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EVALUATION OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION STRATEGIES IN PRESCHOOL PLAY: INSIGHTS FROM KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Preschool age is a period characterized by play, during which children learn social rules, interact with others, communicate, and coexist with peers. Conflicts and disputes that arise among children during play constitute a natural and integral part of everyday life in kindergarten. However, children often display inappropriate behaviors in their play due to underdeveloped social skills, thus being unable to resolve their disputes effectively. Since children's conflict-resolution abilities are not yet well developed at this age, the role of the kindergarten teacher is considered particularly important in the effective management of such conflicts within the kindergarten setting. What practices, then, do kindergarten teachers follow in order to manage children's disputes during play? What is the role of the teacher when a conflict emerges between children? The present study seeks to investigate and evaluate the ways in which kindergarten teachers handle and address children's conflicts during play within the kindergarten setting. The sample of the study consisted of 25 kindergarten teachers who served during the 2024–2025 school year in public kindergartens in the Region of Crete. The main research tool chosen for recording teachers' views was the semi-structured interview. The findings indicated that most conflicts occur during free play among children, with the primary cause being children's reluctance to share toys. Regarding the most effective method of conflict management, whole-class dialogue emerged as the preferred approach.

KEYWORDS: play, preschool age, conflicts, kindergarten teacher

1. INTRODUCTION

Play constitutes a highly significant aspect of every child's life and an integral part of their daily routine. Children devote a substantial portion of their everyday activities to play. Beyond entertainment, play holds a crucial role in shaping children's personalities. It is not coincidental that,

particularly within the framework of early childhood education, kindergarten teachers incorporate play to a great extent during children's engagement with daily preschool activities.

However, play is not always conducted harmoniously among children, often resulting in various conflicts. Disputes and clashes that arise during play undeniably constitute a natural and inherent component of everyday life in the kindergarten-whether during structured or free activities within the classroom or even during recess. It is frequently observed that children, due to underdeveloped social skills, may display inappropriate behaviors during play, thereby struggling to effectively resolve disagreements or conflicts with their peers.

In this context, the kindergarten teacher plays a pivotal role, as she must appropriately manage children's conflicts that occur during play. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate and highlight the ways in which kindergarten teachers handle and address children's conflicts during play within the daily preschool program.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Play in Kindergarten

In contemporary times, play holds considerable power, as it facilitates children's learning and development. This is evident in the emphasis placed on it by national curricula, which seek to promote and support playful modes of learning in early childhood education. Creating opportunities for learning through play within the classroom presupposes imagination and dedication on the part of the educator (Kieff & Casbergue, 2017, p. 89).

Play is, moreover, intrinsically linked to childhood. It contributes substantially to the developmental learning domains of young children. For instance, numerous playful activities support children's familiarity with Mathematics, Language, the Natural Sciences, and more. At the same time, play provides enjoyment and relaxation, helping children acquire meaningful knowledge through their active participation in the classroom (Skoumpourdi & Merzioti, 2022).

A significant number of contemporary studies have examined the value of play and its role in the kindergarten setting. More specifically, its inclusion in the early childhood education curriculum underscores and formalizes its role in the kindergarten environment. Play serves as a medium for socialization through which children receive essential support in learning how to collaborate with others, engage in shared play, and interact effectively with their peers (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). As previously mentioned, it imparts important knowledge to children in alternative ways that contrast with the more traditional, formal method of teaching a "typical lesson." Furthermore, play constitutes a powerful and effective teaching strategy (Kieff & Casbergue, 2017, p. 97).

According to Blatchford (2001), children in early childhood education engage in both structured and free activities, as defined by the curriculum. In structured activities, the educator is responsible for designing the framework of the play experience (Avgitidou, 2001). Children are expected to follow

the rules and generally do not have the option to choose the nature of the activity, frequently imitating the model set by the educator.

Conversely, during free activities, children learn in a more liberated manner, as they are provided with the opportunity to choose their activities based on their needs, interests, and preferences (Avgitidou, 2001). It is worth noting that beginning the kindergarten day with free-play opportunities, where each child independently selects an activity, can be beneficial, as it allows children to start their day with greater enjoyment, motivation, and relaxation.

The role of the kindergarten teacher is also pivotal: teachers must encourage children to choose one of the learning centers and engage in play. These centers are arranged by the educator, often in collaboration with the children, to serve different pedagogical aims depending on their needs and interests. Free play supports children considerably, enabling them to act more autonomously, participate actively, and practice their memory, imagination, and motor skills (Avgitidou, 2001).

