Young children's use of emotion and behaviour regulation strategies in socio-emotionally challenging day-care situations

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the ways in which children conduct and adapt their emotion and behaviour regulation activities in socio-emotionally challenging situations in day-care settings. The data consists of 75 video events of different challenging situations in two- to five-year-old children's (N = 30) day-care activities. Unique strategies, sequential associations in strategy use and children's abilities to adapt strategy use were explored. Also, the effects of teacher involvement in children's strategic behaviour were analysed. The results show that children used a variety of strategies to regulate socio-emotionally challenging situations and that the employed strategies were associated with interaction with other children and the teacher: Children used different strategies in situations where a teacher was involved compared to those without a teacher, favouring physical regulation strategies when they acted independently. When the teacher was involved, they most typically redirected their activities and attention. Furthermore when a teacher was involved, the children were more likely to adapt their regulation activities. The findings highlight the importance of external involvement in challenging situations to support children in learning to solve conflicts constructively and adapt self-regulation skills according to the demands of a situation.

1. Introduction

Learning to effectively regulate emotions and behaviour is an essential developmental goal for young children, as it has long-term effects on several areas of children's lives. (Eisenberg, Spinrad & Valiente, 2016; McRae et al., 2012; Whitebread & Basilio, 2012). Studies have shown that learning how to regulate emotional responses and behaviour in adaptive and socially appropriate ways plays an important role in children's successful development (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Boekaerts, 2011; Graziano, Reavis, Keane & Calkins, 2007; McRae et al., 2012). Research in academic settings has shown that self-regulation processes are key factors in creating differences in learning outcomes (Kim & Hodges, 2012; Schmitt, McClelland, Tominey & Acock, 2015; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant & Swanson, 2010). In addition, they have been linked to success in social relations in school (Blair & Raver, 2015; Denham et al., 2003) as well as in aspects of children's general well-being (John & Gross, 2004; McLaughlin, 2008; McRae et al., 2012).

It is widely acknowledged among researchers, that interactional processes play a crucial role in the learning and development of self-regulation skills (McCaslin, 2009; McClelland and Cameron, 2011McClelland & Cameron; 2011). Still, there is a lack of research on real every day interactions, where regulation skills are needed, used

and supported. So far, research studying self-regulation has mainly focused on measuring general regulation abilities by, for example, using parental or teacher reports (e.g. Howse et al., 2003; Penela et al., 2015) or by structured observational methods in laboratory settings and test situations (e.g. Spinrad, Eisenberg & Gaertner, 2007; Ducksworth, Tsukayama & Kirby, 2013). This study adds to the research of young children's self-regulation by examining authentic socio-emotionally challenging situations, which are regarded as the contexts where children learn and rehearse self-regulation skills (Hutchinson, 2013; Calkins & Hill, 2007; McClelland and Cameron, 2011; Morris et al., 2007). The current study aims to provide evidence about children's use of emotion and behaviour regulation strategies and the ways these are related to teacher involvement and the strategies used by peers. The study's purpose is to provide evidence on how children's strategic activities are associated with the interaction with teachers and peers. The analysis in this study is based on the assumption that, from children's observable verbal and non-verbal behaviour in authentic situations, it is possible to detect qualitatively different regulation strategies and abilities to monitor and modify one's own behaviour when needed (Bryce & Whitebread, 2012; Morris et al., 2007; Whitebread & Basilio, 2012) as well as to analyse in more detail, how strategy use is associated with external involvement (Pino-Pasternak,

Whitebread & Tolmie, 2010).

2. Self-regulation in young children

Self-regulation is generally understood as a multidimensional concept that includes the ability to engage in goal-directed actions by managing emotions, behaviour and cognitive processes (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Cole, Martin & Dennis, 2004; Neuenschwander, Röthlisberger, Cimerli & Roebers, 2012; Robson, 2010; Rueda, Posner & Rothbart, 2005; Zelazo & Muller, 2002) and by adaptively using metacognition, motivation and strategic actions (Perry & Winne, 2006; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). Self-regulation is considered a prerequisite for self-regulated learning (O'Malley, 2005; Whitebread & Basilio, 2012), which refers to the regulation of activities and motivations during a learning process with regard to learning goals (Boekaerts, 2007; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz & Perry, 2002; Whitebread and Basilio, 2012).

Self-regulation manifests as adaptation and behavioural change. In learning, self-regulation refers to the active monitoring and recognizing of problems and adjusting activities accordingly to reach personal goals and standards for task engagement (Hadwin, 2013; Winne & Hadwin, 1998). Among young children, abilities to monitor their own actions and alter them in reaching intended goals are regarded as a sign of early self-regulation or metacognitive skills (Bryce, Whitebread & Szücs, 2015; Deák and Narasimham, 2003; McCaslin, 2009). Instead of persisting in an incorrect or inefficient response or choosing to neglect a goal, a child with self-regulation abilities is better able to alter his or her actions if the initial strategy seems ineffective (Bryce et al., 2015; McClelland et al., 2015).

