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PRESCHOOL TEACHER STRATEGIES FOR SOLVING
CONFLICT SITUATIONS AMONG CHILDREN

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Abstract

This study focuses on interaction of a teacher and a child in kindergarten in the situations that we can perceive as conflicting communication among children in preschool environment. For the purpose of this study, we consider a situation to be perceived as conflicting when two or more children have a misunderstanding caused by the non-conformance of their interests in the kindergarten class. The aim of qualitatively oriented research is to find out how the teachers perceive a conflict, what situations they describe and how they choose strategies in these situations. The data was obtained through participatory observation in four different classes of kindergarten, with six teachers of these classes who also underwent an in-depth interview. The transcripts passed then through the open encoding and category creation. The results show that only some teachers include the child's view of the situation in their strategy; their decisions are mainly based on the assumed social skills of children, where active participation in the solution of the situation is expected from children over 5 years of age. A frequent case is the "no discussion" teacher's strategy, when the conflict situation is solved only by teacher's own decided interference thus the children remain in a passive role.

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1. Introduction

Conflict, as the manifestation of opposition between two individuals, is an integral part of human communication. For children this consists of situations where they recognize the negative circumstances of communication, learn to respond to emerging problems, and become aware of their own emotions and the emotional expressions of others. Children have already begun at preschool age to understand the causes of emotional reactions; they already know that certain situations always evoke the same feelings, such as a feeling of happiness. The causes of negative emotions are less identifiable, and as a result situation that cause fear or anger can only be differentiated by children over four years of age. Children of older preschool age understand why they sometimes feel bad in certain situations. Their own experiences aid their comprehension (Vágnerová, 2005).

Conflict in the school environment is perceived as a difficult educational situation. The most frequently described problem behaviours of preschool children that need to be addressed by the kindergarten teacher include impulsivity, hyperactivity, and increased aggression (Powell, Fixen, & Dunlap, 2003). The specific expressions affect the child himself and the peer group in the kindergarten class, and can disrupt order in the classroom. These influence the overall atmosphere of the class and, of course, the work of the teacher. A lack of preparedness for dealing with challenging situations with children tends to be one of the problems that create so-called culture shock in novice teachers. Even the higher-quality concept of the work of future teachers cannot offer students enough experience to resolve the various conflict situations they encounter in their day-to-day interactions with children and their parents.

Knowledge of potential teacher strategies for conflict situations among children in the kindergarten environment is therefore an important part of preparation for future teachers. Based on the research of the present study, it is not possible to present a generalized model of strategies; the effort is rather to expand knowledge about the real situation portrayed.

2. Problem Statement

In previous research by one of the authors dealing with the perceived challenges faced by kindergarten teachers in interacting with children, the sense of helplessness of teachers during childhood conflicts was identified. Teachers described the specific situations in which they perceived a lack of control over conflict resolution options, concerns of inappropriate intervention, reflecting the experiences they encountered only during the course of their day-to-day in kindergarten classes. I have a problem to meddle with children conflicts because I don't know who's right and wrong and I don't want to treat anyone unjustly (Navrátilová, 2015).

The present study therefore focuses on an analysis of teacher strategies in conflict situations among preschool children in kindergartens. Since there are many different definitions of conflict in the literature of communication, psychology and pedagogy, it was necessary to define what situations can be considered conflicts before engaging in field research. Based on a review of the literature, as well as knowledge of the kindergarten environment, we consider a conflict to be a situation in which two or more children have a misunderstanding caused by the incompatibility of their interests in a given activity (Dudzińska, 1977).

2.1. Types of child conflict

The traditional criterion for defining conflicts, which is also applicable to conflict situations among preschool children, is the number of people involved, to which the consequences of the conflict and the options for resolving it are related. Conflicts can be intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, or may consist of conflicts within a group. For many situations, the factors of origin and number of people may vary depending on the situation.

