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AN ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES DEPENDING ON A TEACHER'S AGE

ANALIZA STRATEGIJ REŠEVANJA KONFLIKTNIH SITUACIJ PRI ŠPORTNI VZGOJI GLEDE NA STAROST UČITELJEV

ABSTRACT

The interaction between the teacher and the pupil in the process of physical education represents co-operation, interpersonal effects, communication with each other etc. The individual characteristics of teachers and pupils, different values, behaviour, personal mood, overfilled classrooms, inappropriate teaching, insufficient teaching equipment, poor material conditions and suchlike can from time to time also lead to conflict situations in the physical education process which teachers settle in different ways.

With this survey we wanted to establish which conflict management strategies physical education teachers most commonly resort to, and if there are any statistically distinct differences in the chosen conflict management strategies with respect to teachers' ages (physical education teachers up to 45 years and 45 years and above).

The research included 439 randomly selected physical education teachers with higher education diploma from across Slovenia. We measured the conflict management strategies (ROCI-II questionnaire – Rahim, 1983; Rahim & Magner, 2000). The data were processed with the SPSS statistical analysis software where descriptive statistical methods and an analysis of variance were used.

It was established that the teachers use various approaches to resolving conflict situations. Generally speaking, they most often rely on integrating as a conflict management strategy, and least often on dominating. We established statistically significant differences in the conflict management strategies between the younger (<45 years) and older (≥45 years) teachers.

Key words: physical education teachers, conflict management strategies, older and younger physical education teacher, analysis of differences

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IZVLEČEK

Interakcija med učiteljem in učencem pri procesu športne vzgoje pomeni sodelovanje, medsebojno vplivanje, komuniciranje drug z drugim itd. Individualne značilnosti učiteljev in učencev, različne vrednote, vedenja, osebno razpoloženje, prenatrpani razredi, neprimerno poučevanje, pomanjkljiva učna sredstva, slabi materialni pogoji ipd. lahko občasno privede tudi do konfliktnih situacij pri procesu športne vzgoje, ki jih učitelji rešujejo na različne načine.

Namen raziskave je bil ugotoviti, katerih strategij reševanja konfliktnih situacij se pri svojem delu najpogosteje poslužujejo slovenski učitelji športne vzgoje in ali obstajajo statistično značilne razlike glede izbranih strategij reševanja konfliktov glede na starost učiteljev (učitelji športne vzgoje do 45 let ter 45 let in več).

V raziskavi je sodelovalo 439 naključno izbranih učiteljev športne vzgoje z visokošolsko izobrazbo iz cele Slovenije. Uporabili smo vprašalnik za merjenje strategij reševanja konfliktov ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983; Rahim in Magner, 2000). Podatke smo obdelali s statističnim paketom SPSS. Za analizo podatkov smo uporabili deskriptivno statistiko in enosmerno analizo variance.

Ugotovili smo, da učitelji športne vzgoje uporabljajo različne strategije reševanja konfliktov. Vsi učitelji športne vzgoje se najpogosteje poslužujejo sodelovanja kot strategije za reševanje konfliktov, najmanj pa prevlade. Prav tako smo ugotovili, da se starejši učitelji športne vzgoje (≥45 let) glede izbranih strategij reševanja konfliktov statistično značilno razlikujejo od mlajših učiteljev športne vzgoje (<45 let).

Ključne besede: učitelji športne vzgoje, strategije reševanja konfliktov, starejši in mlajši učitelji športne vzgoje, analiza razlik

INTRODUCTION

Of all different social organisations, education organisations are in particular organisations in which very strong interpersonal relationships are present. An unavoidable part of each interpersonal relationship is conflict (Forgas, 2001); it is therefore completely natural that conflicts also emerge at schools, just like in other organisations (Argon, 2009; Longaretti & Wilson, 2006; Miklas & Kleiner, 2003). As many conflict definitions state that conflicts arise due to an incompatibility of goals, thoughts, feelings, interests and incompatibilities of two or more people (Berlogar, 2001; Cahn, 1992; DeDreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999; Jehn, 1995; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Longaretti & Wilson, 2006; Rahim, 2001). They are caused by situations in which an action by one person prevents, frustrates or hinders an action by another person (Lamovec, 1993; Kompore et al., 2002).