Finally, many researchers emphasize that play is the primary means through which children develop their personality and awaken their abilities. Numerous psychologists and scholars consider the advantages of play within early childhood education to be highly significant, contributing to the holistic development of the child (Klein, Wirth & Linas, 2003; Severino, Cabatic & Molina, 2024).

2.2 Children's Play in Early Childhood: Conflict, Challenges, and Management Strategies

It is well established that play functions as a tool used by educators to facilitate the educational process. More specifically, it helps children develop knowledge, skills, and active participation. Through play, strong bonds of friendship can also be formed among children (Avgitidou, 2001). However, this does not imply that conflicts do not emerge during play.

Tensions between children are frequently observed during play, often as a result of poorly developed interpersonal relationship skills. Naturally, every aggressive act has an underlying cause (Halmatov, 2018). In the kindergarten setting, children may sometimes disagree intensely during play. This can disrupt the smooth functioning of the classroom and may even lead to aggressive behaviors (Arsenio & Lover, 1997; Chen et al., 2001; Jenkins et al., 2008).

Conflicts among peers in the school environment are inevitable during the educational process and constitute an integral component of young children's cognitive, social, emotional, and moral development (Arsenio & Cooperman, 1996; Campbell, 1995; Chen et al., 2001; Chen & Smith, 2002; Göncü & Cannella, 1996). Problems can arise during free play, within learning centers, during structured activities, and, of course, during recess. With the central aim of investigating how educators respond to children's disputes, several strategies commonly employed by teachers in such situations are discussed below.

During playtime, children may disagree and exhibit heightened behavior toward their peers, resulting in conflict. According to the literature, one foundational distinction is that between intra-personal and

interpersonal conflict. As Rahim (1992) explains, intra-personal conflict refers to an individual's internal struggle concerning their values or beliefs, while interpersonal conflict concerns disagreements between two or more individuals (Pappas, 2006).

Another classification distinguishes between functional and dysfunctional conflicts. Functional conflicts arise when a group within an organization confronts differing viewpoints on a shared task, with each member expressing their own position. They are termed "functional" because the manner in which issues are addressed enhances the group's effectiveness. Dysfunctional conflicts, by contrast, involve interpersonal disagreements that are expressed outwardly through feelings of anger (Robbins & Judge, 2013).

According to Saitis (2007), three forms of conflict may appear in a school setting: (a) perceived or manifest conflict, which concerns latent disagreement arising from misunderstandings of another person's actions or words; (b) latent conflict, which involves an existing conflict that has not yet surfaced; and (c) overt conflict, in which various forms of disagreement become visible and lead conflicting parties into direct confrontation.

Undoubtedly, every form of play within the kindergarten environment is essential for children's well-being and overall health. Entering kindergarten is a significant milestone, as children are at a sensitive and crucial stage of development. It is in this setting that the first peer group is formed and children gradually develop a sense of belonging. However, within any group, conflicts are inevitable, particularly in kindergarten during play (Perren et al., 2006).

Every conflict stems from specific causes. In the school environment, numerous disagreements occur among children. One major cause of conflict during play is competition (Saitis, 2014). Each child has particular goals they seek to achieve during play, and achieving these goals may upset others, leading to disagreements or conflict (Saitis, 2014).

Furthermore, during play each child assumes a role. This, too, can be a frequent cause of conflict: children wish to control their space and materials and often desire the "best" role in the play scenario (Evaldsson, 2003). Another common cause of conflict is a lack of communication. Children at this tender age often misinterpret situations during play, which can escalate into conflict (Evaldsson, 2003).

Additionally, the feeling of rejection-frequently experienced by children during play-is a significant cause of conflict. Rejection is an unavoidable component of peer interaction, as it can provoke anxiety and affect children's social development (Nergaard, 2018). For a preschool-aged child, such emotionally distressing experiences are difficult to process, and the inability to regulate emotions and behavior often leads to the emergence of conflicts among peers.

2.3 The Role of the Kindergarten Teacher in Children's play and in Managing Conflicts

Undoubtedly, play constitutes a highly significant and indispensable element within the kindergarten environment. Equally important, however, is the role of the kindergarten teacher. More specifically,

the teacher must create an appropriate play-based learning environment that fosters children's creativity and imagination (Garvey, 1990). At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the educator should focus not only on the content of learning but also on the learning process itself.

Furthermore, observing children's play is considered a crucial aspect of the teacher's role. By monitoring the activities that capture children's interest, the educator can adapt them according to their needs, making the learning process more enjoyable and enabling active participation. These activities should not only appeal to children's interests but also correspond to their cognitive level in order to promote developmental progress (Dafermou, Koulouri & Basagianni, 2006). It is not sufficient merely to provide opportunities for play-educators must also engage actively themselves to ensure optimal development (Kieff & Casbergue, 2017, pp. 97, 99).

