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EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES IN AN INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOL UNIT – A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW*

Introduction: The preschool stage is a time when children have many opportunities to develop their social skills and deeper comprehension thereof. The occurrence of peer conflicts is typical during this time, which, when properly resolved, can provide a developmental boost to children's cognitive and social-emotional competencies. Intentional instruction by the teacher to support peer interactions increases children's skills in this area. Children with disabilities who have lower social-emotional competencies, and, thus, perform less adeptly in conflict situations, may need special support. This is due to their difficulties in naming and understanding emotions, as well as reading the intentions of peers. The use of effective conflict resolution strategies by teachers can significantly affect the development of peer relationships and the process of integrating these children into the group.

Research Aim: The purpose of this article is to analyse the effectiveness of peer conflict resolution strategies in an inclusive preschool unit.

Research Method: A systematic review of scientific articles from Web of Science, Scopus, EBSCO, and Google Scholar for the years 2000–2024 was conducted using the PRISMA scheme. Nine full-text articles meeting all inclusion and exclusion criteria were analysed.

Summary: The review indicates the need for further in-depth research, meeting high methodological standards, in this area, with a particular focus on the effectiveness of peer conflict resolution strategies implemented in preschool inclusion units.

Keywords: inclusive preschool, peer conflict, conflict resolution strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a natural context for children to develop socially, morally and cognitively (Chen et al., 2001; Kozłowska, 2014). In Piaget's theory, conflict is central to cognitive development; it supports both the child's individual and social competencies (Hay and Ross, 1982). As children grow older, they learn to understand social situations and emotional conditions, which leads to learning and using positive conflict resolution strategies (Cao et al., 2023). This is more evident in girls than in boys (Madrid and Kantor, 2009; Pieng and Okamoto, 2020) and in children who have friendship relationships (Hartup et al., 1988).

Conflicts are potentially bi-directional. They can be developmental in nature, contributing to the optimisation of a child's social competence, as well as destructive, causing a range of negative consequences (Cywińska, 2003). Strycharz-Banaś et al. (2020) note that when viewed as exchanges occurring within a spectrum of other interactions, conflict or conflict-like interactions can contribute to children's broader relationship structure and overall development, including their negotiation of belonging to a new community, as well as testing and (re) negotiating different aspects of their identity. For many children, kindergarten is a new environment in which they have to find themselves in a group of peers who present desires, feelings and interests different from their own. Consequently, kindergarten is a key place where children learn how to navigate, manage and avoid conflict in negotiating their social worlds (Moore and Burdelski, 2020). The ability to resolve conflict and celebrate peace is recognised as an important value in early childhood education in many countries (Gunnestad et al., 2022). The acquisition of pro-social behaviours used in conflict is linked to mutually beneficial resolution and peaceful interaction after the conflict situation has ceased (Spivak, 2016).

However, conflict also has negative consequences. Donner et al. (2022) found that when negotiating the roles of play participants or the use of a toy, conflict can arise and result in the exclusion of the participant through passive resistance (ignoring or neglecting). A child excluded from play experiences disrespect and so engages in a struggle for recognition (Quinones et al., 2024). Children with limited cognitive and communication skills may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing bullying, peer rejection, and victimization (Mishna, 2003; Son et al., 2014), even in inclusion settings (Luciano and Savage, 2007), as they have lower competencies to deal with them successfully. Children with language difficulties struggle to understand emotions, peers' intentions and resolve conflict situations (Lloyd-Esenkaya et al., 2021).

Chen et al. (2019) showed that children with disabilities were less likely to interact with peers in their play networks compared to children who were developing normatively, but there were no differences between children with and without disabilities in terms of their participation in conflict networks. Moreover, they

were segregated in both play and conflict networks by their disability status, interacting more frequently with peers with disabilities than without.

Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are a special group. Autistic traits and externalising problems negatively affect young children's peer relationships (Sari et al., 2021). According to a study by Linimayr et al. (2023), sometimes children with ASD were assigned negative roles by peers in the inclusion unit, causing other peers to reject them, fear them or ignore their presence. Children with ASD are about 20 times more likely to be socially excluded, leaving them vulnerable to social isolation without adequate support (Humphrey, 2008).

Ren et al. (2023) show that some teachers were unable to resolve peer conflicts that arise during play with peers. Silver and Harkins (2007), on the other hand, found that teachers were more likely to use cessation than mediation in dealing with conflicts of preschool children. Killen and de Waal (2000) note that it is more effective to support children in resolving conflicts on their own by acting as a facilitator and mediator rather than as an instructor. If adults teach children the art of negotiation and compromise, conflicts fade away. However, for children with cognitive and communication skills difficulties, support from the teacher in the form of using effective strategies (Odom et al., 1993; Malloy and McMurray, 1996) to resolve peer conflicts is advisable.

To the authors' knowledge, there is a lack of review studies on peer conflict resolution strategies in inclusive preschool units. The only meta-analysis on peer conflict known to the authors covered the period 1900–1998 and dealt, to a limited extent, with conflicts involving children with special educational needs (Laursen et al., 2001). The purpose of this article, therefore, is to review the state of research on the effectiveness of peer conflict resolution strategies used in inclusive preschool units for the years 2000–2024.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

A systematic review of the results of studies published in the scientific journal databases Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), EBSCO and Google Scholar between 2000 and 2024 on peer conflict resolution strategies in an inclusive preschool unit was conducted. The review was conducted to answer the following research question: What is the effectiveness of peer conflict resolution strategies in an inclusive preschool unit?

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines were used to develop the systematic review (Booth et al., 2016). The data search was structured according to the literature review methodology (Czakov, 2011; Orłowska et al., 2017; Mazur and Orłowska, 2018; Markowska, 2020). We also used the example of the review of special education articles by Ro-

fiah et al. (2023). In line with PRISMA, the research work was carried out in three phases: identification, screening and inclusion.

Phase 1: Identification, carried out from February to March 2024, included a preliminary analysis of scientific articles in Scopus, WoS, EBSCO and Google Scholar databases published from January 2000 to March 2024. The databases were selected for their content. Scopus is the only database that collects a wide range of scientific literature in several fields. The other major bibliographic database is the WoS. EBSCO is a comprehensive, full-text database of research, while Google Scholar is a free and open-access search engine that contains the majority of the peer-reviewed literature in various fields. Publications in Polish and English, published in scientific journals from 2000 to 2024, presenting qualitative, quantitative and mixed research results were taken into consideration. Covidence software was used for the analysis. Articles were selected based on the following inclusion and exclusion criteria developed using the PICOC scheme (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes, Context – Booth et al., 2016) (Table 1). The following syntax pattern was used in the search command: peer conflict resolution AND inclusive AND preschool OR kindergarten OR early childhood education.

Table 1.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

PICOC scheme	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Population	Children with disabilities and teachers from inclusive preschool units	Children without disabilities, students, adolescents, adults
Intervention	Peer conflict resolution strategies	Therapy, teaching strategies; child-adult conflict resolution strategies
Comparison	Studies indicating the results of strategy implementation, including experimental studies with an experimental and control group, pre and post-test	Studies that do not show the results of using the strategy
Outcome	Effectiveness of strategies	No indication of strategy effects
Context	Inclusive preschool	School, special preschool or mainstream preschool without children with disabilities

Source: Authors' own study.

