

Project „Losberhöhle“

Mediation in Kindergarten and Elementary School

Rita Stadelmann

Introduction

It is August, a new school year starts. 23 children attend kindergarten. Their age ranges between 5 and 7 years. It is a lively and imaginative group of children. Of course conflicts are part of their daily life at the kindergarten. The children often turn to their nursery teacher. They want her to resolve their problems.

The nursery teacher turns to me for advice. She wants us to establish a project, which enables the children to solve their problems by themselves. After the autumn break we start the project „Losberhöhle“ together. („Losberhöhle“ from colloquial German: to listen und to discuss in a cave)

I am in charge of the project and assist it if necessary. Every Monday morning I am present at the kindergarten and offer activities to the topic.

Preparation and start

1. To get to know the rules

At the beginning of the project getting to know the rules is central. Children are familiar with rules for living together, for dealing with materials, rules for the breaks etc. Now communication rules relating to the conflict project are introduced.

They are as follows:

- listening without interruption
- no calling names, no offensive language
- telling about themselves

Symbols are introduced, in this case a „speaking stone“ and visual aids. The child holding the „speaking stone“ is allowed to speak and the others are listening and not allowed to interrupt. As soon as the child puts the stone down somebody else can take it and speak.

These rules are discussed, practiced, deepened and regularly checked.

2. To perceive and communicate feelings and emotions

At the same time feelings and emotions are dealt with. this is done with a symbolic weather disc. The purpose of the disc is to indicate and communicate emotions: Each child makes its own cardboard disc (10 cm across). The disc is divided in quarters, the first with a sun (I am well), the second with a rain cloud (I am sad), the third with a flash of lightening (I am angry), the fourth with a moon (I am still tired or I am not sure yet how I feel). A top sheet with a cut out quarter is fixed to the weather disc so that one can turn it like a lid revealing the symbol one wants to show.

The children learn to perceive and communicate their feelings. The nursery teacher also communicates with the help of the symbols. Through asking the children she checks if statement and symbol correspond. Even for children with a different mother tongue these symbols are a big help and easy to understand.

At the beginning of the day each child puts the disc in the individually appropriate position. In the course of the day this can be altered when the emotions change. This applies to the nursery teacher, too.

In this way perceiving emotions and communicating them becomes a firmly established in the day to day life of the kindergarten. It heightens the self awareness and improves compassion.

After a few weeks I show the children a large map with peace symbols and reconciliation symbols from all over the world. Together we look at them and discuss the individual symbols and the children talk about them.

The children experience that quarrels, conflicts and peace and reconciliation are part of life all over the world.

Then the children design their own symbols for all sorts of things, e. g. for friends, anger, happiness etc. they draw, paint and model

different symbols in all variations. They communicate, what the meaning is for them and what they associate with them. This results in a creative approach with the topic which can be deepened at the same time.

Each child paints his/her favourite symbol on material and which is turned into four cushions for the group.

Dealing with conflicts

1. Perceiving conflicts, points of view, positions

I tell the children with the hand puppet „Hoppeli“ (he is a coward) about difficult situations in the forest and about other arguments with other animals, e.g. Hoppeli wanted to go with his girl friend to a carrot field and she did not wait for him.

Now the children consider Hoppelis feelings and point to the appropriate weather symbol. e.g. Hoppeli is sad, the child goes to the rain cloud, or Hoppeli gets angry – the child goes to the lightening.

The children also discuss their opinion and talk about it. They find out, that not everybody feels the same in a specific situation, they take different positions. And very quickly we reach the type of conflicts that children are familiar with. Through the integration of the weather discs the children are made sensitive to various conflict areas and they start talking about them.

2. Search for solutions

After having experienced various points of views and positions in conflicts the project moves into its next phase: search for solution. From the beginning this search is associated with a „sound sphere“ which „heralds“ good ideas. Again invented and eventually topical conflicts are told. After that the children try to find a solution. In pairs they should think of at least three ideas how to carry on. Even utopian, highly imaginative and impossible ideas are collected. With each idea the sound sphere is made to produce a tone.

Finally the children chose the solutions which they like and find agreeable and check if they can be turned into practice.

3. Reach agreements

If both children or conflict parties agree on a solution, the children touch the sound sphere with their hand (one at the top and the other at the bottom) and they speak the sentence while they sound the sphere „I agree“.

The entire ritual is accompanied either by me or the nursery teacher. The children know our parts as negotiators. We make sure that the rules are kept. We summarize, reflect and ask questions etc. The children look for the solutions themselves. We merely memorize them and if necessary list them again. The children decide which solution is suitable.

After a few weeks, now it is early December, we inform the children, that we won't come to the cave anymore that from now on they have to sort out their conflicts themselves.

Experiences

In most cases the results were excellent. Many conflicts were resolved by the children without a problem, independently and fair. It meant a visible relief for the nursery teacher as she had to resolve fewer conflicts. The checked from time to time if the solutions were fair. Sometimes there was no solution or agreement. In difficult cases mediation was necessary. Certain topics were discussed in the entire group and settled. The cave was used a lot at the beginning but less as time went by. The children settled their conflicts more and more frequently where they were playing.

At the end of the school year the „Losberhöhle“ was moved on to the first form. The children had learned a well functioning ritual of conflict solving which enabled them to solve many conflicts by themselves in a fair way.

At the school a new constructive conflict culture was established. This requires that the teaching staff has to be familiar with mediation and that they are interested in the process and contribute to the project.

The Conflict ritual of „Losberhöhle“

One morning in November the “Losberhöhle” hangs in the kindergarten. It is made of brown bits of material and the name symbolizes the place you go to in order to listen and talk to each other. In the cave there are four cushions with the symbols, in the middle the sound sphere, the „talking stone“, the weather disc and the sequence of ritual with cards and symbols.

Sequence of ritual in the cave

The children are informed and made familiar with the ritual of conflict solving.

- The disputants go into the cave. E.g. one child asks another child to come with him/her in order to discuss a situation/a problem.
- One child holds the speaking stone and explains the problem. Afterwards the stone is put on the corresponding symbol of emotion.
The children know the rule that they can speak without being interrupted.
- After the first child has put the stone down the other child takes it and narates now his/her point of view. Then the stone is positioned on the corresponding symbol of emotion.
The children can pick up the stone as long as they feel that everything has been said that relates to the conflict.
- After everything has been said and explained, when each child has shown its feeling with the help of the stone, then the child who has an idea how to carry on takes the sound sphere and suggests a solution. The children always look for more than one solution until they cannot think for another one.
- They go through their suggestions for solutions and look if there is one that both can agree on and can be put into practice. If so they both hold the sphere in their hands, chime it and say „I agree“.
- Then they go back to their activities.

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