An example of a specific typology that already reflects the specific environment and interaction of kindergarten children is the definition of the authors Isenberg and Jalongo (2006):

- Ownership disputes: occur when children argue about a toy or other subjects.
- Disputes over domination: occur when children want to be the first or force other children to play games "after theirs".
- Conflicts when entering a group: these occur when a child attempts to join an ongoing group activity.
- Disputes at play: these occur when the child's aggression increases in intensity
- Disputes between children and adults: arise when children or adults have disagreements about rules, or prefer certain games, activities, or ways of initiate and maintaining interaction.

2.2. Teacher strategies in conflict situations in the school environment

The typology of the teacher's strategies can be viewed through the concept of a hierarchical model. Lewis, Roache, & Romi (2011) identified six common teachers' strategies for managing conflict situations: rewarding, punishing, involvement in decision-making, discussion and negotiation, hinting, and aggression. These specified strategies can also be included among the general practices that teachers use. Finally, they fell into five broad categories: (1) maximize structure and predictability; (2) post, teach, review, and provide feedback on expectations; (3) actively engage students in observable ways; (4) use a continuum of strategies to acknowledge appropriate behavior, and (5) use a continuum of strategies to respond to inappropriate behavior (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008; Eleftheria, Botsoglou, & Andreou, 2013).

Essa (2011) recommends that teachers focus within the basic definition of possible responses based on parenting strategies in families:

- Reinforce correct behaviour.
The concept of self is influenced by how the adult responds to the behaviour of the child. The adult's reaction is retained in the child's memory and, depending on the situation, the child reacts. The correct behaviour is reinforced in a child when the adult shows that she appreciates what the child is doing or how he is responding. It should be kept in mind that verbal support for behaviour must always be honest. Empty praise or learned phrases will not give children the necessary lessons. Of course, praise does not always need to be expressed verbally but can be expressed in different ways as well. Recognition or praise can be communicated, for example, through a smile, touch, eye contact, or embrace. All these forms of recognition are of great importance to the child.
- Ignoring inappropriate behaviour.

One of the most effective strategies is to ignore the inappropriate behaviour, simply do not pay any attention. Of course, it is always difficult to ignore inappropriate behaviour, and in some situations this cannot be sustained. The best way is to use this method when a child repeatedly disrupts the class. However, this method is not suitable when, for example, a child is hitting someone; such situations cannot be overlooked. Ignoring is best used when the child is trying to attract attention. The teacher can identify this situation, usually by the child first looking around before doing something; he gains the attention in order to be sure that someone is watching him.

- Discussion and creative solution of the problem.

One of the methods that works, particularly in older children of preschool age, is discussion. Children at this age are already willing to discuss with the teacher about the behaviour or conflict that has occurred. Sometimes, when there is a problem, it is necessary to get to the "core" of the issue so the child knows why this is not done. Discussion can take place with the teacher alone or with the entire class in cases where the problem applies to all children, and also serves as a form of prevention. When searching for solutions, everyone will come up with a proposal. The teacher then listens carefully and tells the children what was wrong and what was right if they are not able to judge. The solution is mutual respect. If at any time the child decides to talk about their problems privately, the teacher should always be available to make the child feel more secure.

It is possible to consider the teacher's strategies in two dimensions. When applying the first strategy, the teacher remains dominant; she is a formal judge who deals with the children's conflicts and tells them what to do. In the second case, the teacher is more an observer, supporting children in the active search for possible solutions. Both types of strategies have also appeared in the research findings discussed further in Chapter 6.

3. Research Questions

The research in the present study attempts to respond to the following research questions:

- What strategies do teachers choose in conflict situations among kindergarten children?
- What conflict situations among children are described by kindergarten teachers?
- How do kindergarten teachers perceive conflict situations among children?
- How does a teacher communicate with children in conflict situations?

4. Research Questions

The aim of the present study is to describe the observed strategies of a teacher in conflict situations among kindergarten children. Next, to reveal how teachers perceive conflict between preschool children and how children communicate with them in these situations.

The purpose of the study was also to use the results to develop recommendations to be applied in kindergartens and also to provide relevant findings to be discussed in the teaching of future kindergarten

teachers as part of their university studies. This will give rise to the desirable penetration of current knowledge with current research findings from a real environment.