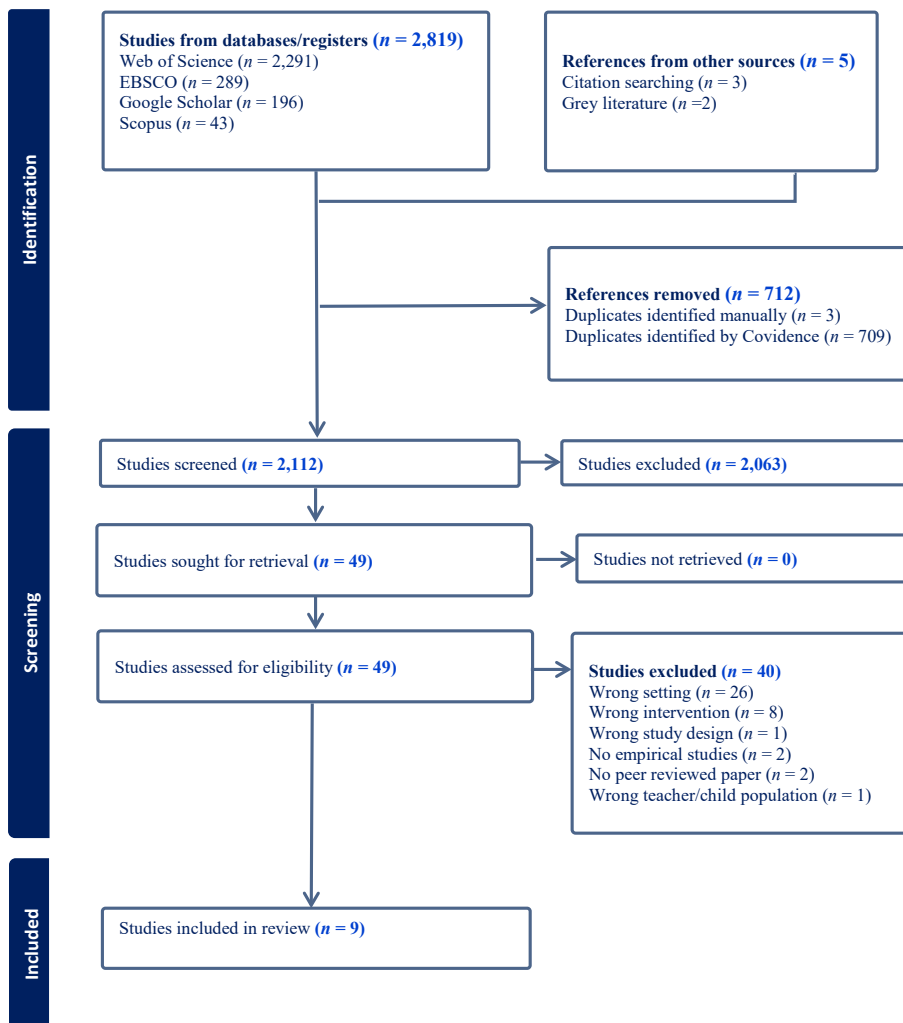
Phase 2: Screening – the results were retrieved using RIS tag from four databases Scopus, WoS, EBSCO and Google Scholar, and then the publications were exported to the Covidence web application, which allowed an efficient review of titles and abstracts, after excluding duplicates (Kellermeyer et al., 2018). A total of 2,824 articles were collected, and 712 duplicates were removed. Both authors in-

independently analysed the titles and abstracts of 2,112 publications for compliance with the inclusion criteria.

Phase 3: A total of 49 full-text publications meeting the criteria were selected for analysis. Finally, a total of 9 articles meeting all inclusion and exclusion criteria were analysed (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Summary of the search and publication selection process on the PRISMA flow diagram



Source: Authors' own study.

EVIDENCE-BASED REVIEW

During the period analysed (2000–2024), 2,824 literature items were found in four databases: (1) WoS ($n = 2,291$), (2) EBSCO ($n = 289$), (3) Google Scholar ($n = 196$) and (4) Scopus ($n = 43$) and other sources ($n = 5$). Finally, based on the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1), 9 articles were analysed in depth. Table 2 characterises the organisation of the study considering: methods used, informed consent, ethics committee approval, fidelity check, clinical diagnosis criterion, and inter-observer agreement.

