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"Not Pure Harmony, but Less of a Power Struggle": What Do Teachers and Pedagogues Think About Using Existential Pedagogy?

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ABSTRACT

Existential Pedagogy (EP) derives from existential analysis and logotherapy developed by Viktor Frankl and Alfried Längle in the tradition of existential philosophy and phenomenology. This study investigated how EP influences pedagogues' and teachers' attitudes and teaching. Four focus groups with a total of 12 persons each were conducted in an elementary school that is tailored for students with emotional and behavioral problems. Data were analyzed with the qualitative content analysis. EP helped teachers come into relationship with students, strengthen students' self-esteem, and find meaningful approaches to the learning content. It also facilitated coming into touch with one's emotions and with the children's emotions. The individualized approach does not solely focus on children but highly impacts teachers and pedagogues. Similarities to other pedagogies can be found, but it appears to be specific for EP to have an impact on teachers and pedagogues. Additionally EP encourages an individual and flexible handling of EP.

Existential pedagogy (EP) is the name for a personal approach in education and teaching. The scientific work of Viktor E. Frankl (1905–1997) on existential analysis and logotherapy, and Längle's four existential dimensions proposed for psychotherapy (Längle & Holzhey-Kunz, 2008) provide the basis for existential pedagogy (Waibel, 2013). Even though the aspects assumed by EP are similar to those assumed by other pedagogy approaches, EP represents a new pedagogic concept. It concentrates mostly on personal growth and less on didactics, methods in teaching, or development of teaching, even though EP is mostly used in this context. EP deals with the question of how pedagogues and teachers can guide and help children move toward a meaningful, fulfilled life that strengthens students' self-esteem (Waibel, 2009).

Literature review

The following is an overview on EP to comparable pedagogies and their respective effects on teacher development within current academic literature.

Existential pedagogy

To put the child at the center of educational work is neither new nor original (Key, 2006). Although some trends of reform(atory) pedagogy (Schonig, 1989) work from the same principal concept, reform(atory) pedagogy is not automatically a holistic or reform(atory) pedagogic concept. EP and reformatory pedagogy differ in the context of how the human being is perceived One example for such different conceptions of human beings refers to Maria Montessori's idea of the human being as mainly biological (Böhm, 2012), whereas EP orients itself according to the person's (albeit biologically induced) spirituality. Both approaches, Montessori's and EP, focus on the child. However, biological approaches (e.g., Montessori's pedagogy) assume a biologically determined corrective anchored in the developmental process. Thereby other persons (e.g., teachers, pedagogues) are considered as possible hindrances to a natural course of development and growth. EP refers to a personal and spiritual approach that focuses on others (e.g., pedagogues, teachers) addressing the child, thereby stimulating development and growth. Proposed risks in the expectations of biological approaches could be a more "laissez-faire" attitude in education. This stands in contrast to EP, where self-efficacy and thus the individual actively engaging with her or his reality is stressed (Waibel, 2013). Furthermore, different approaches to personhood exist (see Böhm, 2004; Buber, 2000; Flores d'Arcais, 1991; Guardini, 2000 for reference). EP includes students' personal and dynamic achievements (Klafki, 1989) and focuses on the students' potential (Lueger, 2014). Encounters as proposed by Rogers and Stevens (1984), namely empathy, positive regard, and genuineness, pose an essential background for EP, in addition to existential, philosophical, and phenomenological pedagogy (Brumlik, 1989). This also influenced the dialogical principle of Buber (1983), in that pedagogues completely engage in encounters, and provides the basis for education in general (Flores d'Arcais, 1991; Guardini, 2000; Liessmann, 2006).

Basis of existential pedagogy

Particularly Frankl's (1985, 2002) view of the person, but also the work of Längle (see Längle, 2003, 2012, 2013; Längle & Holzhey-Kunz, 2008 for reference), provided the basis for EP. EP focuses on a three-dimensional conception of human beings (i.e., physical, mental, and spiritual). According to Frankl, a person is not merely a physical being with psychological drives, but also has a spiritual (dimension) in addition to a somatic and a psychological dimension (Frankl, 2005). Consequently, Frankl's (1985) interests concerned what he termed the specifically human dimension and thereby also refers to the question of meaning. To stimulate the spiritual dimension—which is essential in EP—the teacher's and pedagogue's attitude is decisive in order to emphasize the being and the dignity of the child. One characteristic of this attitude is phenomenological openness, which focuses on resources, interests, and potential for change, and guides the child to uncover her/his potential. On the one hand, this refers to openness regarding everything; on the other hand, it is about openness regarding commitment for comprehending the child. Such openness focuses on questions such as what do I see, hear, and feel? Consequently, this attitude encourages the child to embrace herself/himself.