Therefore, the teacher's role in children's play has a positive impact on the quality of children's experiences (Jung, 2013, p. 187). Often, when children participate in group play, especially in larger groups, teacher involvement becomes essential for organizing the play experience and preventing potential problems among children (Avgitidou, 2014, p. 209). When conflicts arise, the teacher is called upon to intervene to prevent inappropriate behaviors.

The manner in which the educator manages conflicts is a critical issue for maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships as well as harmony and cooperation within the school environment. Naturally, conflict management requires adequate time, as it is a communicative process aimed first at exploring the underlying causes and then at making appropriate efforts to resolve the issues that have emerged.

According to Deutsch (2005), the educator serves as the mediator in this process. In order to resolve the conflict, the essential first step is to speak with both parties involved-that is, to discuss the issue with the children who have disagreed-and to work towards improving the atmosphere between them so that they can manage the situation effectively. More specifically, the educator must create an environment in which tensions are minimized. Communication, both among the children and between children and teacher, is a key component of this process (Deutsch, 2005).

It is also important to note that the educator serves as a role model for children at this age. Therefore, the teacher can create the appropriate climate and approach the emerging problem through calm and constructive dialogue. It is crucial that this conversation includes encouragement towards friendliness and positive interaction among the children, initiated and modelled by the kindergarten teacher.

2.4 Stages and Methods of Conflict Management

To address conflicts, Cohen (2005) developed a pyramid consisting of four stages: (a) prevention, (b) management, (c) mediation, and (d) arbitration. The first stage, prevention, forms the base of the pyramid. At this stage, the educator creates a supportive environment that helps prevent conflicts from arising. More specifically, the teacher cultivates communication skills, democratic values, and active

listening skills. This stage contributes to establishing harmony within the learning environment while reducing the occurrence of conflicts.

The next stage is management, which follows directly after prevention. This stage was designed to facilitate communication among those involved (i.e., the children) so that they can resolve potential conflicts through dialogue. For this process to be effective, it is essential that those involved participate in counseling intervention programs and school-based mediation initiatives. Such programs support children in regulating impulsive behavior and resolving their problems peacefully.

The third level of the pyramid is mediation. This stage becomes necessary when conflicts between children cannot be resolved independently and thus require the presence of a mediator, a third party. In this context, the educator typically assumes the role of mediator and is responsible for bringing both sides together, namely the children in conflict, and guiding the process through dialogue to achieve resolution.

The fourth and final stage of the pyramid is arbitration. This stage does not aim to resolve the disputes or disagreements between the parties involved. Instead, it involves the intervention of a third person who interrupts the conflict in order to restore peace and harmony within the school environment (Cohen, 2005).

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study seeks to evaluate the causes of conflicts and disputes that arise among young children during play in the kindergarten setting, as well as the potential ways of addressing them, drawing on the personal views of kindergarten teachers.

The primary aim of the present study is to examine conflicts among children during their playtime and how these are managed by the kindergarten teacher, in order to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the causes that often lead to conflicts and disputes among young children during their play in kindergarten?
2. In what ways can kindergarten teachers manage conflicts that arise between preschool children during their play?

Specifically, the first research question seeks to examine the causes that trigger conflicts and disputes during preschool children's play. Subsequently, the second research question focuses on the important aspect of managing these conflicts, that is, the possible ways in which kindergarten teachers can address this significant issue.

In this research, the qualitative approach was deemed necessary and appropriate as the chosen methodological framework. Qualitative research enables the exploration of individuals' attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and experiences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008).

In this study, the semi-structured interview was employed, as it offers flexibility and immediacy, fostering a sense of familiarity with the respondent. It involves a flexible form of conversation using open-ended questions, which allow participants to respond freely. Moreover, the researcher is able to gain a clear and comprehensive understanding of the interviewee's perspectives.

3.1 Participants-Research Sample

The sample of the present study consists of 25 kindergarten teachers who served in public kindergartens in the Region of Crete during the 2024-2025 school year. Table 4.1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: Demographic Data

		n	Percentage %
Sex	Male	0	0.0%
	Female	25	100.0%
	Total	25	100.0%
Highest Educational Level	Department of Preschool Education	25	100.0%
	Postgraduate Studies	18	72.0%
	Doctoral Studies	0	0.0%

Considering the purpose and the research questions of the present study, the sampling strategy selected was convenience sampling. A convenience sample allows the research to be conducted at a low cost, as it involves a population that is readily accessible, providing the researchers with easier access to individuals they know or who are within close proximity. However, a limitation of convenience sampling is that the findings derived from such a sample may not be fully representative of the wider population (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008).

