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Conflicts among peers in the playground in a group of Spanish elementary schools

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyse and explore through systematic observation the conflicts that occur among peers during the playground in elementary schools in Spain. The study followed a non-experimental descriptive design and all conflicts were observed in their natural context of 44 schools. Among the 1691 conflicts detected in a sample of 2529 students, significant differences were found among the different types of conflicts (verbal, physical, social exclusion and sexual harassment), which depended on the course and sex of the protagonists. Furthermore, a different pattern emerged in the reactions that other peers and teachers had to the initial conflicts. Additionally, findings were consistent with the findings in previous studies in the literature regarding the need to train and prepare teachers to prevent future conflicts in the scholar context.

KEYWORDS

elementary school
conflicts among peers
playground
reaction to conflict
assertiveness
teachers

INTRODUCTION

During the past decades, there has been a renewed interest in social interactions and conflicts among children (Rubin et al. 2006; Laursen et al. 2001). Studies show that the school playground provides an important and unique context for analysing and learning about children's conflicts and disagreements

(Santa 2007). However, given its unstructured nature, the examination of the different kinds of conflicts is not easy, for neither researchers nor teachers (Félix et al. 2008; Rivers and Smith 1994).

At the same time, there is a wide consensus among researchers regarding the origin of such conflict behaviours. Contrary to what was commonly believed, it has been proven that the majority of conflicts appear due to a lack of a successful emotional management (Filella 2014; Keener and Leaman 2007). Thus, the best way to intervene and prevent conflicts is to train children into how to be more efficient at an emotional level. This makes it easier to avoid harsher consequences such as problems in the learning process, or even bullying (Basu and Mermillod 2011).

In order to tackle the particular causes and limited skills that enhance conflict situations, it is highly needed to understand conflict behaviours and how they are displayed in centres and schools, as well as which other variables may intervene.

According to previous literature, the most influential variables in conflict situations are sex and age (Ostrov and Crick 2007; Murray-Close and Ostrov 2009). Several studies emphasize that the highest incidence of conflicts takes place between the age of 9 to 14 years, when coercion is often the most used strategy to solve conflicts (Laursenet al. 2001; Pelegrini and Long 2002). However, it is often observed that younger children live more conflicts on the playground due to their immaturity and their tendency to present more aggressive behaviour during conflict situations (Sidorowicz and Hair 2009). Regarding sex, studies show that boys exhibit a higher degree of physical aggression, whereas girls tend to present more relational aggression (Murray-Close and Ostrov 2009; Toldos 2005).

In this same direction, the reaction of peers to the initial conflicts have been relatively little studied. Previous studies, though, point out that reactions are often different between boys and girls, though both show a tendency to reactive aggression at the first moment (Hay et al. 2011).

One further issue is how teachers manage the conflicts that appear in school. In this sense, it is safe to state that most teachers rarely intervene in conflict situations that take place in the playground and do not feel ready to deal with them (Escámez 2001; Simbulaet al. 2012; Van der Meulen et al. 2003). Escámez (2001), for instance, demonstrated that 57 per cent of the teaching staff did not feel ready to face the conflicts that appear in the classroom, while a striking 10 per cent of the teachers did not regard conflict situations in school as their responsibility. Nonetheless, teachers feel pressured to intervene when certain situations take place, for example, hitting, stealing or blackmailing, cases that may make them feel overwhelmed (Del Barrio et al. 2003).

Therefore, the causes and resolution of conflict situations in school cannot be understood without analysing the conflict phenomenon that is taking place in our centres and schools.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of the present article is to describe the types of conflicts occurring in the school playground, providing results for age and sex, and to shed some light on the underlying mechanisms of such behaviours. Furthermore, we want to explore if the initial conflicts predict certain reactions. Additionally, we aim to study the kind of intervention that teachers exhibit when conflict situations occur.

To classify conflicts, we will use the classification of the Defensordel Pueblo (2006) and Martín et al. (2003), which make a distinction between verbal aggression; physical aggression; social exclusion; and sexual harassment.

METHODS

Sample and participants

The sample comprised a total of 1691 peer conflicts experienced by students of 44 schools of elementary education in the city of Lleida (Spain). The total number of students participating in the study was 2529 (1548 boys [61.21 per cent] and 981 girls [38.79 per cent]). The average rate of conflicts registered every day was 4.8 conflicts per day.

Instruments and Data sources

The present non-experimental descriptive study was based on a systematic observation registration that was carried out by the students of the last course in Elementary Education at the University of Lleida (UdL). Students were specifically trained for the purpose and participated voluntarily in the study. The anecdotic registration used in this study had four dimensions: demographic data, description of the initial conflict, description of the reaction of the students to the initial conflict, and intervention. After the registration, the conflicts were categorized in four clusters: verbal aggression, physical aggression, social exclusion and breaking the rules of the school.

The observation took place during February 2014. During this period two graduate students, who were undergoing their training program, registered all the conflicts that occurred during a period of eight days in each one of the participant schools. They also registered those conflicts that were reported by the students.