5. Research Methods

In keeping with the established research objectives, qualitative research strategies were selected for this study. In preschool education research, we more frequently encounter studies based on direct observation and/or analysis of video recordings with subsequent quantitative methods of data analysis (Suchodoletz, von Fäsche, Gunzenhauser, Hamre, 2014; König, 2009; Tompkins et al., 2013). Data acquisition and in-depth interviews were used to collect data. Participatory observation took place directly in a location that was natural for the participants, allowing them to see and understand situations in real time. A total of 19 observations took place in three kindergarten classes during the entire morning, when all children are present in the classroom. Observations and subsequent in-depth interviews involved 6 teachers of the kindergarten. Teachers had different amounts of experience (3 to 25 years) and had completed high school and university studies.

Data obtained in the form of field notes and interview transcripts was subjected to open coding and consequently to the categorization process. The analysed data was discussed by two researchers at the same time in order to create a consensus that supports their reliability.

6. Findings

The results of the present study provide answers to the research questions posed. It should be noted that this is a small sample size as part of an effort to follow repeatedly selected kindergarten classes and analyse the observed phenomena of conflict situations based on subsequent interviews with the teachers of the classes. However, we consider the findings to be the basis for a deeper discussion of observed phenomena in the teaching of future kindergarten teachers at the university.

6.1. Observed causes of conflict

While observing children interacting in class, we identified some causes of conflict situations among children. Conflict over a toy or other subjects is one of the most common and applied mostly to young children. In children prior to admission to elementary school, disputes were registered in these situations, but they did not transit further into conflict. Children were usually able to solve the problem independently. However, verbal or physical assault of other children in the group occurred even in the case of older children during teacher-directed educational activities. The children tried to gain a certain advantage for themselves, for example a pencil they felt worked better on graphomotoric sheets. Here the predominant frontal organizational form, which does not support cooperation and development of social skills, plays a role.

The behaviour of a particular child was a major factor in the emergence of conflict across the classes observed. In these classes there are children who seek out conflict situations. In one class there was a boy who was constantly taking toys from other children; it seemed that he was intentionally trying to upset the given child. Over time some of the children had become accustomed to his behaviour and resisted the pressure he was applying. But some of the children became involved in a conflict with him, so the boy got his way. *One boy was disrupting the entire class of children during managed activities, and within a short*

time he was not satisfied "merely" by disrupting the others but began nudging the children next to him - he nudged nearby friends, pushed at them, poked them with his finger. The children were upset and did not like the entire situation. For this reason the teacher intervened and moved the boy to another spot. However, the formal change did not work as the teacher wished; the calming of the situation occurred only when the boy devoted himself to individual activities alone".

6.2. Conflict with the view of the kindergarten teacher

Teachers in the interview described specific conflict situations from their own practice. One of their most common experiences was the children fighting over toys, tugging or shoving. This is a fairly common conflict among children in the group, mostly with no observed serious manifestations of aggression towards other children. One of the teachers, however, described a child's exceptional behaviour during conflicts. *"We were with the children in the garden. Some of the children wanted to use the toilet, so I went with them. From the door, I looked around the garden and saw the two boys pushing each other on the hill. I couldn't leave the children alone at that time. One fell, and the other started kicking him. I immediately began calling the teacher who was nearby, but her back was to the children. She immediately turned and got involved, but he was actually kicking him. I don't know where the kids get it."* The teacher was disturbed by the conflict, because he did not expect children to respond that way in kindergarten. Teachers also described conflicts arising in children with disabilities, such as in a child with autism spectrum disorders, who generally do not wish to play with others.

6.3. Conflict resolution strategies

The specifics of interaction of preschool children is the significant difference in communication from the perspective of age. In the Czech Republic, most children enter kindergarten at the age of 3 and in the course of the next three years come into contact with both the school environment and set rules, as well as peers. Children explore and imitate communication strategies following the model of other children and teachers. The gradual development of strategies of mutual conflicts takes place as well, where the approach of the teacher is important as a model for the children. When examining conflict situations among preschool children, the participating teachers determined appropriate strategies based on the age of the children.

