YOU DO NOT LIKE THE ACTIVITY ARRANGED BY THE TEACHER; WHAT DO YOU DO?

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Abstract

In the article, we examine children's perceived strategies in a conflict situation with a teacher and the development of these strategies. We also study the connections of the children's strategies to the activity of the nearest educator. The data is based on the interview question 'You don't like the activity arranged by the teacher; what do you do?' A total of 411 children from 33 different Finnish day care centres and preschools participated in the research. The children's and the nearest educators' activities were observed, and the two data sets were merged. The children's strategies tended to become more adaptive as they developed. At the same time, their agency for seeking alternate solutions increased. The general trend moved from enduring the unpleasant situation to seeking alternatives. If children are required to participate in situations in which the teacher has already determined the desired outcomes of the disliked activity, they have very little freedom to act. Younger children in particular only see the option to obey.

Keywords: Early childhood, social conflicts, action strategies, child development

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the article is to describe children's perceived strategies in relation to a conflict situation with an educator. We view the situation as part of the interaction and communication present in the power relations of all educational activities. In the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in Finland (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2003) the principle of giving due weight to the views of the child is mentioned as a central value in early childhood education and care (ECEC). The principle of children receiving understanding and having their say in accordance with their age and maturity is also listed in the values of ECEC. Children should be heard and seen. In general, educators should be sensitive to children's needs and initiatives. Unfortunately, this focus on children's rights and human dignity does not include children as producers of social interaction outside the curriculum. Instead, educators are considered to be committed, sensitive and able to react to children's feelings and needs. In the community of adults and children, they enable a good atmosphere in which children have a feeling of togetherness and inclusion.

In the year before compulsory education begins, children can participate in pre-primary education. The core curriculum for preschool education (the Finnish National Board of Education, 2000) stresses the promotion of children's growth into humane individuals and ethically responsible members of society by guiding them towards responsible actions and compliance with generally accepted rules as well as towards appreciation for other people. Children are to practice the rules of co-existence and learn commitment to these rules. They are to internalize the good practices of our society and understand their significance as part of everyday life. The idea of children as producers of social content is not considered.

According to Kalliala (2008), the problems of interaction between children and adults are rarely discussed. The sensitivity of educators has an impact on their role. Conflict situations between children and educators require a shared understanding about the context and dialogue (Lundan, 2009; Turja, 2011). Moreover, children's own ways of interaction and their use of interactive tools have an impact on the interaction processes between children and educators. For example, Reunamo (2007) has described four different orientations toward change in social situations: accommodative, participative, dominating and withdrawn. Lehtinen (2000) describes the personal, social and cultural resources held by children, which result in four profiles of agency: reformers, fighters, reproducers and followers. According to Lundan (2009), the different types of interaction produce different strategies for action, for example, resistance, freedom, cooperation and education.

In addition to the paradigm of studying children's conceptions as adaptations, we need to consider children's views as independent variables that have the capacity to impact

the environment, too (Reunamo, Sajaniemi, Suhonen, & Kontu, 2012). These views are often related to metacognitive processes. In this article, we interview the children to reveal the children's interaction strategies between children and adults. The interviews were designed to elicit the children's orientations toward change. The children's views are not studied in a given environment; rather, they are studied in order to see how they affect the children's own experiences and development. That development has an effect on others' development as well.

2. Problem Statement

The purpose of the research has been to study children's action strategies in a conflict situation with a teacher and the changes in these strategies as the children develop. An important aspect of these strategies is the children's agency. Agency has been an important aspect of research for some time (Cooney & Selman, 1980; Reunamo, 1988; James & Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 1997; Reunamo & Nurmilaakso, 2007). However, this article focuses on the agency of the children's views and on how the children's views change their behaviour and environment.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the children's strategies when confronting a disliked activity arranged by an educator?
2. How do the children's strategies develop as they get older?
3. How are the children's strategies related to the educators' activities?

4. Purpose of the Study

Children seem to be more agentive with other children and in learning environments that have been created by the children themselves. With teachers, children have less freedom (Kyhälä, Reunamo, & Ruismäki, 2012). In this article we study how children perceive their interaction strategies in a conflict situation with a teacher. We also study how these strategies are related to their development, environmental changes and to the teachers' own actions. We study the children's agentive perception (Reunamo, 2009) in relation to a conflict of interest with the teacher. We do this by first collecting the children's strategies with interviews and then merging these strategies with results from observation done by systematic sampling. This arrangement makes it possible to study the impact of the children's perceived strategies on the environment.

