

## **When “words do not work”: Intervening in children’s conflicts in kindergarten**

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### **Abstract**

Conflict situations occur in daily life in kindergarten. Often children find solutions by negotiations and compromises, but sometimes they also can use physical force against each other. The focus in this article is kindergarten practitioners’ interventions in conflict situations when children use physical force and do not stop when they are told. This may cause new conflicts between the child and the practitioner who intervenes. The aim is to contribute to a discussion about ways to meet children in conflict situations when words do not work. Data consist of semi-structured group interviews with practitioners from a Norwegian kindergarten for children from 1 to 6 years of age. Excerpts from the interviews underwent thematic and dialogic analysis. When children do not obey oral directions as the practitioners demand, they get angry and use physical force themselves. Analysis reveals that words as well as feelings and physical behavior influence actions not only for children but also for practitioners. The practitioners were not comfortable with this means of handling the situation, acknowledging the need to explicitly discuss, with each other, what to do. Exploring and understanding more of the complexity of intervening in children’s conflicts when words do not work, can contribute to choosing strategies that don’t undermine overarching democratic aims for conflict solutions in kindergartens.

### **Keywords**

Conflicts; democracy; intervention strategies; physical force; professional judgment.

## **Introduction**

Conflicts between children, and also between children and staff, occur in different situations in the daily social life in kindergarten (Chen, 2003; Jenkins, 2008; Singer, Van Hogdalem, De Haan, & Bekkema, 2012; Togsverd & Ørskow, 2011). Pedagogical practice reveals different ways to deal with conflicts, depending on: the issue and involved persons, their acts and intentions within the institutional context, and also the ideas and values in the specific culture (Blank & Schneider, 2011; Grindheim, 2014; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Killen, Ardila-Rey, Barakkatz, & Wang, 2000). Practitioners can perceive conflicts as a threat to children's play and interaction. Therefore, they make an effort to prevent the development of conflicts by being at the forefront or diverting the children. However, conflicts can also be considered as experiences, which contribute to children's learning about social relations, demands and rules, and to their cognitive, social, and moral development (Chen, 2003; Hedegaard, 2008, 2009; Shantz, 1987). Thus, practitioners often let children resolve conflicts themselves and offer support or help only if they are unable to do so on their own (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Newberry & Davis, 2008). If practitioners intervene, they usually do so by asking about what happened and how the involved parties can resolve the conflict (Blank & Schneider, 2011; De Haan & Singer, 2003).

Sometimes ordinary strategies for intervening in children's conflicts do not work, and other intervention strategies are used. In situations where attempts to talk to a child who uses physical force do not work, there can emerge a new conflict between the practitioner who intervenes and the child. Practitioners can then resort to other intervention strategies such as using physical force, yelling, or threatening the children (Chang & Davis, 2009; Chen & Smith, 2002; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2015; Johansson & Emilson, 2016). What practitioners think about these conflict situations and intervening strategies is still unknown in research about strategies for conflict resolution. My contribution is therefore to explore the following research questions:

How do practitioners manage and understand conflict situations where children use physical force toward each other and the attempt to intervene by words does not work?

What sorts of pedagogical reasons seem to motivate the way to intervene when words do not work?

The aim is to understand the challenges practitioners face when ordinary strategies for intervening in children's conflicts do not work. To do this, I focus on the complexity of such strategies in kindergarten and discuss the practitioners' own reflections. The collected data is based on a qualitative research study from 2014, involving four different kindergartens for children from 1 to 6 years of age in Norway. In this article, the main data material is from two different focus group interviews with practitioners, discussing their ways of intervening in conflict situations when words do not work.

In the next section, the concept of conflict is presented and illuminated through international research, which reveals two main strategies for intervening in preschool children's conflicts. This is followed by a theoretical perspective, where Biesta's question about the overarching aims for pedagogical practice, and Hedegaard's model for meeting children's conflicts, is seen from different levels. After an explanation of the methodology, two excerpts from the research material are presented. The practitioners' interventions and their reflections about the strategies will be analyzed and discussed in

the context of democracy as an overarching aim for pedagogical practice in kindergartens.

