the emotions of an aggressor illustrated a ‘happy’ aggressor (😊) – see Table 2 – across Times 1, 2 and 3. Much less frequently, a child drew an aggressor with a sad expression (😢). A few children described the aggressor as being angry. Between 25 and 42% of the children, across all the phases of the study, drew an aggressor with a neutral expression or did not draw an aggressor in their pictures at all (such ‘neutral’ and absent aggressors were grouped together and recorded as ‘neutral aggressors’).

Most of the children who drew the emotions of the victims depicted the victim as being happy, sad or neutral; only a few children described the victim as being angry (see Table 3).

Forms of aggression

A total of 89, 42 and 27 scenarios associated with aggressive behaviour were reported by the children in Times 1, 2 and 3, respectively. The forms of aggression reported by the children are summarised in Table 4. The most frequent form of aggression reported by the children was physical aggression (e.g. kicking, hitting and pushing). The other forms of aggression mentioned by the children included verbal aggression (shouting at and scolding peers, and

Figure 3. Drawing of male-to-female aggression. ‘A boy [right] has taken away my schoolbag [left]; said a girl (six-year and six-months old).
belongings being taken away by other children). One child mentioned a child had stopped others from doing things they wanted to do in Time 2. Two children in Time 2 and one child in Time 3 reported that some children had forced others to do things they did not want to do. The remaining children could give only a general description of aggression, without describing specific forms of aggression (e.g. ‘boys will bully girls’). No relational forms of aggression were mentioned by any of the children. Regarding the children who had mentioned aggression at school, 66% of the boys in Time 2 and 91% of the boys in Time 3 mentioned physical aggression. In contrast, about 50% of the aggression scenarios mentioned by the girls were about physical aggression. Sixteen per cent of the aggressive behaviour depicted by the boys in Times 2 and 3 was associated with verbal aggression; and 8% of the boys mentioned this type of aggression in Time 3. In contrast, 26.9% of the girls predicted that verbal aggression would happen at school; and 16 and 20% of the girls talked about verbal aggression at school in Times 2 and 3, respectively. In sum, the boys talked more about physical aggression at school and the girls talked more about verbal aggression at school.

Table 2. Depictions of facial affect of aggressor in the children’s drawings and narratives (by gender).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Happy aggressor % (n)</th>
<th>Angry aggressor % (n)</th>
<th>Sad aggressor % (n)</th>
<th>Neutral aggressor % (n)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 (n = 27)</td>
<td>37 (10)</td>
<td>7.4 (2)</td>
<td>22.2 (6)</td>
<td>33.4 (9)</td>
<td>100 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 (n = 4)</td>
<td>75 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>25 (1)</td>
<td>100 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3 (n = 9)</td>
<td>66.7 (6)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>33.3 (3)</td>
<td>100 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 (n = 35)</td>
<td>42.9 (15)</td>
<td>11.4 (4)</td>
<td>2.9 (1)</td>
<td>42.9 (15)</td>
<td>100 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 (n = 16)</td>
<td>43.8 (7)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>18.8 (3)</td>
<td>37.5 (6)</td>
<td>100 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3 (n = 10)</td>
<td>60 (6)</td>
<td>10 (1)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>30 (3)</td>
<td>100 (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Depictions of facial affect of victim in the children’s drawings and narratives (by gender).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Happy victim % (n)</th>
<th>Angry victim % (n)</th>
<th>Sad victim % (n)</th>
<th>Neutral victim % (n)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 (n = 27)</td>
<td>29.6 (8)</td>
<td>7.4 (2)</td>
<td>40.7 (11)</td>
<td>22.2 (6)</td>
<td>100 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 (n = 4)</td>
<td>25 (1)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>75 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>100 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3 (n = 9)</td>
<td>11.1 (1)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>55.6 (5)</td>
<td>33.3 (3)</td>
<td>100 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 (n = 35)</td>
<td>31.4 (11)</td>
<td>2.9 (1)</td>
<td>37.1 (13)</td>
<td>28.6 (10)</td>
<td>100 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 (n = 16)</td>
<td>43.8 (7)</td>
<td>6.3 (1)</td>
<td>18.8 (3)</td>
<td>31.3 (5)</td>
<td>100 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3 (n = 10)</td>
<td>40 (4)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>50 (5)</td>
<td>10 (1)</td>
<td>100 (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Forms of aggression from children’s drawings and explanations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Physical aggression % (n)</th>
<th>Verbal aggression % (n)</th>
<th>General expression of aggression % (n)</th>
<th>Others % (n)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 (n = 89)</td>
<td>59.6 (53)</td>
<td>22.4 (20)</td>
<td>18 (16)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>100 (89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 (n = 42)</td>
<td>59.5 (25)</td>
<td>16.7 (7)</td>
<td>16.7 (7)</td>
<td>7.1 (3)</td>
<td>100 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3 (n = 27)</td>
<td>70.4 (19)</td>
<td>14.8 (4)</td>
<td>11.1 (3)</td>
<td>3.7 (1)</td>
<td>100 (27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coping with aggression during the transition to school