5. Research Methods

The data consisted of 411 children from Finnish day care centres and preschools. The sample included 209 boys and 194 girls (the data on gender were missing for 8 children). Altogether 34 children had special needs. The participants originated from eight municipalities from southern Finland and from 33 different day care centres in those municipalities.

The participating day care groups varied substantially in their practices and pedagogy. There were units using Steiner and Montessori pedagogies, 24-hour day care centres, private and municipal units and half-day preschools. One group had only nine children (including children with special needs), and another unit had no separate groups among the 54 children.

Stratified sampling was used to select the groups. The children of one group from each day care unit were selected for the study. The exact number of parents who did not permit their child to participate in the research is not known, but the percentage of refusals was low, presumably under 5%, in any case under 10%. All the children in the selected groups participated in the study. Seven children were not included in the observation. Because of absence and communication problems, 10 children did not participate in the interviews.

Interviews. In February 2010 sixty kindergarten teachers were trained to interview children with the interview instrument. The interview consisted of sixteen questions in which the children were presented with different situations describing everyday day care situations with open-ended results. The complete interview instrument can be retrieved from http://www.helsinki.fi/~reunamo/apu/interview_instrument_with_pictures.pdf and the interview instructions from http://www.helsinki.fi/~reunamo/apu/interview_instructions.pdf. We focused on a child-adult interaction in a controversial situation. The question was 'You don't like the activity arranged by the teacher; what do you do?' All the children whose language abilities were good enough to present their strategies were interviewed. Only a single 1-year-old child (21 months) was able to describe her strategies in the interview, eight of the children were 2-year-olds, 67 were 3-year-olds, 83 were 4-year-olds, 100 were 5-year-olds, 122 were 6-year-olds, and 22 of the children had already had their seventh birthday.

Observation. Seventy kindergarten teachers were trained to observe the children between September and December of 2009. The training included a session each month with a one-month period for practicing between the training sessions. In the training, the teachers observed videos of everyday situations, and the observation categories were discussed one by one. The children's data were based on a total of 19,608 observations made between

December 2009 and May 2010. The activity of the nearest educator to the observed child was also written down. For example, if a child was playing with Legos and the educator was talking with another educator, the educator's activity was classified as no child contact. The observation instrument was originally prepared for Reunamo's (2007) preliminary research and was adapted for international comparison. The observation instrument can be retrieved from http://www.helsinki.fi/~reunamo/apu/observation_instrument.pdf.

The interviews and observations were conducted with completely independent measures. The observers did not interview the observed children, and the interviewers did not observe the interviewed children. Furthermore, in the analysis process, the analysis of the interviews was kept independent of the observation results. The researcher responsible for the qualitative analysis of children's answers had no access to the other research data. This researcher had no background information about, for example, the children's age or gender. The children's interview answers were studied using content analysis (Gambrel & Butler, 2013).

6. Findings

In general, the children tended to **agree** with the teacher (27.2% of the children) even if they did not like the activity arranged by the teacher (Table 1). The youngest children had the fewest agreeing strategies, for example: *'I like it'*, *'I will do it'*, *'Yes'* or *'I think about it'*, *'Do that'*. The agreement increased as the children became older, for example: *'I try to do right'*, *'I do as the teacher says'*, *'I just walked as I should'*, *'I start to do it'*. The differences between the ages were statistically significant when cross tabulated with other strategies, $\chi^2(1, N = 389) = 10.728$, p = .001, Cramer's V = .176.

The second largest percentage of strategies encompassed **refusing** to do the disliked activity (24.7% of the children), for example: *'I say I don't want'*, *'Then I don't go'* or *'I do nothing then'*. Younger children seemed to refuse slightly more often, but the difference was not statistically significant when cross tabulated with the other strategies, $\chi^2 2(1, N = 389) = 1.141$, p = .285, Cramer's V = .057.

The next 13.4% of the children **did not know what to do** or could not describe their strategy if they disliked the activity arranged by the teacher, for example: *'I don't know'*, *'I can't think of anything'* or *'I don't remember'*. The age group differences were randomly ordered, and the differences were not statistically significant when compared to other strategies, $\chi^2 2(1, N = 389) = 1.141$, p = .589, Cramer's V = .076.

A further 13.4% of the children described **doing something else unprompted** (out of the blue) when they disliked the teacher's activities, for example: *'I do something else'*, *'I'll*

jump with the trampoline' or *'I do my own play'*. The strategies where the children described themselves as doing something else seemed to become fewer for the older children, but the differences were not statistically significant in comparison to all the other strategies, $\chi^2 2(1, N = 389) = 1.541, p = .255$, Cramer's V = .063.

