

3rd report:
**Views of Bullying as an Everyday Phenomenon
in Early School Years**

Rikke Kamstrup Knudsen

Jonas Erck

Stine Lindberg

Jan Kampmann



Centre for Childhood and Youth Research, CEBUF

Roskilde University

May 2008

Contents

Introduction	2
Support for the project Free from Bullying.....	3
The parents' knowledge of the pilot project.....	3
Varying understandings of bullying	5
At what age does bullying begin?	7
Responsibility for bullying.....	7
The school's anti-bullying preparedness	11
The children's play relations and wellbeing at the schools.....	16
Social manners at the schools	23
Conclusion	27
The report's data material.....	28

Introduction

This is one of several reports from Roskilde University's follow-up research project accompanying Save the Children Denmark's pilot project entitled 'Free from Bullying' (in Danish: *Fri for Mobberi*). The report is based on a questionnaire survey among staff of early primary education (from reception class to class 3) and parents of children in reception class and class 2 at the three schools taking part in the pilot project, namely Skjoldhøj School in the Municipality of Århus, Hellerup School in the Municipality of Gentofte (within Greater Copenhagen) and Vonsild Parish School in the Municipality of Kolding. A similar report has been drawn up against the background of questionnaires circulated among personnel and parents of preschool children in the participant day-care centres in June 2007.

The schools set out to work on Free from Bullying at the beginning of the academic year in August 2007. Thus, they were still in the start-up phase of the project when the survey was carried out in December 2007-January 2008.

This report sheds light on the school staff's and the parents' understandings and views of bullying as expressed early on in the project process. Furthermore, the report examines the staff's experience of social conduct in the schools' and current preparedness against bullying.

The follow-up research project is funded by Save the Children Denmark in collaboration with the Mary Foundation as well as the Danish National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators (BUPL) and the Research and Development Fund of the National Federation of Social Educators (SL). Ideally, it will contribute to fruitful professional discussions about bullying and how to prevent it within each school.

We hope you will enjoy reading it.

The group of researchers

Support for the project Free from Bullying

The responses to the questionnaire survey show great support for the schools' participation in the project Free from Bullying among school staff and parents alike. Thus, asked whether they find it a good idea for the school to take part, 100% of respondents answered *yes*. The parents explained their support by pointing to the severe consequences of bullying for children at the receiving end. Not only do they suffer and find it hard to learn while it goes on, but it may also leave mental scars for life.

Below are some examples of reasons given by parents:

- Bullying is terrible and destructive for a child's self-esteem and life. Bullying must be stamped out.
- It is a great step forward that we in Denmark have begun to focus more on bullying generally, because it is harmful to the victim. I am relieved, happy and proud that 'my' school is participating.
- I would be deeply saddened if my own child were subjected to bullying, and she might indeed be a soft target. I was bullied myself as a child.
- It is absolutely essential to avoid bullying for everyone to have optimal chances of learning at school. Without wellbeing, learning will be inhibited.
- Prevention is better than cure.

Among the school personnel's stated motivations to participate in the project is that it has contributed to highlighting an issue which they consider to be important. Some indicate that the project's approach is novel and instructive for them. One respondent writes, for example, that it has triggered some significant conversations within the staff group. Below are some examples of reasons given by the professional educators:

- Finally, we have a project that is forward-looking rather than just applying sticking plasters to a pressing problem. We need this. The anti-bullying project has been exciting and relevant to work on at 'the children's level'.
- It is important to be vigilant with the problem of bullying. This is a novel approach, which I have found to be interesting and instructive.
- It has certainly sparked off conversations within the staff group.

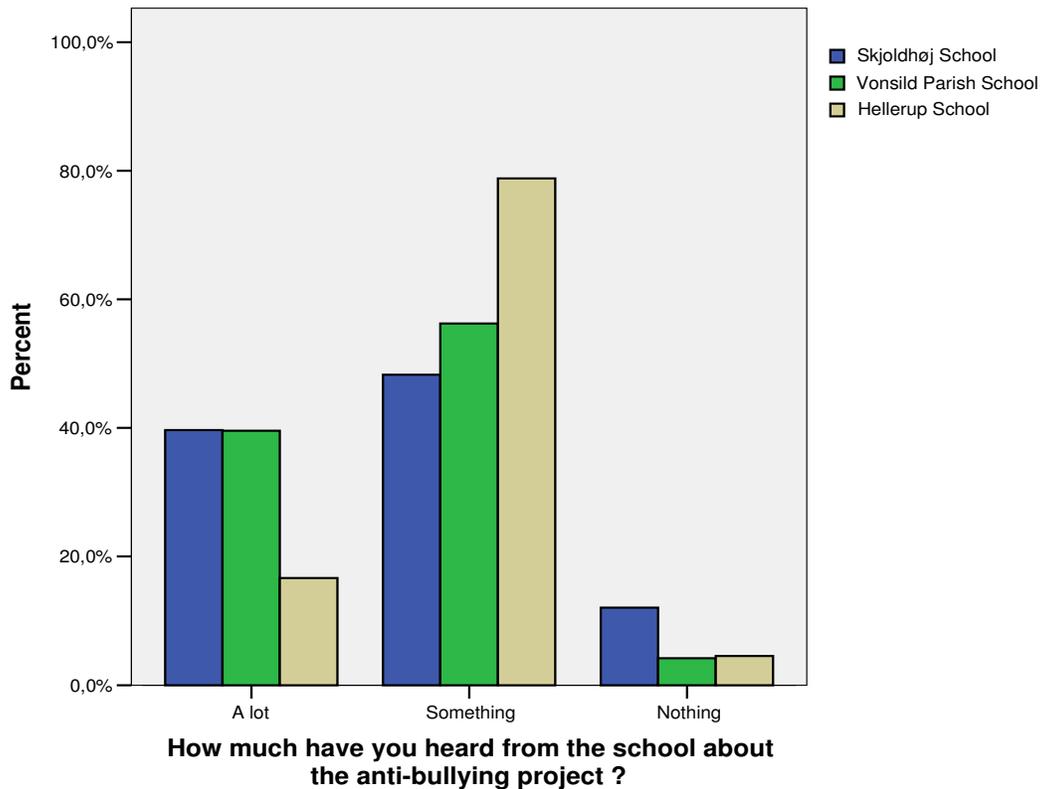
The parents' knowledge of the pilot project

Part of the philosophy behind Free from Bullying is to begin to prevent bullying even prior to the start of school and during the first school years. Thus, the project suggests cooperation between preschool centres and the school departments with the youngest pupils (from reception class to class 3). At the time when the questionnaires were completed, the preschools had already been involved in the project work for about one year, whereas the schools did not begin in earnest until they received the first children from participant preschools at the start of the school year in August 2007.

Since the project Free from Bullying calls for close cooperation between school and parents, the survey has inquired as to what degree the schools inform the parents about the project.

The schools have undertaken this task in varying ways, and all staff members agree that the parents have got to know *a lot* (35%) or *something* (65%), while nobody finds that the parents have not been informed at all.

The parents' answers correspond well with those of the staff, since a majority of parents affirm that they have heard either *a lot* (31%) or *something* (62%) about the project. However, 7% of the parents indicate that they have not been informed at all. The bar chart below shows how the parents' responses are distributed at each school.



What the chart reveals is that a greater percentage of parents at Skjoldhøj School and Vognsild Parish School feel very well-informed about the project, though it is also at the Skjoldhøj School where the largest share of parents claim not to have heard about the project at all.

The fact that parents of children from the same school have such contradictory experiences of information about the project points to the importance of communicating frequently and through a variety of channels. Furthermore, the responses may reflect that parents have highly differing expectations of the information flow from the school, i.e. there are differences in how well informed the parents *feel*, even if they indicate that they have received the same information. For example, two parents both affirm that they have been informed about the project at a parent-teacher meeting and through the school intranet, and against this background, one has the experience of having heard *something* about the project, and the other *a lot*.

In general, parents of class 2 pupils feel less informed than reception-class parents. Only a few parents of class 2 children respond that they have heard *a lot* about the project.

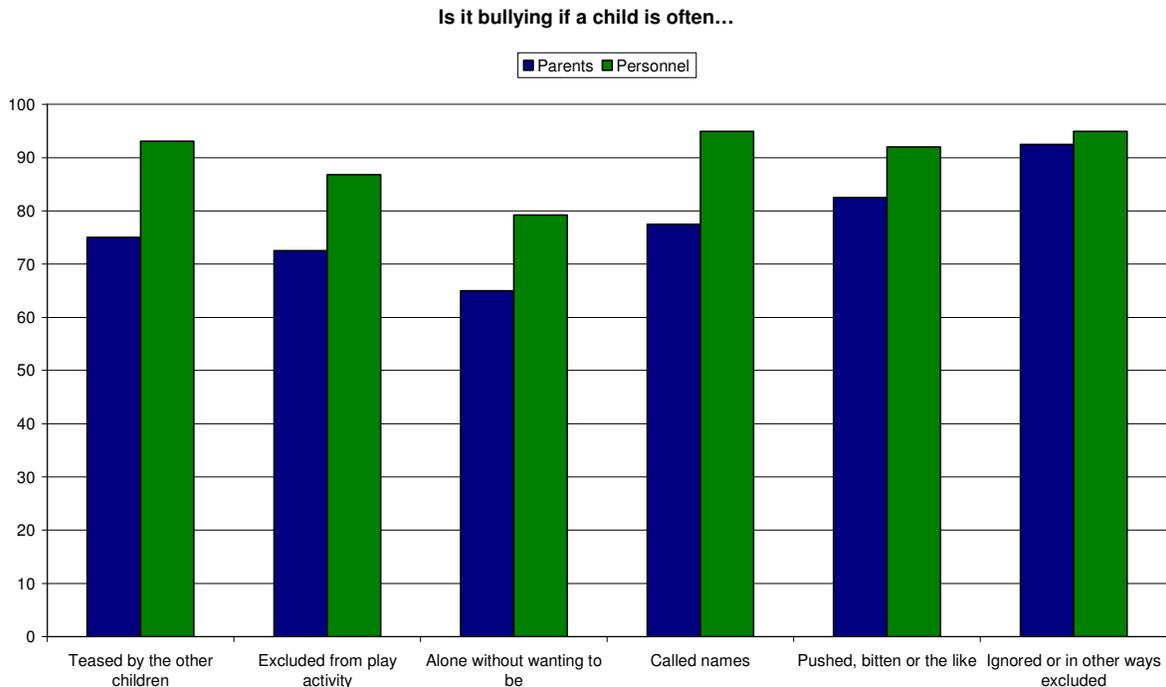
The chief communication channel has been the school itself. Only at Skjoldhøj School have the parents also been informed through the after-school centre.