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Data Collection Procedure

The research data collection process involved gathering qualitative data. In this study, the use of semi-structured interviews with predetermined open- and closed- ended questions was deemed necessary. The primary purpose of the interviews was to collect kindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding the causes of and approaches to managing children's conflicts during play in the kindergarten setting.

The interviews commenced in early February 2024, allowing the researchers to capture and record the teachers' views on the subject. The interviews were conducted in a familiar environment chosen by each participant. In parallel, explanations were provided regarding the objectives of the interview and the study, as well as ethical considerations (confidentiality, anonymity), instructions on the interview procedure, and clarification regarding the questions.

Prior to each interview, all participants were provided with the research approval form, signed by the Assembly of the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Crete. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, and a voice recorder was used to document the discussion. Throughout the collaboration with the teachers, the researchers conducted themselves with discretion, respect, professionalism, and objectivity to ensure the proper execution of the research process.

3.3 Methods of Data Analysis

Considering the needs of this study, qualitative content analysis was employed. According to Creswell (2011), qualitative content analysis is a systematic and flexible method of interpreting qualitative data, widely used in the social and educational sciences for an in-depth understanding of phenomena, experiences, and perceptions. It relies on the process of coding, where the researcher analyzes the data and organizes it into meaningful units. This begins with open coding, where key themes are identified, followed by axial and selective coding, during which themes are grouped, related, and synthesized into broader categories. Qualitative content analysis does not merely describe the data but aims to interpret their meaning, enabling the researcher to identify patterns, recurring structures, and underlying significance.

3.4 Research Ethics

In the present study, the main ethical considerations concerned: (a) the qualitative research approach, (b) the participation of adults, specifically kindergarten teachers, and (c) data collection through semi-structured interviews. The appropriate measures taken by the researchers to address these ethical issues are outlined as follows:

The primary concern of the researchers was to ensure informed consent from all participating teachers. Educators were informed about the purpose, objectives, content, and procedures of the study. They were also made aware of the potential benefits of participation, as well as any possible risks. It was clearly communicated that participants were free to express their opinions, which were considered highly valuable for the study's aims, and that mutual respect would be maintained throughout the collaboration. Furthermore, participants' anonymity was preserved during the interviews.

Approval for the study was granted by the Assembly of the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Crete. To conduct the research, the researchers provided the teachers with the official research approval form, confirming that the Department had reviewed and agreed to the study's content and procedures.

During the methodological planning, data collection, and analysis phases, the researchers ensured that the study was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics and Research Conduct (Decision 389/29.11.2018 session), the Operating Regulations of the Research Ethics Committee (Decision 398/29.11.2018 session), and the relevant Ethics Committee of the University of Crete.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Causes and Management of Children's Conflicts During Play in Kindergarten

According to the first research question, which focused on the causes leading to conflicts among children during their play in kindergarten, a variety of responses emerged from the teachers. Specifically, many kindergarten teachers indicated that children often struggle to learn how to share their toys. Most of the time, multiple children want the same toy at the same moment, which is not feasible without cooperation and negotiation among them. Representative statements from some teachers include:

"...they argue because they don't know how to share their toys..." (Kindergarten Teacher 3)

"...they disagree because they want the same toy..." (Kindergarten Teacher 4)

"...I think that most of the time the cause concerns an object that two or more children want at the same time..." (Kindergarten Teacher 5)

"...because one child wants another's toy. They find it difficult to share..." (Kindergarten Teacher 13)

Furthermore, conflicts often arise during role-playing games, as two or more children may wish to assume the same role. Teachers highlighted:

"...even for a role that they may want to play and claim at that moment, children quarrel..." (Kindergarten Teacher 6)

"...sometimes I see that they argue during play in the yard when they have to distribute roles or tasks in symbolic play..." (Kindergarten Teacher 23)

"...other times they argue about the roles each child will have in the games..." (Kindergarten Teacher 25)

Another frequent cause of conflict in play concerns decision-making and the desire to be the "leader." Children often struggle to reach a compromise that satisfies everyone, resulting in displays of arrogance. Teachers reported:

"...I think the most common cause of conflict is that they want the game to unfold according to their preferences and in their own way. They often struggle to accept the differing opinions of their classmates..." (Kindergarten Teacher 2)

“...who will make the decisions for the game, who will be the leader... this is a cause of conflict for most children...” (Kindergarten Teacher 10)

“...I think the causes of conflict among children during play relate to who will control the game...” (Kindergarten Teacher 22)

