

Collaborative Action-Research as Training Strategy for Conflict Mediation among Children

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Abstract

Conflict situations are a daily issue in the environment of Kindergarten. This paper reports on a work in progress about an action-research project in a collaborative setting in which the author worked with a group of kindergarten teachers (from day care to preschool) - at a social care institution in the center of Lisbon – in order to investigate the occurrence of conflict situations among children. The practitioners used observations, group discussions and reflections to share experiences and improve practices. Several data was collected, from focus group interviews, taped and summary sessions, registrations of observations, reflections, and their analysis, summaries of the readings, finalizing with a synthesis of the sessions as well as follow up interviews, amongst others things. For this presentation only analyzed data was used from the follow up interviews with the kindergarten teachers and from that data the following analysis system was created: organization and process of teacher education; interdependency between teacher education and other factors of professional development; changes in kindergarten teachers regarding both different areas and levels; changes in the institution; difficulties and constraints. The teacher education process contributed to a greater involvement between kindergarten teachers in both ways from different valances (day care and preschool) and within valances. Some kindergarten teachers have a different way of perceiving, reflecting and acting towards conflict situations, others were able to transfer knowledge from their professional to their personal sphere and others mentioned a self transformation regarding their own conflicts and how they deal with them. The major problem was, as always, the time factor and the major achievement, including all the processes, was the creation of pedagogical teams, providing kindergarten teachers a greater opportunity to share and reflect upon their daily practices.

Key words: Teacher Education; Collaborative Action Research; Childhood Education.

Introduction

The aim of this article is the dissemination of a collaborative action-research project with kindergarten teachers, concerning conflict mediation among children. Nowadays, from

an early age children spend more and more hours of the day in institutional context rather than with family. As they grow older their peers start to play a more important role in their social development. The Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (1997) emphasized that “being part of a group allows children to confront themselves with different points of view and, therefore, experience conflict situations” (p. 37). These, usually, have as a result *primitive answers of fight and flight* (Sastre & Moreno, 2002: 51) among young children, given their low level of development of interpersonal understanding (Selman, 1980, in Coimbra, 1990: 21). Ladd, Price and Hart (1988: 991) state that children who experience difficulties with their peers at this stage, have a growing risk of rejection or neglect by peers at the next stage. Also because “the cumulative effects of long-term social difficulties (...) in childhood may be responsible for the recursive cycle phenomenon” (Katz & Chard, 1997: 55), this means that children who are given the chance to practice their social skills tend to improve those skills (*positive cycle*), on the other hand, children who are avoided or rejected tend to respond in the same way and this decreases their opportunities to practice their social skills (*negative cycle*). Sandy and Cochran (2000) underline the fact that “the social skills and appropriate behaviour are strong and consistent predictors of academic achievement” (p. 316).

Social interaction, including conflict interactions among peers need the adults support (parents, kindergarten teachers and others), guiding them through their “(...) attempts of conflict resolution and negotiation (...)” (DEB, 1997: 37), leading them throughout progressive acquisition and development of social skills, such as “solving problematic situations and managing conflicts” (Cachapuz, Sá-Chaves, & Paixão, 2004: 30), so they can “learn to live together” (Delors et al., 1998: 77).

Conflict itself is neither positive nor negative; the constructive or destructive consequences depend on the way conflict is managed (Thomas, 1983: 889). In the mediation process instead of seeing conflict as a negative phenomenon it is faced as something “natural” (Fernández, 2001: 21; Jares, 2001: 34), “inherent” (Burguet, 1999: 18; Fonkert, 1999: 170) to individuals and “allows individual, group or organizational improvement” (Ferreira, Neves, & Caetano, 2001: 511), therefore, “necessary” (Lederach, 2000: 72) and “consubstantial” (Jares, 2001: 25; San Martín, 2003: 10) to life.

Hence, kindergarten teachers should prevent conflict situations guiding children through mediation, which is a process of “constructive (committed, non-violent and positive), creative (inventing new paths, formulating original ideas and opening our mind), cooperative (recognizing, revaluing and dialoguing with others) and critic (fair, transforming and peaceful) management” (Boqué et al., 2005: 11), that always searches for a positive result to the parties involved in conflict. It’s important to engage children with this process from an

early age, because "the sooner they learn about personal relationships (...) and about the conflicts that arise from them, the easier it will be to neutralize the violent and uncontrolled responses" (Sastre & Moreno, 2002: 52).

