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Practices of early childhood teachers in Greece for managing behavior problems: A preliminary study

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Abstract

The initial purpose of this research is to examine the strategies of early childhood teachers in Greece for managing behavior problems in their classroom and then to design and implement a program for further teachers’ training. The sample consisted of 74 early childhood teachers who divided in four groups according to their years of service. A questionnaire with 20 types of problematic behaviors and 24 management practices was used. Teachers were asked which of those behaviors have addressed and which strategies they have implemented for each type of behavior. Results showed statistically significant differences among the groups regarding teachers’ practices.

Keywords: behavior problems; classroom management; kindergarten, teachers’ training; early intervention

1. Introduction

paper examines, from a pedagogical perspective, the practices of early childhood Greek teachers for managing behavior problems in the classroom.

2. Behavior problems in classroom

Arbuckle & Little (2004) indicate that teachers typically designate as behavioral problem, the behavior that obstructs the educational processes. McNeil et al. (1991) designate as problem behavior, the behavior that is considered to be disruptive or annoying for the teacher and the others in the classroom like whining, destructiveness, attention-seeking etc. The most prevalent classification of problematic behaviors distinguishes them to those with an “externalizing problem” where the behavior is addressed to the environment of the child (aggression, anger, etc.) and to those with an “internalizing problem” where the behavior is expressed with an internal turning of the child to himself (anxiety, timidity, etc). The latter is often not noticeable by educators since its presence is not disturbing them (Campbell, 1990. Rubin, Coplan & Bowker, 2009. Manolitsis, 2014).

Numerous studies examine the opinions of teachers about what they consider to be a divergent behavior and what practices they implement to manage with them. Until the past decade the scientific interest focused on primary and secondary school teachers and did not examine the pedagogical implications of management practices (Arbuckle & Little, 2004. Kaplan, Gheen & Midgley, 2002). Nowadays, the scientific interest has come closer to the preschool age (Manolitsis, 2014).

3. Teachers’ practices

By the term “teachers’ practices” for managing behavior problems are meant those practices that teachers apply to deal with behavior problems in the classroom (classroom management). In an outdated approach “classroom management” was viewed from the perspective of discipline and child compliance to rules set by the teacher. Nowadays, the concept no longer means discipline and behavioral interventions (Evertson & Harris, 1999). Allen (2010, p.2) recognizes that the term “classroom management” is often associated with discipline but points out that “management of the class is a complex set of skills that involves much more than the ability to control the behavior of students.” Strategies of the teachers that generally are reported in literature are: reward, punishment, negotiation, prior notice / hinting, aggression and combinations of them (Lewis, Romi, Qui and Katz, 2008. Lewis, Roache & Romi, 2011). There is evidence that recognition practices, empowerment and shared responsibility are associated with positive behaviors of students, while aggressive and punitive practices are associated with problematic behaviors of students respectively (Lewis et al. 2011). However relevant literature concerns mainly primary and secondary education.

Previous research has shown (Chazan, 1994) that teachers have negative attitude towards the problem behaviors of children and also that early childhood teachers impose restrictions and punitive interventions to children who exhibit behavioral problems (Barnett & Boocock, 1998). They also tend to interact much less with these children than with those who do not exhibit behavioral problems (Raver & Knitzer, 2002). On the other hand frequent positive interactions between children and teachers prevent the emergence of future behavior “with internalizing problem” (O’Connor et al. 2011). Teachers who participated in the study of Reinke, Herman & Sprick, (2011) reported that their primary problem was that they hardly felt prepared to effectively deal with the behavior problems of children in the class.

In Greece the education of both pre – service teachers and teachers in service, in “classroom management” is unsystematic and incomplete whereas their need for special education in this area is constant and increasing (Beazidou, Botsoglou, & Andreou 2013). The problem becomes more acute in recent years as rapid changes in social - economic status of families have arisen. Those changes are accompanied by severe problems and therefore affect children’s behavior.

4. The purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the practices of early childhood teachers for managing behavior problems of children in preschool classrooms and secondly to investigate the connection between the specific types
of problem behaviors and management practices. It is a preliminary study in the wider framework of a nation-design research in Greece.