Analysis of the articles shows that four research teams (Hanline and Correa-Torres, 2012; Recchia and Soucacou, 2006; Roseth et al., 2008; Tan and Perren, 2021) used a qualitative study, which may have been determined by the need to explore the phenomenon under consideration in its naturalistic setting (Hu et al., 2011). In the following four articles, an intervention was implemented in the form of programmes to develop social skills in children, for which the authors used: a cluster-randomised controlled trial (Larose et al., 2020); an experimental study (Maich et al., 2018; Szumski et al., 2019) and a quasi-experimental design (More et al., 2013). These methods provide children with opportunities to learn social skills in a naturalistic environment while promoting interaction with peers (Barry et al., 2003). One study used the research circle method (Linimayr et al., 2023), which was justified by the need to strengthen teachers' resources in the context of using inclusive practices (Holmstrand et al., 2008).

Regarding ethical issues, most of the studies state that consent was obtained either directly from the participants or from the children's guardians. In half of the reviewed articles, the authors indicated that they had received ethics committee approval to conduct the study (Roseth et al., 2008; Maich et al., 2018; Szumski et al., 2019; Larose et al., 2020; Linimayr et al., 2023).

The fidelity check was implemented in different ways. Researchers pointed to the organisation of training in the data collection method (Roseth et al., 2008; Maich et al., 2018), the use of selective monitoring (Recchia and Soucacou, 2006; Szumski et al., 2019; Larose et al., 2020), the completion of properly prepared worksheets (Szumski et al., 2019), and the use of a developed rubric to assess the reliability of qualitative data (Tan and Perren, 2021). Two articles indicated the criteria or tools adopted in the clinical diagnosis of the research group (Maich et al., 2018; Szumski et al., 2019). The required level of inter-observer agreement was achieved in four articles (Recchia and Soucacou, 2006; Roseth et al., 2008; More et al., 2013; Maich et al., 2018).

Table 2.
Organisation of research articles on effective conflict resolution strategies in an inclusive preschool unit from Scopus, WoS, EBSCO and Google scholar databases, meeting inclusion/exclusion criteria

No.	Study	Study design	Informed consent	Ethical approval	Fidelity check	Diagnosis	Inter-observer agreement
1	Maich et al. (2018)	Experimental design	Yes	Yes	Yes	2 children – DSM-IV-TR, 1 child – DSM-IV-TR PDD-NOS	80%, 83% and 85%
2	Limimayr et al. (2023)	Research circle methodology	Yes	Yes	No	Not clear	Not clear
3	Recchia and Soucaou (2006)	Qualitative studies	Not clear	Not clear	Yes	Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDDNOS)	>80%
4	Larose et al. (2020)	A cluster-randomised controlled trial	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not clear	Weak or moderate
5	Roseth et al. (2008)	Qualitative studies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not clear	>80%
6	Szumski et al. (2019)	Experimental design	Yes	Yes	Yes	Clinical diagnosis	Not clear
7	Tan and Perren (2021)	Qualitative studies: case studies	Yes	Not clear	Yes	Not clear	Not clear
8	Moreet al. (2013)	Quasi-experimental design	Yes	Not clear	Yes	Not clear	97%
9	Hanline and Correa-Torres (2012)	Qualitative studies	Not clear	Not clear	Yes	Not clear	Not clear

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 3.
Characteristics of the studies

