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Original Research

Mediation in conflict situations among early childhood children

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Abstract: This research examines the effect of conflict resolution intervention programs on reducing conflict among early childhood students. Conflicts are defined as occasional or mild disagreements among children of the same age. Although they do not always lead to violence, learning peaceful conflict resolution skills from preschool age is considered important. The study analyzed the frequency and intensity of conflicts in early childhood students. In this direction, a team of students participated in conflict resolution activities. The results support that the implementation of specialized intervention programs in early childhood students leads to the strengthening of positive conflict management skills.

Keywords: Conflict, Mediation, Early childhood children, Peer cultures, Socialization

The concept of "conflict" in the school context

School is as a critical space where children interact daily, enhancing the companionship through shared common experiences and perspectives (Khaliq et al., 2014). Social skills, which include characteristics such as unity, continuity and cooperation, obedience, submissiveness, progress, change – physical, emotional and mental – and social adjustment play an important role in shaping interactions and relationship of students in the school environment (Khaliq et al., 2014; Lagiou et al., 2021).

According to Social Learning (SL) theory people learn how to act on each other through observation, imitation and modeling. Therefore, a person's environment affects their behavior and the opposite (Whiteside, 2016). The development of social skills begins in childhood age (Corsaro & Everitt, 2023), and it is shaped by interactions with parents, adults, and peers, influencing children's ability to adjust socially and academically (Mahardika & Saud, 2020).

The school as a microcosm of society brings together different views on the world, different ways of being, thinking and living, consisting of a context of an environment social differences and a place where different conflicts occur every day. The treatment requires the training of teachers so that they are be able to appropriately manage conflicts in the classroom and train their students for this purpose (Valente, Lourenço & Németh, 2020). Thus, assessment and lifelong improvement is regarded as the path leading to the civic society (Andrea et al., 2020).

The word "conflict" comes from the Latin "conflictus,-us with a direct reference to "confligere", which translates as "to clash, to strike" (Moldovan & Bocoș, 2022). The social nature of conflict can be expressed in human interactions from young ages, which has led to questions, reflections and research on the formative impact of conflict in the educational environment (Martini et al., 2024; Moldovan & Bocoș, 2022). Conflicts between primary school children include verbal, mental and physical violence, often escalating due to different perspectives (Ćirić, Pavićević & Ćirić, 2018). They mainly come from teasing,

disruptive behavior and physical fights (Ferreira da Silva & Vinha, 2017) and which are displayed inside or outside the school classroom or are inherent in human nature (Valente, Lourenço & Németh, 2020).

In educational settings, conflicts within classrooms are common due to different interpersonal relationships (Harun-or-Rashid, 2022), while external sources of conflict can arise from various factors, such as power struggles and different beliefs (Kushmatova & Olimjonova, 2023). Finally, human nature includes conflicts that are an integral part of moral and emotional development (Kiliç, 2023).

Several studies highlight the differences among gender in conflict behavior. Boys are often involved in disputes related to status or dominance, such as competition in sports, while girls tend to be involved in relationship issues, such as sharing secrets or social exclusion (Rillo-Albert, de Ocáriz & Lavega- Burgués 2022). Studies show that girls demonstrate higher levels of conflict resistance and are more self-estimated compared to boys, emphasizing cooperation and avoiding conflict (Kesebir et al., 2020).

On the bases of these statements, this research focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of a conflict resolution program in reducing the number and intensity of conflicts between students in early childhood. In this direction, a team of students participated in conflict resolution activities and an experimental methodology was adopted.

Conflict management handling practices

Recent literature on conflict resolution programs in elementary schools indicates the importance of early intervention to prevent conflicts from escalating into violence (Rembush et al., 2022). Teachers can effectively manage conflicts in classrooms through understanding the predictive impact of personality traits such as neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and responsibility in conflict management (Lourenço et al., 2023). Conflict management skills are crucial during initial teacher training to constructively handling various school conflicts (Valente, Lourenço & Németh, 2020).