Having this in mind, a kindergarten teachers' collaborative group was created to reflect on performances when dealing with conflicts and finding solutions to everyday problems. The assumption of a reflective attitude can lead to a change in the educational practices, leading to professional development. The professional development also contributes to the continuous teacher's education, which is a way to update, enhance knowledge, skills and abilities, in other words, it's an improvement factor for the teacher's professional performance which could possibly influence the results of pupils' learning abilities.

It is well known that several heads think better, than one and Fullan and Hargreaves (2001) also said that "nobody is an island. We cannot develop in isolation, but through our relationships, especially the ones we keep with those who are significant to us. The significant others work as a kind of mirror of our personal development" (p. 71). The authors defend the existence of collaborative cultures in schools instead of an individualistic school culture. Here also lies the problem of this investigation, as it is still common to hear teachers talk about a certain professional loneliness, which can and should be overcome through interaction with others, sharing experiences and building new knowledge. Therefore, it is important to integrate collaborative work groups, meaning that, through dialogue and reflection, teachers overcome difficulties and achieve objectives which, individually, would be more difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, Boavida and Ponte (2002) state that there are different forms of collaboration depending on the goals, however "the use of the term collaboration is suitable when different actors work together, not in a hierarchical relationship, but on an equal basis so that there is mutual support towards achieving goals which will benefit all" (p. 3). Even when dealing with researchers, a collaborative research allows both – researcher and teachers, together – to experience, test and discuss new ideas. Therefore, it becomes a potentially more critical research: critical about the practice informed by theory and critical about the research informed by practice. Day (2001), in his book *Developing Teachers: the challenges of lifelong learning*, challenges teachers to actively involve themselves in research, in processes of gathering data, descriptions, synthesis, systematic data analysis and evaluation. Researchers must consider the teachers' emerging questions as relevant, understand their needs and search for possible answers. Above all, in order for the research to be effective, the researcher should follow the teachers closely in their work environment, which means highlighting the work of the researchers with the teachers rather than about the teacher (Blond & Webb, 1997).

However, in this particular research we had to look at both sides. When researching with kindergarten teachers, we had the following questions arise from practice problems:

- How to deal with a child who's constantly biting peers?
- What should be done when facing the constant dispute for the first place in the train queue?
- How do we raise family awareness to this issue?
- How to involve other adults in conflict resolution?
- How to optimize strategies for conflict resolution in the context of early childhood education?

And when researching *about* kindergarten teachers or rather, the teacher education process, the following questions arose:

- What are the repercussions of teacher education processes in collaborative action-research when it comes to the kindergarten teachers' conceptions and practices?
- How can kindergarten teachers equate the development of collaborative action-research, as a formative process able to make a change?

Brief presentation of projects and other adults involved

The research developed in two continuous instances: the first instance (from March to June 2009) consisted of a study circle training about *conflict mediation* and the second one (from October 2009 to May 2010) consisted of informal sessions. Throughout the second instance, kindergarten teachers developed their own projects in their classrooms.

In day care there was a project called treasure basket (Goldschmied & Jackson, 2004) that consisted of a basket with several objects from our daily routine but not always available for children to explore and that helped reduce the conflict situations among children at certain moments of the routine.

In preschool there was a project called "the feelings box" that was used everyday at the final group meeting. Children drew a face (happy, sad, angry or scared) according to how they were feeling and would have to explain and discuss the reason to the group, as well as what they could change in their own behaviour or would like some peers to behave differently towards them.

In addition to that, Teacher's Assistants and Parents were also somehow involved. It was important that teacher's assistants had a training session on conflict management and

that stimulated continuous dialogue between them and the kindergarten teachers about the way they usually acted and how they should act in conflict situations among children, so there would be consistency in the actions of all adults in the classroom and therefore, children's sense of security would be heightened. During the discussion session, parents were also given the opportunity to reflect on the subject. There were parents from day care to preschool, who were very interested in the issue and had time to present their concerns in small groups and all together (parents and kindergarten teachers) tried to coordinate ideas and suggestions in order to work better as a team.