Längle and Holzhey-Kunz's (2008) four existential dimensions build the framework for understanding and stimulating a person's development and potential. Any motivation (cognition, feelings, values, decision, and meaning) refers to these dimensions (Längle, 2003). These dimensions refer to the relationship to the world, to one's own life, to myself as a

person, and to one's future and meaning (Längle, 2012). Teaching and education have to consider these four dimensions. The first basic motivation relationship to the world emphasizes three main prerequisites: protection (in the sense of a secure physical and emotional base), space, and support. When people meet these prerequisites, they have the power "to bear or change the actual conditions" (Längle, 2012, p. 165) in their life. The second motivation is built on relationship, which includes the prerequisites for experiencing life values such as having relationships, taking time, and experiencing closeness with what is valuable to oneself. "These experiences, in turn, enable a person to devote himself to other people, to his community, to social action" (Längle, 2012, p. 166). The third motivation is called relationship to myself as a person, which requires attention, justice, and appreciation. This enables the person to have a clear picture of her or his identity, to build up self-esteem, and to appreciate another person's value. The fourth and last motivation is the relationship to one's own future and meaning. Here, people experience "meaning when they feel they are engaged in worthwhile tasks or are oriented towards possibilities waiting to unfold in the future" (Längle, 2012, p. 167). The prerequisites in this area include field of activity, a structural context, and values to be realized in the future.

Another essential aspect of an EP attitude is based on the so-called existential turn. This existential turn refers to comprehending every pedagogic situation and every pedagogical conflict as a question itself. These questions cannot be solved, but the individual can perceive them as a chance to find her/his best possible answer. Responding to one's life questions is a matter of self-responsibility. Just as important, children discover and develop their own personal values in the sense of Viktor Frankl (1987, 1990; Längle, 2013; Waibel, 2013). EP—just as existential philosophy—is thus not a self-contained but an open construct (Bollnow, 1984).

Teachers' and pedagogues' use of EP

The challenge to teachers and pedagogues resides in guiding children in their development of self-formation, so children become active and take their lives and learning into their own hands (Waibel & Wurzrainer, 2016). In this sense, the person becomes strengthened in her/his ability to define herself/himself. Thereby, her/his potential will be revealed by addressing the full spectrum of personhood, even beyond school-related skills and abilities. Similar to the other approaches, such as the self-determination theory approach (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Stroet, Opdenakker, & Minnaert, 2015), EP promotes self-responsibility, decision making, and choice as necessary requirements. A pedagogue or teacher trained in EP observes a child non-judgmentally to understand the child's needs and encourages the child to give his or her personal response. This also means that the pedagogues and teachers will learn from the child and are responsive to the child. This fact is subsumed in the following question: what does this particular child need at the present time from me?

Importantly, such an attitude toward children is not the same as a laissez-faire attitude or indulging children, but the attitude is based on an existential dialogue with the child. In this dialogue the child discovers her/his freedom and responsibility, which are present in every single situation. For example, the child is confronted with questions such as how do you feel about a certain situation? What moves you regarding this situation? What would be the right thing for you to do? Thereby, it encourages her/him to take matters into her/his own hands.

In short, existential analysis and logotherapy (Frankl, 2002), and the four existential dimensions (Längle, 2011) build the basis for EP and provide the framework for an attitude requisite for

using EP. This attitude is also influenced by the existential turn, thus life questions and the perception of every situation and every conflict as an opportunity. Based on this description of EP it becomes clear that this pedagogy is oriented toward the individual person and the specific situation, and thus offers no universal "recipe" for action or reaction. Consequently, EP is challenging, but such a challenge is balanced by the fact that it is based on a sound theory. Most importantly, EP impacts and makes demands on children, teachers, and pedagogues alike.

Consequences for training and advanced training

From the three dimensional and dialogical conception of human being, it follows that an attitude of basic phenomenological openness and a dialogical exchange with the world, nature, society, specific circumstances, and conditions of life are prerequisites for teachers and pedagogues.

Thus, pedagogues and teachers being trained in EP must be developed and strengthened as persons. From this standpoint, they must face their own personal resources and confront themselves with existential questions about their lives and their education biographies (Waibel, 2013). An important key for training refers to the so-called and aforementioned existential turn, thus addressing actual life questions, making decisions and thus defining the trainees' lives. In this sense, EP can also be seen as guidance for one's own life management. If such an attitude essential for EP is to be revealed to children, teachers, and pedagogues will have to deal with it. Previous EP training sessions already produced positive feedback. Feedback showed that teachers and pedagogues especially appreciated the interconnection between theoretical input and practical (value of the EP) approach. However, an analysis of teachers' and pedagogues' experience using EP has not yet been undertaken. Thus, this study aimed to analyse the change perceived in teachers and pedagogues when using EP, as well as the benefits, and challenges encountered when using EP.