Rejection among peers is also a significant cause of conflict. Teachers observed that children do not easily forget negative behaviors from their peers. Specifically, if a child consistently behaves poorly during play, others remember this behavior and may refuse to play with them, resulting in social exclusion. One teacher noted:

“...I believe children come into conflict with others for many reasons. A child may spoil the game or say something intending to upset others. If a child repeatedly displays offensive behavior, other children do not want to play with them, as they fear it will happen again. This leads to rejection, which in turn generates conflict...” (Kindergarten Teacher 11)

Self-defense is another important cause of conflict. When a problem arises during play, children often attempt to defend themselves, which can escalate into a disagreement. Similarly, they may defend a friend, which can also provoke conflict. Teachers reported:

“...I think children usually conflict when they disagree, when they claim or wish to change something, or when they want to defend themselves...” (Kindergarten Teacher 8)

“...I have observed that they often argue when defending a friend...” (Kindergarten Teacher 14)

Finally, some teachers emphasized that children have not yet learned, for various reasons, how to communicate effectively with one another, which is crucial for mutual understanding. Teachers stated:

“...I think that sometimes the cause of conflicts is the children’s difficulty in managing their emotions and considering others’ desires. Additionally, the lack of communication mechanisms plays an important role. Children have not yet internalized the ways in which they can solve a problem...” (Kindergarten Teacher 7)

Additionally, several kindergarten teachers reported that the causes frequently leading to conflicts and disagreements among young children during play in kindergarten often result in aggressive behavior toward their peers, causing some children to cry, shout, or insist on having their own way. Representative statements from some teachers include:

“...these conflicts are usually managed verbally, but sometimes also with physical aggression...” (Kindergarten Teacher 8)

“...crying, shouting, and hitting each other...” (Kindergarten Teacher 9)

“...children usually insist on having their own way...” (Kindergarten Teacher 12)

“...mainly through hitting and loud yelling...” (Kindergarten Teacher 13)

However, there are children who manage their disagreements more calmly and seek assistance from the teacher. Moreover, some children withdraw from play without engaging in conflict. Teachers noted:

“...initially, their first reaction is to call the teacher to act as a mediator and provide a solution to their problem. Gradually, however, they learn to engage in dialogue and resolve the issue themselves...” (Kindergarten Teacher 17)

“...they usually come to me, explaining what happened and asking me to take a position regarding the problem...” (Kindergarten Teacher 19)

“...other times, they step away from play for a short period...” (Kindergarten Teacher 23)

The second research question of this study concerned the possible ways teachers address conflicts among young children during play in kindergarten. First, the majority of kindergarten teachers reported that conflicts occur daily and quite frequently. Regarding the effective management of children's conflicts by teachers, observation was identified as a primary strategy. Specifically, teachers first observe the children's behavior during a conflict and intervene only when necessary, particularly in cases involving physical or verbal aggression. Teachers noted:

“...I usually intervene when things could become dangerous. Most of the time, I allow children to solve their own problems unless they ask for my help...” (Kindergarten Teacher 3)

“...I do not consider intervention necessary if I observe that shortly after, the children can find a solution. However, if the conflict persists, I intervene, as my goal is the well-being of the children, and through my intervention, I aim to protect them while also teaching them strategies for resolving daily problems in kindergarten...” (Kindergarten Teacher 4)

“...I personally intervene only when I consider it necessary, that is, when I observe that the situation is getting out of control, such as when a child is about to hit another or when a child is crying and cannot resolve the issue independently...” (Kindergarten Teacher 11)

“...I try to initially let them negotiate and resolve the problem themselves, but when I see that my intervention is needed, I step in...” (Kindergarten Teacher 16)

“...most of the time, I encourage them to find the solution themselves and emphasize that it is not my job, always within the framework of discreet observation and after we have worked on acceptance, inclusion, and emotion management. Personally, over time, I intervene less...” (Kindergarten Teacher 22)

A key strategy employed by many teachers to handle difficult situations, such as conflicts during play, is discussion. Calm dialogue helps children reflect on their behavior, understand the reasons that led to disagreement, recognize their mistakes, and resolve the issue. Teachers reported:

“...most of the time, I try to create conditions for dialogue among the children and encourage them to propose solutions that they believe are feasible and acceptable to all parties involved...” (Kindergarten Teacher 15)

“...mainly through discussion... we talk continuously...” (Kindergarten Teacher 18)
“...inviting the children who were in conflict to sit together for a discussion...” (Kindergarten Teacher 20)