The different coping strategies used by the children are summarised in Table 5. A total of 99 strategies in Time 1, 45 strategies in Time 2 and 27 strategies in Time 3 were suggested by the children in the study. As shown in Table 5, the children suggested three types of coping strategies, namely (1) direct problem-solving strategies – some of the children used their own efforts to solve an aggression problem; (2) avoidance actions; and (3) seeking support from others. The majority of the strategies used were either direct problem-solving strategies or seeking support from others. The most frequent direct problem-solving strategies mentioned by the children, before and after they went to school, were asking the aggressor to stop harming the victim or talking to the aggressor. The other direct problem-solving strategies used by the children were to ‘ignore the aggressor’, ‘invite the aggressor to play’, ‘apologise to the aggressor’, ‘ask the aggressor to apologise’, ‘protect personal belongings’, ‘give the aggressor gifts’, ‘be nice to the aggressor’ or ‘blame the aggressor’. The children actually used fewer direct problem-solving strategies in Times 2 and 3 than they had predicted in Time 1. Fewer aggressive scenarios were reported after the children went to school; this may explain why fewer coping strategies were reported in Times 2 and 3.

As regards seeking support from others, the children mainly sought help from their teachers when they encountered aggression (25% in Time 1, 35% in Time 2 and 40% in Time 3). A few of the children used avoidance actions to cope with bullying.

Discussions and implications for research and practice

The findings show that aggression among the young children happened in the school playground, classroom, toilets, corridors and tuck shops. More girls than boys predicted that aggression would happen at school in Time 1 and more girls talked about aggressive behaviour at school in Times 2 and 3. Similar to a study examining four- to nine-year olds’
perceptions of teasing (Bosacki, Harwood, and Sumaway 2012), our study found that the boys’ drawings involved more male-to-male aggression. Interestingly, the girls in our study also reported more male-to-female and female-to-female aggression at school than the boys did. In sum, there was a gender difference in perceiving the gender role in the aggression scenarios: the boys in this study depicted a male as being the initiator in the aggression scenarios, while the girls ascribed the initiator role to both genders (Bosacki, Harwood, and Sumaway 2012).