Studies highlight the effectiveness of specialized conflict resolution activities in elementary school curriculum, demonstrating positive results in promoting peaceful conflict management skills among students (Cervantes-Barraza, Cabañas-Sánchez & Reid, 2019). These programs typically focus on enhancing students' conflict resolution knowledge, empathy, social problem solving ability, and prosocial behaviors (Akgun & Araz, 2014).

Conflict resolution practices in the school environment have been extensively studied in various scientific sources. Research by Andrews (2017) supports the importance of daily lessons of grace and kindness, adult intervention, and conflict resolution strategies in Montessori early childhood settings. Grace and politeness lessons offer appropriate language and strategies for conflict resolution. Teacher

observation allows children to self-manage conflict and empowers them to resolve their differences on their own (Andrews, 2017).

Role-playing games, such as simulations and online games, play an important role in conflict resolution in schools. This research shows that simulations enhance students' problem-solving skills, motivation, and understanding of complex topics (Wehlan & Reinke, 2023). Role-playing simulation games such as "ACCORD", developed as e-learning tools, provide a platform for educators to promote conflict resolution within school settings (Dell'Aquila et al., 2020). Role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons improve conflict resolution in schools by promoting social interaction and enhancing interpersonal skills among students, promoting positive relationships and positive self-concept (Sousinha & de Almeida, 2019).

In addition, online multiplayer games such as Minecraft offer a variety of benefits in developing conflict resolution skills through structured and unstructured play, facilitated by coordinators and mentors (Dell'Aquila et al., 2020). Finally, puppet theater enhances the cognitive background in conflict resolution in primary school students, especially in understanding disagreements between friends and developing empathy. Therefore, the need for continuous emphasis on such activities is required (Rembush et al., 2022).

Mediation in children's conflicts

In the school environment, two types of mediation can be distinguished, school mediation and peer mediation. The purpose of mediation is generally to reach an agreement that addresses the acceptable aspects of the dispute. The mediator should support the parties in finding unconventional solutions and create new values (de Souza et al., 2023; Wrótniak, 2022). Mediation takes into account a very important educational aspect of taking responsibility for the behavior and decisions made by young people and adults (Wrótniak, 2022). People involved in a conflict are supported in finding a mutually satisfactory solution and face the necessity to make a final decision (Wolk, 2022; Wrótniak, 2022). Therefore, they are obliged to adhere to the mutually agreed terms and consequently the necessity to consider the consequences of a given behavior is an impetus for change and finding alternative solutions of conflict situations (Wrótniak, 2022).

Mediation in education is a voluntary and confidential search for a solution to a dispute between the conflicting parties - teachers, principals, students and parents (Wrótniak, 2022), which enhances conflict resolution in elementary school by promoting cooperation through the guidance of an impartial and a neutral mediator (Yuferova, Koryakovtseva & Bugaichuk, 2021). It allows the definition of contentious issues and the overcoming of communication barriers and aims to develop proposed solutions and reach

agreements that are mutually satisfactory to the disputing parties (Wrótniak, 2022).

Whiteside (2016) argues through his study that peer mediation has proven itself to be a viable option as a means of dealing with school conflicts. So when students get involved in a dispute they have two ways to end it. First, to solve the conflict themselves or second, to report the conflict to someone older. Peer mediation creates an alternative solution that lies between these two options and gives students a greater voice in their problems (Whiteside, 2016).

Peer mediation is a tool for preventing undesirable social phenomena taking place in the school environment and a way of resolving conflicts through reconciliation (Lešková & Haburajová Ilavská, 2023). It is widely used in shaping the responsibility of the new generation, teaches young people to take an liability for their behavior, forms attitudes of tolerance, values and moral ethics and focuses on communication and mediation skills (Wrótniak, 2022). Mediation is a tool that develops empathy in young people, sensitizes them to each other (Wojtanowicz, 2016) and is a voluntary and confidential search for a solution to a conflict between students, in the presence of two impartial and neutral mediators - school of students, who are prepared to carry out peer mediation (Wrótniak, 2022).