When the children were asked to describe what they do when the teacher arranges an activity they dislike, 8.0% of the children described that they **had to obey**, for example: *'I have to go'*, *'I go even if I don't want'* or *'I force myself to go'*. No significant differences were seen in the children's ages in comparison to other strategies, $\chi^2 2(1, N = 389) = .008, p = .929$, Cramer's V = .060.

Crying, sadness and sulking were the described strategies for 7.2% of the children who disliked the arranged activity. The younger children had the highest percentage (21.1%) of negative emotional reactions, for example: *'I cry'*, *'I go and sulk'* or *'I get sad'*. The oldest children had the lowest proportion (2.8%) of negative emotions. The differences were statistically very significant, $\chi^2 2 (1, N = 389) = 19.374, p < .0005$, Cramer's V = .258.

Seeking alternatives was described only by 3.6% of the children. The youngest children did not give any strategies that sought an alternative activity, and the strategies increased with age, for example: *'Can I stay inside?'*, *'Can we all play with these things?'* or *'I go and beg for teacher that I can keep playing'*. The differences between ages were statistically significant in comparison with other strategies, $\chi^2 2 (2, N = 389) = 7.965, p = .005$, Cramer's V = .147.

Aggressive strategies were rare in all age groups, for example: *'I would hurt you and tear your clothes'*, *'I get angry'* or *'I maybe do something else and get angry'*. The differences between the age groups were not statistically significant, $\chi^2 2 (1, N = 389) = .663, p = .415$, Cramer's V = .057. Aggression was not a popular strategy for the children when they disliked an activity.

In conclusion, the children often agreed even if they disliked the arranged activity. Other frequent strategy was to refuse. Negative emotional reactions were less frequent in the older children, while agreeing with the teacher and seeking alternatives were more frequent. It is important to recognize that seeking alternatives requires interaction, but an unprompted change of activity does not. In Table 1, the shift in the children's strategies in the older children is presented.

Table 1. The percentages of children's answer categories in different age groups

Children's strategies	1–3-year-olds	4–5-year-olds	6–7-year-olds	Total
Agrees	14.1 %	26.1 %	35.2 %	27.2 %
Refuses	29.6 %	24.4 %	22.5 %	24.7 %
Does not know what to do	11.3 %	14.2 %	13.4 %	13.4 %
Does something else unprompted	15.5 %	14.8 %	10.6 %	13.4 %
Has to obey	5.6 %	9.7 %	7.0 %	8.0 %
Cries, is sad, sulks	21.1 %	5.1 %	2.8 %	7.2 %
Seeks alternatives	0.0 %	2.3 %	7.0 %	3.6 %
Aggressive	2.8 %	3.4 %	1.4 %	%

The children's strategies in relation to the amount of teaching. The children's strategies were merged with the observation data (the means of the educators' activities). This procedure enables to study the relation between children's strategies (interview) and the educators' activities collected (observation). One category in the observed educator activities was that the educator was teaching, which in the observation instructions was defined as 'teaching, the teacher already has a pre-defined goal and knows what should be learned'. The mean percentages of the different strategies in different age groups can be seen in Table 2. In Table 2, the age groups are not directly comparable because the older children participate in more teaching situations. Thus, the differences may describe just the different amounts of teaching the children participate in, not the differences in the children's strategies. A better option is to compare the proportions in each age group one by one. This comparison enables seeing the important differences, for example, in the group of 1–3-year-old children. Then we can perhaps clarify the differences between the age groups.

Table 2. The mean percentages of teaching in different children's strategies and age groups

Children's strategy	1–3-year-olds	4–5-year-olds	6–7-year-olds	Total
Seeks alternatives	0.0%	6.3 %	**25.7 %**	20.1 %
Does not know what to do	14.9 %	**15.9 %**	21.6 %	17.8 %
Has to obey	**27.5 %**	13.9 %	20.5 %	17.8 %
Does something else unprompted	16.0 %	**15.9 %**	21.9 %	17.4 %
Refuses	12.2 %	14.3 %	18.6 %	15.4 %
Agrees	9.9 %	11.6 %	18.6 %	14.9 %
Aggressive	8.9 %	15.4 %	22.2 %	14.7 %
Cries, is sad, sulks	11.3 %	13.2 %	19.2 %	13.1 %
Total	13.4%	14.0%	20.0%	16.0%

1–3-year-old children. If the nearest educator offered a large amount of teaching, the youngest children described themselves as obeying more often (in 27.5% of the cases). The overall differences in the amount of teaching were statistically significant, $F(7, 61) = 2.545$, $p = .029$, partial eta squared = .200. In the post hoc test (Tukey) the percentage of teaching was significantly higher with children describing obeying strategies than with children with agreeing strategies (9.9%), $p = .019$. In practice, these children did not agree willingly, but they forced themselves to agree to participating in the teaching situation. The percentage of teaching for the obeying children were also higher than the percentage of teaching with crying, being sad and sulking strategies (11.3%, Tukey post hoc $p = .023$).