No.	Study	Research aim	Population	Conflict resolution strategies	Description of sessions	Method of recruitment	Results
1	Maich et al.(2018)	To examine educators' perception of change in target children's social skills	3 boys aged 4-6 with ASD; 8 teachers from inclusive early years settings in Ontario, Canada	A peer-mediated social skills programme – Stay, Play, and Talk	Data was collected in three 10-minute intervals over 2 hours/day twice a week and in planned circumstances enabling social interaction, especially during structured or centre-based activities such as games or those with goals set by the teacher, informal peer interaction at break time or child-led play	Direct contact through community-based consultants working with these individuals with ASD	Results of Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale results on Play Interaction (PIPPS-T) subscale (including "helps settle peer conflict") indicated a significant rise in play interaction ($d = 0.89$) and disruption ($d = 0.46$), and a drop in play disconnection ($d = 0.42$)
2	Limimayr et al. (2023)	To study teachers' perspectives on factors hindering or facilitating peer play between pupils with ASD and those developing typically	8 teachers working with 5 boys and 5 girls aged 4-5.9 years old with ASD	Preventive strategies: time for movement (e.g. jumping on a trampoline), calming activities tools (e.g. waiting for favourite toys, calming picture cards), personal play time on a rug, reading a story about peer conflicts, glove puppets used to discuss emotions	Four research circle meetings where teachers discussed their experience	Information was emailed to six inclusive early education institutions and 14 local counselling service providers	The findings support the hypothesis that teachers play an important role in supporting peer-play. However, the results also confirm that obstacles to the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream education remain. This study shows the need for institutional support. Finally, the research circle method proved useful in promoting knowledge formation, sharing and learning with colleagues. It supports the involvement of teachers in the research process and can contribute to further research implementation in practice

3	To examine the social behaviour of children and teachers in diverse and complex contexts	Female teacher from inclusive preschool unit; a boy aged 4.2 with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD-NOS) and 1 normative child; 2 special units	Teachers spoke and modelled behaviour needing explanation, diverted conflicts by assisting pupils to communicate more appropriately with others (i.e. sharing an object); found ways to scaffold appropriate social responses through structured tasks in the classroom (i.e. X collects the books today)	Two 2-hour morning observations took place when the pupils were most engaged to get to know the context, educators and children. Observation of the focus child took place in 1-hour sessions twice during regular activities. Individual and whole class observation totalled 10–14 hours per class	Three classes were chosen from the original sample representing various populations and settings including 2 self-contained preschool special education classes and one inclusive preschool class with pupils aged between 3 and 5 with a range of disabilities. Two children were selected from each class	The results show special education teachers and assistants use a range of strategies and behaviours to respond to children's conflicts in their classes. Children managed to resolve conflict with teacher assistance
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4	Larose et al. (2020)	To study the impact of educator-led social skills training on pupils' disruptive or prosocial behaviours. To examine whether the children's sex and family influenced the training's outcome	Intervention group: $n = 163$ children (including 10 with developmental diagnosis) and 22 educators. Control group: $n = 162$ children (including 7 children with developmental diagnosis) and 21 educators	The Minimally curriculum is delivered using a puppet to model prosocial and inclusive behaviours	16 play sessions over a period of 8 months	38 public Child Care Centres in the Montreal region were invited to participate in the survey	Intervention was effective among the girls from the experimental group who showed fewer disruptive behaviours than those from the control group ($f2$ effect size = 0.15). Intervention was ineffective in the group of boys
5	Roseth et al. (2008)	To clarify the role of teacher intervention in preschoolers' natural conflict resolution	19 preschool teachers from 5 classes, 91 children (43 girls and 48 boys, including 6 children with general developmental delays)	Direct intervention (breaking up the conflict, ordering the children to stop their fight, directing the children's following actions or eliminating the conflict's cause) and indirect intervention (helping the children to resolve their own conflict)	Children were observed for at least one hour during eight 3-week waves	University laboratory preschool located on the campus of a large Midwestern University	Teachers' interventions disrupt the conflict resolution cycle, especially in terms of ongoing interaction between pre-school children and the use of alternative solutions to temporary separation