Korpela, Kurhila & Stevanovic (2022) examined the importance of apologies in the institutional agenda of school mediation. What characterized the apologies in this context was their function as an obligatory part of the mediation and the explicit form of the pair "apologise-apology accepted". Through the excerpts presented in the above research, it is shown that students face up to the confession and apology as recognizable actions. To play an important role in conflict resolution, apologetics must fulfil its institutional expectations, which guide both teachers and students. During the interaction, honesty and balance can be inherently problematic and contradictory in terms of the expectations projected in the apology. Sincerity aims to demonstrate the personal expression of remorse and therefore facilitates forgiveness. Equilibrium seeks to create interpersonal equality and balance between disputants and thereby repairing the interpersonal consequences of the harm caused. To achieve the mentioned interpersonal goals, the apology involves tension and therefore it requires effort. In this way, the apology is prepared throughout the mediation activity (Korpela, Kurhila & Stevanovic, 2022).

The implementation of peer mediation programs not only helps in effective conflict resolution, but also promotes a culture of healthy coexistence by preventing indiscipline and violence in schools (Wolk, 2022). Research shows that peer mediation is easily perceived by students, who show an increased interest in becoming peer mediators and using this method to deal with personal and school conflicts (Mota, Lando & A., & do Nascimento, 2022). Therefore, peer mediation emerges as a valuable tool that not only resolves conflicts, but also promotes dialogue, respect and mutual understanding within the school community (Kiriazis & Hadzilacos, 2022).

Research methology

The present research is an experimental methodology. This research focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of a conflict resolution program in reducing the number and intensity of conflicts between students in early childhood. The research's hypothesis aims that the implementation of a classroom conflict will lead to a reduction in the frequency and seriousness of conflicts.

Two classes (infant and first class of elementary school) participated in the research, one of which was the Experimental Team (ET) and the other the Control Team (CT). The number of students in each class was approximately equal (ET: 23, CT: 22) and their ages were between 5 and 6 years (Kindergarten and 1st Class of Elementary school). The research followed the bellow steps:

For one month, researchers observed and recorded conflicts in both classrooms. Then, these conflicts were classified according to their duration.
a) Classification of intensity: The duration of the conflicts determined their intensity:
   -Mild conflicts: Lasted a day.
   -Moderate conflicts: Lasted 1-3 days.
   -Serious conflicts: They lasted more than three days.
b) Intervention: ET implemented a conflict resolution program for one month. This program included:
   -Counseling by a social worker: Children involved in conflicts received guidance from a social worker.
   -Classroom activities: Twice a week, classes did activities focused on conflict resolution skills. These activities presented hypothetical conflict scenarios and encouraged students to propose peaceful solutions before conflicts escalated.

After the month of program implementation, the researchers observed and recorded conflicts again in both classrooms in order to assess the impact of the intervention program.

Measurements were made in both groups before (pre-test) and after the intervention (post-test). Which concerned the recording of children's behaviors at the class level as well as at the individual level. Therefore, to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, the design of two groups, experimental and control, was used, with two measurements before (pre) and after (post). In general, an experimental design with measurements before and after the intervention, in at least two groups (experimental and control) and in a controlled environment, can ensure the evaluation of the effectiveness and understanding of the causal relationship and the effects of the intervention in the target population (Cohen et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the intervention program was a pilot study and was carried out with the permission of the school principals and under the responsibility of the teachers

within the framework of the standard school program.

Results

As mentioned above, the conflicts between the children in both classes (ET and CT) were recorded for one month. Overall, the number of recorded conflicts was about the same: 73 in CT and 77 in ET. Then the conflicts were classified according to their duration (Table 1).