In order to validate the systematic observation tool, several expert judges evaluated the reliability by using the Cronbach's α index, which resulted in a satisfactory result of 0.81.

RESULTS

Conflicts registered in the observation

As can be seen in Table 1, a total of 1691 conflicts were observed, differentiating between cycle (age) and sex of the participants. The cycle in which more conflicts were observed was the initial one (6 to 8 years old). Interestingly, the lowest number of conflicts was observed when the children involved in the conflict had different ages.

Regarding the difference between sexes, we observed that when conflicts occur among peers of the same age, the highest percentage of conflicts registered is always between boys. However, contrary to that, in those conflicts that involved children of different ages, the highest percentage of occurrence was among boys and girls, that is, mixed.

The Chi-Square test was carried out to study the differences between cycles and conflicts among peers. Table 2 shows that conflicts among boys tend to be more physical, whereas conflicts among girls are mainly related to social exclusion. Regarding the cycles, it is important to note that during the initial cycle, physical conflicts were significantly more common, especially among

Grade of elementary school in Spain	Sex	Frequency	Per cent	Total cycle
Initial cycle (6–8yo)	Boys	292	17.3%	<i>n</i> =636 (37.6%)
	Girls	158	9.3%	
	Mixed	186	11.0%	
Medium cycle (8–10yo)	Boys	186	11.0%	<i>n</i> =447 (26.4%)
	Girls	141	8.3%	
	Mixed	120	7.1%	
Higher cycle (10–12yo)	Boys	153	9.0%	<i>n</i> =315 (18.6%)
	Girls	67	4.0%	
	Mixed	95	5.6%	
Mixed cycle (6–12yo)	Boys	111	6.6%	<i>n</i> =293 (17.3%)
	Girls	40	2.4%	
	Mixed	142	8.4%	
Total		1691	100%	

Table 1: Descriptives of the sample regarding sex and grade (*n*=1691).

boys. In contrast, in the medium cycle, the most frequent type of conflict was social exclusion, particularly among girls. All in all, social exclusion appeared to be the most recurrent type of conflict, especially among those situations that involve girls.

As a second part of the analysis, we studied the relationship between the conflicts that were initially registered and the reactions of the other peers to these situations (see Table 3). A Chi Square test was carried out to explore whether there was a relationship between these two variables. Interestingly, physical aggression tended to be responded with both a fresh aggression or, alternatively, asking for help, which is similar to what happens on breaking the rules. In a different manner, those children who faced verbal or psychological aggression tended to react by asking for help.

Finally, we carried a χ Square test to explore how the initial conflict determined which resolution strategy was adopted by the teachers. As Table 4 shows, the most applied strategy is the mediation role of the teacher in all kinds of initial conflicts, whereas the resolution strategy that was less employed was making the student say ‘sorry’ on breaking the rules. Strikingly, psychological aggression was the type of conflict that registers less intervention from the teachers.

DISCUSSION

Coexistence in school inevitably leads to the emergence of conflicts. Olweus (1993), as a pioneer in the field, explained that conflicts lead to negative consequences for all those who live them. More recently, in an attempt to explain why these conflicts emerge and cause such devastating outcomes, several experts suggested that aggression does not occur due to a high hostility but due to a lack of adequate emotional management (Filella 2014; Ortega 2008).

Cycle	Type of conflict	Sex			Total	Bilateral sig.
		Boys	Girls	Mixed		
Initial cycle	Verbal	52	32	25	109	$p<0.001$
		17.8%	20.3%	13.4%		
	Physical	127	29	79	235	
		43.5%	18.4%	42.5%		
	Social exclusion	74	85	51	210	
Medium cycle	Verbal	25.3%	53.8%	27.4%		$p<0.001$
		39	12	31	82	
		13.4%	7.6%	16.7%		
		47	33	22	102	
		25.3%	23.4%	18.3%		
	Physical	80	23	31	134	
		43.0%	16.3%	25.8%		
	Social exclusion	46	71	48	165	
		24.7%	50.4%	40.0%		
	Norms	13	14	19	46	
Higher cycle	Verbal	7.0%	9.9%	15.8%		$p<0.001$
		34	23	33	90	
		22.2%	34.3%	34.7%		
		53	16	23	92	
		34.6%	23.9%	24.2%		
	Physical	33	27	30	90	
		21.6%	40.3%	31.6%		
	Social exclusion	33	1	9	43	
		21.6%	1.5%	9.5%		
	Norms	23	11	38	72	
Mixed cycle	Verbal	20.7%	27.5%	26.8%		$p=0.062$
		43	5	37	85	
		38.7%	12.5%	26.1%		
		35	20	51	106	
		31.5%	50.0%	35.9%		
	Physical	10	4	16	30	
		9.0%	10.0%	11.3%		
	Social exclusion	156	99	118	373	
		21.0%	24.4%	21.7%		
	Norms	303	73	170	546	
Total	Verbal	40.8%	18.0%	31.3%		$p<0.001$
		188	203	180	571	
		25.3%	50.0%	33.1%		
		95	31	75	201	
		12.8%	7.6%	13.8%		
	Physical					
	Social exclusion					
	Norms					
Total	Count	742	406	543	1691	

Table 2: Chi square indexes for the different conflicts regarding the cycle and the sex.