6	Szumski et al. (2019)	To assess the effectiveness of PT/ST and ICPS programmes in enhancing the social skills of preschool children with ASD and their theory of mind	52 children with ASD from 10 preschools. Intervention group: 14 children in PT/ST (10 male and 4 female), and 12 children in ICPS (8 m and 4 f). Control group: 26 children (18 m and 8 f)	"Play Time/Social Time" (PT/ST), "I Can Problem Solve" (ICPS)	20-minute routine sessions were conducted every weekday and held in a room with the necessary toys or games	Information about the survey was sent by e-mail to 55 Warsaw and sub-Warsaw kindergartens, of which 20 responded, while 10 inclusive kindergartens qualified	Social interaction increased as a result of PT/ST (β STDY = 1.48, $p < .01$). Problems in coping with difficult social situations decreased more thanks to PT/ST (β STDY = -1.65) than ICPS (β STDY = -1.18, $p < .001$)
7	Tan and Perren (2021)	To examine teachers' strategies to promote peer interactions between children with and without special educational needs (SEN) in an inclusive preschool	7 teachers, 176 children aged 3–6, including 2 with physical disability; 2 with autism; 2 with delayed development, 1 with social and emotional challenging behaviours	Resolve conflicts skills embedded in the curriculum. Examples: after noting how two children managed conflicts in their small group, the teacher held a whole-class discussion where children were encouraged to talk to one another or to take turns to share when a conflict took place; storytelling and asking children what the main character did to stop the conflict	The general observation took place during the morning session from 8 to 12. The intensive observation held outdoors lasted for five minutes per session	Four classes of inclusive preschool in Shanghai	Both prevention and intervention strategies are seen at 5 levels: when collaborating with stakeholders, when lesson planning, creating activities, in the classroom itself and with individual children with SEN. Implemented strategies promote children's social development, including conflict resolution skills, thereby creating a more supportive social environment

8	More et al. (2013)	To compare intervention by "story only" and "story plus practices" effects on preschoolers with and without disabilities in an inclusive environment	16 children with disabilities (developmental delay – 11; ASD – 4, other health impairment – 1) and 16 children without disabilities aged 3–6	A social "story-only" intervention, a social "story-plus practices" session intervention	Pupils were rated on their engagement in the 15 behaviours listed in the SIOS. Four 1-minute intervals at the 2nd, 4th, 6th and 8th minute of 10-minute playtimes were coded	Children were selected from two local inclusive preschool classes in a middle-class district of a large southwest American city	Interventions using social stories have not proven effective
9	Hanline and Correa-Torres (2012)	To examine how preschoolers with severe disabilities in inclusive educational environments interact socially	3 preschoolers with severe disabilities; 7 preschoolers without disabilities (4–5 years old, 4 girls, 3 boys); and 8 adults (4 teachers, 4 caregivers)	Modelling for peers the appropriate social interaction behaviours, physical actions to end the conflict	Pupils were observed during morning playtime, meals and snacks as well as transitions. Each researcher observed at different days but observed approximately 12 hours each	Children were selected by their teachers	Peers present positive conflict (talking the toy of the peer) resolution to child with disability

Source: Authors' own study.

As can be seen from the above characteristics, the objectives of the studies under consideration focused on children's social behaviour. The studies that implemented intervention programmes to develop social skills focused on analysing their effectiveness (More et al., 2013; Maich et al., 2018; Szumski et al., 2019; Larose et al., 2020). The most frequently studied group was children with autism spectrum disorders, which may be since these individuals are particularly prone to experiencing difficulties in social interactions (Baron-Cohen, 2014). Regarding conflict resolution strategies, four studies (Recchia and Soucacou, 2006; Roseth et al., 2008; Hanline and Correa-Torres, 2012; Linimayr et al., 2023) used teacher intervention, while the remaining studies used programmes to develop social skills (More et al., 2013; Maich et al., 2018; Szumski et al., 2019; Larose et al., 2020; Tan and Perren, 2021). The collection of empirical material was carried out during play/games time, carefully arranged activities, daily classroom activities and research circle meetings. The methods of recruiting participants varied, but the sampling was most often random.