Method

This study investigated the perspective of teachers and pedagogues regarding the EP approach as implemented in an elementary school. Even though literature on EP is scarce, the school adopted the EP approach as a whole and has a special focus on children who experienced difficulties (e.g., due to emotional and/or behavioral problems) in regular schools. Additionally, this school staff attends training courses and advanced training in EP on a regular basis, approximately 2–3 times per year. At their previous schools, kindergartens, or in their families, children attending this school showed mostly socioemotional deficits. Thus, teachers and pedagogues at this school focus foremost on the children's socioemotional development and how to strengthen the children's self-esteem. In this context an attitude displaying appreciation for the children and their actions is prevalent. Such an attitude also includes: having a voice in learning content, projects, school life, and consequences when misbehaving. This stimulates socioemotional development.

The level of socioemotional deficits also requires specific conditions. Therefore the school has specifics such as small classes; promotion of life and social competencies; project days; alternations in class, exercise, or creative lessons; classes tailored to the child's needs; and feedback given verbally to the child instead of grades. However, this study focused less on benefits for these children, and more on teachers and pedagogues adopting this approach. Exploring children's perceived

change when coming in touch with EP would have been out of the scope of this article, because this study targeted the experience of those using EP. EP is considered to affect teachers and pedagogues in their perception of children, their own approach to teaching, learning, and rules as well as in their interaction with others. Findings on the impact of EP on teachers and pedagogues will be included in training programs on EP and thereby make EP as pedagogy more sustainable and effective. This aim can only be achieved by exploring teachers' and pedagogues experiences with EP and its impact on those adopting this approach.

Ethical issues

Study participants were recruited from an elementary school that adopted the EP approach. First, the project was presented to the director of the institution that hosts the elementary school and the school principal. All ethical questions (e.g., anonymity, data preservation, aim of the study, use of the data acquired in the study, and potential harm) were discussed in depth with these persons before receiving the principal's permission to approach teachers and pedagogues. Names of all study participants and places were anonymized to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary. Participants were asked to provide written consent before participation and all issues concerning anonymity, aim of the study, and confidentiality were discussed with participants before participation and before consenting to participate. No ethics committee was further involved.

Recruitment of participants

Information about the project was conveyed to teachers and pedagogues. When members of these groups expressed their interest in participating in the project, the date and time for focus groups were agreed on. Allocation to particular focus groups was based on group membership (i.e., pedagogue-only groups, teacher-only groups, etc.). Some of the participants expressed concern because they were asked to give written consent to participate in the study. This was also noticeable in the focus groups, but became less evident after the first group was conducted. As this study focused on teachers' and pedagogues' experience with EP, only the findings from these groups will be presented here.

As already mentioned, EP is a relatively young pedagogic approach and has not been implemented widely. Even though some 100 teachers and pedagogues and another 20 teacher trainees completed EP training over the past 5 years, this study recruited participants from one school only. This ensured that aspects such as school structure, characteristics of children (in this case children with socioemotional deficits), framework of teaching and learning (small classes, open teaching classes), and regular advanced training sessions were the same for all participants. Consequently, all teachers and pedagogues from this school were considered eligible to participate in the study. The school is a relatively small school with fewer than 100 children.

Qualitative approach

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study for several reasons. First, to our knowledge no scientific studies of teachers' and pedagogues' perception of EP have been conducted. Thus, there is a need to investigate teachers' and pedagogues' experience with EP as well as

the use of EP in an everyday setting. Therefore, a qualitative approach seemed to provide the possibility to deepen knowledge on the practicability of EP and to give teachers and pedagogues a voice in this matter as well as to deepen discussion of specific aspects of this matter that were expected to emerge during discussion. Another important reason referred to the aim to analyze teachers' and pedagogues' personal experience with and perceptions of EP, which was considered to be compatible with a qualitative approach. Finally, a qualitative approach was of a structural nature: as the school chosen for the study based on its implementation of the EP approach was relatively small, it offered only a limited number of eligible participants.

Focus groups were chosen to enable discussion of differing opinions and perceptions of EP and their shared understanding of EP. This was especially important as these teachers and pedagogues work together closely and need to share the same approach when caring for a child. Before conducting the study, it was also known that school staff was more open to group settings than individual settings as they value sharing in groups and thereby profiting from each other's experience.