Thus, when the teacher offered more extensive teaching and the children did not like the activity, the youngest children did not protest emotionally; rather, they felt that they had to endure the activity. When confronted with a lot of teaching, young children seem not to become emotionally agitated; they try to control their behaviour and act appropriately. Moreover, in the post hoc test the percentage of teaching was higher with obeying strategies than the percentages of teaching with refusal strategies (12% of the children, Tukey post hoc $p = .029$). This means that if the teacher taught more, the youngest children tended to refuse to endure the activity arranged by the teacher less often, even if they disliked that activity. They would rather obey. This tendency was not found in the strategies of the older children. The younger children may have thought that teaching is something unavoidable, whether they liked participating in that situation or not. Less teaching elicited more positive and negative reactions from children.

3–5-year-old children. The highest percentage of teaching occurred with children who were either uncertain about their strategy (15.9%) or who just stated that they would do something else (15.9%) if they disliked the arranged activity. The differences in the amount of teaching were smaller in different strategies for the 4–5-year-old than for the 1–3-year-old children. The differences were not statistically significant, $F(7, 168) = .814$, $p = .577$, partial eta squared = .033. None of the post hoc (Tukey) differences between the groups were statistically significant. We can guess that the 3–5-year-old children have more versatile strategies than the youngest children. However, the amount of teaching does not affect children's strategies substantially. Children's language abilities may be an intervening variable in the differences. Therefore, we need to be even more careful and say that these children only described a few strategies of seeking alternatives.

6–7-year-old children. The oldest children often described a strategy where they sought solutions for the disliked arrangement. The other differences in the mean percentages of teaching were small, and the overall difference was not statistically significant, $F(7, 133)$

=.679, p = .689, partial eta squared = .035. The post hoc (Tukey) differences were also not statistically significant. What should be noted in Table 2 are the differences in each age group. The differences in the oldest group are the smallest. This tells us that the children's strategies did not change much in relation to how much teaching they participated in. Only when the children participated in a higher amount of teaching did the children seem to seek other alternatives for the disliked activity. Even this difference is tentative.

The general impression given is that when older children participate in more teaching situations, they more readily seek alternative solutions if they do not like the arranged activity. The general trend seems to move from enduring the unpleasant situation to seeking alternatives. If the children are required to participate a lot in situations in which the teacher has already determined the desired outcomes of the disliked activity, there are not many degrees of freedom. The young children in particular do not understand that they have another option. They believe that they have to obey.

7. Conclusions

The children's strategies in relation to disliked activities were often adaptive, and their tendency to adapt kept growing as the children grew older. This growing adaptation is not just submission, because the children's strategy of seeking alternative strategies also became more frequent as the children aged. With age, the children's negative emotions diminished, and the proportion of strategies that avoid interaction seems to decrease. The children's strategies became both more adaptive and interactive in relation to disliked activities. The older children were able to consider more options for their actions. The children were also more agentive in their search for alternatives.

Because the researcher interpreting the children's answers did not know the age or gender of the respondents, the trends in the children's development seem to be verified. However, the children's answers may have had an unconscious effect on the interpreter, as three-year-old children answer differently than older children. The younger children may not have been skilful enough to elaborate on their strategies. For example, when a young child answered 'Do that', the interpretation was that the child agrees to do the disliked activity even though it could mean that the child does something else. Furthermore, the older children in particular may have felt an obligation to give 'correct' answers and to hide their rule-breaking behaviours. Nevertheless, the children's strategies had statistically significant connections with the educators' activities in the observational data, which strongly verifies these strategies and their connections because the measurements are independent. Children's

agency and openness seems to increase with age. However, the context also matters. The teaching context seems to evoke different kinds of emphasis from the children.

Young children may not yet have the needed strategies to avoid unpleasant teaching sessions. On the other hand, older children who participated in more teaching sessions had learned to seek alternatives. These results bring an interesting perspective to the Piagetian paradigm of improving the adjustment to and knowledge of the environmental conditions (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). These results highlight children's ability to see the possibilities for changing their environmental conditions. This would mean that we should not only study the equilibrium between accommodation and adaptation. We also need to study the equilibrium between adaptation and agency.

Acknowledgements

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