Physical forms of aggression were the ones most frequently depicted by the six-year-old boys in their drawings in the present study. The girls, however, talked more about verbal aggression at school. Previous research (Walker, Irving, and Berthelsen 2002) has shown that girls as young as five are more likely than boys to cooperate with their peers and suggest prosocial strategies for solving peer conflicts. In contrast, boys are more likely than girls to suggest aggressive strategies for solving peer conflicts. Walker, Irving, and Berthelsen (2002) argue that aggression among boys is caused by boys’ tendency to wish to use force to maintain a dominant position in their peer group. Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012) argue that teachers tend to accept that boys behave more aggressively than girls in preschool and this may contribute to gender differences in peer interaction strategies. Further, Walker, Irving, and Berthelsen (2002) found that boys are more likely to use aggressive strategies for entry into a girls’ group than for entry into a boys’ group; the authors argued that it is possible that boys perceive girls as being more susceptible to domineering behaviour. This may explain why many instances of male-to-female aggression were reported by the girls in the present study. Maccoby (1988) argues that gender segregation is likely to be caused by the different interaction styles of boys and girls. In order to reduce aggression at school, gender and cultural equality, tolerance and acts of kindness and compassion should be promoted during the transition to school (Bosacki, Harwood, and Sumaway 2012). In order to reduce conflicts between boys and girls, teachers could provide more opportunities for children to work in mixed-gender groups; this would help the children understand each other’s interaction styles and promote collaborative problem-solving skills among the children. Holmes-Lonergan’s (2003) study showed that, in a mixed aged group that was set problem-solving tasks, the girls were more controlling; the boys were more likely to seek agreement. It is likely that children learn different interaction styles from the opposite gender when they work together on collaborative problem-solving tasks.

The present study has shown that aggression declines with age. A longitudinal study on the effect of a socio-emotional programme on children’s coping strategies, using the same participants as this study, showed that 70% of the children who had attended the socio-emotional programme – ZF – found the direct problem-solving strategies learned at preschool useful in coping with stress at school; and 30% of them mentioned that the support-seeking strategy learned from the ZF programme had helped them to cope with stress at school (Wong 2015a). Thus, the children’s competence in using appropriate coping strategies may have contributed to the decline in aggression at school.

Another of our findings is consistent with those of some previous studies: the six- to seven-year-old children in this study did not mention relational aggression (Monks and Smith 2006). However, some studies have shown that girls often use relational aggression at the age of five to six (e.g. Zsolnai, Lesznyák, and Kasik 2011). There are three possible explanations of these differences in the findings of different studies. First, with their limited cognitive development, children may find it easier to understand aggression involving
obvious or direct harm to the victim, such as when the victim is kicked or objects are taken away by the aggressor. Relational aggression includes direct aggression (e.g. social rejection) and indirect aggression (e.g. spreading nasty rumours about the victims) (Monks and Smith 2006). Young children may not be able to clearly express this type of aggression in their drawings and narratives. Second, the different findings may be the result of different methods being used. Research using observations of aggressive behaviour (Ostrov, Gentile, and Crick 2006), or using hypothetical social situations and puppets in interviews with children, has found more relational aggression among girls than boys (Zsolnai, Lesznyák, and Kasik 2011). Hence, future studies of children’s aggressive behaviour should use multiple methods in order to get a full picture of aggression among young children during their transition to school. Third, recent research has found that more acts of relational aggression are likely to happen among sibling dyads than among friend dyads (Stauffacher and DeHart 2005). Future research should explore Chinese children’s perceptions of aggression among siblings.

Previous research has found that even young children are able to judge an action as morally wrong when it has negative effects on a victim’s welfare or rights (Turiel 1983), but young children fail to attribute negative emotions to the victimiser. Young children tend to believe that the victimiser has positive emotions when the victimiser benefits from the aggressive behaviour (Arsenio 2014). Older children (aged seven or above) understand that the victimiser can have positive and negative emotions at the same time (feeling good when she/he uses aggression to fulfil a desire, but feeling guilty when seeing the victim is hurt). Many of the children in the present study depicted a happy victimiser in their drawings; only a few children portrayed a victimiser as being sad or angry. However, none of the children expressed the idea that a victimiser may have both negative and positive emotions at the same time. Gummerum et al.’s (2016) study has shown that children’s understanding of a victimiser’s negative emotions can be enhanced by giving children the time to reflect on moral norms and by training children in inhibitory control; these methods are moderately effective in reducing aggression.