Varying understandings of bullying

When dealing with bullying and how to prevent it, it is important to uncover which understandings of the phenomenon are in play among the groups involved. The interpretation of what bullying is and of one's own role in this regard as a parent or professional has a major bearing on the way in which prevention is tackled. At the same time, significantly divergent understandings can be presumed to pose an obstacle to work towards a common goal. The questionnaire asked parents and staff to describe in their own words how they understand 'bullying' (*mobning* in Danish). It also posed a series of more specific questions to home in on what they perceive as encompassed by the term.

The survey shows that nearly all professionals and parents distinguish between 'bullying' and 'teasing'. 100% of staff members and 92% of parents answer *yes* to the question of whether these two phenomena differ. However, it is worthy of notice that a small section of the parents do not make this distinction, thus interpreting 'bullying' in broader terms as equal to teasing.

In another part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked whether they would characterise various negative acts as bullying, e.g. being hit, being called mean names, or being ignored. Each statement gave the option of ticking off whether it was a case of bullying if the child were subjected to it *sometimes* or *often*. The majority of both staff and parents ticked exclusively the box for *often*. Thus, it is a recurrent theme in the majority understanding that negative acts require a certain frequency to amount to bullying. The distribution of answers appears from the chart below.



It may be inferred from the chart that parents are more inclined than the professional educators to characterise frequently occurring negative acts against a child as bullying. For example, 95% of parents see it as bullying, if a child is called names (i.e. subjected to abusive language), while only 78% of the personnel share this view.

Furthermore, the chart shows that some transgressions are more likely than others to be described as bullying, namely being ignored/excluded, being called names, and being subjected to physical abuse,

such as being hit, pushed, bitten and the like. Furthermore, to 65% of the staff and 79% of parents, it classifies as bullying when a child is often alone without wanting to be.

However, there are also some staff members and parents who indicate that the negative acts need only occur *sometimes* to amount to bullying.

- 12% of the personnel and 11% of parents feel that bullying is an appropriate term, if a child is only sometimes called names by the peers.
- 18% of the personnel and 21% of the parents call it bullying, if a child is only sometimes hit, pushed, bitten or the like.
- 10% of the personnel and 17% of the parents find it to be bullying, if a child is only sometimes ignored or in other ways excluded.

Another issue is whose feelings or intentions determine whether it is a case of bullying. Is it bullying if this is how it is experienced by the one who is hurt, regardless of the intentions behind it? Or is it only so if the negative acts are performed *with malice*? These two perspectives are about equally represented in the staff's and parents' characterisations. These are two parents' differing definitions of bullying, based on the bullied child's experience and the bullying party's intentions, respectively.

"A feeling of being excluded, of not being appreciated, of being lonely while not wanting to be."

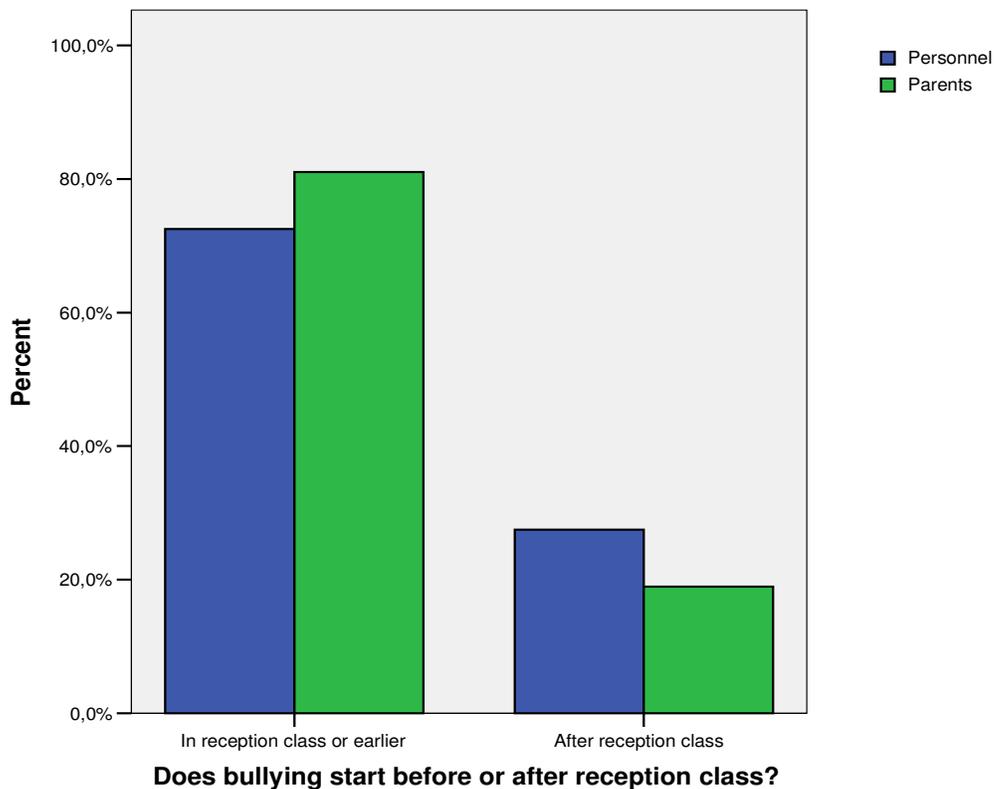
"When teasing does not spring from something amicable, but has a tone of hostility. When it is meant to hurt, degrade or harass."

Whose perspective is chosen as the starting point for the definition of bullying tells us something about whose experience is given precedence. At the same time, it raises important questions about the nature of bullying. For instance, can hurtful behaviour directed against a child out of thoughtless 'routine' be considered as bullying? If we insist on malice as a precondition for bullying, it also becomes necessary to ponder whether children at various ages are capable of understanding the consequences of their acts.

At what age does bullying begin?

Researchers and practitioners do not share a uniform view of how early in children's lives bullying takes place. Nevertheless, the question is highly relevant to determine at what stage it makes sense to intervene with preventative measures.

Consequently, the lower years school personnel and the parents were asked at what age they believe bullying may start occurring. The respondents were asked to decide based on a definition of bullying as *recurrent and offensive acts directed against a single child*. The next chart shows that a vast majority of school employees as well as parents think that bullying may start as early as reception class, or even earlier. This is the case of 72% of the educational staff and 82% of parents, whereas 28% and 19% of these two groups, respectively, find that bullying begins after reception class.

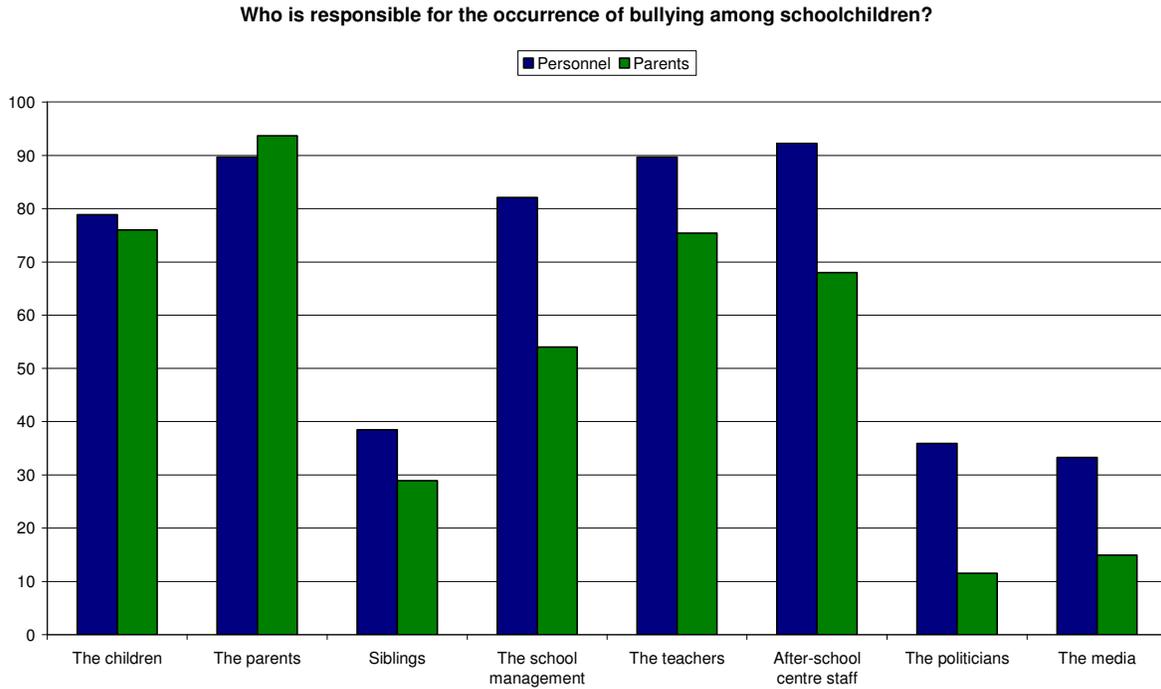


This shows that the vast majority of personnel as well as parents perceive bullying as a potential threat to children right at the start of school. Thus, it also indicates that the early intervention of Free from Bullying is seen to make sense, which is further borne out by the vast support for the project established in the first part of this report.