Furthermore, class-wide discussions are frequently used to resolve certain problems, as children have the opportunity to reflect on what happened, hear the perspectives of their classmates, and collectively find a solution. Teachers noted:

“...if something serious occurs, we discuss it in the class assembly...” (Kindergarten Teacher 1)
“...at the moment of conflict, if tension is high, I separate the children and try to talk to each one individually. If things are calmer, we have a constructive discussion together...” (Kindergarten Teacher 8)

“...my role must be guiding, not strict. I discuss with the class as a whole so that conflicts do not arise and children can resolve problems in the best possible way...” (Kindergarten Teacher 25)

Many teachers also use examples to help children understand their behavior toward peers and recognize when they have used inappropriate strategies to manage conflicts during play. Teachers stated:

“...from my experience with conflicts, role-playing games and the examples I present to children are often helpful...” (Kindergarten Teacher 22)
“...usually, through discussion and examples, I try to intervene in children’s conflicts...” (Kindergarten Teacher 3)

Another strategy employed by teachers is the use of open-ended questions. Teachers ask children about the cause of the conflict, when it occurred, what solutions they could propose, and why they acted as they did. Teachers explained:

“...open-ended questions often provide a solution to conflicts...” (Kindergarten Teacher 4)
“...I primarily use open-ended questions... I think this helps children think and contribute to resolving the problem...” (Kindergarten Teacher 17)

Additionally, it is crucial for children to remember classroom rules, as reminders help reinforce those aggressive behaviors are unacceptable in both kindergarten and daily life. Teachers reported:

“...discussions and reminders of the rules with children are very important...” (Kindergarten Teacher 9)
“...first, I let them discuss among themselves... if I see they struggle, I suggest some words to use during their discussion and, of course, remind them of the classroom rules... this is very important...” (Kindergarten Teacher 14)
“...rules from the beginning of the school year and extensive discussion help a lot...” (Kindergarten Teacher 24)

Furthermore, teachers frequently use specific vocabulary during conflict resolution, emphasizing concepts such as love, care, and teamwork to help children gradually develop empathy. Teachers also use phrases such as “Stop, I don’t like that” to teach children how to express their feelings appropriately and resolve disagreements through dialogue rather than conflict. Teachers reported:

“...we work extensively in class on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors as well as communication... we learn to express our feelings and share them with our classmates. So, when someone does something I don’t like, I immediately discuss it, saying ‘STOP. I don’t like what you are doing. What you are doing upsets me,’ etc.” (Kindergarten Teacher 2)

“...I try to use specific vocabulary such as teamwork, care, and love. I always talk about these concepts with the children and explain the importance of helping and taking care of friends...” (Kindergarten Teacher 12)

Finally, the use of sticker-based evaluations (emoticons) on a poster is another strategy employed to prevent conflicts. Children learn that inappropriate behavior leads to a sad or angry sticker, while appropriate behavior earns a happy sticker, which encourages positive conflict management. One teacher explained:

“...through sticker-based evaluations, children often avoid conflicts...” (Kindergarten Teacher 25)

5. INTERPRETATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Kindergarten Teachers’ Perspectives on Children’s Conflicts during Play and Their Management Practices

Initially, the present study revealed that children experience conflicts most frequently during free play, followed by recess, and to a lesser extent during structured activities, where full supervision and organization by teachers are present. These findings are consistent with study by Tay-Lim & Gan (2013), who note that children experience more conflicts during free play, with rejection among peers being a common cause.

Play, as previously mentioned, is intrinsic to young children. Beyond providing entertainment and enjoyment, it also supports their holistic development (Klein, Wirth & Linas, 2003). A common phenomenon observed is that children often engage in aggressive behaviors toward their peers during play. Regarding the causes of these conflicts, which are certainly numerous and varied, Evaldsson (2003) identified role assignments in games as a frequent source of conflict. Each child wants the most desirable role, and when two or more children compete for the same role, conflicts arise (Evaldsson, 2003).

Additionally, children who are rejected for any reason often experience distress, which they may express through aggressive behavior. Several kindergarten teachers reported that when a child has behaved poorly in previous play interactions, other children typically reject them and avoid playing with them. This finding aligns with similar research by Nergaard (2018). Furthermore, conflicts occur

when competition arises among children, each wanting to assert their uniqueness and achieve the most goals in play, which is consistent with the findings of Saiti's study (2014).

Another frequent cause of conflict is children's inability to share toys. When multiple children desire the same toy simultaneously, poor communication often leads to arguments and conflicts. This finding concurs with previous studies (Killen & Turiel, 1991; Shi, Zhang & Zhu, 2024). The research also indicated that some children desire to be the decision-makers or "leaders" in play, which can upset their peers. Consequently, conflicts emerge when children defend themselves or a friend, corroborating similar findings in the literature (Mawson, 2009; Morda & Waniganayake, 2010).