### **Conflicts involve resistance and need for democratic negotiations**

Conflicts generally arise between people who want different things, and who have different ideas, values, motives, or aims for their thoughts and actions (Doppler-Bourassa, Harkins, & Mehta, 2008; Hedegaard, 2008; Rourke, Wozniak, & Cassidy, 1999). Conflicts can thus be seen as interpersonal (Chen & Smith, 2002; Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008; Roseth et al., 2008). They can also be called political because they influence relations and the common life in kindergarten (Johansson & Emilson, 2016). From these perspectives, conflicts are considered important for democratic interaction between children, where expressions of different interests, perspectives, and therefore resistance, characterizes the communities (Grindheim, 2014; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Pettersvold, 2015). In Scandinavian societies and pedagogical institutions, children are expected to handle conflicts through negotiations and compromises. In line with the political theorist, Mouffe (2000), democratic values such as equality, freedom, and inclusion, demand that people relate to conflicts not in antagonistic or hostile, but agonistic, ways. The latter term means that resistance and opposition are taken seriously, differences can be confronted, and individual desires transform into desires for all (Biesta, 2011, 2015a; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Killen et al., 2000; Mouffe, 2000; Todd, 2010).

Interpersonal or political conflict involves disagreement, resistance, protest, and a consequent need for negotiation (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Biesta, 2011, 2012, 2015a). Solutions are usually found, but the conflict can also go beyond the initial issue and lead to new conflicts (Chen & Smith, 2002; Medina & Martinez, 2012; Shantz, 1987). If the relations between parties are equal, negotiations and compromises often resolve the conflict and strengthen the relation between them. But if the power balance is asymmetric, intentional resistance in the form of competition can lead to frustrated emotions and violated relations. Even aggression and use of physical force may occur (Chang & Davis, 2009; Chen & Smith, 2002; Grindheim, 2014; Singer et al., 2012). There will always be an asymmetry in power between practitioners and children. The way practitioners choose to intervene is essential, both for the outcome and for the children's perception of and learning from the conflict situation (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Singer et al., 2012). The interpersonal, which in the following sections is called the political aspect, is the main criterion for the selected research about intervening strategies presented in the next section.

### **Research about conflicts and strategies for intervention**

Research reveals that an important pedagogical aim for practitioners from different countries is to help children acquire strategies for solving conflicts that teach them to cooperate and to be members of the group (Killen et al., 2000). In particular, the use of physical force against another human being is not accepted in Nordic societies. Children should learn that the use of physical force for resolving conflicts is unacceptable. Researchers have also found that the use of physical force decreases with age, and the eldest children in kindergartens are able to engage in intersubjective interaction by words

and negotiations, especially when they are playing and want to continue (Chen, 2003; Chen & Smith, 2002, De Haan & Singer, 2003; Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008; Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002). Nevertheless, the use of physical force occurs in some conflict situations in kindergartens. In such situations, the practitioners usually intervene (Bratterud, Sandseter, & Seland, 2012; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2015; Killen et al., 2000; Roseth, et al., 2008; Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002). The use of physical force has a particularly negative role in children's peer interaction, because the pain and harm caused to another is irreversible. Such conflict situations are considered the most difficult to intervene in (Chang & Davis, 2009; Killen et al., 2000; Roseth et al., 2008; Shantz, 1987).

Earlier, preschool researchers have highlighted two different strategies generally used by children, but also by practitioners (Chen, 2003; Killen et al., 2000; Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002; Singer et al., 2012). Bilateral or facilitative strategies emphasize the involved parties' different perspectives of negotiations and dialogue (Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002). In such strategies, practitioners identify the children's agendas without letting their own perspective dominate. They also take into consideration activated emotions and relations. Practitioners' aim in intervening is to model good examples of bilateral strategies, by focusing on compromise between parties, reconciliation of the opponents, supporting the children's relationships, and by offering explanations. Helping children verbalize their view and recognize the other children's feelings and perspectives seems to be important in bilateral strategies (Chen, 2003; Chen & Smith, 2002; Killen et al., 2000; Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002; Singer et al., 2012).

