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## **How preschool teachers handle problem situations: Discussing some indicators of emotional issues**

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### **Abstract**

Teachers usually interact with their students in various ways including instruction. If there is a conflict that occurs between child and teacher, teachers may have tendency to use several strategies to regulate this situation. However, some teachers may not know or not have adequate skills how to handle problems or problem behaviours of children. This may lead teachers to display misbehaviours and even it is possible to see various forms of emotional maltreatment. In this study, we focused on self-report reactions of preschool teachers and tried to realize if there would be any indicator regarding emotional maltreatment when they experience conflicts with their students. It is a qualitative study with 91 female preschool teachers from ten schools. We prepared four semi structured questions to ask about typical problem situations they might encounter in the class. Teachers were supposed to answer questions based on their experiences and/or opinions concerning how they would handle those kinds of situations. They mostly repeated deprivation which means removing materials/resources that make child feeling comfortable. Other reactions were threatening to remove materials/resources from the physical environment, not being sensitive enough to the needs of child, embarrassing child in front of others, ignoring child who has problem by leaving on his/her own. Results were discussed based on teachers' role within interactions in a classroom context to affect their emotions, thinking styles, well-being and involvement in classroom activities.

*Key words:* Teacher-child interactions, classroom management, emotional maltreatment, preschoolers.

### **Introduction**

In the schools, children need to be adaptive to the school community in general, following the demands of the school, keeping the rules, managing behaviors in a good manner, performing well academically. During this process, specifically, in the early years, the role that teachers play in children's lives would be helpful, guiding and supportive in terms of adaptation (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Teacher behaviors and guiding role would also be important to improve well-being of children and to encourage classroom involvement of them (Murray-Harvey, 2010, Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011). In a recent study (Archambault, Vandenbosche-Makombo & Fraser, 2017) researchers reported that closer relationships with teachers predicted higher behavioral engagement of students. It has also been indicated that positive teacher-child relationships can influence academic outcomes, social competency and adaptation of children (Downer & Pianta, 2006; Pianta, 1999). The quality of teacher-child relationships has also been found to be associated with academic skills and decrease in behavioral problems consistently throughout elementary school (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011).

Within a relationship perspective, teachers usually interact with their students in various ways including instruction. The relationships between children and teachers may provide an important context for communication which includes exchanging messages between two parts of a dyadic system (Pianta, 1999). Earlier relationship experiences with critical adults (e.g. parents), temperament, interactional styles, perceptions, and attention are important components in affecting healthy communication between those two parts. Each child has different repertoire because of earlier experiences and those experiences can determine the way how they behave in a relationship. Similarly, teachers' earlier experiences and interactional styles would be important and may influence how to interpret student's behavior for initiating and sustaining effective communication.

Many previous studies indicated that it is critical to understand teacher's point of view because teachers are seen as starting point to promote effective communication and social and academic competencies of children as well (Howes, 2000; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & LaParo, 2003; Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002). As emphasized by Analoui (1995), teachers can be seen just like managers within classroom context. This is not only because they arrange daily routine and instructional procedures, but also they need to manage effective communicational styles within classroom. When children fail in adapting classroom routines, rules and regulations, or display disruptive behaviors, they need to activate an efficient way of handling those kinds of challenging behaviors otherwise they may have conflicts with their children. If there is a conflict that occurs between child and teacher, the literature indicates that teachers may use several strategies to regulate this position, even though they may have tendency towards taking some kind of disciplinary actions (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010). If such a tendency appears, any factor that creates diversity like ethnicity, race, special educations needs of children would increase the frequency and/or strengthen the intensity of these actions. However, these types of strategies may lead to some fragility in children's lives.

When we look at the main tendency of teachers, they usually try to change behavioral styles of children via reactive responses at the time the problem appears. As indicated by Kazu (2007) "warning child verbally" was one of the strategies that teachers would prefer to use in the case of conflict situations. Following strategies were described as "ignoring" "giving very long advice" "talking to student to solve the problem", "changing seat". Proactive strategies like "giving a soft touch on the shoulder of child" were noticed to be used very rarely by teachers although it would be critical to increase commitment of children specifically during the preschool period. If the problem cannot be solved very effectively, some disciplinary actions leading to emotional harassment may be used instead of implementing proactive strategies before conflict occurs. Thus, it should be carefully considered that teachers who may not know or not have adequate skills how to handle problems or problem behaviors of children within classroom may lead children to experience various forms of emotional maltreatment (McEachern, Aluede & Kenny, 2008).