The analysis of results further revealed that many children do not react calmly during conflicts. Specifically, teachers in this study reported that children's initial responses often include crying, using physical or verbal aggression, shouting, and insisting on their own way. These findings are consistent with the study by Stonecipher et al. (2004). Only a few instances were observed in which children sought help from the teacher or withdrew from play without causing disruption.

According to Kourkoutas (2011), in conflict situations, children display various forms of aggression, including verbal, physical, and hostile behaviors, which serve as expressions of anger. More commonly, a child shows frustration through expressions of anger, inappropriate language, and loud vocalizations, while less frequently responding calmly and maturely (Kourkoutas, 2011). Only a few teachers reported that children engage in dialogue with peers to collaboratively resolve the problem.

When asked whether boys or girls experience more conflicts, teachers' responses varied. Eleven teachers reported that they do not believe in such a distinction, considering that boys and girls conflict to the same extent. The remaining eleven teachers stated that boys tend to experience more conflicts than girls. These findings are in line with the study by Cordoni, Demuru, Ceccarelli, and Palagi (2016).

Teachers are called upon to address classroom problems, particularly conflicts among children. Each teacher employs different strategies to resolve these issues. Initially, it was found that not all teachers intervene immediately. Specifically, 20 out of 25 kindergarten teachers reported that they first observe how children manage the conflict themselves and intervene only if they fail to resolve it or if physical or verbal aggression occurs.

Additionally, two teachers reported that they intervene only when children request help, whereas three teachers stated that they intervene immediately in cases of conflict. Several researchers (Lewis, 1996; Malloy & McMurray, 1996) emphasize that many teachers consider children capable of managing their own problems without immediate solutions from adults, intervening only when the situation becomes unmanageable.

Regarding strategies for managing children's conflicts during play, the analysis of results revealed several approaches. Initially, 16.0% of the sample indicated that discussion and dialogue with children involved in a conflict is a highly effective strategy. Calm dialogue allows children to reflect on what

occurred, understand the reasons behind the disagreement, and identify errors, ultimately leading to solutions.

Class-wide discussions were also deemed useful, allowing all children to participate and gradually learn how to resolve similar issues appropriately, without resorting to conflict or aggression that might generate negative emotions. Although a smaller number of teachers emphasized this, dialogue has been widely documented as a pedagogical tool in kindergarten (Killen et al., 2000). Through dialogue, teachers provide logical explanations and feedback, helping children understand appropriate strategies for resolving disagreements in future situations.

Another common strategy reported by kindergarten teachers is the use of open-ended questions. These questions encourage children to reflect on what happened, why it occurred, and how they could have addressed the issue differently rather than engaging in conflict. Researchers (Arcaro-McPhee et al., 2002; Killen et al., 2000; Singer & Haan, 2007) highlight that kindergarten teachers can facilitate relationship restoration and reflection through such questions, promoting empathy, understanding of consequences, and the development of functional social strategies.

Furthermore, a few teachers emphasized the use of specific vocabulary. Words reflecting care, love, and empathy, as well as prohibitive expressions (e.g., stop, no), are employed to guide children toward non-conflictual interactions. By reinforcing empathetic language from the start of the school year, teachers encourage children to recognize others' emotions and consider appropriate responses rather than engaging in conflict (Arcaro-McPhee et al., 2002; Bandura, 1997; Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008; Lewis, 1996).

Another method involves providing concrete examples to children, helping them recognize mistakes and encouraging reflection before acting inappropriately. Teachers also stressed the importance of reminding children of classroom rules to promote self-regulation (Koçyiğit, Eğmir & Erdem, 2020; Kural & Ceylan, 2022).

Finally, the ideal teacher intervention, according to the study, involves first adopting an observer role and subsequently acting as a mediator. Teachers initially observe children's behavior during conflicts and intervene only when necessary to help children reach a common solution. These findings align with the study by Cohen (2005), who categorizes mediation as a key stage in conflict management. Other researchers (Arcaro-McPhee et al., 2002; Bandura, 1997; Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008; Lewis, 1996) also emphasize that teachers, acting as mediators, create environments that foster positive peer relationships and enable children to collaboratively resolve conflicts appropriately.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to investigate the causes of conflicts among children during their play in kindergarten and to examine the ways in which teachers manage such situations in the daily life of the classroom.