Besides the interaction between a teacher and a pupil at school there are also interpersonal relationships between teachers and parents, between individual teachers, between individual pupils and between teachers and school management. However, it is true that the relationship between the teacher and the pupil is the one that is exposed the most (Bowman, 2005) because it represents a basic element of education (Brajša, 1995). Besides the professional relationship between the teacher and the pupil, there is also a personal relationship between them. This reasonable basis is strongly related to an emotional component which contributes to the favourable emotional atmosphere needed for spontaneous interaction (Breznik Apostolovič, 2000). The interaction between them represents co-operation, an interpersonal effect or communication with each other which sometimes also leads to conflict situations. How perceptible, penetrating and lasting conflicts in education are (Hocker, 1986) was proven in research in which more than one-third of the people interviewed stated that the worst experience ever in their lives was a conflict or negative relationship with a teacher (Branson, 1972). Disagreements emerge for various reasons, like discipline and assessment, but they can also occur due to intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts among teachers or pupils and similar. Further, the individual characteristics of teachers and students, different values, behaviour, overfilled classrooms, inappropriate teaching, insufficient help and so on also cause the emergence of conflicts at schools and in classrooms (Argon, 2009).

Conflicts are also present in the physical education pedagogical process in which certain situations due to the nature of work further enhance the possibility of a conflict emerging (Štihec, 1994; Štihec, Bežek, Videmšek, & Karpljuk, 2004). It is true that physical education lessons are not as formal as other school subject lessons, during which pupils have to sit calmly at their desks (Štihec, 1994). However, more free movement during physical education lessons should not be a reason for indiscipline, disobedience, the occurrence of situations which lead to conflicts or basically to the emergence of anarchy. In addition, the emotional interference of pupils is stronger during physical education lessons than during other lessons, which is very desirable because the enhanced level of motivation enables us to achieve and improve tasks and goals in the pedagogical process. In contrast, the enhanced emotional presence represents the potential of conflicts and inappropriate behaviour appearing (Štihec et al., 2007).

Conflicts and their emergence do not represent a problem. It is the management of these conflicts that represents a problem. A suitable approach can change a conflict situation into an important step towards development; it can otherwise lead to a destructive force. Individuals use one or more strategies for conflict management. They use them consciously according to the goal they

want to achieve. The goal can be the reaching of a personal goal, because of which an individual is brought into conflict, or the maintenance of good interpersonal relations, depending on the importance of either one (Lamovec, 1993). If the conflict is managed constructively and in a quality manner, this will lead to facilitating, improving and revitalising the relationships between teachers and pupils (Brajša 1993). Horvat (1998) established that despite the different naming and different number of methods offered for conflict management by various authors it is possible to divide the methods for conflict management into two major groups: in the first group the methods work according to the principle of power and result in only one-sided satisfaction; the second group includes methods that bring satisfaction and benefit to all participants.

Štihec et al. (2009) share the opinion that the efficiency of managing conflict situations during physical education lessons requires teachers to employ different approaches. Which approach teachers will choose in a certain situation depends on themselves, their character, mood, pupils, environment etc. Selecting the most suitable conflict management strategy depends on the actual pedagogical situation.

Numerous authors (Longaretti & Wilson, 2006; Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006; Perry & Ball, 2005) point out that younger teachers often use different conflict management approaches than older ones. Here we find two extremes: they are either too lenient and friendly, or too strict and try to establish their authority through strictness.

In our survey we wanted to establish which conflict management strategies teachers of physical education most commonly resort to, and if there are any statistically distinct differences in the chosen conflict management strategies with respect to teachers' age. We therefore divided them into two groups: the first group included physical education teachers up to 45 years and the second group such teachers who were 45 years and above.

METHODS

Participants

439 teachers of physical education participated in the research. In the 2009/2010 school year the participating teachers were working in primary and secondary schools in Slovenia. The schools were randomly selected from different regions in Slovenia. Participation was voluntary. All teachers included in the poll first gave us their consent to participate in the research. All personal data remained anonymous. The whole process of data collection was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Personal Data Protection Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No.86/2004).

The sample of respondents consisted of 247 men (56.3%) and 192 women (43.7%). We divided them into two groups based on their age; the first group included men and women (younger) aged up to 45 (N=236; 53.8 %), the second group (older) included men and women aged 45 or above (N=203; 46.2%). In the first group there was an average total employment period of 16 years and in the second group it was 27 years.

Instruments

Conflict management strategies were measured by Rahim's (1983) "Organizational conflict Inventory" (ROCI-II). This instrument is one of the most widely used measures of conflict styles

(Henning, 2003; Rahim & Magner, 1995). Originally, the inventory was designed to measure five styles: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising and contains 28 items. The items of ROCI-II use a five-point Likert scale. A higher score indicates greater use of a style of handling interpersonal conflict.