Some researchers reveal that practitioners do not always use bilateral conflict strategies during intervention (Chang & Davis, 2009; Chen & Smith, 2002; Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2015; Johansson & Emilson, 2016). In unilateral strategies, also called "cessation strategies" (Chen, 2003; Chen & Smith, 2002), practitioners occasionally offer verbal and nonverbal opposition. They can also express anger and yell at the children involved. For practitioners, unilateral strategies include a focus on the rules and directives regarding behavior and the fact that hitting, shoving, or grabbing is forbidden. Some researchers also find competitive resolution strategies, in which practitioners demonstrate power and maintain control. Some decide on a solution in which one child is a winner and the other a loser (Jenkins, 2008; Singer et al., 2012). Generally, practitioners prefer bilateral strategies and reduce unilateral strategies, particularly the use of physical force. But research also reveals, regardless of the children's age or their conflict behavior, that sometimes practitioners can apply physical force and coercion; for example, grabbing the child's arm or picking up and removing the child from the scene (Chen, 2003; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2015; Singer et al., 2012).

In sum, mostly bilateral strategies are used when practitioners intervene in conflict situations between children, emphasizing respect and negotiations in accordance with an agonistic approach. But more unilateral strategies also occur, where practitioners make use of physical force and threats, and do not take the children's own perspectives seriously. This is in line with a more antagonistic attitude, and not in accordance with democratic ways of interacting. The different perspectives represented in bilateral or unilateral strategies will become appropriate tools for analyzing and discussing the democratic perspective, which regards conflicts as political, and will be further elaborated in the following theoretical section.

## **Theoretical perspectives**

To illuminate and discuss the excerpts from the data material in the light of the research question, two theoretical perspectives that complement each other are presented. The first perspective, represented by the education philosopher Gert Biesta (2015a, 2015b) highlights pedagogical aims for education and considers democratic formation to be a central, but also conflictual, aspect. The second perspective is taken from the cultural-historical researcher, Mariane Hedegaard (2008, 2009). She offers a model for the complex processes of understanding and analyzing conflict situations and conditions for children's development on different levels, which contextualizes the practice in kindergarten as a pedagogical institution.

According to Biesta (2015b), the pedagogical practice always relates to the educational purpose. He suggests that education generally performs three aim-related functions, called socialization, qualification, and subjectification. Socialization is transmission of norms and values, and introducing individuals to ways of doing and being, both regarding desirable and undesirable features. Qualification is about providing children with knowledge and skills. Subjectification is about democratic formation, to become an autonomous and independent, as well as responsible, human being (Biesta, 2015a, 2015b). It is when children act or take initiative and meet resistance, or themselves resist others, that they appear as subjects. Therefore, conflicts and resistance are important. Biesta stresses that peoples' intellect and feelings are important for actions, but also involve a distance to others and to the world. When it comes to the domain of action and initiative, the physical hand and body offers a particular and direct "access" and connection to others and to the world (Biesta, 2012). For children to be able to work with conflicts and resistance, it is important that teachers facilitate processes that include physical aspects of acting. In a democratic perspective, it is necessary that different actions can be transformed into something desirable, not just for the individual child, but also for others (Biesta, 2012, 2015a).

Between the dimensions of qualification, socialization, and subjectification, synergy is possible, but there are also different potentials for conflicts. How teachers use their professional judgment about what they seek to achieve in each of the domains and keep these in an educationally meaningful balance is challenging, not only in a general sense, but in relation to each child (Biesta, 2015b).

To analyze the pedagogical aims in relation to institutional practice, the cultural-historical approach is relevant. Hedegaard's model (2008, 2009) highlights the complexity of conflictual aspects in practice where the child's development is conditioned by their relationship to the cultural and social surroundings in a dialectical way. In Hedegaard's model, conflicts in relation to practice are considered from three different levels: those of the society, the institution, and the child. From a societal perspective, different educational aims are actualized through various values, norms, and discourses about child development and conditions for personal formation (Hedegaard, 2009). Pedagogical institutions are expected to adhere to practices anchored in the laws and guidelines in accordance with the legal and official view of children. Thus, conflicts can arise between a child's motives and intentions and the dominating aims and demands in the pedagogical institution. These conflicts are seen as important for a child's development and are a way to find out the child's developmental intentions and perspectives. For Hedegaard, the child's intentions, motives, and perspectives are crucial for his or her activity in the concrete institutional activity setting. A child's social

development is realized through the child's interaction with others. But it is the way in which caregivers manage to help children to negotiate social conflicts (and in accordance with institutional demands) that is important (Hedegaard, 2008, 2009).