However, classroom discipline should be distinguished from emotional maltreatment. There have been few studies signifying importance of emotional maltreatment of teachers in the classroom. As shown by Krugman and Krugman (1984), students may come face to face different teacher behaviors such as yelling, getting mad when they

cried, threatening, bad comments on children and using homework as punishment all of which can be identified as indicators of emotional maltreatment (see Sava, 2002). Other behaviors that can be defined as maltreatment are prejudiced attitudes towards children, controlling, pushing, distancing, not being supportive, and creating generally negative impact on the whole classroom climate (McEachern, Aluede & Kenny, 2008). Students also reported that teachers revealed reactions such as harassment; verbal put-downs; labeling (e.g. stupid, dummy); inconsistent, erratic behavior; screaming at the children until they cried; inappropriate threats to try to control classes; allowing some children to harass and belittle others; and use of homework as punishment depending on the grade (Hyman & Snook, 1999). It has been shown that those kinds of behaviors might probably have harmful effects on psychological well-being of children as well as classroom involvement (McEachern, Aluede, & Kenny, 2008). In Krugman and Krugman's study (1984), they observed students who were emotionally maltreated by their teachers and they found that students under the effects of emotional abuse were indicating school avoidance, low self-esteem, excessive worrying about classroom performance, fear of teachers, physical symptoms (e.g., headaches and stomachaches), sleep disturbances, excessive crying and depression, and withdrawal behavior. However, as it was indicated, discipline strategies that teachers use should be preventive and guiding students to find an appropriate way among other alternatives (Shure and Spivack, 1979). Teacher should be careful that those strategies should not be punitive; not focus on student related factor's such as personality, race, ethnicity, and disabling condition or not involve name-calling/labeling students, making demeaning/sarcastic remarks about them, and not deny their feelings to prevent problem behaviors or conflicts (McEachern, Aluede & Kenny, 2008).

Although those behaviors mentioned above can easily be classified as indicators of emotional maltreatment, teachers may not know about possible indicators of emotional maltreatment (Shumba, 2002). Moreover, they may lack of competencies in preventive strategies how to handle conflict situations for managing classroom effectively. Since it is difficult to measure, still there is no exact agreement on indicators of emotional maltreatment which is more difficult to define within classroom atmosphere (Sava, 2002). Behaviors displaying lack of effective communication, caring and affectionate interaction may also be emotionally harmful to younger children; therefore, these can also be identified as indicators of emotional maltreatment. Instead of using the term emotional abuse in schools, authors prefer to use the term teacher misbehavior and/or emotional maltreatment (Sava, 2002).

There is a considerable amount of research in the area related to the effects of positive child-teacher relationships, while negative teacher behaviors in communication are still needed to be investigated (Sava, 2002). It is already known that conflictual relationships with teachers would have more negative effects during early years than higher grades in schooling period (Roorda, Koomen, Spiltand Oort, 2011). It was indicated that ineffective teacher communication such as lacking of responsiveness, clarity in messages, and competency in communication would lead to student reactions because of emotional arousals (Mazer, McKenna-Buchanan, Quinlan & Titsworth, 2014). Therefore, in this study, we focused on teacher behaviors when a conflict and/or problem behavior occurs in their classroom. It would be important to know about challenges and insights of teachers working with young children when they have experienced conflicts with children specifically in urban areas.

## **The aim of the current study**

In this study, we aimed to explore what the particular reactions of preschool teachers prefer to use in the case of problem situations are and how often they use those kinds of reactions. More specifically we tried to realize if there would be any indicators pointing to emotional issues (a tendency towards maltreatment) based on their own reports while handling conflicts with children.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

It is a descriptive study with a group of preschool teachers working with children aged 3-6 who had no developmental delays or difficulties. In this research, we used a proper sampling method. Thus, teachers who could easily accessible and being volunteers as being participant were included in this study. We recruited teachers from ten public preschools located in three districts of Izmir which is one of the biggest cities in Turkey and situated on the west coast of country. In Izmir, it is possible to see families who have different levels of socioeconomic status, from highest to lowest. Even within city center there are socially and economically disadvantaged areas. We selected schools which were located on both socially and economically disadvantaged areas since living under disadvantaged conditions could lead children to display more disruptive behaviors and this might lead to potential problems experienced among preschoolers in those classrooms. As a result, we believe that teachers would have more experiences to handle conflictual situations that appear in their classrooms. At the beginning, we aimed to reach 94 teachers from ten schools, in the final position 91 female preschool teachers agreed to be volunteer in participating this study. All of the participant teachers were graduated with a four-year BA degree in Preschool Teaching field. There is a centralized curriculum for teacher training field in Turkey; therefore, participated teachers had very similar educational background. The experience of teachers by year was ranging between 2 to 28 years.