Table 1. The number and classification of conflicts during the initial phase

Conflict Intensity	ET	CT
Mild	33	31
Moderate	28	30
Serious	16	12
Total	77	73

It was observed that the two groups were dominated by mild conflicts (ET: 33 incidents, CT: 31 incidents) and moderate conflicts (ET: 28 incidents, CT: 30 incidents). This shows that conflicts were generally resolved on the same day or within three days of their occurrence.

However, there were also a number of serious conflicts (ET: 16, CT: 12) that took more than three days to resolve and children's upset lasted longer. The causes of these conflicts were varied: "pushed or hit me", "grabbed my toy", "took my bag", "teased me", "made fun of me".

The intervention for ET lasted six weeks. During this time, children involved in conflict were called by the social worker and offered individual counseling sessions; these focused on understanding the causes and nature of the reported conflict and developing alternative ways of conflict resolution to support an optimal relationship with classmates. In addition, twice a week, the entire class participated in conflict management skills development sessions. During these teaching units, the children were presented with various conflict situations and then suggested ways to resolve them. Dramatic play was often used to depict a conflict situation and its resolution. In this way, the children found the sessions more interesting and participated more actively.

At the same time, the control group (CT) did not benefit from any program focused on conflict resolution and continued to implement the regular school curriculum.

After six weeks, the clashes between the two classes were recorded again for a month. These were again classified according to the criteria set at the beginning of the research. The results of the intervention program were evaluated based on the number of conflicts and their intensity in the EO after the completion of the intervention program. These are shown in Figure 1.
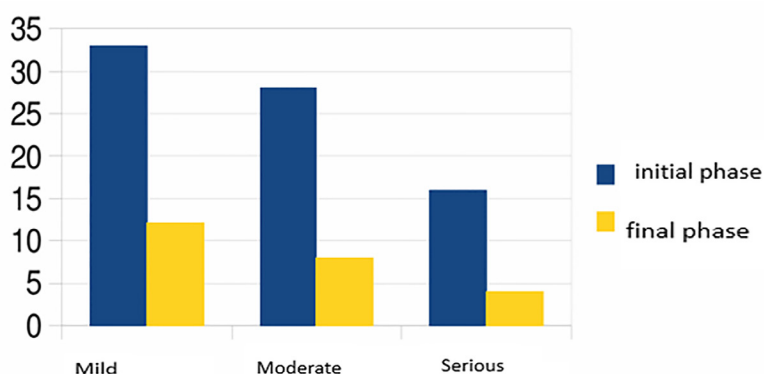
Figure 1. The number and classification of conflicts in the ET

A significant reduction in the number of conflicts was observed in the experimental group (ET) from 75 to 24, almost three times fewer conflicts in the final phase compared to the initial phase. The conflicts recorded were mild and moderate (12 and 8 respectively). There are still 4 serious conflicts, that lasted longer than three days, which involved the children disliking someone of their classmates.

To emphasize that the results are related to the method used, the final results of the ET are compared with the results from the CT. The comparative results between the two classes in the final phase are demonstrated in Figure 2.
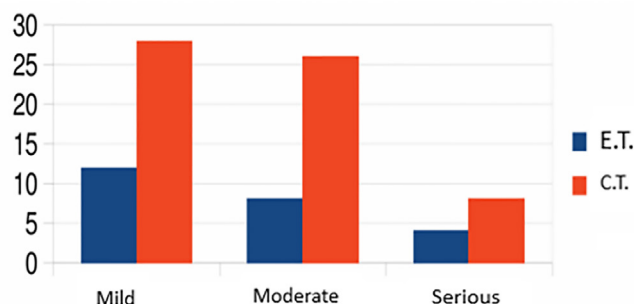
Figure 2. The number and classification of conflicts in the final evaluation

It was observed that the number of collisions also decreases in CT, but this is much less compared to ET. The number of conflicts between children in CT remains about the same level and their reduction is probably due to the physical development and intellectual maturation of the children.

