

Interpersonal Conflicts between Children as Difficult Situations in Teaching

Abstract

Interpersonal conflicts arising between children are not only difficult for children themselves, but also for teachers responsible for conducting educational and didactic activities with children. Empirical studies (based on the diagnostic survey method: interviews with children, questionnaires for teachers) conducted among one hundred preschool teachers working with six-year-olds, and among one hundred preschoolers, have revealed that a considerable percentage of the surveyed teachers underestimate the importance of children's conflict situations in their educational activities. The teachers are mostly unaware of the developmental dimension of conflicts, and they emphasise mainly the negative impact of such situations on children (46%), often punishing their pupils – as claimed by six-year-olds – for becoming engaged in a dispute (48%). The teachers also fail, to a significant extent, to reflect upon incidents of conflict, be it reflection upon the situation in the course of action or reflection upon the action with the benefit of hindsight. Results obtained in the studies demonstrate that the teachers do not show their pupils what a constructive dispute is about, and do not teach them any ways to resolve a conflict situation in an integrative manner – in cooperation with other interaction partners. They also fail to explain the meaning of dialogue in the conflict process to children, despite claiming to do so (81%). The findings may imply that although teachers know which constructive procedures should be used in situations of conflict between children, they do not put their knowledge into practice because, e.g., they are not competent enough to do so.

Keywords: *interpersonal conflict, difficult situation, reflective actions of teachers, destructive and constructive meaning of conflicts, strategy of punitive behaviours in conflict, dialogue in conflict situations, culture of conflict.*

1. Introduction

The defining features of our times are diversity and variability. Postmodernists argue that the world is designed in an antagonistic fashion: dominated by ambiguity, dissimilarity and multiplicity of discourse – the category of difference. Such differences, they emphasise, should be perpetuated, while conflict should be proposed as a fundamental rule. D. Dana argues that “not to have conflicts means not to live” (D. Dana, 1993, p. 7) because without conflict one loses the autonomy and individuality reflecting the uniqueness of every single individual: their needs, attitudes, systems of values and expectations. This is why contradictions and disagreements are part and parcel of our everyday lives, and an inevitable part of social relationships, too. Interpersonal conflicts, which reflect inherent contradictions and differences between people, affect all age groups. However, special attention should be paid to those which emerge early in life. This is because, as shown by J.S. Turner, D.B. Helms, L.B. Rosenfeld, R.F. Proctor II, R.B. Adler, R. Vasta, M.M. Haith and S.A. Miller, conflicts in adult lives are very similar to the ones experienced in childhood. Accordingly, our early experiences in this respect determine how we handle difficult situations in the future. Therefore, it becomes crucial to develop, as early as in childhood, appropriate skills which make it possible to resolve, in a harmonious way, both our own conflicts and those of other people, thus promoting a proper conflict-solving culture and, as highlighted by K. Mollenhauer, educating for conflicts (B. Śliwerski, 2004, p. 276).

2. Teachers faced with children’s conflicts

A vital aspect of education is being open to development which, as emphasised by L. Witkowski, has always been marked by conflict (L. Witkowski, 1989, p. 133). This is why contemporary teachers and tutors should teach children the difficult art of co-existing with diversity and otherness on a daily basis, embracing differences which form the basis for developing tolerance and respect for arguments and feelings of the other side.

Children’s conflicts are not standard situations in which familiar and well-rehearsed procedures could be applied. It will not suffice to be an expert applying a list of standardized recipes regardless of the situation, since children’s conflict situations are unique and need to be treated individually. In order to cope with such situations in a constructive way, the teacher needs to act reflectively, give proper considerations and analyse both actions and their effects, think about the situation

from multiple points of view. In other words, conflicts require teachers to reflect on the situation in the course of action and reflect upon their actions afterwards, with the benefit of hindsight.