### **Measurement Tool**

In this study, we prepared a measurement tool including four semi structured questions to ask about typical problem situations that teachers might encounter in their classes. Those were hypothetical situations structured as story stems based on literature review, conflictual conditions usually reported by teachers and observations of researchers regarding their own experiences in preschool settings. They were scenarios including conflicts about sharing a toy, lining up (who is going to be the first one on the line), going to having meal, disrupting reading activity. One example for the story stems is: "Two of your students at dramatic play area start to discuss loudly who would play with the only vacuum cleaner. What would you prefer to do to handle this situation generally?" By those hypothetical problem situations teachers were supposed to answer questions based on their experiences and/or opinions concerning how they would handle those kinds of situations.

## **Process**

After official permissions from District of Ministry of Education, we communicated with teachers via school directors. We requested from teachers to answer questions via self-report what they would do in the case of the situation described within the story stem. It was a paper work; therefore, they were asked to write down in detail how to handle those problem situations. We kept anonymous any demographic information about teachers because of ethical considerations and asked them to sign informed consent for their participation. We allowed teachers one week to fill the form since it would take 30-35 minutes to complete. We received their forms via enclosed envelopes.

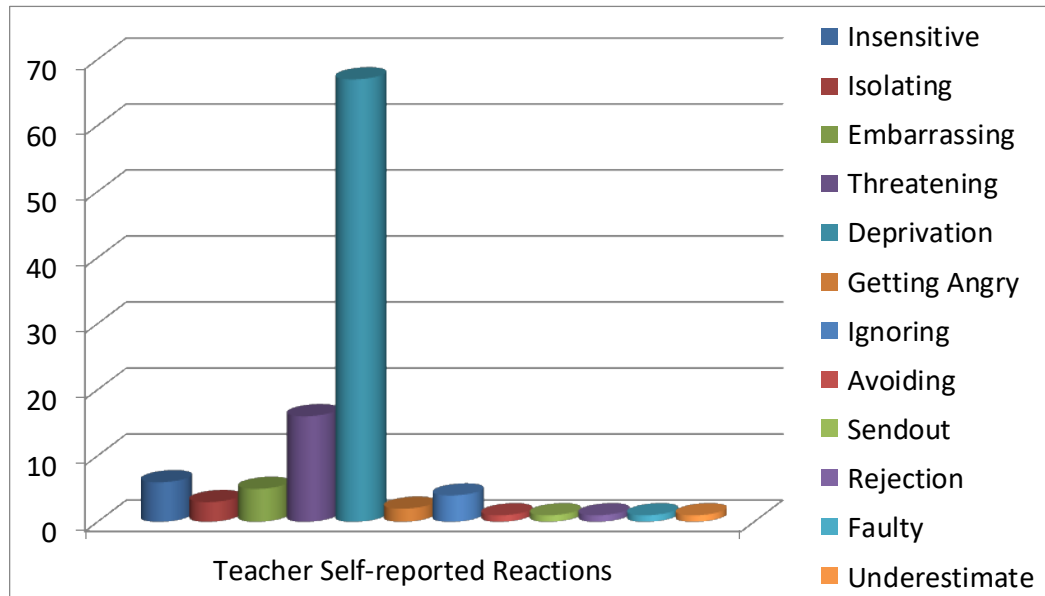
## **Data Analysis**

Before we started to work on codings, we made a list of possible indicators for emotional maltreatment based on literature. Afterwards, we put all the answers of teachers together for each question in order to make a whole script for making inferences considering whole data set. Besides coding list emerging from the literature, we added new codes to the list revealed from teachers' answers when it is needed. We inferred main themes based on those codes and interpret the results according to the answers of teachers. For increasing credibility of the findings we used more than one rater to interpret whole data set. In order to achieve this, we asked a professional for interrater reliability who teaches in teacher training program, working with teachers in the preschool education field and having enough experience in preventive interventions with a clinical psychology background. The agreement rate was found as 84% with the categories that were coded by researchers. Totally we had 34 pages to analyze for four story stems. After all raters coded whole data set, those ratings were converted into numeric variables. They were entered into SPSS program as indicated 1 or 0 to count frequency of each code to reach finalized frequencies.

## **Findings**

It was possible for teachers to describe more than one way to handle any of four problem situations; therefore, we reported frequencies indicating that how many times they repeated a particular reaction across the four story stems.

In this section, we will discuss the first five categories that mostly repeated by the teachers in their self-reports and give some examples considering their responses. The full names and frequencies of categories revealed based on teachers' responses were visualized on the Graph 1.