Responsibility for bullying

In the effort to prevent bullying, it is also important to look at the parties' views of who is responsible for its occurrence. Thus, this was asked about in the questionnaire. The distribution of responses can

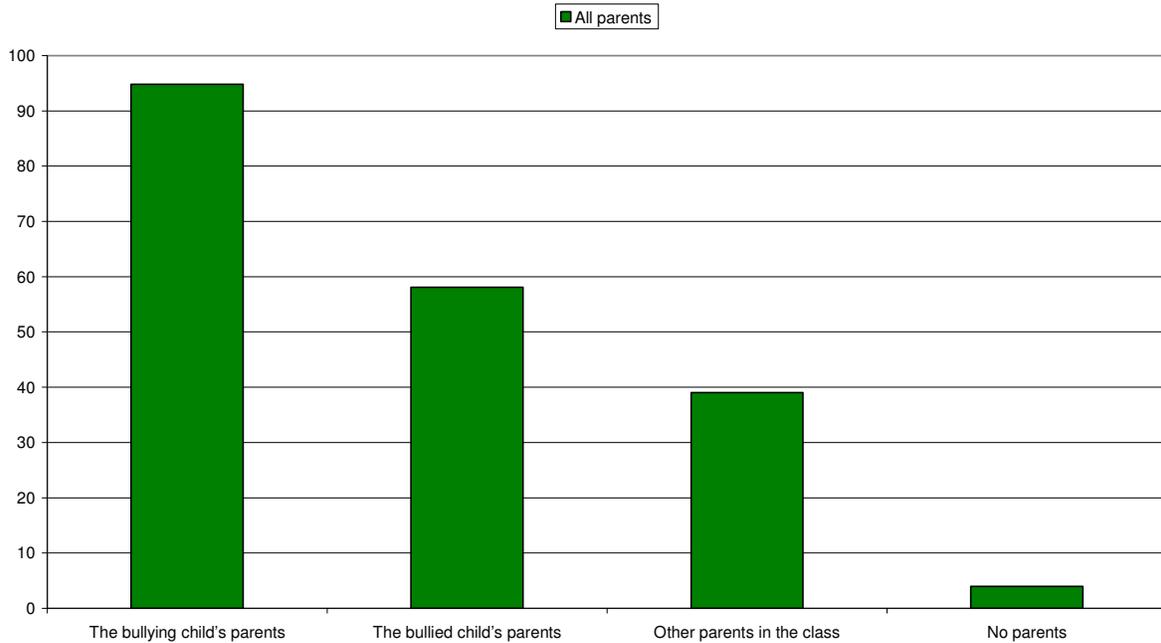
be seen in the chart below.



The figure shows that the adults who are closest to the children in everyday life, i.e. the parents, teachers and after-school centre staff, are attributed responsibility by the greatest proportion of respondents. However, the vast majority of staff members also believe that the school management has responsibility, while only slightly more than half the parents hold that view. Over 75% of both personnel and parents also believe that the children themselves have responsibility in relation to bullying. The fact that the staff rather than the parents tend to ascribe responsibility to, for instance, the media, politicians and school management may stem from this group of respondents observing, on the ground in their working lives, how such external actors indirectly influence the children’s conduct and help shape the possibilities and limitations of children’s interaction.

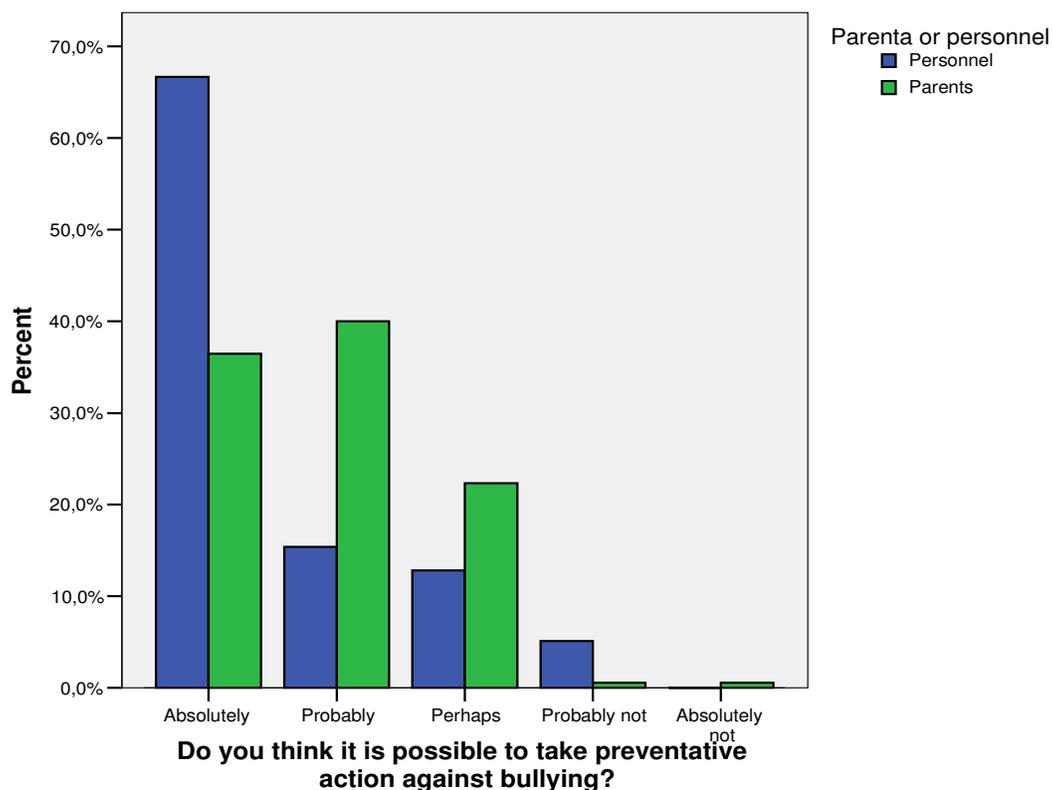
Moreover, the parents have been asked *which* parents they believe carry responsibility for any bullying that might occur in a class. The answers appear in the next chart.

If there is bullying in a class, which parents have some responsibility?



The chart shows that nearly all the parents ascribe responsibility to the parents whose child is doing the bullying. Over half find that the bullied child's parents have some responsibility, while less than 40% answer that responsibility for dealing with bullying also resides with the other parents of the class. The fact that over 60% of the parents apparently do not view bullying as a shared responsibility of all parents in a class is contrary to Save the Children's intentions of turning bullying into a collective matter that also concerns those parents whose children are not directly involved by either bullying or being bullied.

The parents and staff were also asked if they think it is possible to take preventative action against bullying. As the next chart shows, a vast majority believe that bullying may be kept in check through such measures.



Furthermore, parents and personnel were asked to offer any ideas of *how* bullying might possibly be prevented. In response, both groups mention interventions by the school as well as by the parents. There is no marked difference between the proposals for prevention of parents and professional educators. As for the school's role, for example, both parties focus much more on the work at the individual class level than on prevention at the overall school level. In particular, the conversation between teacher and pupils is highlighted by many, whether it is to talk about bullying, teasing, conflict, friendship, etc. *in general* or to address *specific* issues and aspects of the children's wellbeing in the class concerned. In addition, both parents and personnel suggest concrete tools for the prevention of bullying, such as twinned classes, play patrols, role plays, literature and films about the subject, cooperation exercises, etc. Only a few reply that the professional educators' *own conduct* may help prevent bullying by serving as role models to the children. Likewise, anti-bullying policies and action plans receive surprisingly rare mention, as only two staff members list such instruments as an element in the prevention of bullying.

The most noticeable difference between the parents' and the personnel's responses is that the former are much more likely to emphasise the importance of the school conducting a dialogue with the parents, involving them in the effort against bullying. Conversely, the replies of the staff members tend to perceive the prevention of bullying as something that takes place within the setting of the school.

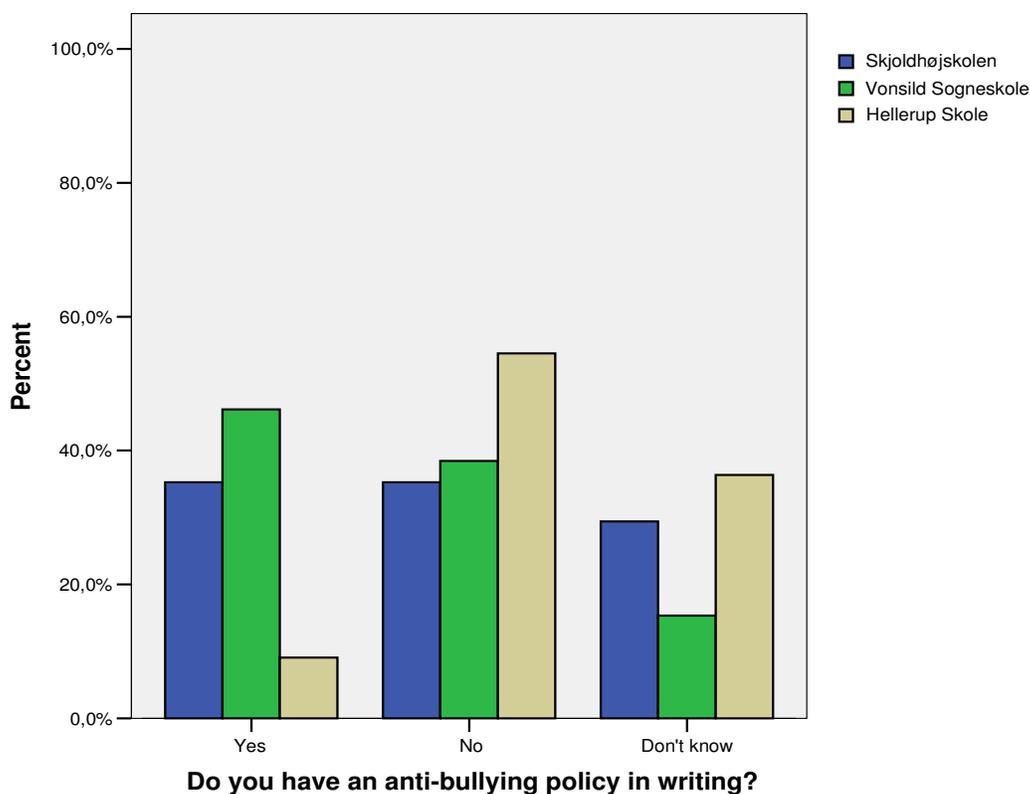
In the questionnaire, the parents were also asked to elaborate on how they see their *own* role in the prevention of bullying. The responses show that parents see their tasks as, first and foremost, educating their own child to be tolerant, open-minded and caring towards others, as well as talking to their child about bullying and specific occurrences in everyday school life. Some also see it as incumbent on them as parents to encourage their child to play with a greater variety of peers, and possibly also to defend

the weakest in their class. About a quarter of the parents indicate that parents are role models for their own children, hence being able to prevent bullying by taking care, for example, to speak respectfully about other people in the children's presence. Finally, about a fifth affirm that parents may contribute to preventing bullying by entering into positive relations with the school staff and the other parents of the class, whether it be in terms of a dialogue about bullying or simply by organising or taking part in social events.