Both Biesta's questions about the overarching aims of education and Hedegaard's model of conditions for children's development, contribute to perspectives for the analytical work and discussion of the findings. The practitioners' interventions and reflections about their own choice of strategies are conditioned in very complex ways, dependent on the actual child involved in the concrete conflict situation, the institutional practice, and also in accordance to the traditions, expectations, aims, and values for socialization of children into the society.

### **Method, data collection and analysis**

The research project has a qualitative research design, based on the author's own collecting, transcribing, and analyzing of data drawn from a project approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Written consent from the practitioners and parents was obtained, based on promises about anonymity and confidentiality (Backe-Hansen, 2016). For the youngest children, parents gave their consent, but for children over 3 years of age, the researcher also tried to explain why she was visiting them (Bell, 2008). All names of the informants and the kindergarten in the presented excerpts are pseudonyms.

Written observation protocols, primarily about conflicts in children's play were collected during a week in each of four different kindergartens. The material for analysis also provided insight into the institutional framework factors and the routines for everyday practice. In addition, the researcher asked the practitioners to write narratives about conflicts experienced between children or between children and practitioners themselves. Based on thematic (Gibbs, 2007) analysis of all the narratives, a semistructured focus group interview was designed and 12 focus group interviews with 47 practitioners from the four kindergartens were conducted and recorded. Each group interview was about 60 minutes and resulted in an average of 20 pages of transcription per interview, 240 pages in total. The focus groups consisted of one or two kindergarten teachers and two or more assistants (who did not have formal teacher education).

In this article, the focus group interviews with the practitioners are the main source for analysis and research findings. A semistructured focus group interview involves a dialogue between the interviewer and informants, but also allows for informants to respond to each other. In this way, the dialogue about conflicts in children's everyday life in kindergarten reveals different perspectives like a prism (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). The informants also found support and trusted each other, and it is realistic to assume that they brought up events that they probably would have otherwise not talked about in individual interviews.

Research about practitioner's intervention in pedagogical institutions often addresses hypothetical questions about possible conflict situations (Jenkins, 2008; Killen et al., 2000; Sava, 2002). In contrast to this approach, my informants were asked a very open question: to describe and discuss conflict situations they remembered and had experienced themselves the week before the interview took place. In addition to a dialogue about the different conflict situations they handled in a way that usually worked,

the practitioners themselves chose to describe situations in which they were unsure and uncomfortable with the way they had intervened, when “words did not work”.

In the process of trying to categorize the data, the analysis reveals different episodes in the interviews where several practitioners, belonging to different kindergartens, talked about situations when the ordinary strategies to intervene by words and dialogue did not work. Only excerpts from two different groups of practitioners are presented. These practitioners belong to the same kindergarten (Hegren Kindergarten), but are working with different age groups in two different staff teams. The occupational position of the informants does not seem to affect how they handled the situations and is therefore not considered. The excerpts are selected because of the practitioners’ relatively elaborate reflections and argumentations about their own interventions. These excerpts have been analyzed utterance by utterance, considering who introduced the specific topic and who of the participants in the interview contributed to further elaborating the topic (Linell, 2009; Linell & Gustavsson, 1987). Because the informants in the interviews are the practitioners, the institutional level is elucidated (Hedegaard, 2008, 2009). The collected data do not allow a direct analysis at the individual level, which is the children’s own perspectives, intentions, and wishes. Nevertheless, the practitioner’s perceptions and expectations of the children’s activity shape both the way they meet conflicts and resistance as well as the possibilities for children to appear as democratic subjects.

The present discussion focuses on the reasons and aims (Biesta, 2015b) that seem to motivate the way the practitioners choose to intervene in conflicts. As mentioned in other research where the potential for developing professional judgment is in focus (Sava, 2002), the purpose is not to criticize the practitioners for making mistakes, but rather provide a discussion to improve understanding of the challenges practitioners face in their everyday practice.