Facilitator of focus groups

The focus group facilitator was a woman experienced in working with existential pedagogy; she was also known to the participants from previous existential pedagogy training programs and visits to the school. The facilitator stated that in focus groups including teachers and pedagogues it was noticeable that the topic Existential Pedagogy was approached cautiously, presumably because the facilitator was known to be an expert on this subject.

Four focus group discussions were conducted with teachers and pedagogues. Questions for focus group discussions were developed based on the procedure for opening, introductory, transitioning, key, and ending questions proposed by Krueger and Casey (2009). These questions covered the topics on: how participants learned of EP and how their attitude toward it developed; how they experienced changes in the child after it started attending this school using EP; and how EP influenced family life or professional life. All groups were asked the same questions.

All participants gave their written consent for discussions to be recorded and data acquired from the discussions to be published anonymously. The focus groups were recorded with a technical device and then transcribed verbatim. On average, focus groups lasted 105 minutes and consisted of a minimum of two and a maximum of four participants. Nine women and three men participated in focus groups for pedagogues and teachers: two held leadership positions, eight were pedagogues, and two teachers.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis by Mayring (2000, 2010, 2014). The technique is rule-governed and systematic, including an evaluation of coded sequences by constantly re-appraising codes and developing categories. The research question provides the basis for searching material for phrases and sequences. As already mentioned above, the study focused on what change, benefits, and challenges were experienced when using EP, as well as on obtaining an insight into the understanding and practicability of EP on a daily basis. These research questions formed the basis for the analysis. The qualitative content

analysis permits an inductive analysis of data, which was also performed in this article. Thus, categories and sub-categories were derived from the data and not conversely. After coding approximately 10% of the material obtained from the focus groups consisting of teachers and pedagogues, a coding scheme was drafted and applied to the rest of the data. Thus, material was first read several times and all sequences in the text relating to the experiences made and impressions gained by pedagogues and teachers with EP were highlighted. Thereafter, every sequence was processed by reducing and abstracting the text to extract the essence of the sequence. Thereafter, the essence was defined to apply it to other sequences in the material referring to the same content. While applying the scheme, categories and sub-categories were constantly re-evaluated to determine whether any changes needed to be made or if categories and sub-categories had to be adapted in their scope.

Focus groups have been criticized for the fact that their analysis tends to concentrate mostly on content and less on the dynamics of the group (Kühn & Koschel, 2013; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009; Wilkinson, 1998). In this sense the content analysis was paired with a focus on the context in which participants made a statement or comment during the group discussion. Thus, the coded text passages of the transcripts were evaluated according to the pre- and post-sequences to assess the context and embed the narration in the group's dynamics. According to Mayring (2000), the qualitative content analysis can be used with other techniques to analyze qualitative data, thus in this context in combination with an analysis of interaction and group dynamics during discussions. However, the focus groups conducted in this study largely resembled interviews, rather than group discussions of certain topics. Participants provided answers to the facilitator's questions, but hardly discussed each other's opinions. Thus, only limited dynamics and interaction were noticeable.

Researchers' roles

The study was designed by both authors (HS and EMW). However, data collection and data analysis were performed separately by the two authors. Thus, EMW was in contact with the school and participants, and conducted the focus groups, whereas HS performed data analysis. EMW was involved in data analysis at a later time to discuss findings. It was considered more feasible to have EMW conduct the focus groups as it was felt that participants would be less hesitant to talk to EMW after having been in contact with that author. Additionally, EMW was also trusted by the school principal and the director of the institution. Thus, bringing in an unfamiliar person (HS) was not only seen as challenging and potentially damaging in this situation, but it was also feared it would have an intimidating side-effect on the participants. HS conducted the data analysis to ensure that implicit knowledge concerning the school and staff did not influence the analysis. After the analysis, the findings were discussed and the groups of categories evaluated and re-appraised by both authors.

Results

Categories derived from the focus groups drew a picture of what it meant for teachers and pedagogues to apply EP in their work and how they engaged with EP. These categories are presented along with quotes from the focus group participants to facilitate understanding and transparency of categories. Narrations included becoming acquainted with the concept

of existential pedagogy, initial and most memorable experiences with EP regarding establishing rules, developing an understanding of EP and the constant involvement with EP in order to comprehend EP as well as the meaning of EP for teachers and pedagogues. Additionally, findings ranged to the impact of EP on teachers and pedagogues, but also on children and aspects that teachers and pedagogues perceived as essentially promoted by EP (see Table 1). Thus, the process of change in the person her-/himself and reflection were central topics in the focus groups.