The school's anti-bullying preparedness

A major issue in the questionnaire survey has been to examine the school's preparedness against bullying, as experienced by the school staff. On the whole, the study indicates that, internally at all three schools, there is a degree of uncertainty over this, just as the staff's competencies in relation to the prevention and containment of bullying are deemed to leave room for improvement.

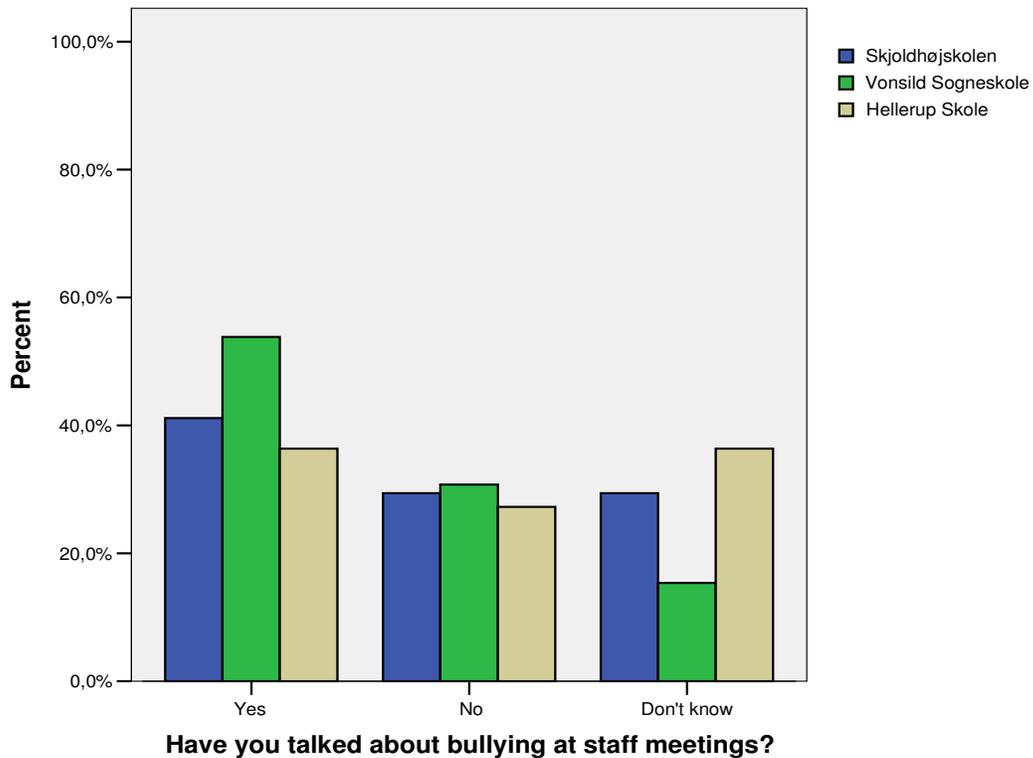
The questionnaires asked the educational staff if their school has an anti-bullying policy in writing. As the next chart shows, the responses were at odds even within each of the three schools.



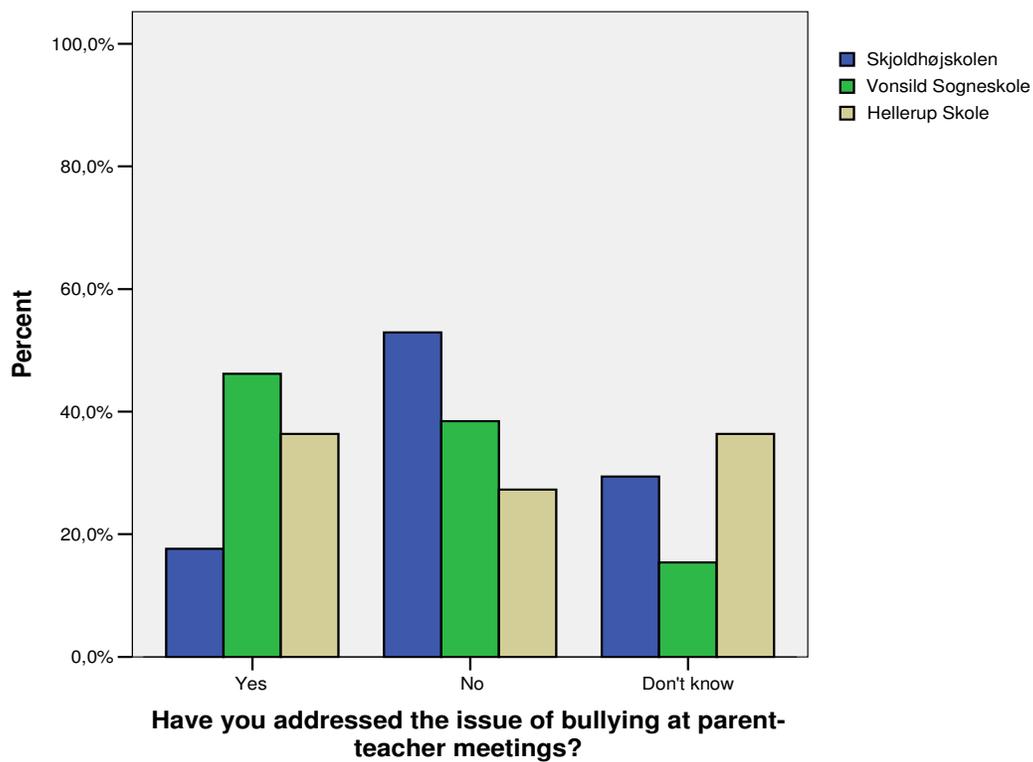
Taking the example of Skjoldhøj School, 35% of respondents believe that the school has an anti-bullying policy in writing, the same proportion come to the opposite conclusion, while 29% say they do not know. The same pattern occurs at the other two schools. What emerges is that, interestingly, the responses do *not* clarify whether the three schools actually have such a policy. However, the chart does

reveal that the schools are certainly not *actively presenting* an official anti-bullying policy known by all staff and regularly brought into play.

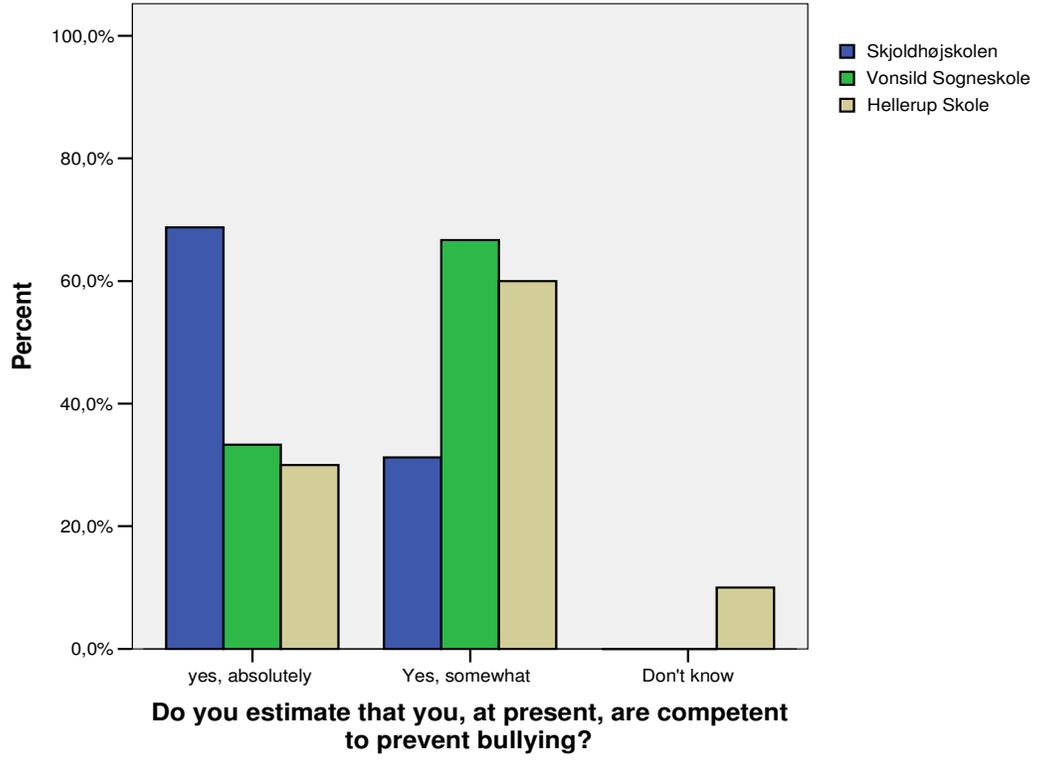
The professional educators were likewise asked if bullying has been discussed at staff meetings. 36% at Hellerup School, 41% at Skjoldhøj School and 54% at Vongsild Parish School confirmed that it has. Thus, more than half of the respondents have never addressed the issue of bullying at a staff meeting.



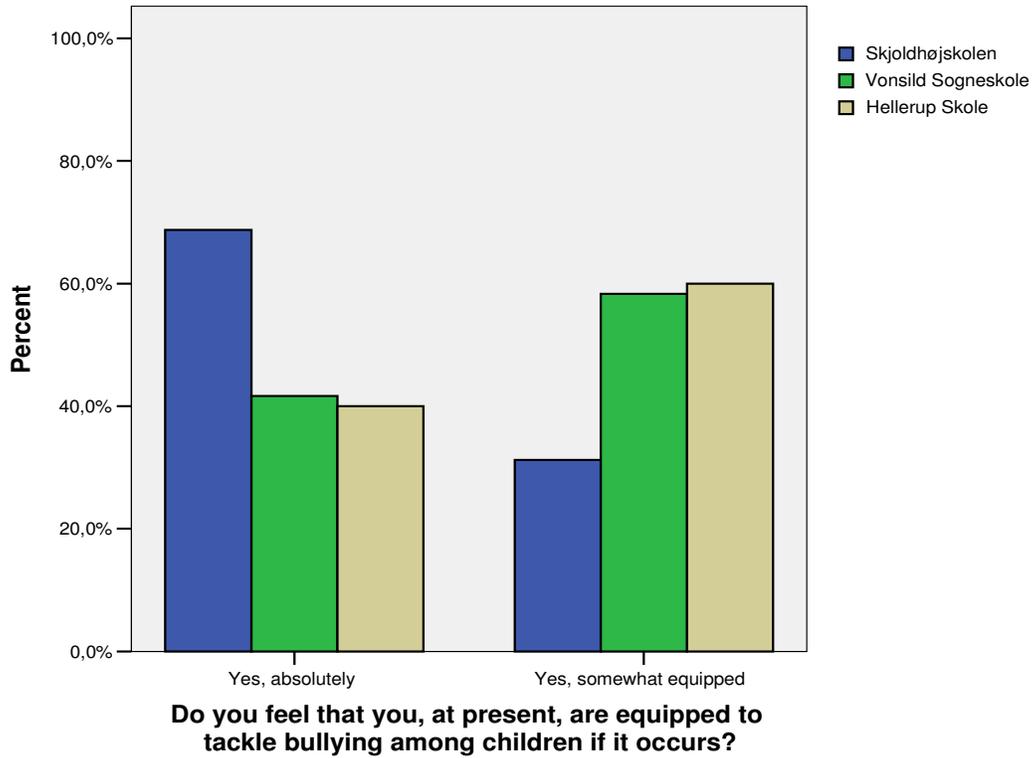
Accordingly, bullying does not seem to be a widely raised topic within the personnel groups, at least not at the meetings. The same applies to parent-teacher meetings. Only 32% of the parents in the survey reply that the issue of bullying has been addressed at a parent-teacher meeting. The next chart shows the distribution of answers at each of the three schools.