However, for the PO, the reduction in the number and intensity of conflicts is significant, indicating that the children have learned strategies for friendly managing conflicts and peacefully resolving stressful situations that may arise in their daily school life. Furthermore, this indicates positive relationships with his classmates and as a result a quality integrate in to everyday classroom ensures better learning outcomes.

Therefore, the hypothesis formulated at the beginning of the research was validated by this small study: counseling and mediation sessions, introduced into the classroom, led to a reduction in the number of conflicts and their intensity. The main goal was achieved as the children learned strategies for friendly conflict management, which helped them to develop more assertive behavior and better integrate in school curriculum.

Conclusions-discussion

The preliminary study results show that social skills are still low for children aged 4-6 years old. The children having difficulty respecting others, speak harshly and at a high volume, fight over toys, give up easily in activities, not obey game rules, and blame others for their mistakes or defeats (Utami et al., 2024). By participating in conflict resolution, children cultivate a range of interpersonal and interactive skills, adopting various strategies. They have the ability to negotiate, challenge positions, oppose decisions, persuade, compromise and apologize (Wintz & Abdul-Majied, 2021).

According to this research, the implementation of conflict mediation programs in schools, with the active participation of social workers, can contribute to the effective management of conflicts and the cultivation of a friendly and cooperative school climate, where children learn and acquire social skills that will help their transition to adulthood more easily. It is confirmed by Salimi & Fauziah (2023), who support that Children with good social skills in Early Childhood and Primary Schools, are easily accepted by others, easily form cooperation, adapt and build a stable team, and have high empathy.

The research findings are in line with previous research on the effectiveness of integrating conflict resolution skills into elementary school curriculum (Akgun & Araz, 2014; Cervantes-Barraza et al., 2019). As the results of the research clarify, it is considered necessary to integrate such programs into curriculum school, which should have appropriate training in their implementation

The present program highlights the value of the intervention program in the management and resolution of conflict situations in early childhood children, aimed at behavior change. This view is in line with the findings of the literature, which highlights the importance of early intervention in order to prevent conflicts from escalating into violence (Rembush et al., 2022). In this direction, cooperation among educators, psychologists and parents is necessary for early diagnosis and intervention, as it is required by new legal regulations that emphasize cooperation for effective help (Serge et al., 2022).

The educator plays an essential role not only in delivering teaching and promoting learning, but also in guiding preschoolers towards non-aggressive behaviors and mediating, and solving conflict (Petrea, 2024). It can be achieved if educators promote positive behavior by implementing positive education based on interventions that emphasize the development of character strengths among students (Schiavon et al., 2020).

Mediation is considerate a beneficial method for dealing with school conflicts, as it promotes responsibility, tolerance, empathy and communication (Kiriazis & Hadzilacos, 2022; Whiteside, 2016; Wolk, 2022). These perceptions are consistent with Garandeau et al., (2023) who argue that empathy plays an important role in predicting defensive actions, with higher levels as it related to increased defense of victimized classmates.

In addition, it is considered important to integrate the teaching of social and emotional skills to children, as it seems to be a difficulty they face until they reach the school. However, teachers should guide children in regulating their emotions (Mahabbati et al., 2023). This

prompt is reinforced by Perez-Jorge et al. (2023) arguing that students feel safe at school when initiatives are taken to effectively deal with conflicts, promote positive relationships, and enhance emotional regulation.

It is recommended, as a basic approach, children are taught conflict resolution skills, as well as the differences that may arise. By perfecting these skills, children can become mediators in peer conflicts, understanding the causes of the conflict and providing with opportunities to resolve them in order to change their behavior in a positive and constructive direction. The specific finding is identified with the necessary use of positive reinforcement in order to encourage desired behaviors (Fiberianti et al., 2023).