Practice and awareness of EP prior to study

Teachers and pedagogues discussed the concept of EP with regard to their knowledge of it before starting to work at this school. Some of the teachers and pedagogues were already familiar with the concept. However, some had not heard about EP prior to working at this school. Thus, the experience or familiarity with the concept of EP varied among the participants, ranging from no knowledge to familiarity with the concept. Some participants stated that they first heard of EP when starting to working at this school or when reading a job advertisement for a position at this school.

> Participant A: I started to work here about [a number of] years ago and in that context I heard about existential pedagogy for the first time.

> Participant B: In my case, I read the job advertisement for a position at this school and it [the concept of EP] was mentioned there. I did not know it either and I had no idea what it was or what it could be and basically I learned EP by doing EP.

Teachers and pedagogues differed in their knowledge about EP, but also in their approaches to teaching and learning before working in this school. In this sense, teachers and pedagogues reported that even though the term EP was unfamiliar to them, they felt that they had applied EP in previous positions.

> What I remembered in the beginning was […] to accept a person the way she/he is and to build a relationship from that. This approach was also an important attitude on my previous job.

Learning about EP also included the fact that EP provided some kind of designation for their attitude regarding working with children and this designation made their actions more understandable for them. Thus, some teachers and pedagogues reported feeling relieved that they were finally able to put their pedagogic approach into words.

> I felt that it was fascinating and I have to admit, I rediscovered myself in the book [about EP]. There were many passages in the book where I got an explanation for the things I did and that I had not been able to explain and then I found the name for those things I already did and I could integrate it.

Additionally, teachers and pedagogues stated that before dealing with EP for the first time they felt that approaches to educating children in schools focused too much on deficits and errors, whereas emotional aspects of working with children were experienced as lacking. They also reported that they sometimes felt that their students were out of control and they had no tools to connect with these children, especially if they needed special attention (e.g., because of emotional or behavioral problems). Thus, the lack of tools, time, and opportunity

Table 1. Categories and subcategories derived from focus groups including teachers and pedagogues.

Categories	Subcategories	Rules for coding	Examples of coded text
Practice of and awareness for EP before working with EP		The category focused on how teachers/pedagogues became aware of vacancies in the school, how they became interested in the EP approach. It ranged from never having heard of EP before to having used EP previously.	
	Concept of EP relatively unknown before working in this school	Statements were coded for this sub-category if teachers/pedagogues had not known EP before working in this school.	I didn't know it [EP] before and I had no idea what it could be, and basically I dealt with it while I was doing it here at school.
	Familiarity with the concept of EP before starting to work in this school	This sub-category referred to teachers/pedagogues having used EP before working in this school	I know the school, I also knew EP.
	Basic tenor of EP already applied in previous work settings	The sub-category included basic tenor of EP having been applied in previous work settings; however, the concept of EP was not known.	In comparison to my previous work, we also had the child in focus there and this was one topic, repeatedly, foremost to take the child as it is, with all his strengths and weaknesses and to not force it into something, that was very important.
	Prior using EP approach: focus on deficiency and less attention given to life competencies and emotions	The sub-category described dissatisfaction with approaches focusing on deficiencies in children but less on competency or potential. Also, emotion work was felt to not be addressed adequately. There was interest to use other pedagogical approaches as the common approaches focusing on deficiency were felt to fall short.	At this time, there was a lot of conflict with this group, well massively and the pedagogues were stretched to the limits and we didn't know what can be done, with the kids who [...] didn't want to fit in and apparently so, yes, we had the feeling that something slipped away from us.
Developing an understanding for EP		Teachers/pedagogues described how an understanding for EP was developed and what aspects they perceived as important to gain such an understanding.	
	Constant involvement with EP in order to comprehend EP	Constant involvement with EP was coded if it was perceived as necessary to create an understanding for EP, how to use EP, and how to comprehend EP. Such involvement was not restricted to the individual using EP, but was also applied in encounters with another person.	The involvement with it [EP] is decisive.
	Reflection as an important instrument	Statements were coded if they referred to constant reflection as a necessity for using EP. Reflection was facilitated through others (e.g., interaction with children, who also establish contact with EP).	It is also difficult, you are always challenged. You always have a part in every situation, because you are part of it.