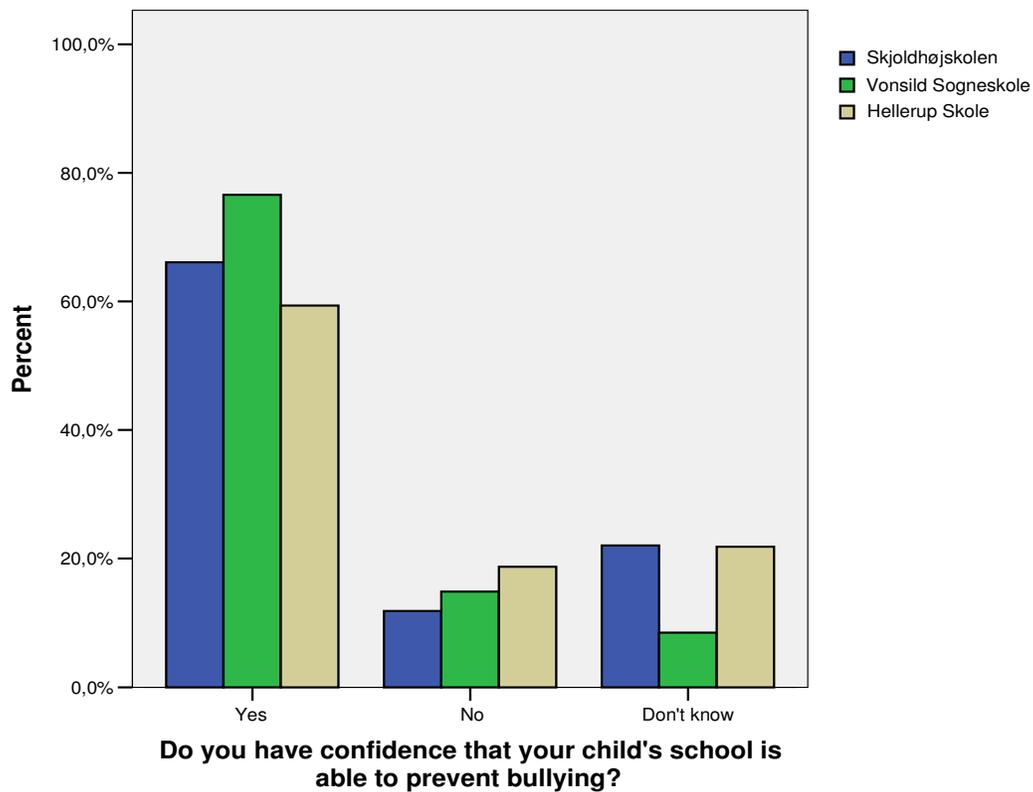
In the questionnaire, the staff members were asked to assess their own competencies in relation to the prevention of bullying. About half judged themselves to be *absolutely* competent to prevent bullying, whereas the other half felt only *somenwhat* competent. The distribution of answers at each of the three schools can be deciphered from the chart below.



Likewise, the professional educators were asked to assess their own competencies in terms of tackling any bullying after its outbreak. Again, about half felt *absolutely* equipped to deal with the problem, whereas the other half felt only *somewhat* prepared. The next chart shows the distribution of answers at each of the three schools.



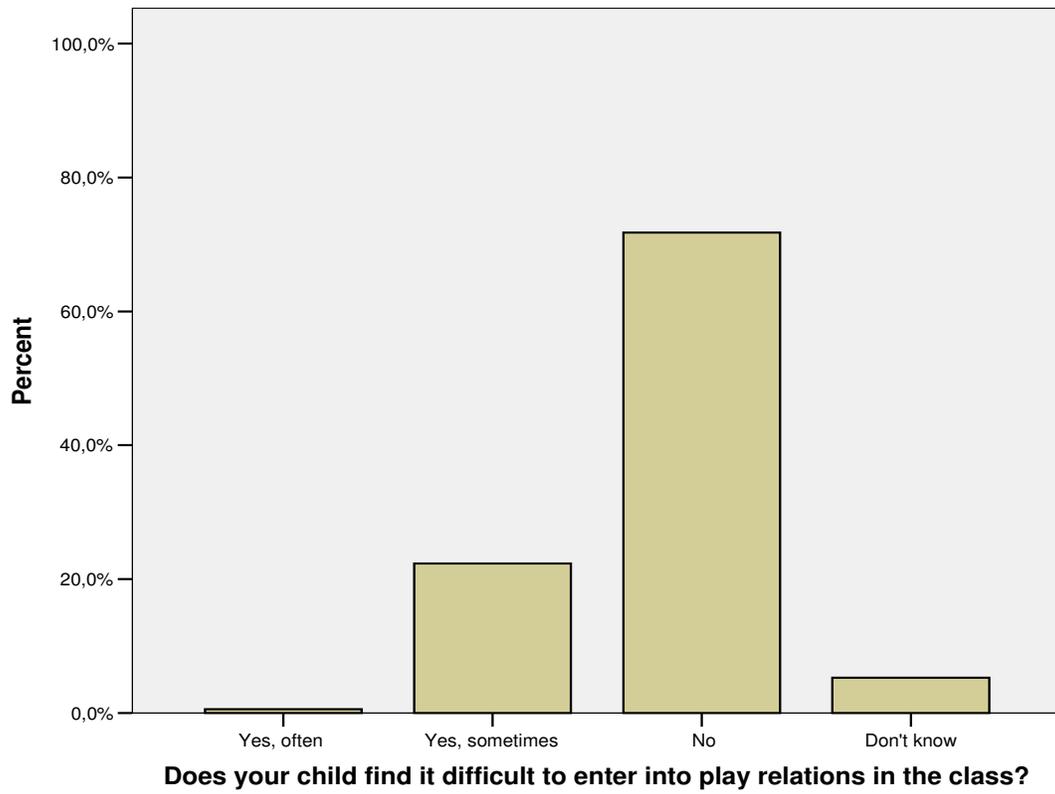
The above section has exposed the participant schools' anti-bullying preparedness as experienced by the personnel. However, it is also relevant to examine how the parents view the schools' state of readiness. The following chart shows how the parents replied to the question of whether they have confidence in their child's school's ability to prevent bullying.

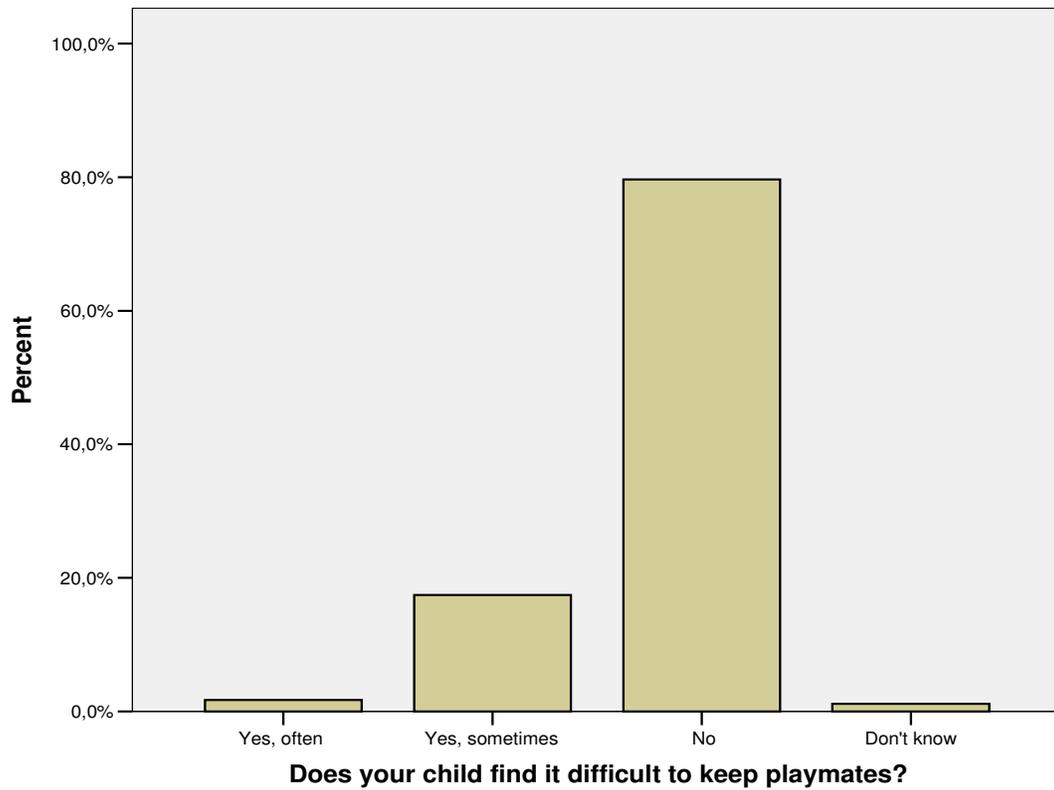


As it appears, a solid majority of parents put their trust in the school's capacity to prevent bullying, though 12-19% feel differently. The substantial proportion of parents without the confidence that their child's school can prevent bullying may stem both from their experience of inadequate anti-bullying preparedness and from the view that bullying cannot be prevented through interventions by the school.

