

Article summary:

Staying with discomfort: Early childhood teachers' emotional themes in relation to children's peer-culture aggression

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Introduction

In early childhood classrooms, teachers are typically expected to monitor and control children's displays of aggression in order to promote socially and morally approved emotional behaviours (p. 486). At the same time, teachers are expected to regulate the display of their own emotions, performing 'emotional labour' in order to maintain an outward appearance of love, care and 'niceness' (p. 487). This ethnographic study focusses on educators working in an early childhood classroom that was characterised by high levels of child conflict and aggression.

In this classroom, three educators were responsible for nineteen racially diverse children (aged four to five) from lower- and working-class families in an early childhood classroom in southern USA. The educators described the levels of conflict and aggression as 'atypical', noting that all of the children had experienced trauma in their lives. Conflict 'affected every aspect of classroom life' (p. 490), including group-work, free play, meals, naptime, and morning and afternoon greeting routines (p. 491). The aggression was described as a 'contagious' energy that radiated from particular children, leading to a community of young children who 'revolted' against the teachers' classroom norms and rules' (p. 491). On their part, the teachers felt frustrated, tearful, worried and exhausted (p. 492).

To investigate this complex emotional landscape, the researchers and teachers collaborated in an eight-month ethnographic study. Data sources included field notes, observations, audio recordings of teacher/researcher team meetings, and video recordings taken across many weeks of the whole class, with a particular focus on six target children (p. 488). The teacher/researcher team meetings and select video recordings of the children at play were transcribed, then interpreted and re-interpreted with the teachers to verify important details, establish alternative viewpoints and identify themes (pp. 488-489).

What happened in the classroom

Early in the study, the researchers noticed a parallel between the children's aggression and the teachers' emotional discomfort. The study explores how the teachers shifted towards an 'ethic of discomfort', that is - embracing emotional discomfort as a pathway toward transformation rather than avoiding the uncomfortable emotions we experience during times of uncertainty (Foucault, 1997). Drawing on Foucault (1997), the article suggests resisting the impulse to repair our discomfort with a state of uncertainty and, instead, become comfortable with the unknowing, as this is a space where what we know can come into dialogue with what we know little about and create opportunities for growth.

In the example of practice, the teaching team began to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty in their understandings of children's behaviours and to challenge their own assumptions by asking these critically reflective questions:

- 'Was the children's peer-culture play actually aggressive or did it just appear aggressive?
- What did it mean for a child to be aggressive?
- If children were "play fighting," should teachers intervene?' (p. 492).

Allowing for more uncertainty and ambiguity, the three teachers started to give 'wait time', providing children with the opportunity to work out conflict among themselves without teacher intervention (p. 493). Staying with the emotional discomfort enabled a more productive classroom culture, 'where both the children and the teachers expressed emotions including anger, sadness, and frustration' (p. 494). Rather than immediately shutting down conflict, the teachers would stop other activities and use these moments to explore conflicts *with* the children. 'The goal was to offer the children a safe space to explore emotions that "were not going away"' (pp. 494-495).

The researchers conclude: 'In the end, instead of responding to the children's aggression as social acts that were to be micromanaged or policed, the teachers explored the transformative power and possibilities when letting go of emotional control and *being with* the children as they explored anger as part of the classroom curriculum' (p. 495). This is not to suggest that child or teacher aggression is always productive. Rather, the researchers 'are problematizing current practices that police or silence these types of emotion, and highlighting how staying with troubling emotions can shift the classroom culture' (p. 496).

Key take-aways for educational practice

- Conforming to the social norm of the 'good' early childhood educator can involve high levels of emotional labour.
- Staying with emotional discomfort – embracing an 'ethic of discomfort' – can be productive for both teachers and young children. It can help teachers to critically reflect on their own assumptions, see multiple perspectives, and use a range of emotions productively. It can provide opportunities for children to develop a sense of belonging when their emotions are able to be displayed, witnessed, explored and discussed in a safe community environment.
- Rather than micromanaging aggression, educators may look at the educative potential of conflict and include social and emotional content in the curriculum so that children are able to explore emotions in a safe space.

Further reading

- Albin-Clark, J. (2020). 'I felt uncomfortable because I know what it can be': The emotional geographies and implicit activism of reflexive practices for early childhood teachers. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 21(1), 20–32.
- Andrew, Y. (2015). What we feel and what we do: Emotional capital in early childhood work. *Early Years*, 35(4), 351–365.
- Madrid, S., Baldwin, N., & Frye, E. (2013). Professional feelings: One early childhood educator's discomfort as a teacher and learner. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 11(3), 274–292.
- Zembylas, M. (2010). Teachers' emotional experiences of growing diversity and multiculturalism in schools and the prospects of an ethic of discomfort. *Teaching and Teachers*, 16(6), 703–716.