Reaction to the initial conflict								
	Verbal aggression	Physical aggression	Psychological aggression	Breaking rules	Helplessness response	Asking for help	Doing nothing	Bilateral sig.
Initial conflict								
Verbal aggression	35 (24%)	29 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	24 (29%)	58 (16%)	21 (20%)	p<0.001
Physical aggression	20 (14%)	96 (43%)	3 (14%)	0 (0%)	27 (33%)	98 (27%)	41 (40%)	
Psychological aggression	40 (27%)	31 (14%)	11 (50%)	1 (100%)	29 (35%)	161 (44%)	34 (33%)	
Breaking rules	51 (35%)	66 (30%)	8 (36%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	51 (14%)	7 (7%)	
Total	146	222	22	1	82	368	103	

Table 3: χ^2 index for the reactions to the initial conflicts among peers.

Resolution of the initial conflict						
	No intervention	Students solve it on their own	Teacher as a mediator in the conflict	Students must say sorry	They are being punished	Bilateral sig.
Initial conflict						
Verbal aggression	48 (27%)	23 (22%)	220 (21%)	20 (26%)	62 (21%)	p=0.001
Physical aggression	50 (28%)	26 (25%)	324 (31%)	35 (45%)	111 (38%)	
Psychological aggression	63 (37%)	36 (35%)	373 (36%)	21 (27%)	78 (26%)	
Breaking rules	14 (8%)	19 (18%)	121 (12%)	2 (2%)	45 (15%)	
Total	175	104	1038	78	296	

Table 4: χ^2 index for the reactions of the teachers to the initial conflicts among peers.

Teachers and other peers are key to ameliorate and solve these conflicts in schools, creating and potentiating a positive environment and climate in school contexts (Collell and Escudé 2011), through assemblies (Agramunt et al. 2004), specific programmes (Tuvilla 2004) or mediation (García-Raga et al. 2012; Molina 2005). Above all, as many authors have pointed out, conflicts can be successfully resolved and prevented when the implicated individuals receive good management of emotions, that is, successful and efficient management of their social and emotional skills (Greenberg et al. 2003). Therefore, preventive interventions that focus on the training of emotional education can be highly beneficial to avoid conflict situations in schools (Eisenberg and Spinrad 2004; Greenberger et al. 2003).

Despite the aforementioned assumptions, conflicts remain present in schools, showing different patterns, and thus, pointing out different underlying emotional training needs. In the present study, we could observe these different patterns, in both students and teachers, which suggests that some intervention at social and emotional levels may be needed.

Conflict registration

According to our results, the highest number of conflicts took place among students that were younger. Although some authors claim that more conflicts can occur among older children (Laursen et al. 2001; Pelegrini and Long 2002), other researchers claim that younger children are more likely to exhibit poor impulse control, low frustration tolerance and limited insight into their own feelings and that of others (Sidorowicz and Hair 2009). Thus, younger children are more easily engaged in aggressive behaviour, which turns, at the same time, into more observable conflicts, as is the case with verbal and physical aggression (Sidorowicz and Hair 2009).

Regarding the sex of students, our results demonstrate that the most number of conflicts occur between boys and girls. This is supported by previous studies in the literature, which explains that more observable conflicts, such as hitting or insulting, are more observed among boys, whereas those conflicts involving girls tend to show behaviour more related to social exclusion (Artavia 2012; Félix et al. 2008).

Reactions of the students to the initial peer conflicts were also explored in the present study. Although few studies have focused on studying this matter, cross-sectional findings indicate that both boys and girls are initially likely to use reactive aggression (Hay et al. 2011). Our results show that aggression tends to be answered with a fresh aggression instead of with a regulated emotional response. However, those peer conflicts that were more related to psychological or verbal aggression did not result in another aggressive behaviour but in the search for help. This can be explained by the possibility that the level of social skills at the ages 6–12 partially mediates the effects of anger reactions. That is, older children, with higher emotional awareness and with more defined social abilities may exhibit more appropriate behaviour when facing an aggression (Eisenberg 1999).

Teacher intervention

Our results regarding the intervention of teachers during conflicts shed some light on the responses that children get from their educators in conflict situations in the playground. It is interesting that results show that the most applied strategy was the teacher's mediation in the conflict. That may indicate that a mediation training in these schools could be highly beneficial. Additionally, it is important to highlight that data show that most teachers feel unprepared to deal with certain conflicts, although when they intervene they tend to mediate or punish more often, which clearly supports our results (Escámez 2001; Meulen et al. 2003).

It can thus be concluded that, unfortunately, conflicts among peers are still very present in schools and cannot be explained without considering emotional development. Therefore, the implementation of efficient programmes that train and help the learning of emotional competences could be highly beneficial not only for students, but also for those professionals that interact everyday with children in schools, such as teachers and educators.

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