“Reflection in the course of action is a simultaneous process which comprises an action and concurrent thinking about the action” (H. Kwiatkowska, 2008, p. 69); it represents the “thinking as we go” approach, so to speak. It enables the teacher to modify their behaviour and adjust it to a specific difficult situation which has arisen between children. After the situation has been interpreted, it is possible to intervene in the conflict (e.g. to prevent aggression between children from escalating, initiate an action aimed at reaching a consensus), and then continue the actions which have been undertaken.

In contrast, reflection upon the action with the benefit of hindsight is a “type of consideration given from a temporal perspective to what has already happened” (H. Kwiatkowska, 2008, p. 69). Such reflection does not evolve under the pressure of the unfolding incident, so it can be more thorough, in-depth, and significant for future actions in specific situations, including children’s conflicts discussed in this paper. This type of reflection seems to be particularly essential in the process of searching, together with children, for mutually satisfactory solutions that determine how children are guided through a conflict.

Interpersonal conflicts between children are difficult not only for the latter, but also for their teachers and tutors who are confronted with conflicts in their everyday teaching work. This is why it seemed interesting to identify the extent of teachers’ educational and didactic influence in situations of social discord in the course of interpersonal conflicts in children’s environment. Selected aspects of children’s conflict situation thus attracted the interest of researchers. Empirical studies were conducted, primarily on the basis of the diagnostic survey method, among one hundred preschool teachers and one hundred six-year-old preschoolers. The teachers were surveyed with questionnaires, while the children were interviewed. The studies were carried out in Poznań and in the Wielkopolskie Province in 2010 and 2011.

The empirical studies sought to find answers to the following questions:

- What significance do preschool teachers attribute to children’s interpersonal conflicts?
- How do children, in the teachers’ opinion, respond to conflicts arising between them?
- What is the teacher’s declared way of responding to interpersonal conflicts emerging between children?

Significance of children's conflicts in the opinion of preschool teachers

Interpersonal conflicts may be both constructive and destructive in nature. H. Białyszewski believes that all conflicts comprise both integration and disintegration, elements which are destructive and those which are beneficial from the perspective of social relationships. There is only the problem of one of the two types dominating a given conflict process (H. Białyszewski, 1983, p. 47).

Nevertheless, conflict situations are most often purported to only exert a negative impact on individuals. The emphasis is on various forms of open confrontation (direct or indirect aggression) or concealed fight (harassment, sabotage, boycott) implicating strong emotional tensions, frustration, anxiety and fear which all have a disadaptive effect on the conduct of individuals and prevent them from acting effectively. Conflict situations which unfold in this way have a negative impact on the individual's "self", as they represent a transmission of inappropriate models of conduct in difficult situations.

Conflicts of the type, discussed above, may generate further conflict interactions which, instead of removing existing contradictions, tend to amplify them and thus lead to attitudes marked by hostility and antagonism.

Empirical studies on the significance attributed by preschool teachers to conflicts between children show that 46% of teachers notice mainly the negative impact of conflicts on the child. Opinions submitted by teachers in their questionnaires state, e.g., that "conflicts between children disturb the order, create an unpleasant atmosphere, trigger off aggression", "all conflicts are bad and they have a negative impact on the child's development", "conflicts have negative significance since they trigger off negative emotions [*and*] have a negative effect on children's co-existence in a group", "we should teach how to avoid conflicts since they damage relationships between children and make it impossible to work with other children."

It should be highlighted at this point that only 25% of the teachers surveyed in the study see any positive effect of conflicts on the child, 22% believe that such situations may produce both positive and negative effects, and 7% of the teachers gave no answer to that question in the questionnaire.