The children's play relations and wellbeing at the schools

Both personnel and staff have answered a series of questions about the children's play relations and wellbeing at the three schools. The next two charts illustrate how the parents responded to questions about whether their child finds it difficult to enter into play relations and to keep playmates.

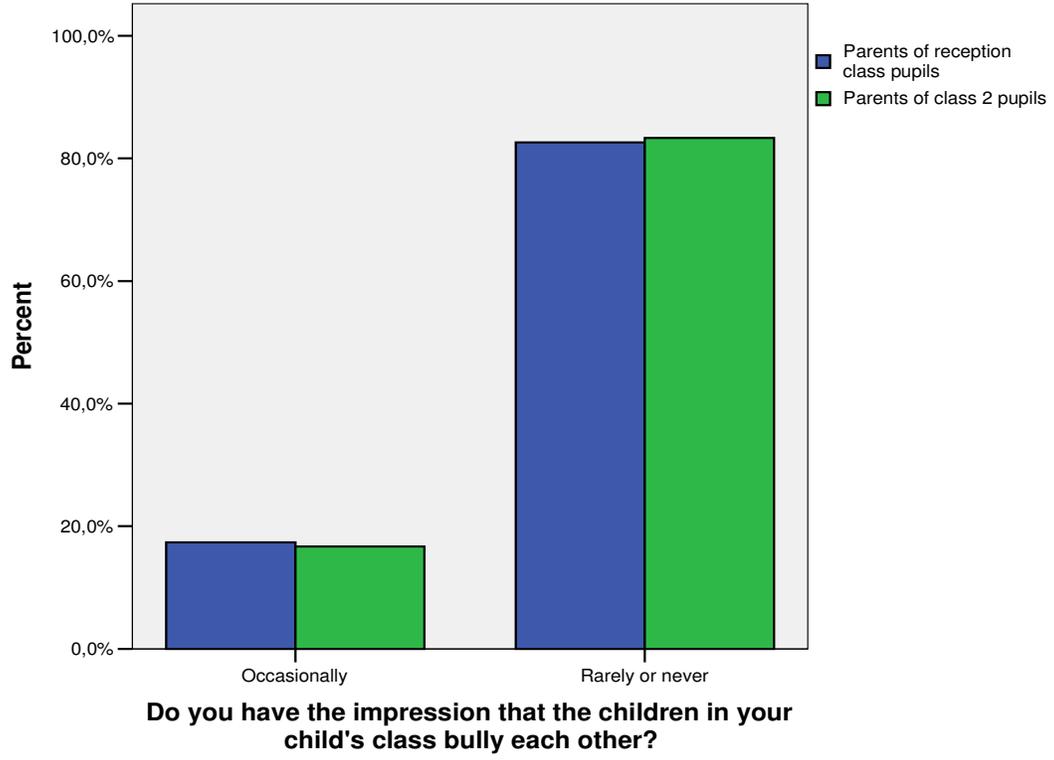


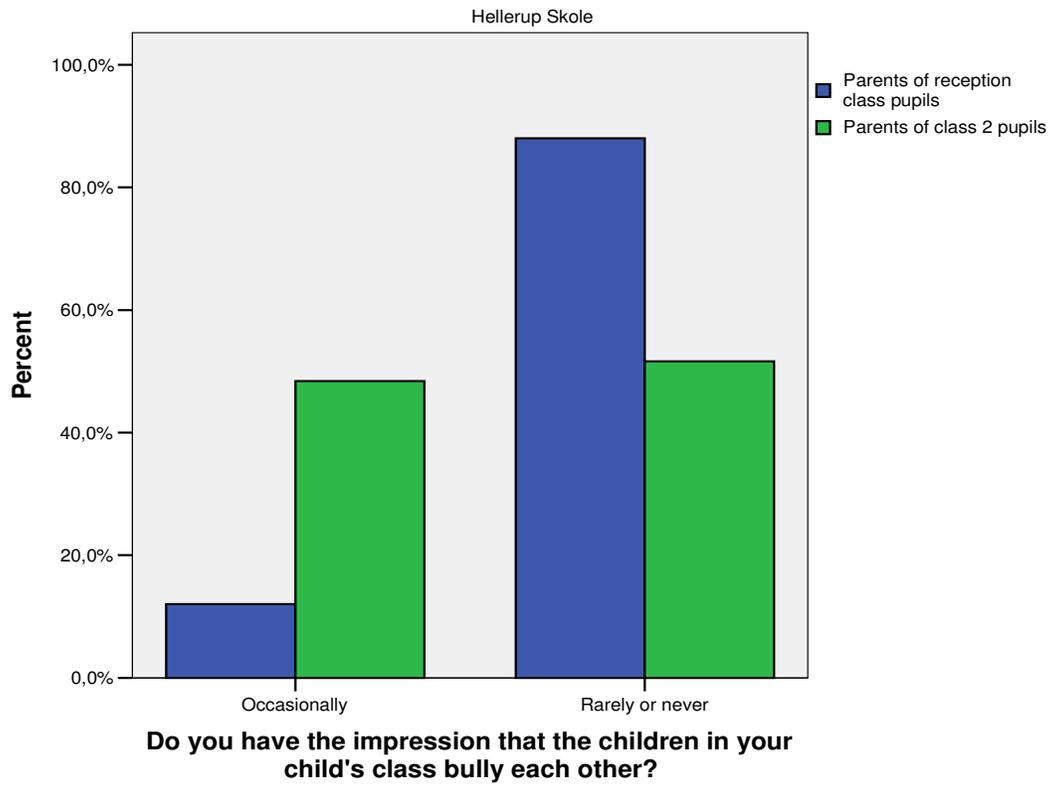


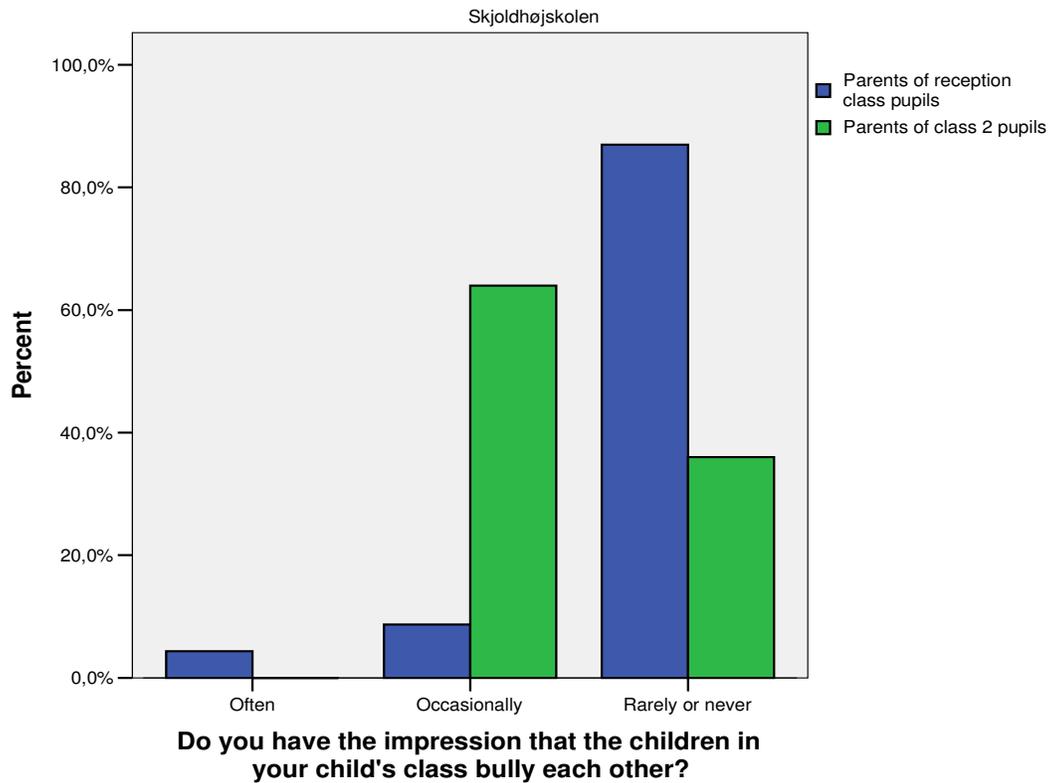
The charts show that the vast majority of parents experience that their child has no problem establishing and preserving friendships. However, there is a group of about 20% who – according to their parents – find it harder to achieve or maintain relations with their peers.

The parents were also asked if they were under the impression that outright bullying occurs in their child's class. Below, the replies are counted for each school, distinguishing between parents of reception-class and class 2 pupils.

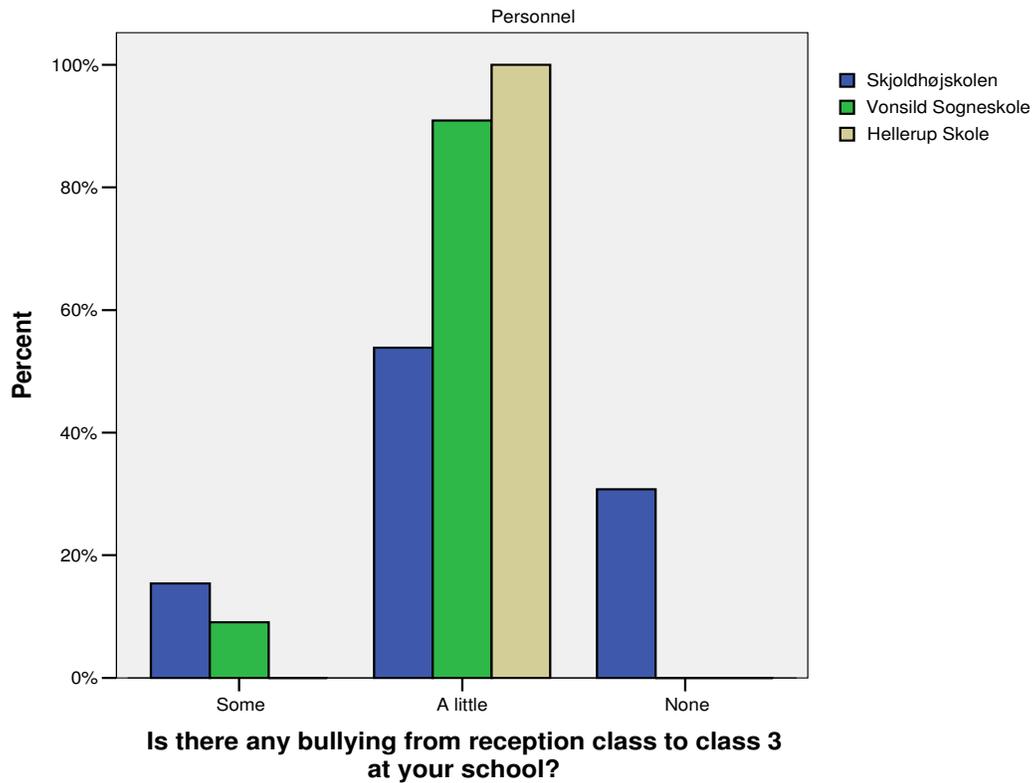
Vonsild Sogneskole







The three charts show that most parents are under the impression that bullying happens *rarely or never* in their child's class. However, some believe that bullying occurs *occasionally* or even *often*. Furthermore, the charts reveal that parents of class 2 pupils are more likely to find that bullying occurs in their child's class than parents of reception-class pupils, which could be related to the previously described perceptions of the age at which bullying begins. The parents' experiences of how much bullying takes place match the personnel's assessments, which appear from the next chart.