### **Excerpts from the data material.**

To illuminate the ways practitioners manage and understand conflict situations where children use physical force toward each other, and the practitioners’ attempts to intervene when words do not work, two different excerpts from the data material are presented. These excerpts are also the basis for further analysis and discussion of the findings, according to the strategies they use and their own reflections about their interventions.

The first excerpt is from a group interview with four practitioners who work together with children 2–4 years old.

**Nora:** “I don’t think it’s something you can do often. But we have a child who is quite large. Every day when he came out . . . He was a rather intelligent boy. So I knew he understood. He was always picking on a child who was weaker. Every day he went over to him and grabbed the hood of his raincoat and went around, holding him. And the boy shouted: “No, stop, stop!”. It is unpleasant to be grabbed by the hood and dragged around. He did this for many days, and we went over and said: “You have to stop!” So in the end [laugh]. . . So I just felt, I became extremely mad at him. So I took him by his hood. Then I went around. And he [said]: “Stop, stop, it’s disgusting! It’s disgusting!”. “No!” I said. “It’s okay! So, I went around a little while with him.”

In the above excerpt, just one of the practitioner's stories is presented. In the group discussion that followed Nora's story, comments from Nora and the other participants reveal how they perceive and reflect upon the event. Nora points out that the way she handled the situation "is not a way you can use often". She repeats this point later and also says: "I don't think it was a good action". Simultaneously, she argues that the boy had persisted for so long, and neglected to listen to what had been told him. In particular, he had neglected to listen to the other child who was exposed to his actions. Nora says: "It wasn't a good thing for an adult to do, but at the same time I think, 'Do you know, now . . .'".

Lisa, one of the other interview participants, adds that it is also bad for the other child who experiences this grabbing from the boy. Ann, the third practitioner, emphasizes that the boy's behavior has persisted for a long time. In a way, now it was enough. Nora says: "There are also other ways to do this", but Ann follows up: "It is something about it, they actually have to know on their own body. It is also about 'to speak to deaf ears'. It doesn't always help. And then you have to resort to something else". Nora answers: "I don't think it is a good way to handle it, but I didn't know how . . . I feel I had tried everything".

To summarize: Nora starts by saying that her way of intervening is not a strategy that can be done often. After many times talking to the boy, he still did not stop bothering the other child. Then she became extremely mad and she used physical force to stop the boy, in exactly the same way as the boy did with the other child. Nora repeats that it is not a strategy that can be used often and she does not think it is a good action. But the boy has neglected to listen and stop as he has been told. Lisa adds it is also bad for the other child. Ann explains that the behavior has persisted for a long time, and children have to know on their own body. Often practitioners speak to deaf ears, and it does not always help. Nora repeats that it isn't a good way to handle the situation, but she does not really know how to do so otherwise; she has tried everything.

The second excerpt is from a group interview with five practitioners from the same kindergarten, Hegren, though they work with a different group of children of ages 1–6 years.

**Siv:** "I can tell something. I feel guilty about it. Because we have a child who is 'closed off'. We don't come inside. We cannot reach him, and he continues to kick and hit while you are holding him. One day, we had gone for a walk. Then there were two other boys who got into a conflict. They snatched each other's caps. So this boy went over. In a way he began to defend one of the boys. We don't really know what are . . . He began to kick him and snatched his cap and threw it away. Then I caught and held him. While I was holding him, he continued kicking and snatching the cap. So he snatched the cap from another boy and threw it away. So I snatched his cap and threw it away. Then it went completely wrong for him. So I took him away. And he was furious. I couldn't, . . . whatever I, – how much [I did]. Then he tried to bite me, a 6 year old boy! So I said to him: 'What if I bite you back?'. Then, he stopped. Then he looked at me. So I said: 'Now, we are going to pick up the cap'. So we went and picked up the cap. He was still angry at me. But I felt, it was the only way I could reach him. So, I don't know, probably it wasn't the right thing to do, but this child, we have tried everything."