The opinions of the teachers quoted above imply that a considerable percentage of them are not aware of the developmental dimension of children's interpersonal conflicts, thus failing to see that conflicts are capable of stimulating intellectual, emotional and social skills of six-year-olds. This is because opposition provides an opportunity to be confronted with a point of view that differs from one's own, to analyse the social situation from the perspective of others and to coordinate various perspectives. This, in turn, contributes to the interpersonal decentralization which determines the development of empathy and engagement in socially-

mindful behaviours. It is through conflicts that children also learn how to control their emotions, cope with anger, annoyance, sadness and fear. Conflicts stimulate individuals into looking for contact with the other side, learning real-life strategies for normalising conflict-ridden situations and testing their effectiveness. Consequently, they offer valuable “lessons” of social co-existence in which partners learn how to express their opinions, views, positions and hence also defend them in a way that conforms to the generally applicable moral code. However, above all, the constructive effect of conflicts is associated with the possibility of developing a mutually satisfactory solution together with the interaction partner, achieving a “I win – you win” situation that is needed for boosting one’s self-esteem and triggering nonconformist behaviours.

Summing up this aspect of children’s conflict situations, it should be stressed that a significant percentage of the surveyed preschool teachers fail to see conflicts as an opportunity for children’s dynamic development, and are not aware of the role of conflicts as educational situations. The observed trend, as highlighted by, among others, X.R. Jares, may underlie the prevailing negative perception of such situations in our education system (X.R. Jares, 2001, pp. 128-129).

How six-year-olds see their teachers responding to conflicts between children

The perception of children’s conflicts as destructive by the surveyed teachers corresponds to what six-year-olds said about their teachers’ reactions to conflicts arising between children. They claim that a large proportion of their teachers (up to 48%) use punishment – a strategy of punitive behaviours (“...when the teacher sees a quarrel, she sends [*pupils*] to the corner, shouts, gives a punishment...”) for engaging in an argument. From what the children said in interviews it follows that it is the teacher who decides – without talking to pupils or establishing any dialogue with them – who and how should be punished for becoming involved in an argument. This attitude reinforces the children’s belief that rows and arguments are exclusively negative situations, which should not take place and hence must be eliminated by, among other things, punitive behaviours. It should be underlined here that where various forms of punishment are used as the principal method of influencing the child, certain undesirable behaviours may be successfully eliminated, however, at the same time children have no opportunity to embrace those attitudes which are socially desirable and acceptable.

Such an approach of teachers to children’s conflicts represents a technique of conflict de-escalation rather than a method of coping constructively when faced with difficult situations of this type. This is because integrative conflict resolution

should be combined with the strategy whereby the teacher arrives at the solution together with the children; it should reflect a solution which the children would accept and fully understand, so that they could imitate it in similar situations.

The process of developing this important competence among preschoolers is supported by the Peaceful Kids ECSEL programme (S.V. Sandy, K. Cochran, 2005, pp. 324-327), which stresses that in order to find a way out of conflicts constructively, children need to combine intellectual and practical training that includes the development of emotional intelligence, skills for effective communication and collaboration with the partner, and creative intelligence – especially creative problem-solving strategies.

The reactions of the teachers to children's conflicts were also analysed in the context of injustice in conflicts. It turned out that as many as 35% of the interviewed six-year-olds considered the punishment imposed by the teacher to be unfair ("the teacher sent me to the corner, but she did not see who hit first, who started it...", "the teacher told me off, but she never listened to me first", "the teacher punished me, but I was only defending myself...", "the teacher punished me, but it was my friend who first started calling names"). It needs to be stressed that whenever children feel the punishment given by their teacher to be unfair, the situation sets off further conflicts which are likely to escalate. In addition, it gives rise to feelings of resentment and disappointment. Children are likely to feel hurt and may lose their confidence in the teacher who, especially in the early years of education, is a significant person for them.

The literature on the subject proves that children's perceived injustice is often a trigger for conflicts. Also, on many occasions there is injustice during a conflict, or a conflict may arise out of different perceptions of what is fair and what is not (M. Deutsch, 2005, pp. 41-64). Accordingly, a conflict may arise, e.g., from the unfair distribution of goods to which certain persons are equally entitled. The author's own research shows that possession is the primary motive behind preschoolers' and junior schoolchildren's conflicts with their peers. It reflects the child's desire to have, at any given moment, a toy, a prop or another object necessary to play with or to complete a certain task. The desire is often combined with an agreement between children (or rather failure to fulfil one) as to the exchange of certain objects or props (M. Cywińska, 1995, pp. 48-61; M. Cywińska, 2004, pp. 40-49).