Category	Sub-category	Description	Quote
Meaning of EP for teachers and pedagogues	Living EP in every interaction	This sub-category referred to values and attitudes having adapted over time and now matching those of EP. Thus, values became concrete and were seen as guidance for using EP. EP was perceived as having a specific meaning for teachers/pedagogues and what characteristics of EP they felt to be particularly important.	Maybe I was like this before. But the importance or that I am aware of how I interact with other people, that's the effect of this pedagogy.
	EP is unrestrictedly accepting others	The sub-category included that one important meaning of EP, included unrestrictedly accepting of others.	I think, foremost, that we, that the children also sense this, no matter what happens, I am not branded or I don't have a mark.
	EP is not pure harmony but less power struggle	The sub-category referred to EP as no miracle cure, but as an instrument for creating more harmony and simultaneously also allowing conflict.	Of course it is not always pure harmony, when they want something different, but I get the impression that there is less of a power struggle than when I say, it's just the way it is, because, of course you can always fight that, because it's not true.
Impact of EP on person (teacher/pedagogue)	Positive impact of EP on the person on a general level	EP was seen as an approach also impacting the person doing EP and how this impact was reflected in the teacher/pedagogue. The sub-category referred to the positive impact and change in teachers/pedagogues (e.g., patience, feeling emotionally balanced).	I think I am more patient now. Sometimes not, but in general. And I am longer with me and my behavior than I used to be.
	Positive impact of EP on emotion regulation of teachers	The sub-category was coded for statements on strengthening contact with one's emotions and also emotion regulation. This also included attitude toward one's faults and errors, changed perception of failing.	Previously it often happened that I had this strange feeling at work and I could not classify it. Where does this feeling come from? What is different today from yesterday? And this view to the basic motivations, because this view is practiced so much and I can apply it to myself, that I have a good feeling, to be able to rely on one's feelings.
Impact of EP on team of teachers/pedagogues		The category referred to EP impacting working together as a team and interaction within the team, but also that the approach does not appeal to everyone.	

Table 1. (*Continued*).

Categories	Subcategories	Rules for coding	Examples of coded text
	Impact on cooperation and interaction with others	This sub-category was coded if EP was described as impacted the work in teams and if such a change in interaction was attributed to EP.	The interaction with each other, you feel appreciated and you appreciate the others and that is a kind of working atmosphere that also the kids notice.
	EP is not for everyone	The sub-category included the fact that not every person is able to make use of EP. Some colleagues did not find EP appealing and consequently quit.	I imagine there were people in the team who were not satisfied and they are gone now.
Experience with rules and slowly changing attitude toward rules		The category referred to experiencing a change in applying and dealing with rules and consequences for misbehavior.	
	Searching for rules and consequences when starting to apply EP	The sub-category included uncertainty about how to use EP, how to administer punishment and how to guide a child in the right direction. A "recipe" for how to do EP was discussed as well as different terminology, which was first seen as confusing and potentially disturbing for the practice of EP.	So we had to state some logical consequences, and it dropped away if these [consequences] were punishments, but we needed or maybe we [wanted] something to be guided by something, to hold on to something, therefore it was also helpful, but I think that this breaking away from it [i.e., the punishment] is quite good.
	Individual approach to the child's needs experienced as more useful than establishing general rules	The sub-category referred to the experience that rules can be ambiguous as these did not work out. Teachers/pedagogues experienced the impossibility of having fixed rules and concepts and turned to an individual approach adapted to the children's needs.	There is no doing by text-book and I think that is very good.
	Working with the child's emotions to facilitate learning	This sub-category included the importance of a holistic view of the child, such as the need to address emotions experienced by the child as these can hinder concentration. Including the emotional world of the child also led to a calmer atmosphere.	If he [i.e., the child] has a bad day, that happens to me as well, then many things don't work out.
	School infrastructure and general conditions facilitate EP	School infrastructure and conditions were coded if these were experienced as a prerequisite for facilitating EP and being able to create a relationship with the child.	Two pedagogues and there is lots, lots of space and I would concede this to everyone who is external and who says: yes, that sounds good somehow, but you need the infrastructure. If I am alone with that many children, you don't have time to do these things

Impact of EP on children		The category described the dual impact of EP, not only on those using EP, but also on children. The impact was described beyond learning outcomes, but on the personal development of children.	
	School as a space for living	The sub-category referred to children demonstrating in their behavior and in their statements a high degree of well-being (e.g., not wanting to leave the school).	One example was that the kids came or they didn't want to leave anymore. Thus, we had such situations more than once, that they didn't want to leave and go home.
	Children develop sense of community	The sub-category described children having been observed to show strong interaction with each other and the creation of a community. This stood in contrast to observing the same children as lone wolves when starting to attend this school.	This perception of another person who is part of my group has changed a lot and that happened also because of rituals but also because of perceiving the other in an open and conscious manner.
	Positive impact on emotion regulation	The sub-category referred to EP strengthening the connection to children's own emotions. Children were experienced as being able to understand their emotions better and having improved emotion regulation.	It's really, it is very hard work because we have so many, such special kids in this school and when [...] they will have experienced this pedagogy for the whole six years, then they will still be special kids, but they will develop in a positive way.
Aspects essentially promoted by EP		The category described several aspects that were highlighted repeatedly in the development of children and how this was impacted by EP.	
	Children learn to accept themselves with a mind of their own	The sub-category described how children learned to accept themselves and how to deal with themselves. This process and the improved interaction between the child and her/his environment were observed by teachers/pedagogues.	He [the child] had a behavioral pattern that he interacted with others by using provocation and he always got kicked out and now because of our impact he knows what he can do and what he can do well and that we will support him and basically he has playful situations in which hardly any provocation is existent, that he is just part of it and he knows: I'm allowed to. I can do this and I don't have to use certain behavioral patterns to achieve something.
	Children learn to defend their interests	The sub-category referred to children coming to know their interests and defending these. They also learn how to act according to their interests.	I think they gain a certain power to do things that are important to them and to defend those things.