5. The sample

A random sample of seventy four (74) preschool teachers participated in the research, all women, who serve in public kindergartens in the wider area of Northern Greece. Participants were divided into four groups according to years of service in public kindergartens: a) 1-5 years b) 6-15 years c) 16-25 years d) 26-35 years.

6. Data collection

The research took place during the academic year 2013-2014. A questionnaire was used which included two lists:

1) The List of Behavioral Problems (LBP). This list was based on behavioral problems that preschooler’s usually exhibit (see: Campbell, 1990. Essa, 2003. Gimpel & Holland, 2003). It includes 20 types of behavior which are divided into two categories: externalizing problems (12 types) and internalizing problems (8 types). In order to adapt the list in the Greek reality we have relied in previous research results with early childhood teachers, who were asked to respond to types of behavior problems that they identify in their classrooms (Manolitsis & Tafa, 2005) and to types of behavior problems which are recorded to the Assessment Scale of Preschoolers’ Behavior (ASPB) (Manolitsis, 2014).

2) The List of Preschool Teachers’ Practices (LPTP) which includes 24 practices. The design of the LPTP was based on strategies presented to the work and the research results of Campbell, Pierce, Moore, Marakovitz & Newby, (1996), McClowry, Snow, Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez (2010) and Handy, Beamish & Bryer, (2005). For the adaptation to the Greek reality we based on the theoretical work of Gotovos, (2000) and Konstantinou, (2001), on results of relevant researches (Minoglou, 2014) and to our experience from the collaboration with the early childhood teachers.

In the distribution of the questionnaires, teachers were asked to respond which practice / practices they apply in their classroom when facing behavior problems similar to those contained in the LBP.

7. Results

Results showed a need of teachers for training in “classroom management”. Half of the teachers (50%) of group (a), 29.4% of the teachers of group (b) and 26.3% of teachers of group (d) replied that they are in great need of training. Only 10% of teachers of group (c) answered the same. Between (a) and (c) groups of teachers were found significant differences (df = 6, p = 0.031).

The higher rates of teachers’ practices in relation to behavior problems of children in the classroom are presented in table 1. The most popular practice (55.9%) is “talking privately with the child about his/her behavior”. Teachers state that they apply it when they are facing aggressive physical behavior and it seems that this practice is chosen in a greater or a lesser percentage for managing all of the problematic behaviors. “Discussion with all the children about the behavior and then decide with them in common about the consequences” was chosen by teachers in 43.2%, in cases of children who obstruct the activities, disturb others in various ways and also in problems of externalizing behavior. Teachers with 6 to 15 years of service are more likely to choose / apply this practice than the others (X² = 8.62, df = 3, p = 0.035).