On the other hand, injustice during a conflict situation is mainly related to unfair procedures employed in conflict resolution, the use of procedures that are biased, unfair and ignore the interests of one of the sides. It seems that the above-mentioned means of resolution of contentious issues among children by their teachers may be classified as such injustice.

Many conflicts are also, as emphasised by M. Deutsch, about which principle of justice should be applied and how. (In)justice also refers to the procedures employed for measuring merits and credits. For instance, some discuss the standard measures of merit such as tests, grades or professional experience, and consider them to be biased against individuals, while others believe such measures to be appropriate.

How the teachers declare to respond to children's conflicts

What the interviewed six-year-olds said about the actual reactions of their teachers to conflict situations contradicts, to a large extent, what the teachers declared themselves. More specifically, as many as 81% of the teachers declare that they engage in a conversation with children when there is a conflict to resolve. The conversation aims at discussing contentious issues, identifying motives behind the conflict and considering ways in which the parties have behaved as well as listening to the arguments of the partners of such interaction. However, one can hardly imagine that such conversations could be integrated with the strategy of punitive behaviours, which is preferred by the teachers in children's conflict situations. It is probably a fair assumption that the teachers know which constructive conflict handling procedures ought to be followed, but they fail to put such knowledge into their teaching practice.

It seems that the studies by E. Bochno (2004) can be a valuable aid in exploring this aspect. The scholar investigated conversation as a method of educational influence used by primary education teachers, demonstrating that a considerable percentage of teachers do not know what a conversation is and, in many cases, have a rather popular understanding of the rules of conversation. What is alarming here is that, as demonstrated by Bochno, teachers typically consider themselves to be highly-skilled in conversation. E. Bochno has found that in relations between teachers and children there is more speaking than talking, and the actual conversations are typical of centralised group systems. The finding is consistent with the authoritarian style of teaching preferred by the teachers during classes and a style of communication in which pupils are not treated as partners.

The characteristic attributes of communication taking place between teachers and pupils, as presented by E. Bochno, challenge the essence of conversation and dialogue, which should take into account the needs of each of the interlocutors – allowing both sides to verbalise their own thoughts, views, and positions, thus leading to a mutual acceptance of differences and individuality. It should be emphasised that dialogue is based on the variability of the sender and recipient roles, as well as the need for the subject and content of a conversation to be accepted by those who

take part in it. Therefore, the significance of dialogue in interpersonal relationships, in the context of conflict situations described here, cannot be overestimated. In the humanities, dialogue is considered to be the central concept defining relationships between people. It is pointed out that dialogue should be the primary method of negotiating differences of opinion in disputes, solving difficult situations and reaching a consensus (H. Kwiatkowska, 2008, p. 45) This is why children should, as early as possible, be taught how to master nonverbal and verbal methods of communication, and thus how to hold a conversation, take into account the recipient's point of view, listen to and analyse what the partner has said, modify one's own messages depending on the needs – and also how to initiate and maintain interactions.

3. Conclusion

In the current times dominated by ambiguity and diversity – the category of difference which often implicates the development of conflict processes – it is necessary to be aware of what actually occurs in such processes, of the dynamics and significance of conflicts in the individual's life, and creative ways to cope with them, related to methods of constructive utilization of individual differences (K. Balawajder, 1992; K. Balawajder, 1998). Therefore, present times require the development of a culture of conflict starting from the earliest period in life. The role of teachers in the process cannot be overestimated, however they must possess specific competences combining cognitive foundations of their actions and a practical operational basis for behaviour in difficult teaching situations, as well as using them to activate educational processes.

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