The findings of the study highlighted the multiple perspectives of kindergarten teachers regarding the causes of children's conflicts and disputes during play, as well as the various strategies teachers employ to address these conflicts. The main conclusions of the study can be summarized as follows:

- Conflicts and disputes during children's play are a common phenomenon, observed on a daily basis in kindergarten. Conflicts occur most frequently during free play, for various reasons.

- One of the most frequent causes of conflict is that children do not share toys. Additionally, arguments often escalate into more significant disputes.

- Children rarely resolve conflicts calmly on their own. Instead, they often cry, shout, or use physical or verbal aggression. Only a few children use dialogue as an optimal method for conflict resolution.

- Regarding conflicts between genders, children argue to the same extent regardless of whether they are boys or girls.

- The most frequently employed strategy by teachers is the use of dialogue and discussion, often in a whole-class setting, to ensure that all children remain calm and gradually learn to resolve disagreements appropriately.

- A key role for the teacher in managing conflicts is first that of the observer and, subsequently, that of the mediator if children are unable to resolve the issue independently.

- Another effective strategy for resolving conflicts during play is the use of open-ended questions and illustrative examples.

- Providing ready-made solutions to children should generally be avoided. Instead, teachers should offer proper guidance from the beginning of the school year to help children learn how to manage situations involving disagreement or conflict.

- Children are capable of resolving their own problems independently, using appropriate management strategies, provided that the class has been consistently guided in this behavior from the start of the school year.

- Teachers must intervene in conflicts when there is potential for or evidence of physical or verbal aggression. It is crucial to emphasize that the teacher is responsible for all children and must prioritize their safety above all.

In summary, play is essential for all children, providing benefits such as entertainment, skill development, socialization, and fostering a sense of solidarity and cooperation. However, conflicts within play are frequent. It is essential for both teachers and children to work on appropriate behavior, conduct regular discussions in the whole-class setting, and establish clear guidance from the outset. This helps children understand the importance of treating their peers appropriately when facing various problems.

Finally, it is important to highlight the value of prevention in the school setting, as emphasized by Cohen (2005). At the beginning of the school year, teachers, together with children, should establish the foundations for proper management and resolution of conflicts, in order to prevent negative situations and problematic behaviors in kindergarten.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations arise from both the findings of the present study and the theoretical framework:

- It is important to place significant emphasis on free play, as children feel greater freedom during this time and are more likely to engage in challenging behaviors.

- Discussion and dialogue are essential communication tools in kindergarten and should be utilized daily by both teachers and children.

- From the beginning of the school year, teachers should introduce children to socio-emotional learning programs and foster empathy through the personal empowerment of each child.

- Maximum importance should be given to teacher guidance from the outset, enabling children to make consistent progress in demonstrating mature and appropriate behaviors.

- Observation is a powerful tool for educators regarding children's behavior.

- Teacher intervention in daily kindergarten activities should occur only when circumstances require it. Ready-made solutions should not be provided to children.

- Continuous intervention by the teacher in children's problems prevents them from learning self-management skills, except in situations involving any form of aggression.

- No teacher should permit violent behavior under any circumstances. Ensuring the safety of children at all times is paramount, and this principle should be conveyed to the children themselves.

- Classroom rules should be collaboratively developed by teachers and children, helping children to understand what is acceptable and what is not. These rules are particularly important in cases of conflicts during play.

7. Limitations and Future Directions of the Study

Certain factors limited the conduct of the present study. While the findings provide valuable insights into the causes of disputes and the management of conflicts in preschool play, they cannot be generalized to the wider population, as they are based on a small sample.

Further research is necessary to explore this issue, as new methods and data may emerge over time. Specific suggestions for future research include:

-Conducting additional qualitative studies to provide a more comprehensive investigation of the topic.

-Considering parents' perspectives regarding the strategies they use at home to educate children on conflict management in school, as their input is highly valuable.

-Utilizing questionnaires and quantitative research methods to further explore the issue of children's conflicts in play and the strategies employed by teachers.

This study emphasized the causes of conflicts among children during their play in kindergarten, highlighting several factors that contribute to these issues in everyday classroom life. It also demonstrated that most disputes occur during free play rather than during recess or organized activities. An essential tool for addressing these conflicts is dialogue between teachers and children, including discussions in the whole-class setting.

Teachers must prepare and guide children patiently from the beginning of the school year to help them navigate challenging situations appropriately, without providing ready-made solutions. In cases of disruptive behavior, the teacher must intervene and mediate to ensure the safety of all children while facilitating a collaborative resolution.

Finally, teachers should focus on establishing effective communication from the outset, both between themselves and among the children, so that children can gradually learn to communicate, cooperate, support each other, and recognize the emotions of their peers in all situations.

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