- **Integrating:** (a strong concern for self and others), this style involves openness, the exchange of information, and examination of differences to reach an effective solution acceptable to both parties. It is associated with problem solving, which may lead to creative solutions.
- **Obliging:** (a low concern for self and a strong concern for others), this style is associated with attempting to play down differences and emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party.
- **Dominating** (a strong concern for self and a low concern for others), this style has been identified with a win-lose orientation or with forcing behaviour to win one's position.
- **Avoiding** (a low concern for self and others), this style has been associated with withdrawal, buck-passing, or sidestepping situations.
- **Compromising** (intermediate level of concern for self and others), this style involves give-and-take whereby both parties give up something to arrive at a mutually acceptable decision.

Procedure

The questionnaires were sent to randomly chosen schools (152 primary and 80 secondary schools). The physical education teachers also received a letter describing the aim of our study along with instructions for how to complete the questionnaire. We also enclosed a stamped and addressed envelope to facilitate the return of the completed questionnaires.

The data were processed with the SPSS 17 statistical analysis software 17 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Inc., Chicago IL), in which descriptive statistical methods were used. The ANOVA test was used to test differences among variables that were measured with the same method between the younger and older physical education teachers. A 5% risk level ($P \leq 0.05$) was used to establish statistical significance.

RESULTS

The results of the whole sample (without a division into individual groups) showed that the physical education teachers employ different ways to manage conflicts. The strategy that is most often used is integrating, followed by obliging and compromising, while avoiding and dominating are used to a smaller extent (see Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for all teachers

Conflict styles	N	M	SD
Avoiding	439	2.81	0.72
Integrating	439	4.01	0.50
Obliging	439	3.42	0.48
Compromising	439	3.13	0.61
Dominating	439	2.74	0.65

Legend: N – number of teachers; M – mean value; SD – standard deviation

The comparison of the results according to the age of the teachers showed that teachers aged up to 45 and those aged 45 or above in most cases integrate with pupils in conflict situations. They oblige pupils and reach a compromise with them to a smaller extent. The younger teachers use avoiding the least, while the older teachers use dominating as a way of conflict management the least (see Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics (younger teachers – older teachers)

DIMENSION		N	M	SD
Avoiding	younger	236	2.72	0.71
	older	203	2.92	0.71
Integrating	younger	236	4.02	0.48
	older	203	4.00	0.52
Obliging	younger	236	3.41	0.46
	older	203	3.43	0.49
Compromising	younger	236	3.13	0.59
	older	203	3.13	0.63
Dominating	younger	236	2.73	0.65
	older	203	2.74	0.64

Legend: N – number of teachers; M – mean value; SD – standard deviation

A statistically significant difference between the younger and older physical education teachers can be detected when it comes to avoiding (see Table 3). When considering other strategies no statistically significant differences between the two groups of teachers were detected. Avoiding as a manner of conflict management is used by the older teachers more often than by the younger teachers.

Table 3: Differences between teachers with respect to age

Dimension	Younger			Older			F	Sig (F)
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD		
Avoiding	236	2.72	0.71	203	2.93	0.72	9.45	0.00
Integrating	236	4.02	0.48	203	4.00	0.52	0.18	0.67
Obliging	236	3.41	0.46	203	3.44	0.50	0.43	0.51
Compromising	236	3.13	0.59	203	3.13	0.64	0.00	0.99
Dominating	236	2.74	0.64	203	2.75	0.65	0.03	0.87

Legend: N – number of teachers; M – mean value; SD – standard deviation; F – coefficient F; Sig. (F) – statistical significance of coefficient F ($p \leq 0.05$)

DISCUSSION

Conflict management requires the co-operation and co-existence of those who find themselves in a conflict situation; therefore, it is necessary to know how to distinguish between dealing with a conflict and managing a conflict. Dealing with a conflict namely significantly affects its management (Brajša, 1993). If we learn how to successfully manage conflicts, we will gain new opportunities to get to know ourselves, other people and the world. The conflict management

process itself enables more intense co-operation and strengthens relationships, while at the same time bringing new solutions which are acceptable for all people involved. With our research we established that when managing conflicts the physical education teachers use integrating to the greatest extent, followed by obliging and compromising. In the forefront of conflict management are so-called cooperative styles which are related to positive results, while non-cooperative styles affect the negative results of a conflict, as also proven by numerous other studies (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Rahim, 2002; Rahim, Magner, & Shapiro, 2000). The abovementioned non-cooperative styles include avoiding and dominating, which physical education teachers use the least.