Siv expands later in the interview: “I expect, when you are 6 years old, then you know you shouldn’t hit anyone. You know if you hit someone, the other person gets hurt . . . But they hit because a reason. Are they hitting just to hurt him, you know he gets hurt”. Kine, another practitioner answers: “I think it is not always easy for them to control their feelings, the impulses they get when they are a little bit [*inaudible*]”. Later in the interview Siv says: “I try to ask: ‘What can you do instead of hitting. Could you have done anything else? You have a lot of words you can use’. I feel sometimes it is functioning very well, but there are many other times it doesn’t. Then you go . . .yea . . .”

To summarize: Siv says she feels guilty about a boy who is “closed off”. She does not really know what was happening, but he started to kick and snatch the other boy’s cap away. While Siv was holding him, he continued to kick and snatch the cap. When Siv threw his cap away, it went completely wrong for him. Then Siv took him away, and the child became furious and tried to bite her. When Siv asked him how he would feel if she bit him back, he stopped and they picked up the cap, but he was still mad at her. Siv felt it was the only way to reach him, but probably not the right thing to do. She says she has tried everything. Siv expects a 6-year-old boy to know not to hit anyone, because it hurts to be kicked, but they hit for a reason. Kine objects that it is not always easy for the children to control their feelings. Usually Siv asks what can they do instead of hitting, advising them to use their words. Sometimes it works well, but not always.

## **Analysis of findings and discussion**

Since these two excerpts are essentially alike, the findings in the excerpts are analyzed and discussed together, but also the differences between them will be highlighted. According to the research questions it is the practitioner’s actions and understandings of their own intervention strategies when words do not work, which are in focus.

Since the empirical data is from group interviews with practitioners, it is the institutional level—in line with Hedegaard’s model (2008, 2009)—that is elucidated. The individual level is not explicit in the focus group interviews, but the way practitioners perceive and talk about the children is analysed and discussed. The societal level is highlighted according to the informants’ reflections on the reasons for their choice of intervention. Nevertheless, the different levels and aspects of intentions, actions, aims, and values seem to cross and complement each other (Biesta, 2015a, 2015b). It makes up a complexity expressed through the practitioners’ reflections about their own actions in the conflict situations they describe.

### *Societal level*

Both excerpts reveal that the ways the two practitioners handle their respective situations are responses to a child’s repeated violations of the rule against the use of physical force toward another child in kindergarten. This rule is one that society demands children learn as a part of their socialization (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2015). Society’s rejection of violence or physical power is also a norm in the socializing of children. In society, central values for social communion correspond to seeing the children as socially competent, both with a right to, but also skills for, participation and interaction with other children in a socially accepted way (Franck & Nilsen, 2015; Grindheim, 2014).

Adults’ use of physical force towards children is also no longer acceptable conduct as mentioned in Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,

which pertains to the responsibility to protect children from all forms of physical and mental violence (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund United Kingdom, n.d.).

The official Norwegian Framework Plan for kindergarten also states that kindergartens "shall help the children to . . . use language to build relationships, to participate in play and as a tool for conflict resolution" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 48). These values and competencies are usually what the informants remind children of, when they intervene in conflict situations. As the practitioners reveal, they used physical force in their attempts to stop children who were using physical force. Although officially, the adults' use of physical force is not condoned, there appear to be different practices in society, which also are reflected among practitioners in pedagogical institutions (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2015; Hedegaard, 2008; Johansson & Emilsson, 2008). Chen and Smith (2002) point out that cessasive/unilateral and facilitative/bilateral conflict intervention strategies are not mutually exclusive, but can operate as separate, coexisting, or parallel dimensions, to different degrees.

### *Institutional level*

Hegren Kindergarten's formal plan for the year emphasizes communication and supportive interaction between children and adults in conflict situations in the light of democratic participation. Usually, the practitioners also meet the children as equal and treat them with respect, but these physical conflict situations generate other perspectives. After repeated oral reminders to not use physical force, the practitioners intervene by the same strategy as the two boys. Ann highlights: "It can be a danger to speak to deaf ears too. It doesn't always help. And then you have to resort to other things" Both Nora and Siv express their uncertainty about the strategies they use when "words do not work". When practitioners feel they can handle the situation, they also control their own feelings, but when children are threatening or challenging their goals and strategies, the practitioners are more likely to feel hurt, or alienated from their students and to experience unpleasant emotions (Chang & Davis, 2009; Johansson & Emilson, 2016).

