War and peace in the nursery: young children’s conflicts in a multi-ethnic early childhood education and care setting

*Carmen Dalli, Anna Strycharz-Banas, Miriam Meyerhoff
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

This paper outlines our early work on a new project investigating the structure of naturally-arising conflict among young children in a multi-ethnic setting with the aim of establishing an empirically-based theoretical understanding of: (i) how conflict is negotiated by children aged 2-5 years; and (ii) how the dynamics of conflict negotiation are linked to belonging and well-being, thus linking the project to two strands of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki.

While in recent decades there has been an increase in studies of conflict, we still know very little about how the youngest children manage peer conflict and its consequences in group-based early childhood (EC) settings. In learning how to negotiate conflict and peacemaking – with or without adult intervention – children (re)produce social organisation and group hierarchies; that is, they create culture. Conflict in a multi-ethnic EC setting can express children’s drive to establish feelings of belonging (Guo & Dalli, 2016) and well-being. Yet how language and embodied action during conflicts contribute to fostering (or hindering) belonging and well-being is not yet well understood. By studying conflict among children as situated relational practice in a multi-ethnic EC setting, we are exploring what patterns of interaction develop that might reflect awareness of intercultural differences or the emergence of transcultural norms.

The project uses audio and video recordings to capture children’s naturally arising interactions in their early childhood setting – both with and without adult intervention – and analyses identified conflicts using sociolinguistic analytic methods. Since the project comprises over 18 months of ethnographic observation, we are looking at both the actual conflict interaction itself, its resolution, as well as any longer-term impact on group dynamics, including on children’s sense of belonging and well-being within the early childhood setting.

This paper outlines our methodology and presents a work-in-progress discussion of how our analytic methods and preliminary analysis are informing our thinking about our research questions. It pays particular attention to embodied expressions of conflict.

Keywords: conflict, multi-ethnic, embodied conflict