Graphic 1. Categories Regarding Hypothetical Situations based on Teachers Reports

The first category that made the highest rate (67 times repeated) was deprivation which means removing materials/resources that make child to feel comfortable. Within this category teachers said, “I would remove toy/material and not allow both kids to play” or “I will send two discussing kids to the end of line no matter the case”. Threatening which was repeated 16 times by teachers as the second category consists of the idea of threatening to remove materials/resources from the physical environment, such as “I would tell them if they continue I will remove the toy/material”. As is the third one, there were two categories which were repeated 5 times each by the teachers; being insensitive and embarrassing the child. Being insensitive includes teachers' reports about not understanding child for the reasons or not being sensitive enough to the needs of child, such as “I would take him/her to breakfast in any case” or “I would make children to leave play for keeping the rules”. The other category was embarrassing child in front of others, such as “I would make other kids (peers in the class) to tell that those two kids disturbing the whole class”. The fifth category reported by teachers 4 times was ignoring which includes the idea teacher doesn't matter how child would solve the problem by leaving on their own like the following statement “I would tell kids to solve their own problems by themselves”. The rest of categories reported by teachers were isolating (3 times), getting angry (2 times), avoiding (once), sending out (once), rejecting (once) faulty child (once), disdaining (once).

## Discussion

In this study, we tried to reveal how preschool teachers handle problem situations in order to understand what sort of reactions do they prefer to display and how frequently they use those reactional styles. It was important to realize preschool teacher's perceptions specifically because school related experiences during early years have been seen critical about overall well-being of young children and attributions related to school engagement (Pianta, 1999). When we considered these main issues regarding literature, fortunately we didn't ~~found~~ find any excessive forms of maltreatment such as sarcasm or name calling. In our study, teachers mostly preferred to use deprivation as a

category which includes actions such as removing materials/resources that make child feeling comfortable. As second most frequent category, teachers reported that they would use threatening to handle any of four hypothetical conflicts. As the third category, we found that teachers reported not being sensitive enough to the needs of child or understanding the child and embarrassing the child in front of others as well. Although we did not find severe forms of emotional maltreatment, the revealed categories reported by teachers in our study did not indicate any proactive strategy like “giving a soft touch on the shoulder of child” as stated by Kazu (2007). Teachers frequently preferred reactive strategies such as deprivation, threatening etc. These reports should be interpreted carefully because the data was gathered only from preschool teachers and relatively small group of participants based on their experiences with young children. Additionally, it should be considered that categories are based on self-reported reactions of teachers and those reactions might be biased by social desirability. Still, one should keep in mind that while the grades get higher, the nature of these findings and the patterns of reactions may vary between different levels of grades. In any case, the categories revealed in this study can easily find place for themselves within the indicators of milder forms of emotional maltreatment. Therefore, teachers should be aware of these issues before they have encountered any problem situations in order to protect fragility of children and to promote social and psychological well-being of them.

There may be some individual differences in the reactions of teachers when handling difficulties in the classroom. They may believe that they should be strict and not having a smile on their faces so that they could handle disruptive behaviours of students. As Sutton (2004) indicated when students displayed misbehaviours in the classroom, teachers reported that they experience negative emotions. On the other hand, there is also a literature about expressing that child-teacher relationships can improve outcomes of children and be a moderator in terms of interactions within the classroom (Mortensen & Barnett, 2015, Lippard, La Paro, Rouse & Crosby, 2017). Although researchers found that teachers used negative emotional tone while approaching disruptive students, they also reported close relationships with their disruptive students simultaneously (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2017). Researchers commented on this finding that by improving emotional quality of teachers in managing disruptive behaviours of their students it may be useful to help to create positive classroom climate. Therefore, there is a need for investigating emotional issues within teaching experiences (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino & Knight, 2009; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003).

Teachers, working with any grade level, should have competencies to initiate and sustain positive student-teacher relationships, effective strategies in managing students' behaviours, continuous monitoring, trying to keep students' attention on appropriate tasks in order to create positive and culturally sensitive and responsive atmosphere within classroom. In order to achieve this goal, school-wide social skills training programs should be integrated into the curriculum to train both teachers and children for managing effective interpersonal relationships and coping with problem situations (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2007).

Additionally, it is critical for teachers to be aware of possible indicators of emotional abuse and/or maltreatment and its effects on child development as well as. Recognizing their own feelings towards children would be helpful when they need to decide on how to deal with conflicts and aggressive behaviours. It is also important for teachers to



understand their roles within interactions in a classroom context in which they can be very effective resources for children to affect their emotions, thinking styles, well-being and involvement in classroom activities.

To sum up, the role of emotions and how they work within teaching profession should be considered in terms of both teacher training programs and teachers working in the field. Professional skills should be improved via trainings (Putman, 2012) in order to gain insight about the importance of emotional skills in coping with students' behaviors (Uitto, Jokikokko & Estola, 2015). More specifically, teaching profession should be handled with its emotional components and teachers' competencies and skills in balancing their emotional reactions concerning all parties; students, teachers, and even parents.

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