When a conflict situation develops, the teacher usually decides whether to intervene or let the children solve it themselves. Here is the overall view of the teacher in a conflict situation: *"A conflict situation is something, or rather, something is happening, that has to be resolved. It cannot go unnoticed."* Of all the strategies observed, three major categories were identified on the basis of this criterion: (1) the teacher as observer of the children, (2) a teacher's approach involving the child's perspective, and (3) a solution "without discussion". Another category is conflict observed outside the teacher's field of view, when the teacher did not even have a chance to respond and the situation was resolved organically by the children themselves.

(1) Teacher as observer of the children.

For children in kindergarten, it is advantageous in many situations if the teacher first chooses the role of observer. The teacher occasionally takes note of the conflict, but decides not to interfere. The reasons can be manifold: she can decide thus because she has a lot of work, is paying attention to another child, or

decides to observe what strategies the children will choose to resolve the conflict. " I don't like solving these minor conflicts. So most of the time, it just seems like a good idea for me to leave them alone, if it's nothing serious, to leave them alone and set them apart to let them try to talk it out among themselves. And it always gets solved by letting them talk it out when I set them apart".

In some situations, the teacher acts as an observer, but anticipates that he will need to intervene. From the beginning, he closely watches the behaviour of the children to see whether it improves or worsens over time. One of the teachers mentioned the strategy of their U4 solution: "At first I leave it alone, to see what happens, and watch the interaction. Of course I don't interfere with it right from the start; if there's anything to do with violence, I would get involved, but I always try to let them sort it out by themselves. Just so that they'll be self-sufficient. Because at school they will have their breaks alone and there they will deal with each other, so they need to prepare for school and for the future".

(2) Approach involving the perspective of the child.

Sometimes the teacher notices a conflict situation from the beginning, but she cannot always be certain of who is at fault. In such cases, in order to clarify the entire situation, they listen to each of the parties involved to get an idea of how the children themselves see the situation. An example may include one of the observed situations. The children made a train out of foam cubes. They also had a cap and wanted to be the conductor, while others just wanted to be passengers. When it came to who would be the conductor, two boys wanted to. And they began to pull on the cap because they both wanted to be the conductor. One of the boys began to cry and smacked the other boy on the hand; the teacher noticed the conflict and intervened. She asked the children what was going on, and whether they would agree on who would be the conductor first. The boys settled down after a while, and one of them was the conductor for a few minutes, and then they switched roles. It is important for children to get involved in the solution at times, too, at least by listening to them by the teacher.

(3) The "no discussion" approach.

Especially among younger children in classes and in heterogeneous classes, teachers often responded to conflict situations with a rapid authoritative, formal intervention. "*I have to intervene quickly because they, they can really hurt each other. It sometimes can lead to real aggression, they can hurt each other. So I have to intervene fast, and we try to solve it among ourselves, but we also have to keep an eye on things and sometimes actually run between them.*" The teachers' actions then include scolding the children, removing the subject of the dispute, separating the children from each other. However, if they do not follow up with a conversation with children about the situation, they do not naturally learn to think about the conflict themselves.

7. Conclusion

The teacher always chooses the strategy based on several factors. One of them is the current atmosphere involving teacher and child moods and ongoing classroom activities, which the teacher can influence in advance with appropriately selected pedagogical strategies for children's activities. "*There, of course, a person activates and immediately thinks about how to explain to the children, of course, one of*

these teachers has to resolve or prevent the conflict in some way, but the children also have to understand that this is not right and that they have to solve these situation themselves, so I mostly think of what I can tell them, how to respond, whether I should be stricter or deal with it more by consensus... ". Compared to the wider range of possible strategies reported by Simonsen et. al. (2008) or Eleftheria et al. (2013) the participating teachers did not make use of many opportunities, their approach was also based on trying to solve the problem of the children themselves, even among the oldest children in the class, i.e. between 6 and 7 years old.

As the teachers in the interview reflected on the solutions they used in the conflict situation, they admitted that they would have preferred to address the issue with the child's active participation in discussion and making suggestions. But the much simpler reaction of a teacher in a full classroom is simply to scold the children, which does not require much contemplation. This is an approach that does not seem harmful, but in this way the teacher is not acting in the best interests of the children, who need to observe and imitate strategies based on active discussion and meaningful solutions to problems.

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