Methodology

The study had followed a qualitative methodology, within the interpretive research paradigm. The research method selected was the *case study* and the methodological strategy was *action-research* in a *collaborative* setting. According to Elliott (1984, in McKernan, 1996) action-research is "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it" (pp. 3-4). Action-research is characterized by the usage of the case study methodology as a way to understand what is happening and how the events are related and some authors include it in the so called applied research, which seeks results that can be used at the level of practical decisions of certain aspects of people's lives and the researcher has an active involvement during the investigation. It is a process that develops in a spiral made by cycles of four interrelated and complementary phases: planning, action, observation and reflection. Each new cycle is the continuation of the previous, which enriches the next one (Lessard-Hébert, 1996: 15). Hence, in a general way, action-research is "(...) a form of practical research that legitimates teacher's attempts to understand their work from their own point of view" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011: 43). Hargreaves (1998) also states that *collaboration* is the nuclear concept of action research assumed while: "(...) the principle of articulation and integration of action, planning, culture, development, organization and research" (p. 277).

The research was based on a critical reflection with eleven kindergarten teachers (four from day care and seven from preschool), about their performances when facing conflict situations amongst peers.

During the process, a variety of methods and research techniques was used, among which: self and pair's observations (with a collective construction frame), interviews (focus group and follow up), document analysis and field notes (summaries of the sessions, synthesis of: reading materials, sessions, observations, reflections; final reports). A great amount of data was collected.

However, for this article the analysis of the follow up interviews was given preference. According to Flick (2009) in some interviews, “researchers turn to participants to verify with them the study results” (p. 107) as happens in follow up interviews. These were taken between December 2011 and February 2012, almost one year after ending the study (May of 2010), with the intention of finding out if any changes had occurred since then. These interviews were also used for the purpose of the triangulation between the follow up interviews and other methods such as the participatory observation (performed by the investigator) as well as parts of the narratives from the initial focus group interviews with kindergarten teachers and the teacher’s assistants (regarding the performance of the kindergarten teachers towards conflict situations). As Stake (1994) states “triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (p. 241). After the interviews were done, they were transcribed and underwent a content analysis. An inductive analysis was carried out, where the categories emerged from the data.

Findings

Proceeded to analyse and interpret the follow up interviews (FUI), 10 in total, where there were found to be various issues relating to the path taken during the teacher education process. The issues emerging from the interviews were related to: *organization and teacher education process*; effects upon both practitioners and institutions, such as *interdependency between teacher education and other factors of professional development*; *changes in kindergarten teachers – areas and levels*; *difficulties and constraints*; and *changes in the institution*.

Organization and Teacher Education Process

In this issue the kindergarten teachers referred to how we were able to create confidence within the group that gathered for the first time for the two valences: day care and preschool, on a frequent basis. And were even surprised with the attitude of some colleagues, like Joana stated: “*Camila is speaking a lot in these meetings, she usually doesn’t talk much!*” (Joana - EP4, FUI, February 2012)¹. They added that working as a group brings people together and helps make them confident enough to express themselves, to share experiences and find solutions with and for each other: “*many times in our conversations colleagues discussed situations that they couldn’t handle and we all contributed with ideas, examples and proposals to see what would or wouldn’t work*” (Joana - EP4, FUI, February 2012). Therefore, there was a kind of

¹ The letters ED and EP stands for Day care and Preschool Educator, respectively.

sense of breaking the isolation, especially between the kindergarten teachers from the different valences. Throughout the process we were able to link practice and theory, reading several authors about the themes of conflict and mediation, particularly: *“having a theoretical basis, because maybe we had never thought about these topics from that perspective or even that there was so much theoretical information about these topics and that there are people who study something that is so normal such as conflict and mediation, therefore the theoretical papers that you presented really helped us”* (Ana – ED5, FUI, February 2012).

Kindergarten teachers did self and pairs observations, this was something new and which they really enjoyed doing. They reflected upon the conflict situations they observed, during the group interactions and their own performances when dealing with the child conflicts and added that *“we have to try to understand in what way we can help each other”* (Ana – ED5, FUI, February 2012). Reflecting on all these aspects in group sessions helped some kindergarten teachers test different strategies while acting in conflict situations and this was very helpful to them: *“I tried other strategies that colleagues had mentioned and some worked and others didn't, because children are different”* (Ana – ED5, FUI, February 2012).

As we also involved Teacher's Assistants, the conflict mediation went from an ordinary event to an issue that could need more attention. They started to talk more often about some particular situations that occurred in their classrooms in order to reach a conclusion on how to respond towards a specific child or situation, so they would have a more consistent performance as a team. To finalise, we also prepared a session with the parents, to disclose our group work and also to inquire about how to improve our performance towards conflict situations and what parents concerns were due to this theme and how both kindergarten teachers and parents could work towards a better understanding of child conflicts.