Table 1. (*Continued*).

Categories	Subcategories	Rules for coding	Examples of coded text
	Children learn shared decision making	The sub-category was coded for statements on how children were encouraged to share decision making. Thus, self-efficacy was promoted and seen as matter of fact.	There are some things that are reasonable to involve the kids in and to have a look at together or to show them: where do we look at and what can we look at together?
	Children set their own limits	The sub-category included children discovering their own pace for, for example, learning, but not through external guidance (e.g., by teachers/ pedagogues) but through self-development and self-discovery.	They are very different and feel very strongly that they work differently, not that they work less at learning subjects, but it is not about more or less, but more about I work on it, I do it and it is different and ok.

Notes. The table presents categories and subcategories deduced from data as well as coding rules. Coding rules were used to identify sequences in the text and attribute these to the appropriate sub-category. Examples of coded sequences are given in the last column.

for dealing with children needing special attention also produced a sense of frustration and helplessness as they were not able to attend to the child's needs as needed.

> On my previous job we worked with groups having many conflicts, massive conflicts, and the pedagogues pushed the envelope and we did not know what to do with the children who ran away again and again, who did not want to integrate, apparently so and yes, we had the feeling it somehow slipped through our fingers.

In this context, some pedagogic approaches encountered on previous jobs were experienced as shortcomings because they focused mainly on children who were able to fit into the mainstream school system and who did not have special needs because of, for example, behavioral or emotional problems.

Developing an understanding for EP

As already mentioned, EP was discussed as having no direct guideline for how to implement it. Hence, to understand EP a constant self-reflection, reflection on the interaction with other persons and on the concept of EP was perceived as necessary. This includes an understanding of EP and its various aspects, as well as how EP is put into practice. In this sense, an understanding of EP not only means to reflect on EP, but also to reflect on EP with regard to its impact on and relation to other persons.

Reflection is experienced as an important instrument when applying EP. This entails reflecting on one's own motives, behavior, and attitude and is also stimulated by others (e.g., by children). This stimulation promotes a constant contact with EP. In statements made by pedagogues and teachers it became clear that it is not an approach that focuses solely on children but also on the person using EP. In this sense, it is a prerequisite that the tenor and values be in agreement with EP. Practicing EP makes personal values become more visible but also more substantial. Pedagogues and teachers described their process of becoming familiar with EP and the way they constantly reflect on their attitude and how this attitude is in agreement with their behavior. EP is not about training skills, but it refers to becoming authentic in one's actions.

> […] I encourage myself to have this attitude, but that this attitude becomes real and that is, I think, a long process of practice. Or exercise, I don't know a different word for exercise, but that it becomes an instinct and not a plan or a role that I slip into and this takes a very, very long time and […] it is one of the only pedagogies I know that focuses on oneself and not only on the children, but I am in the spotlight and personally. […] I profited in the sense of checking my feelings.

Therefore, EP is seen as an overall attitude, not as a mere pedagogy. This also relates to not only adopting EP as an approach, but to living EP in every interaction.

Meaning of EP

The meaning of EP includes that the other person experiences unrestricted acceptance. This means that others are not devalued when they exhibit a behavior that is regarded as not positive. Instead, appreciation and acceptance of the person are shown. If some aspects of an action are perceived as not positive, the child should experience that the child as a person is appreciated and its behavior is discussed with the child. Thus, the discussion with the child

is about the direction in which she/he could change her/his behavior in the future and what would help her/him accomplish this.

> It is not always pure harmony naturally, if they [the students] want to do something else. But I have the impression that it is less of a power struggle than if I were to say "that's the way things will be done." Because, naturally, that [statement] can always be challenged, because it is not true; and, if I tell them my reason why I would like to do something a certain way, you [the student] can also do it and I think this is not good because of this or that and I don't want to have it that way because of that, you have a completely different situation.