When teachers attempt to deal with physical or verbal aggressive behavior they “convince the child that he/she should apologize” (43.2%), they penalize the child (45.9%) or remind them of the penalties (31%) and 17.9% are choosing the practice to “describe in the class how they feel by this behavior”. Group (c) differs significantly from all other groups when facing certain problematic behaviors. In particular, they seem to tend more than any other to apply practices that remind the child that will suffer negative sanctions (threat of sanctions) in cases of aggressive behaviors (X² = 13.1, df = 3, p = 0.004). Moreover, in cases of conflicts they seem to tend more than all others to impose negative sanctions (X² = 10.2, df = 3, p = 0.017). At last they seem to choose more than all others such practices in cases of verbal aggression (X² = 12.05, df = 3, p = 0.007) and profanity (X² = 9.13, df = 3, p = 0.028).
Table 1. Teachers’ practices in relation to behavior problems of children in the classroom (only the highest percentages are presented).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ Practices</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ Practices</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Behavior Problems where they implement those Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discuss with the child in private</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>aggressive physical behavior or isolating behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>excessive shyness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheedling</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>difficulty to speak in public (teacher, classmates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convince the child that he/she should apologize</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>aggressive physical behavior or comes in conflicts often attacks verbally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>destroys the creations of his/her classmates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind him/her of the consequences/penalties</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>violation of class rules or aggressive physical behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I describe in the classroom how i feel about his/her behavior</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>aggressive physical behavior or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I give roles and responsibilities</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>excessive attachment to teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ask solidarity of other children</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>cooperation difficulties excessive shyness isolating behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I give opportunity to the child to express his feelings into the class</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>excessive shyness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I express him constantly my love and my interest</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>excessive shyness / isolating behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers, seem to assist, support and encourage children in cases of “internalizing behavior problems”. For example they highlight the positive features of the child within the group in cases of “isolated behavior” (31.1%), 21.6% of teachers do the same in cases of excessive shyness, 27.0% in cases of a clumsy child and 21.6% in cases of...
a child who asks always for assistance. But in cases of externalizing behavior problems these practices appear at very low rates. According teachers’ answers, only 5.4% of them are choosing to highlight the positive features of children who exhibit aggressive behaviors, 2.7% do the same in cases of children who always want to impose their will, 5.4% in cases of children who disturb the class and 8.1% in cases of indifferent children. Moreover, only 8.1% of teachers answered that enable children with aggressive behavior to express their feelings and 6.8% do the same in cases of children who come in conflicts often. The practice of rewarding the efforts of students to avoid negative behavior such as physical and verbal aggressive behavior was stated in 2.7%. Similarly for those children who create problems in the games of other children this practice was stated in 2.7%, for those with obstructive behavior was stated in 4.1% and for those with indifference was stated in 9.5%. “Rewarding” appears most as a practice in internalized behaviors such as “excessive shyness” 40.5%, “isolating behaviors” 23%, children who have “difficulties to speak in public” 23% and children who “always ask for assistance” 21.6%.

8. Discussion

Teachers seem to apply a combination of practices in cases of externalizing problem behaviors with a wide range which starts from the democratic practice of participatory discussion and supportive practices and reaches to the authoritarian practice of implementing sanctions. Thus, we see that among the most common practices in such cases are both individual and collective discussion and threats and sanction as well. This “coexistence” may imply a serious gap in teachers’ training regarding “classroom management”. This is also highlighted by other researchers (Beazidou et al., 2013. Reinke & Herman, 2011) and has as an outcome, the teachers, one hand to act based on their own experiences and in the basis of an authoritarian pedagogy that they probably have also experienced themselves as students (since this model was dominant in our country until the fall of the dictatorship), and the other based on the views which dominated later and were very critical to the past.

Younger teachers, who stated that they have a great need of training in classroom management, seems that they tend to choose more than the others the practices of dialogue, discussion and assignment of responsibilities, while group (c) choose traditional practices more than anyone else. Probably the teachers of this decade (group c) have developed a specific culture or policy through their studies and also through a period of time, when the teacher assessment was not established and the number of School Counselors’ of early childhood education was limited with whatever this entails. We argue that a nationwide study with the combined method of a questionnaire, interviews with teachers, school counselors and parents and systematic observation through various conditions throughout the time of the kindergarten program is required. This research approach will provide us with specific information in order to design the forms and the content of an education program in classroom management. On an intervention which has been conducted in preschool classrooms where teachers received special training, results showed that after the implementation of practices which included positive reinforcement and positive feedback in the classrooms, teachers continually improved their practices, whereas behavioral problems of children were decreased. At the same time, negative interactions also decreased whereas the number of positive interactions increased (Conroy, Sutherland, Vo, Carr & Ogston, 2013. Conroy, et al. 2014).

Strategies of support, encouragement and reinforcement, are very limited in cases of externalizing behavior problems while the presence of these practices is high only in cases of internalized behavior problems. This finding shows that teachers seem to separate their practices and very few are those who mentioned that reinforce, encourage or reward children who succeed, or try to avoid to develop a negative behavior. Perhaps this aspect of the issue can be the subject of a future survey.

In summary, the results of this survey cannot be generalized as it is, as mentioned from the beginning, a preliminary work of a nationwide survey, which has provided us with useful data for its design and implementation.

References