Both boys appear to the practitioners as capable, but they neglect to meet the demands to make use of words and to take the other child's perspective. According to Chang and Davis (2009), these perceptions of the children's capabilities cause feelings of anger about the situation. In contrast, if the practitioners had guessed the boys could not handle the conflict situation on their own, they would instead intervene with annoyance or sympathy (Chang & Davis, 2009). In the practitioners' frustration and uncertainty, they resort to unilateral strategies and react to the conflict situations in the same way as the children did (Johansson, 2012; Johansson & Emilson, 2016).

The practitioners discussed here have clear expectations of the boys' behavior. Nora considers the boy mature enough and sufficiently intelligent to understand that it is unacceptable to use physical force on another child. She highlights the asymmetry in strength between the two children as considerable. Siv is also clear about her expectation of the 6-year-old boy that she dealt with; he knew it was forbidden to kick or hit anyone. Their stories reveal that the practitioners do not only express an expectation, but a demand for behavior in compliance with a decided standard about what is age-appropriate children's behavior. This standardization can also become a scale for the individual child (Chen, Fein, Killen, & Tam, 2001; Franck & Nilsen, 2015; Gilliam &

Gulløv, 2015; Hedegaard, 2008). What they expect from the child is crucial for how the practitioners intervene.

Although some of the children use physical force toward another child, it becomes a much more powerful behavior when practitioners execute physical force on a child. Therefore this behavior can be interpreted as an antagonistic or hostile way to react. It can have consequences for the child's perception of adults' power and can weaken not only the respect and dignity for the adult, but also for people in general (Chang & Davis, 2009; Jenkins 2008). Antagonistic behavior can develop a sort of hostile atmosphere in kindergarten (Carr, 1992; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2015; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Skoglund, 2015; Todd, 2010).

Focusing only on the expectations and demands upon the child, for complying with certain norms and rules, can lead to a constant perception of the child as problematic and the practitioner can come to define the child as aggressive and lacking social competence (Biesta, 2012). This is a characteristic independent of the children's own perspectives, the context, and not least, the practitioners' own reactions (Chang & Davis, 2009; Franck & Nilsen, 2015; Hedegaard, 2008; Johansson, 2012).

### *The individual level*

According to Hedegaard (2008, 2009) the individual level is primarily an attempt to approach the children's perspectives, motives, and intentions. Both of the conflict situations discussed here happened in the outdoor setting in kindergarten, where the practitioners are less close to the children than when indoors. Thus, it can be difficult to gain an overview of how the conflicts arose and developed (Wood, 2014).

What can be seen as similar in these two situations is the practitioners' lack of attempts to grasp the children's perspectives (Hedegaard, 2008). A central finding of the present study is that the practitioners do not ask the children themselves about what has been going on, which is important if the practitioners are to help children handle the demand to not use physical force to others. Siv mentions that the boy who throws the cap away is possibly trying to defend one of his friends, attacked by another boy. This is not taken into account when she acts or in her explanation of the way she confronts the boy. Earlier research also reveals that to defend a friend can place the child in a risky situation with respect to the practitioners (Johansson & Emilson, 2016).

In the second interview excerpt (Siv's), one of the other informants, Kine says: "I think it can't always be easy for [the children] to control their feelings, the impulses they get when they are little, yea . . .". That the practitioners make use of physical force can be seen as an unintended reaction to the boys' behavior. As seen in other research, their own feelings take over and dominate the way they intervene (Johansson, 2012). However, the practitioners also defend their strategies, arguing that the boys have to feel on their own body (i.e., experience) what they have done to the other child. Ann: "It's something about it, they actually have to know on their own body". Both Nora and Siv do exactly so. When Siv asked the boy to hit back, she perceived it was the only way to get through to the boy. Another interpretation can be that the boy also became afraid of her threat, and therefore stopped. The paradox is that the practitioners demand that the boys consider other children's perspectives and feelings, yet by using physical force, the practitioners themselves are not following this directive. These findings are similar to

what Johansson (2012) found: practitioners seem to close their own eyes to the feelings and the motives the boys can feel in relation to themselves in these events.