In early childhood, support for self-regulation provided by parents and teachers is essential (Calkins & Hill, 2007; McClelland and Cameron, 2011; Morris et al., 2007). Even though differences in children's abilities to self-regulate are partially inherent (Fox & Calkins, 2003), there is strong evidence of the links between parents' and teachers' qualities of interaction and different levels of children's abilities to regulate emotions and behaviour (Eisenberg, Spinrad & Eggum, 2010; McCoy & Raver, 2011; Suchodoletz, Trommsdorff & Heikamp, 2011). It has been maintained that in the interactions, where regulation processes are supported and demonstrated, children gradually internalise self-regulation skills (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Hadwin and Oshige, 2011; McCaslin, 2009).

3. Young children's regulation strategies in challenging situations

Children adapt standards for their behaviour and acquire skills to self-regulate by observing and modelling, and via guided practice in different home and school contexts. These contexts provide various experiences for learners to adapt and abstract regulatory processes and strategies to develop their own regulation strategies (Bronson, 2000; Hadwin 2013; Robson, 2010). In particular, socio-emotionally challenging situations can be seen as contexts where emotional and behavioural self-regulation skills are needed and rehearsed (Bronson, 2000; Kurki, Järvenoja, Järvelä & Mykkänen, 2016; McClelland and Cameron, 2011). Children's everyday interactions can develop into emotion-eliciting situations where children have opposite or variant goals for, or interpretations of, situations to other children or teachers (Arsenio & Lover, 1997; Järvenoja, Volet & Järvelä, 2012). In these challenging situations, children benefit from external support in interpreting the situational cues correctly or in understanding the expected behaviour or strategies available for self-regulation (Bronson, 2000; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Morris et al., 2007). Thus, challenging situations can be regarded as direct opportunities for children to learn and for teachers to support children in regulating their emotions and behaviour (Bronson, 2000; McClelland and Cameron, 2011). In

emotionally laden situations, self-regulation involves processes related to monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional experiences and reactions (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Schutz, Hong, Cross & Obson, 2006; Wolters, 2003). On a behavioural level this shows as an employment of strategies to modify, change or inhibit actions and reactions adaptively in accordance with expectations or one's own goals (Morris et al., 2007; Whitebread & Basilio, 2012).

Research on emotion regulation has introduced several ways to approach and classify different strategies. For example, Gross 2014Gross (2014) classified different types of emotional regulation into five families. (1) Situation selection refers to strategies where an individual decides to enter or avoid the situation based on expected desirable or undesirable outcomes in terms of emotional reactions. In turn, (2) situation modification includes strategies that attempt to alter the situation to affect its emotional impact. (3) Attention deployment refers to strategies to direct attention in order to influence one's emotions and (4) cognitive change includes strategies to change the appraisal or the emotional significance of the situation. In order to manage already occurring emotions, Gross described (5) response modulation, which refers to modifying behavioural expressions of emotion. Particularly among young children, strategies typically aim at modifying a situation at hand rather than regulating internal states (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon & Cohen, 2009). The studies related to young children's emotion regulation strategies also show that children tend to choose distraction and avoidance behaviours in frustrating situations (Boekaerts, 2002a; Op 't Eynde, De Corte & Verschaffel, 2007). Among children, redirecting attention away from negative events has been proven as a means to maintain a positive emotional state (Boekaerts, 2007; Bronson, 2000; Yan, 2012). In general, children's abilities to engage more in active regulation strategies such as distraction or help seeking, rather than in passive strategies such as avoidance or self-comforting, have been linked to children's abilities to sustain attention (Graziano et al., 2011).

Strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and attention deployment have been particularly related to learning activities (Fried, 2011; Gross & Thompson, 2006; Schutz et al., 2006). When facing disappointment or failure, reappraising a situation may be an efficient strategy to enhance positive emotions and diminish negative affect (Loewenstein, 2007; Schutz et al., 2006). Emotional expression may also serve as an effective strategy in social situations, as it can have a strong effect on surrounding people (Rime, 2007; Yan, 2012). Inhibiting or hiding one's feelings, in turn, has proven to negatively affect cognitive resources (Boekaerts, 2011; Richards, 2004). Hence, seeking help or support in emotionally challenging situations can be a useful strategy because help from others may extend to one's own self-regulation resources. It may be particularly relevant for young children, who often depend on external help for self-regulation (Boekaerts, 2011; Calkins & Hill, 2007; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007).

Thornberg (2006) studied children's peer conflict strategies in imaginary conflict situations presented to children, whereas Spivak (2016) used direct observation of dyadic peer conflict situations in early education classroom settings. Both researchers found similar, overlapping strategies. Thornberg identified different types of strategies, such as those that are physically or verbally aggressive towards an opponent and strategies that maintain a child's own position—such as insisting or ignoring (aggressive and simple assertion). These strategy types are similar to inflexible behaviour, where a child is not able or motivated to alter a strategy when it seems ineffective (Bryce & Whitebread, 2012). Thornberg and Spivak both identified strategies where clarifications of a situation are given and information is provided about the situation or rules. They also identified strategies where children oriented towards a solution, such as entering into a discourse to pinpoint a solution. In addition, prosocial behaviour, sharing resources, cooperating or providing assistance to solve a