Interdependence between Teacher Education and Other Factors of Professional Development

In this category, practitioners talked about how they've changed and couldn't attribute this to one particular factor, but rather due to a series of factors that contributed to these changes taking place. They say they've changed their performance and/or the way of thinking about conflict situations, but they do not quite know what exactly caused this change, as we can see by the following comments: *“I cannot tell you if [the aspects that I've changed] are a result of the study or practice or even through time, because I feel that (...) during my practice years everything I received from experience as well as shared experiences somehow (...) I'm incorporating what I value in my practice (...) and it starts to be an integrative part of my performance because I consider it to be*

important” (Joana - EP4, FUI, February 2012). Some of the practitioners had this explicit awareness that it was a number of factors that contributed to these changes.

Changes in Kindergarten Teachers – areas

The kindergarten teachers wrote about the effects of the teacher education process on themselves, in different areas like *declarative, procedure* and *metacognitive knowledge* by stating that “*What I’ve change the most was perceiving what was a conflict (...) and what wasn’t*” (Camila – ED1, FUI, February 2012) and “*It’s important to give the child who provoked the conflict time to understand that the other child is sad and has been hurt by his/her actions*” (Nini – ED3, FUI, February 2012) and made kindergarten teachers review their way on how to organize thoughts: “*This theme, was in fact, not a subject that was a part of my every day-to-day thoughts. It did however disturb me, only because it was a difficult thing to observe “Hurr... there they go again”. I now believe that conflicts have to exist, it would be bad if they didn’t exist*” (Rita – ED2, FUI, February 2012), respectively.

Some practitioners did actually change their *reactions* towards conflict situations as well, because like Camila (ED1) said: “*whenever I saw a conflict I would immediately intervene but not anymore (only if they are pulling each other’s hair, kicking or biting)*” (Camila – ED1, FUI, February 2012), she now listens carefully to both parties before intervening. Another interesting statement came from Lili (ED4) who realized that sometimes two year old children do know, in their own way, how to deal with a conflict situation and therefore changed her performance, because whenever she saw an emerging conflict about to happen, she would react immediately by separating the children. She now stops and observes, to see how the children will handle the situation and will only intervene if necessary.

Hence, practitioners are now starting to think in a different way and are questioning themselves much more concerning the conflict mediation they are using with the children and therefore, they should have different *attitudes and dispositions* towards them. Kindergarten teachers have noticed, as they become more patient and relaxed when facing a conflict situation, that this influences the children’s behaviour.

Collaboration among kindergarten teachers got stronger; they talk more about what is going on inside their classrooms: “*[another] strong point of this training was the closer relationships achieved between colleagues. (...) I think it also put me at ease, maybe because I was young, I thought “ok, I do not have to say anything about what goes on in my classroom because they will think I’m unable to do this or that.” And “I think it made us all, especially me, develop a closer relationship with them all. Honestly, not only here in terms of conflict, but in other aspects as well. I feel that we are more comfortable with each and we are able to openly discuss and share experiences with each other about aspects that happen in our classrooms. There has definitely been a change as far as I am concerned, without a doubt*” (Margarida –

EP8, FUI, February 2012). This has also led to kindergarten teachers trying to get together more often in informal settings, outside the institution like going to the theatre and that has helped in *breaking isolation*.

Changes in Kindergarten Teachers – levels

Previously we talked about areas of change and now we're going to mention some levels of change. By levels we mean deepness, not only referring to integration/differentiation but also to extension (in space and time). This said, we have a level of *turbulence/stability* concerning both *flexibility* and *conviction*. Firstly, a kindergarten teacher noticed she had a more open mind towards conflict situations even with her colleagues, she was more at ease to deal with it – she changed from being defensive to humorous. Secondly, some practitioners feel more certainty about their performance: *"I'm certain that I'm doing what is right and is best for their well-being and they will be nicer people"* (Camila – ED1, FUI, February 2012).

The other level is *transference space/time*, meaning that practitioners felt interdependency between professional and personal development. Some kindergarten teachers started to apply with their own families what they've started to do in their classrooms. Camila (ED1) for instance, she would undermine her husband when he was trying to deal with their kids conflicts but after she adopted a different way of acting in her classroom, she decided to stay calm and observe the conflict occurrences at home and realized she needed to back away a little bit in order each member of the family to have some space on his/her own and the result was that her relationship with her husband improved significantly, *"just like when they were dating"* (Camila – ED1, FUI, February 2012).