The intervention activities focused on conflict resolution skills, using hypothetical conflict scenarios to encourage students to propose peaceful solutions before conflicts escalated. Similar in content were the structured activities of Melikboboyevich, & Yusufaliyevna (2024), where they encourage cooperation of preschool children and could help children develop social skills and empathy.

According to Hinitz (2024), there is a great need for peaceful activities that are proven to reduce stress in our early childhood educational settings. Therefore, the use of role-playing games, such as simulations, puppetry and multiplayer games, can help students develop conflict resolution skills (Wehlan & Reinke, 2023; Dell'Aquila et al., 2020; Rembush et al., 2022; Sousinha & de Almeida, 2019). It is hoped that through the process of children's active participation in social education activities, students can develop the ability to overcome global political issues, as well as enhance their ability to handle conflicts and improve their academic abilities (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

The research findings are in agreement with the previous researches of Akgun and Araz (2014), who specified that there is a relationship between the reduction of aggressive behaviors in the classroom and the academic performance of students, and Wolk (2022) who highlighted the positive impact on climate of the classroom and, consequently, in academic efficiency. Also, they are consistent with the conclusions of Cervantes-Barraza and colleagues (2019) that indicate positive changes in social behavior and an increase in academic status, after the integration of conflict resolution skills in the elementary school curriculum.

This means that the effective management of conflict leads to better relationships among students and in addition, helps students achieve important learning outcomes. Therefore, the results of the research are in line with the literature, that points out the benefits of conflict resolution in terms of social behavior (Cervantes-Barraza et al., 2019), the strengthening of teamwork (Whiteside, 2016), the strengthening of self-confidence (Kiriazis & Hadzilacos, 2022) and the reduction of aggressive behaviors (Rembush et al., 2022).

Limitations

The present research provides a useful foundation for understanding the benefits of conflict resolution programs in reducing conflict among early childhood students. However, there are some limitations that could be considered for future studies. The study is based on a relatively small sample of students, and the lack of representativeness of the sample limits the generalizability of the findings to a large number of primary school student's population. The lack of randomization in the allocation of students to the teams (ET and CT) may have affected the results. Furthermore, the recording of the conflicts is based on the observation by the researchers, raising questions of objectivity and reliability. The research also does not take into account possible external factors that could influence the number and intensity of conflicts, such as students' socioeconomic background or school culture. Finally, the research did not consider gender discrimination, which is an important factor that can influence students' experiences and behaviors in conflict situations.

For future research, it is suggested that a bigger and more representative sample of students from different schools be included and that group allocation be randomized. The development and use of objective and reliable measures to record and classify conflicts, such as questionnaires or analysis of videotaped interactions, will enhance the validity of the study. The study design should take into account potential external factors, such as socioeconomic background or school culture, to isolate the effect of the conflict resolution program. Providing a detailed description of the conflict resolution program, including objectives, methods, materials, and duration, will allow for replication and comparison with other studies. Additionally, the frequency of occurrence of conflicts in boys and girls will allow comparison with previous studies.

Future suggestions

Future research could comparatively evaluate different conflict resolution methods in order to determine the most effective approaches. Collecting qualitative data through interviews with students, teachers and parents could provide a deeper understanding of experiences and opinions about the conflict resolution program. Furthermore, it is considered important to focus future research on the development of materials and educational programs to enhance students' conflict resolution skills. Finally, the cooperation among social worker, teachers and parents for implementing integrated strategies for dealing with school conflicts is the purpose of future research.

Authors' contributions

For research articles with several authors, a short paragraph specifying their individual contributions must be provided. The following statements should be used

"Conceptualization, D.P..; methodology, E.M.; validation, D.P., E.M. formal analysis, D.P; investigation, E.M. A,E; resources, D.P.; data curation, A.E; writing—original draft preparation, D.P. and M.T.; writing—review and editing, E.M.; visualization, E.M.; supervision, D.P.; project administration, D.P.

Data availability

The datasets generated by the survey research during and/or analyzed during the current study are available on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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