The children in our study made references to positive (happy), negative (sad or angry) or neutral emotions in describing the victims of aggression, but we did not ask the children to further explain the emotions of the victim; thus, we did not gather enough evidence to explain the differences among the children. In future, researchers should ask children to further elaborate on the emotions of the victims of aggression and to explain why a victim can have the same emotions as the victimiser or different emotions. A researcher might ask, for instance, when discussing a child’s drawing, ‘Why is this girl feeling angry? Why is one child happy and the other child angry?’

Also in line with the findings of other studies, (Wong 2015a; Zsolnai, Lesznyák, and Kasik 2011), another of our findings was that the six-year-old children largely used their own efforts to solve the problems caused by aggression – that is, they used direct problem-solving strategies (e.g. ‘ask the aggressor to stop;‘ talk to the aggressor’) – with fewer children seeking social support from teachers during the transition to school. Some recent studies offer two possible explanations for this finding. First, ‘children are indeed more adept at social problem solving by themselves’ than seeking other’s help (Zsolnai, Lesznyák, and Kasik 2011, 1514). Second, Garbarino and Lara (2002) have shown that many children think that teachers are not helpful in bullying situations. As they grow older, young children become increasingly interested in the social meaning of others’ behaviour and also more sensitive about how their own actions may be interpreted by significant others (Parker-Rees 2007). Some of the
children in this study thought that the teacher could not help; others thought that they should solve their problems independently, in order not to show weakness in the situations. Thus, it is very important for teachers to let children know that teachers are willing to offer help and to assure children that seeking adult or peer support is not being weak but, rather, being competent in coping with aggression.

Of the children who had sought support from others, 30–40% said (in Times 2 and 3) that they would seek help from teachers after they went to school; but none reported seeking support from peers after they went to school. It is possible that children think that teachers are more competent than their peers in protecting children from peer aggression. Therefore, teachers should encourage children to take an active role in offering help to victims of aggression at school, such as by asking the aggressor to stop, reporting the case to the teacher and telling the aggressor that children should love each other and not hurt anyone in their class.

The children in this study reported many examples of coping strategies, and no gender differences were found in their use of coping strategies. The lack of such gender differences may reflect a methodological problem. Zsolnai, Lesznyák, and Kasik (2011) found no gender differences in coping strategies when using child self-reporting, but gender differences were found when using teacher-reporting (in questionnaires) and when asking the children first to imagine hypothetical social situations and then to use puppets to act out their coping strategies. Zsolnai, Lesznyák, and Kasik (2011) have argued that many teachers’ perceptions of children’s behaviour may be influenced by gender stereotypes that lead the teachers to expect boys to use more overt aggression to cope with their peers’ aggressive behaviour and to expect girls to cry more and seek more adult support. Thus, future studies should include both children’s and teachers’ reporting of children’s aggressive behaviour and coping strategies at school.

Another limitation of this study is that we did not directly use the term ‘aggression’ in the research setting; as a result, some of the children may not have thought about aggression when they were asked to talk about unhappy things. In the future, we will ask children directly about their experience of aggression at school, and use a variety of methods, in order to gain more insights into and perspectives on children’s aggressive behaviour at school. For example, we will use the draw-and-tell technique together with role playing and ask children to act out their coping strategies.

Research on young children’s voices with regard to aggression during the transition from preschool to school has been limited, especially in the Asian context. The present findings may encourage researchers to conduct more studies on young children’s aggressive behaviour and coping strategies, both in the Asian context and in other cultures. Brooker (2011) has argued that researchers need to listen to children’s voices seriously, since children are active social agents who can contribute to the construction of their social environment. Therefore, researchers and educators should consult children’s views as part of their planning, evaluation and research. The major contributions of our study are, first, to have reflected children’s own voices and perceptions of aggression at school; and, second, to have provided appropriate tools and a methodology with which to study children’s conceptions and experiences of aggression – and how they cope with aggression at school – when they are under eight years of age.
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