The last level is *no change*, also present in the statements of some kindergarten teachers who acknowledged that it was important to reflect and read about these practices but only to remind them that what they're doing is already right and therefore they must continue to do so. It shows some resistance to change especially because they believe they are already doing what is right.

Difficulties and Constraints

The only difficulty and constraint pointed out was the *lack of time* that didn't allow for the registration of the observations: *"I think our day goes by so fast - the clocks must be faulty, the world must be crazy - I do not know if this happens to you – we have a meeting, look at the clock! Ten past ten, already! How is that possible?"*, *"We start activities, after a while it's time for to break for a snack, we*

stop and so on (...)" (Fáti – EP2, FUI, February 2012). *"Sometimes I brought home (the notebook) and didn't understand any of the gibberish that I had written"* (Fáti – EP2, FUI, February 2012). Adding to that, being tired doesn't help: *"Sometimes our days are so tiring"* (Lili – ED4, FUI, February 2012).

Changes in the Institution

Practitioners believed that the fact that we were working for some time as a collaborative group had an influence upon the decision to *create pedagogical teams* and that is helpful: *"I think it helps to have teams that encourage us to talk about the problems and obstacles we face, similar to the sessions we did when you were here"* (Ana – ED5, FUI, February 2012). Others felt that the directors of the Institution should approach the kindergarten teachers in the sense of creating dialogue, positive ways and ideas together. *"I think this was a necessity that people were feeling, in terms of participating more actively, rather than merely sitting and listening (...)"* (Rita – ED2, FUI, February 2012).

It was an innovation at the school, they now gather according to age groups (day care, 3 to 4 year olds and 5 year old classes) every 15 days. The purpose is the proximity between kindergarten teachers and their work, by sharing experiences and reflecting on daily questions and at the same time it is a way to decentre concerns from the principal of the school and delegate work tasks to the leaders of each team. These leaders are actually colleagues who know each other better than the principal: *"(...) people who are in the dynamics of the teams are also kindergarten teachers therefore they know their colleagues better than a member of the directorate..."* (Joana – EP4, FUI, February 2012), as well as being very familiar with the more practical situations: *"(...) It's easier to talk directly with colleagues that are familiar with the situations and our practices rather than with the principal of the school (...) who is inside her office and not so involved with our classroom work"* (Camila – ED1, FUI, February 2012) and so, they are the link between kindergarten teachers and the directorate *"...we have a person that helps us reach the directorate... because that kindergarten teacher who's at the pedagogical dynamic is the one who's also present at the directorate's meetings, this is the way we manage to bring things to the knowledge of the directorate."* (Rita – ED2, FUI, February 2012).

Conclusions

This preliminary conclusion is the result of the analysis of part of the collected data – *follow up interviews* – which helped us gain important information that can contribute to and respond to the investigation questions.

Firstly: "What are the repercussions of training processes in collaborative action-research when it comes to the kindergarten teacher's conceptions and practices?" Practitioners assumed that there were changes, regarding their conceptions towards conflict situations and the mediation process and consequently that led to most kindergarten teachers having a different understanding of conflict situations and trying to face them as normal/natural situations that have to exist as part of the child's development. Due to the reflective process carried out involving their particular conflict situations and their own practice, practitioners started to pay more attention to performance and observe before taking any action and adopted some of the mediators strategies for conflict resolution, such as: get down to their level, interfere only if necessary, listen to both parties (be impartial), evoke dialogue (create empathy), talk about feelings, let children come up with solutions, give suggestions when necessary (share turns).

Regarding the second question: "How can kindergarten teachers equate the development of collaborative action-research, as a formative process able to make a change?" the practitioners deal with the fact that the teacher education process enabled the existence of moments in which all kindergarten teachers (day care and preschool) got together, providing a greater involvement of all the teachers of the institution, a joint reflection on the conflicts and modes of action towards them, sharing knowledge and joint problem solving in everyday life. The acquisition and application of new strategies into practice, lead either to the success or failure depending on the ability to be attentive to the situation that is, attempting to contextualize each occurrence of conflict in order to act accordingly. One of the aspects that best relates to the actual existence of significant change is what some teachers said about the ability to transfer knowledge from their professional to their personal sphere, incorporating what can not be disintegrated: personal self from professional self (of education). Some were able to acknowledge the permeable link.

One of the biggest changes was in the collaborative work of the institution that managed to create pedagogical teams, and in so doing, is now providing the kindergarten teachers working conditions conducive to sharing and reflecting upon their practices.

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