These results emphasise the importance of the teachers' role in developing the social skills of preschool children, including conflict resolution skills using various strategies. Moreover, in three programmes to develop social skills, a positive effect size of the implemented interventions was observed. The results of Maich et al. (2018) study proved the effectiveness of the "Stay, Play and Talk" intervention in developing pro-social behaviour. They report an increase in the "Play interaction" subscale with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.89$), an increase in the "Play disruption" subscale with a small effect size ($d = 0.46$), and a decrease in the "Play disconnection" subscale with a small effect size ($d = 0.42$). As Maich et al. (2018) suggest, the small increase in disruptive play may be because the implemented programme focuses on positive interactions between children. In contrast, Larose et al. (2020) found that the "Minipally" programme affected only girls, who showed lower levels of disruptive behaviour with a small effect size ($d = -0.15$). This may be since both the male and female participants exhibited high levels of pro-social skills prior to the intervention. Szumski et al. (2019) found that there were fewer problems coping with challenging social situations as a result of PT/ST (β STDY = -1.65) than ICPS (β STDY = -1.18 , $p < .001$).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The systematic review presented here is based on the analysis of the results of research published in 9 articles on the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies in an inclusive preschool unit, meeting the criteria adopted at the outset. Strategies for resolving peer conflicts in an inclusive preschool unit included prevention and intervention strategies used by teachers and programmes to develop social skills.

As suggested by Kliewer et al. (2004), teachers have a significant impact on the development of children's social skills, including conflict resolution skills. They found that programmes which develop the social skills of children with disabilities, including conflict resolution skills, were the most effective. Although only three articles reported the effect size, this is sufficient for the authors to recognise that a child's social skills influence their ability to cope with difficult situations. These skills are considered a key indicator of school readiness and subsequent educational success (Brigman et al., 1999). The review points to the need for further in-depth research meeting high methodological standards with a particular focus on the effectiveness of strategies implemented by teachers, the acquisition of ethical approval, information on clinical diagnosis criteria and on obtaining an adequate level of inter-observer agreement.

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EFEKTYWNOŚĆ STRATEGII ROZWIĄZYWANIA KONFLIKTÓW RÓWIEŚNICZYCH W INKLUZYJNYM ODDZIALE PRZEDSZKOLNYM – SYSTEMATYCZNY PRZEGLĄD BADAŃ

Wprowadzenie: Okres przedszkolny to czas, w którym dzieci mają wiele okazji do rozwijania umiejętności społecznych i głębszego ich rozumienia. Typowe w tym czasie jest występowanie konfliktów rówieśniczych, które odpowiednio rozwiązane mogą stanowić impuls rozwojowy dla kompetencji poznawczych i społeczno-emocjonalnych. Świadome nauczanie mające na celu wspieranie interakcji rówieśniczych przez nauczyciela zwiększa umiejętności dzieci w tym zakresie. Dzieci niepełnosprawne, które mają niższe kompetencje społeczno-emocjonalne, a tym samym gorzej radzą sobie w sytuacjach konfliktowych, mogą potrzebować specjalnego wsparcia. Wynika to z ich trudności w nazywaniu i rozumieniu emocji, a także odczytywaniu intencji rówieśników. Stosowanie przez nauczycieli skutecznych strategii rozwiązywania konfliktów może znacząco wpłynąć na ich rozwój relacji rówieśniczych i proces włączania tych dzieci do grupy.

Cel badań: Celem artykułu jest analiza skuteczności strategii stosowanych przez nauczycieli w celu rozwiązywania konfliktów rówieśniczych wśród dzieci w inkluzyjnych oddziałach przedszkolnych.

Stan wiedzy: Przeprowadzono systematyczny przegląd artykułów naukowych z Web of Science, Scopus, EBSCO i Google Scholar za lata 2000–2024, stosując schemat PRISMA. Przeanalizowano 9 pełnotekstowych artykułów spełniających wszystkie kryteria włączenia i wykluczenia.

Podsumowanie: Przegląd wskazuje na potrzebę dalszych pogłębionych badań w tym obszarze, spełniających wysokie standardy metodologiczne, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem skuteczności strategii rozwiązywania konfliktów rówieśniczych wdrażanych przez nauczycieli w przedszkolnych oddziałach włączających.

Słowa kluczowe: przedszkole integracyjne/inkluzyjne, konflikt rówieśniczy, strategie rozwiązywania konfliktów