In a way, both the practitioners' strategies in handling their respective conflict situations seemed to work. The boys stopped—or they gave up—because the physical force and the threat from the practitioners were much stronger than their own resistance. Later in the interviews, the informants also reflect on why children use physical force and suggest it can give more direct results than trying to convince by word. It seems to be the same situation for the practitioners themselves. If they do not get the expected reaction using words, then physical force and control are more effective than words (Jenkins, 2008). Biesta (2015b) refers to Carr (1992) who points out that children do not just learn from what the practitioner says, but also from what he or she is doing. The use of physical force confirms it as an effective way to act, in any case when one is strong and has enough power, as an adult does compared to a child. Maybe the conflict situations should also encourage the practitioners to ask: is the child's behavior not only a signal about something they perceive as unfair and misunderstood in relation to the involved children, but also in relation to the practitioners who intervene (Biesta, 2015b; Singer & Hännikäinen, 2002)?

### **To work in accordance with overarching goals for the pedagogical practice**

On their own initiative, the practitioners spoke about conflict situations that expanded to a more intense conflict between the child and intervener when ordinary negotiation strategies by words did not work. Both Nora and Siv are feeling their own anger when the boys repeatedly do not stop their behavior when they are talked to. What the analysis reveals is important. There is a need to recognize that both children and practitioners act and communicate, not only by words, but also in an emotional and physical way (Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008). It is necessary to raise a collective, professional discussion about ways to meet children in conflict situations while taking verbal language seriously, as well as emotions and physical aspects. When the practitioners acknowledge their own emotions and resort to physical force to stop the boys using physical force to other children, it can also give them an understanding of the children's behavior in conflict situations, regardless of their age.

The practitioners say they have tried everything, and then choose strategies they are not comfortable with. The bilateral and democratic strategies they usually use do not always work, and consequently the practitioners make use of unilateral strategies, as grabbing and threatening the child physically. According to (Carr, 1992) it is not sufficient to rely on techniques or strategies, even if they work. The unilateral strategies worked, in the sense that the children stopped using physical force. This way of intervening can also provide an antagonistic interaction where the children can learn to relate to others as enemies in conflict situations.

According to Biesta (2015b), all pedagogical practice is normative, involving values. Therefore, he asks what are the overarching aims and values for education. In accordance with values in our society as well as in the pedagogical institutions, there is always need for subjectification and a democratic aspect. To get in touch with the children, to stay by them in their frustration and help them to relate to resistance and

conflict situations in ways that do not lead to the children destroying themselves or others, is a difficult pedagogical challenge (Biesta, 2012; Blank & Schneider, 2011; Hedegaard, 2008, 2009). Biesta (2015b) emphasizes the possibility for subjectification, which also can regulate qualification and socialization strategies and prevent what he calls a subjectivity-reducing qualification and socialization.

Based on the analysis, intervention strategies that work in different situations are necessary, but not sufficient (Newberry & Davis, 2008). It may be necessary to physically stop the child who resorts to physical force toward another child (Singer & Hännikäinen, 2001). At the same time, it is important to meet the unique child in the specific conflict situation in an agonistic, respectful, and democratic way, even though the child does not accept being verbally corrected. Especially in conflict situations where different goals for the activity and disagreements between children, and also between children and practitioners, become applicable, the subjectification and democratic aspects can appear, but also disappear because of more antagonistic intervention strategies (Johansson & Emilson, 2016). As the analysis reveals, conflict situations when oral directions do not work, presuppose a recognition that not only words, but also feelings and physical behavior, influence actions, both for children and practitioners. Only practitioners are committed to acting in an agonistic way, according to the overarching aims for the kindergarten as a pedagogical institution. To transform those overarching aims in meeting with every child in the specific conflict situation depends on a complex professional judgment (Biesta, 2015b). The practitioners' collective reflections give them a fruitful starting point for a dialogue about how to develop professional judgment in ways that recognize the children's point of view, and also takes their own feelings seriously when words do not work. Then it is also necessary to ask if the intervention strategies they use support the overarching aims for their institutional practice.

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