Morris-Rothschild and Brassard (2006) came to similar results. The teachers they studied in their research also used integrating, compromising and obliging in most cases. Avoiding and dominating are used less. Integrating as the most common strategy for conflict management is also used by Serbian teachers (Bjekić & Zlatić, 2006). In her research into Slovenian teachers, Golob (2007) established that integrating is the style most widely employed for conflict management. It is followed by dominating, obliging and compromising; avoiding conflict is used the least. As the researchers discovered that Slovenian physical education teachers usually approach conflict situations with »persisting on their own requirements«, which can be compared to dominating, although integrating with pupils is also a very common approach (Bežek, 2000; Štihec et al., 2009).

According to the fact that integrating is the most commonly used strategy we can determine that physical education teachers strive for the constructive management of conflict and consequently for a constructive solution. Brajša (1993) states that if conflict management is managed constructively and in a quality manner, this results in relief along with the improvement and refreshing of relationships between teachers and pupils. Brajša also believes that the behaviour of the teacher and the pupil during the situation itself is critically important for conflict management and its consequences. The teacher as an expert in the educational process can be a role model in a specific conflict. The teacher uses the situation as useful educational means and affects the pupil with their quality behaviour. In this way pupils face and learn how to manage problems and conflicts and thereby prepare themselves for future life, in which they will definitely encounter them again. Of course, we should not forget that teachers are only human beings and that even they sometimes encounter a certain conflict situation for the first time for which they cannot find a constructive and suitable management approach at that very moment.

The comparison of results between the younger and older teachers showed that teachers aged up to 45 and those aged 45 or above in most cases integrate with pupils in conflict situations. To a smaller extent they both oblige pupils and reach compromises with them. There is a statistically significant difference between them when it comes to avoiding, whereas the differences regarding other dimensions between both groups are not statistically significant. The older teachers use avoiding as a manner of conflict management more often than the younger teachers. We can assume that based on their experiences the older teachers came to the conclusion that it is sometimes not clever to persist in conflict and they therefore prefer to avoid it. Thus, they can better estimate situations in which avoiding is more advantageous than conflict management. This is often the case where a teacher estimates that the issues are not important or when confronting the other participant in the conflict would potentially have a negative effect. The second possible reason can be found in the inactivity and lack of interest of the older teachers, who simply do not want

to deal with conflict management and thus directly with pupils. However, this behaviour makes the tension between them persist.

CONCLUSION

We discovered that the physical education teachers employ different strategies of conflict management in their work, with integrating being the most commonly used strategy, while avoiding and dominating were the least frequently used strategies. Given that obliging and compromising are some of the frequently used approaches, we can determine that teachers generally use cooperative styles which bring positive results. We may conclude that our research results are a consequence of the nature of the physical education pedagogical process which requires a lot of integrating between the teacher and the pupil. Integrating as the most commonly used conflict management manner is a strategy which is highly directed at care for oneself and for others, it reflects openness, the exchange of information and a review of differences in the tendency to reach an effective solution acceptable to both sides. In this way, both sides affect how a problem is resolved (Aquino, 2000; Rahim, 2002). Teachers which mainly use this way of solving problems by directly facing the conflict and trying to find new and creative solutions that would satisfy both their needs and those of their pupils.

We also found out that the older teachers who have been employed for a longer period are statistically significantly different from the younger physical education teachers who have fewer years of work experience. They both integrate with pupils in conflict situations to the greatest extent, although their conflict management differs when it comes to avoiding.

The conflict management strategies of physical education teachers are subject to pedagogical situations which are different and change very quickly due to the dynamics of the exercise process. Further, individual characteristics of pupils also affect conflict management. Thus, it is uncertain whether one strategy that proves to be efficient for one pupil will have the same effect on any other pupil (Vrbnjak, Videmšek, & Štihec, 2011). There is no universal pattern of conflict management which, on one hand, makes it more difficult for teachers but, on the other, offers them more possibilities when searching for the right solution. Experience, intuition and the so-called good touch for working with children all play an important role. And it is exactly these characteristics that a good teacher should have.

The issue of conflict management in the teaching process in Slovenian schools is very relevant and ever more present; teachers would therefore like to obtain additional competencies in these fields. The survey results represent a piece of the jigsaw of the future development of educational theory for physical education teachers. The findings and conclusions could be disseminated not only to future PE teachers but also to established PE teachers at trainings and seminars, where it should be pointed out that conflict management is also influenced by age and hence by the total period of time an individual teacher has been employed.

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