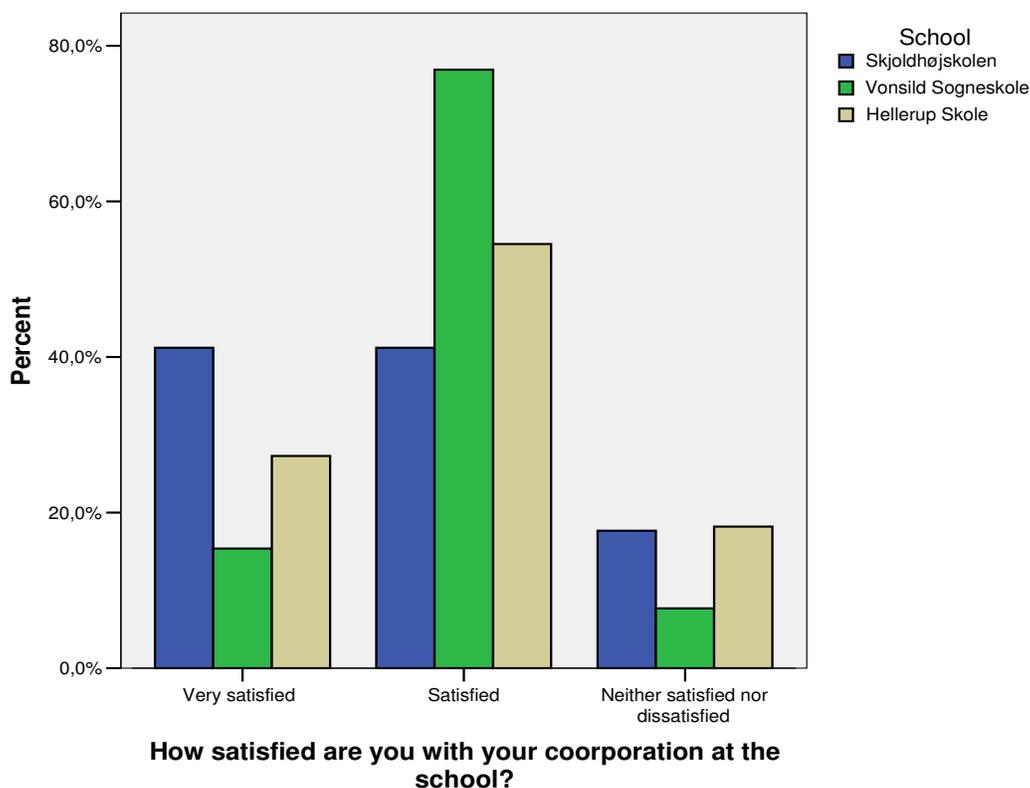


Virtually all staff members indicate that *a little* or *some* bullying occurs in the lower classes at their school. The exception is Skjoldhøj School, where 31% estimate that no bullying takes place at all among the younger schoolchildren. Interestingly, this is also the school where the highest percentage of professional educators, namely 15%, find that there is *some* bullying. This discrepancy may either be interpreted as a failure to share experiences of bullying within the staff group or as disagreement as to what can be characterised as bullying.

Social manners at the schools

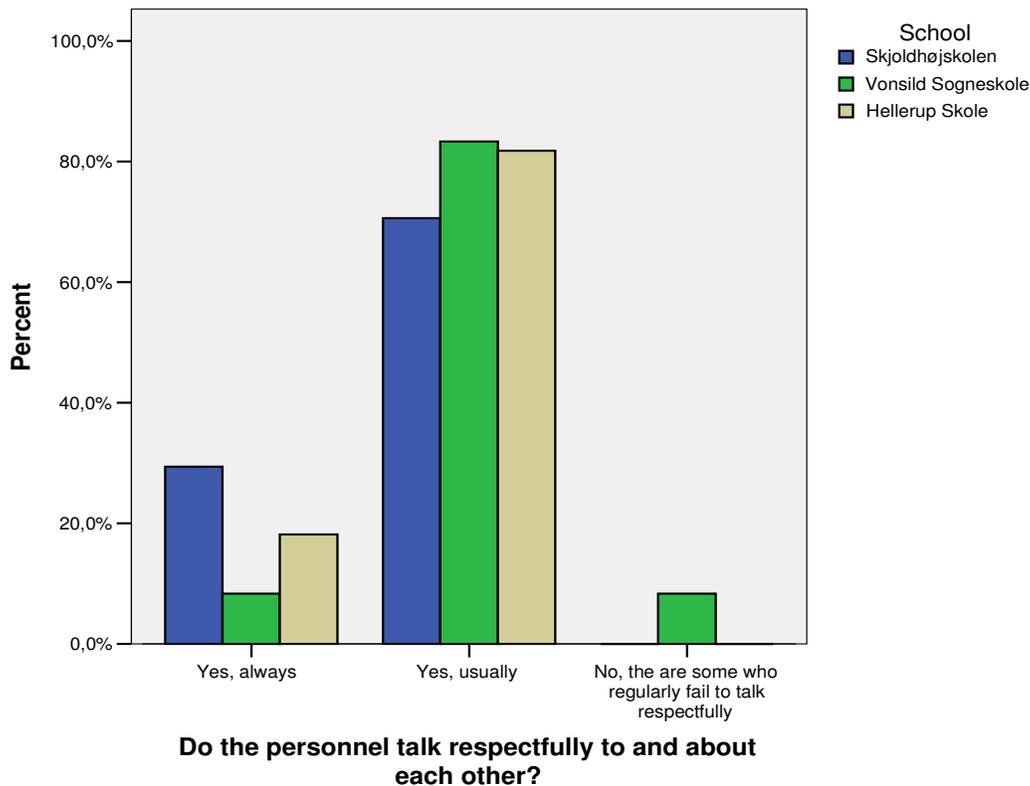
When a school or preschool wishes to take preventative measures against bullying among the children, it is important to pay attention to the social manners generally prevailing within the institution concerned. Children observe and imitate the adults, and a negative rapport among the professional educators may easily spread to the group of children. For this reason, the questionnaire designed for the personnel contained a series of questions about social manners and interaction at the school within the staff group as well as in relation to the children and their parents. The purpose of including such questions has been to foster internal debate among the professionals and to inspire discussions about standards for a good atmosphere at the workplace. Overall, the responses indicate that a clear majority of staff members experience good social manners at the schools. However, the survey also reveals problems in some areas, and that a small group of employees hold negative views of the rapport at their school.

The next chart shows how the staff members of each school view the cooperation with their colleagues.



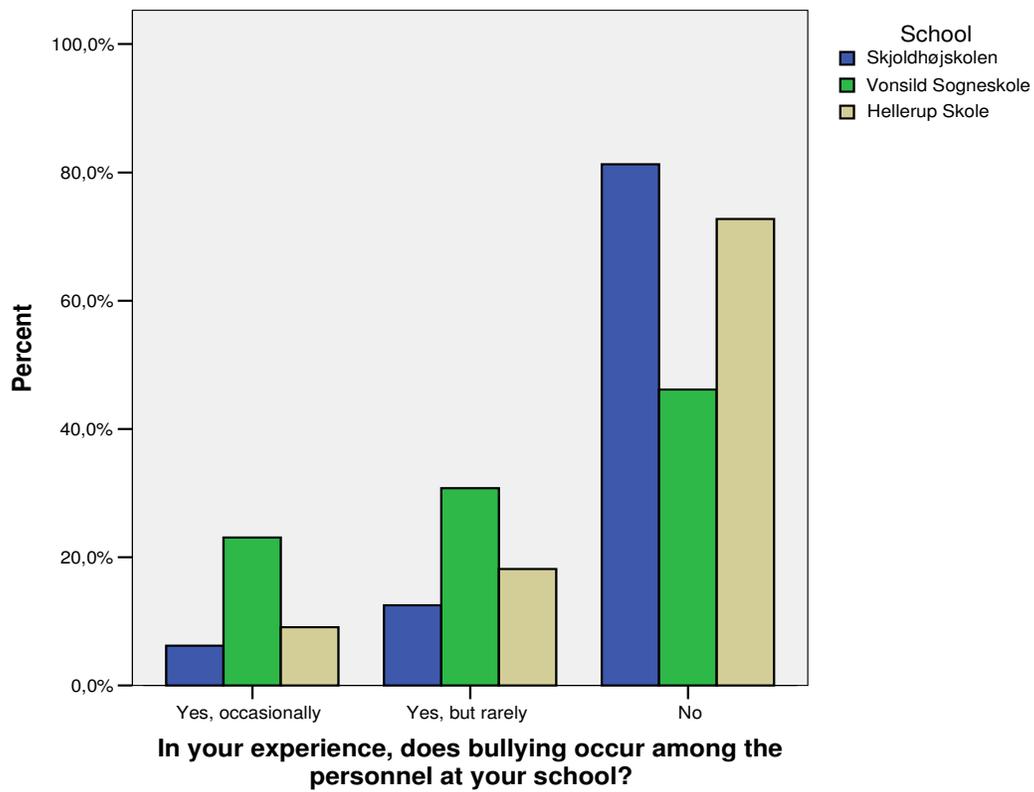
The chart makes clear that the vast majority are either *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with cooperation at their school. The highest degree of maximum satisfaction is found at Skjoldhøj School. However, here it can also be seen that about one in five indicates being *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*. Nobody has declared to be *unsatisfied*.

The personnel was also requested their view of the tone within the staff group. The following chart shows the distribution of answers to the question of whether the personnel talk respectfully to and about each other.

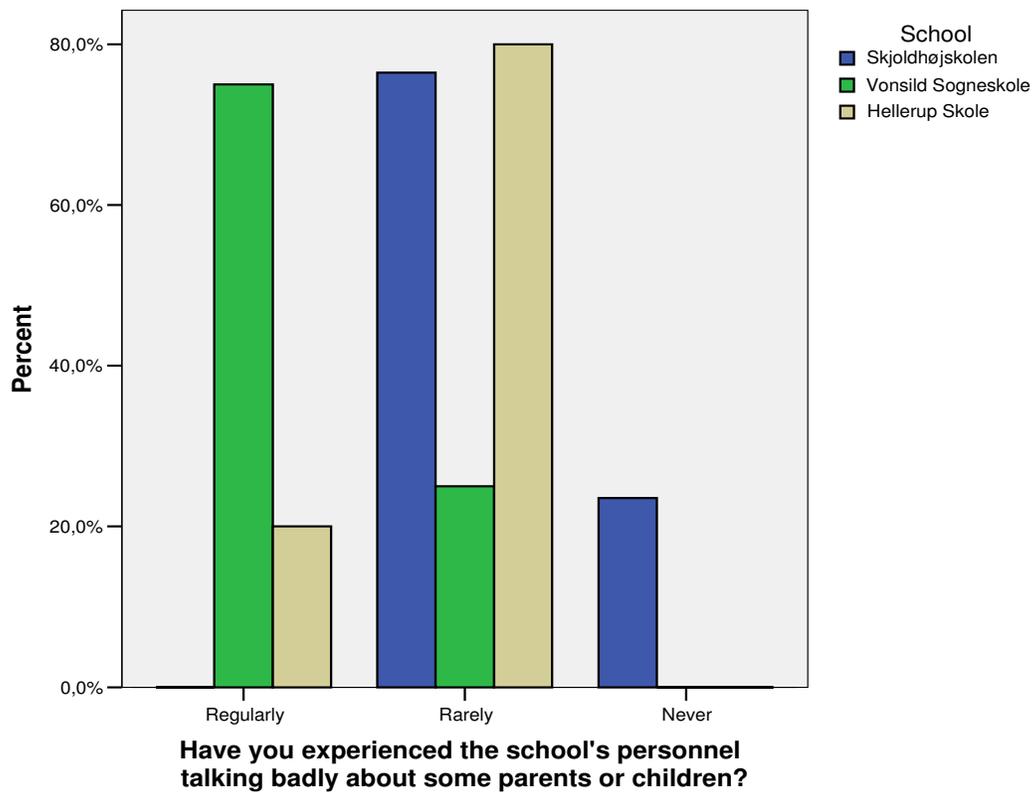


The chart shows that the personnel generally have positive experiences of the tone at the workplace, since nearly everyone replies that the staff members either *always* or *usually* talk respectfully to and about each other. However, at Vognsild Parish School, a few find that some colleagues *regularly* fail to preserve a proper tone.

As for outright bullying within the staff groups, the picture is less rose-tinted. Here, 77% at Skjoldhøj School, 46% at Vognsild Parish School, and 73% at Hellerup School answer *no* to whether bullying occurs among the employees, whereas the rest find that bullying takes place *rarely* or *occasionally*. The distribution of replies appears from the chart below.

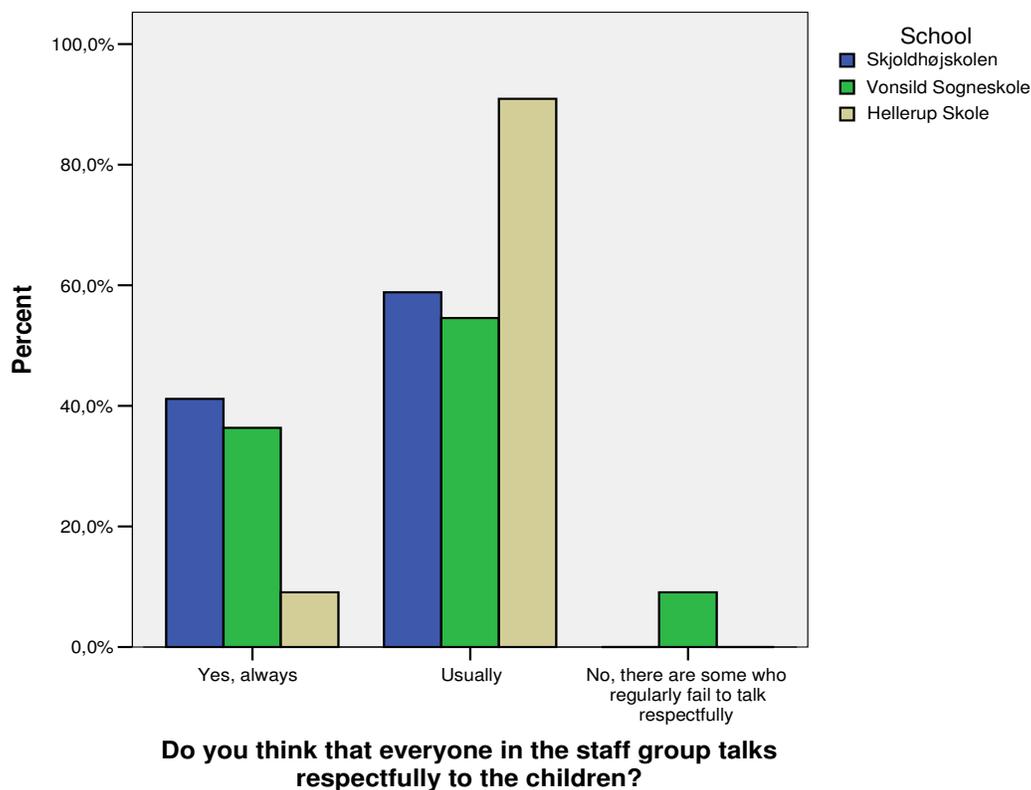


The personnel were also asked how they experience the internal talk about the children and their parents. As the next chart shows, a rather large group observes that individual parents or children are regularly the object of negative mention.



At Vonsild Parish School, 75% of the staff group find that parents and children are regularly talked about in negative terms, whereas only 20% of the personnel have the same experience.

The professional educators were also asked whether they find that everyone in the staff group talks respectfully to the children. The distribution of answers appears from the next chart.



The chart shows that the staff, by and large, find that the children are talked to respectfully, that is either *always* or *usually*. However, at Vognsild Parish School, 9% indicate that some colleagues *regularly fail to talk respectfully* to the children.

On the whole, the questionnaire survey shows that the social manners at individual schools are, in some areas, subject to differing assessments by staff members. While some are satisfied and rather upbeat about how people interact at the school, others hold more critical views. This may stem from each professional entering into different contacts and cooperative relations in their day-to-day work, but may also reflect a variety of tolerance thresholds, expectations to or standards for good conduct. Whatever is the case, conversation within the staff group is likely to contribute to an even greater share of the professional educators experiencing the social manners at their school as positive and pleasant.

Conclusion

In the Danish spring of 2007, the personnel and parents of children in participant *preschool* centres completed a questionnaire with many questions identical to those in the questionnaire reported upon above. This resulted in the follow-up research project's 1st report issued in June 2007. When comparing the answers to the two questionnaires, the parallels are obvious. Both at schools and preschools, support for the project is overwhelming among parents as well as personnel.

Similarly, the parents and the professional educators tend to concur in their understanding of bullying and of who has responsibility for it. Both at preschools and schools, the adults closest to the children

(parents, preschool teachers, reception-class teachers and schoolteachers) are most massively ascribed responsibility for the occurrence of bullying. However, both at preschools and schools, there are some parents and staff members (nearly 10%) who do not feel responsible themselves. One of the most striking differences in responses to the two questionnaires is that the school personnel are significantly more likely than the preschool personnel to attribute responsibility to the management for whether bullying takes place. Less than half the preschool staff members see the management as holding responsibility, compared to over 80% of the school personnel who hold this view. This discrepancy is interesting, because it may be deciphered as different ways of perceiving the prevention of bullying in relation to organisation. Normally, the management is not in day-to-day contact with the children, but may help prevent bullying by placing it on the agenda in the school or preschool, and by taking the initiative to set an overall framework for this effort in terms of policies, action plans, etc. Thus, one interpretation of the divergent responses of preschool and school staff on this point is that school people are more used to thinking along the lines of executive control and joint guidelines.

Towards the end of the follow-up research project, the questionnaires for parents and personnel in schools and preschools, respectively, will be followed up by yet another questionnaire to the same parties in order to draw conclusions concerning possible changes in the experiences of, and perspectives on, bullying and the prevention thereof.

The report's data material

This report is based on a questionnaire survey among personnel in the lower years and attendant after-school centre of each school, as well as among parents of reception-class and class 2 pupils at Skjoldhøj School in Århus, Vognsild Parish School in Kolding, and Hellerup School in Gentofte. In the boreal autumn of 2007, the questionnaires were sent to the schools, which took charge of circulating them among staff and parents, and subsequently also of collecting the completed forms. In the case of the questionnaire for parents, only one copy was handed out to each pupil, even when the parents concerned were not cohabiting. The responses remained anonymous, and were submitted in an attached envelope. At two schools, the initially low response rate led to the circulation of another questionnaire with an accompanying explanatory letter. The list below indicates the number of incoming questionnaires by school and group of respondents.

Skjoldhøj School

Personnel: 17

Reception-class parents: 33 (out of 40¹)

Class 2 parents: 30 (out of 42)

Vonsild Parish School

Personnel: 13

¹ The number of children at each level of schooling is found on the school's websites. The exact numbers of staff members in the lower years (from reception class to class 3) and in the after-school centres of each school are unknown to us, which is why we have refrained from calculating an exact response rate.

Reception-class parents: 24 (out of 34)

Class 2 parents: 24 (out of 36)

Hellerup School

Personnel: 11

Reception-class parents: 32 (out of 59)

Class 2 parents: 35 (out of 69)

Total

Personnel: 41

Reception-class parents: 89 (out of 133)

Class 2 parents: 89 (out of 147)

The submitted questionnaire data was entered into and analysed in the data-processing program SPSS.