In this sense, EP is not seen as some kind of one-size-fits-all or miracle cure to ensure harmony; rather it is seen as one way to establish a culture of discussion for talking with each other in case of conflict, enabling cooperation that also allows conflict.

Discussions to provoke a personal response from students were seen as important, and teachers and pedagogues also reported that these were challenging. These clarification processes have to be adapted to the child's needs and her or his stage of development. This particularly applies for children with emotional and social problems. In this sense, if one child needs to be given more structure or framework in which she/he can act, this structure has to be provided by the teacher or pedagogue. Other children might benefit more from clarifying their goals and values, whereas some children might be overwhelmed by too many clarifying processes.

> The clarification processes and these things, I often think, you should not ask too much of the children, because this pedagogy is sometimes very demanding, I think, and especially relating to the involvement of the children, it very much depends on their stage of development, partly they have illnesses, disorders. Thus, a high degree of involvement is an excessive demand. So they need to know the absolute limit that should not be exceeded and they need to know the consequences if they cross that line, thus independent of clarification processes. That is very important.

In this context it might appear contradictory for teachers and pedagogues to talk about universal consequences and limits, especially as before they reported about the difficulties of having no precise rules and consequences when a child misbehaves, but this is part of EP. However, it can be argued that providing a child with consequences for crossing a line also refers to engaging with the child's needs on an individual basis. Particularly if the child is very young or perceived as being overwhelmed by too great a degree of clarification processes (because of the child's personal situation), the pedagogue or teacher must—from the EP standpoint—always adapt to the child's needs and provide some kind of structure for the child. This was also mentioned by one participant, who stated that despite the perceived absence of clear rules and behavioral instructions EP is about the attitude toward the child and the interaction with one child can completely differ from the interaction with another child as it is about an individualized approach.

Impact of EP on person

EP is not an approach that can be used only in education. Because of the nature of EP and its focus that is set on oneself (i.e., teacher/pedagogue) and others (i.e., children), EP also affects teachers and pedagogues as persons. In the focus group teachers and pedagogues stated that EP had a positive impact on them and they felt more patient but also emotionally more

relaxed than before practicing EP. On the one hand, EP put one more strongly in touch with one's emotions and optimized emotion regulation as perceived by participants. On the other hand, EP is about one's attitude toward errors and failure. This kind of error-friendliness is experienced as a relief for themselves, but also as consolidation with regard to working with children.

> I think I became more patient. Sometimes not, but on a general level. And I reflect on myself and my behavior for a longer time, whereas before I might have overlooked it faster. I practiced this before starting to work here, but I think here it has been intensified and it changed. And the exchange with colleagues is also important, to be able to reflect really well and to have some kind of mirror.

This quote shows that teachers and pedagogues felt that EP helped them to be more in concordance with their emotions and to have increased reflecting on their emotions as well as on their actions. Additionally, it underlines the impact EP has on the person practicing EP.

Impact of EP on teachers/pedagogues

EP is not only visible and noticeable in educating children or in affecting the teacher or the pedagogue as a person, but it also impacts other areas, such as cooperation among the team of teachers and pedagogues. In terms of EP's impact on the team of teachers and pedagogues, the participants reported that interaction between colleagues changed in a positive way and a basic understanding of EP became noticeable.

> So, I can really say this on behalf of the whole team that really everyone is mindful, how the other person is doing, how do I perceive the other person, do I perceive her/him in this or that way for a couple of days now or something like that. That's that, in addition to all the energy we give to the children, we also keep some energy for ourselves and that is very important to us. Nobody takes that away from us.

However, teachers and pedagogues also discussed the fact that they were working with a few colleagues who could not relate to the EP approach and thus left the school after working here briefly. In this sense, EP is not an approach that is suitable for everyone. Instead, some people can relate to this approach to a greater extent than can others. The reason for this was not discussed. Thus, it is debatable how this assumption originates.

Experience and attitude change toward rules

When teachers and pedagogues started to practice EP, they were searching for rules and consequences with which to educate the child. Initially, teachers and pedagogues reported being anxious about how to "do" EP as general rules and the introduction of punishment for misbehavior appeared to not be a part of EP. Thus, teachers and pedagogues discussed the "recipe" (and the lack thereof) for translating an EP approach to their professional practice. For example, they stated that retrospective discussion of technical terms specific to EP was initially considered not helpful for practicing EP. Sometimes it even left them feeling disoriented how to apply EP.

> […] I remember that I, yes, how I felt puzzled when I started reading more [about EP] and I engaged more in it and suddenly I thought, yes, does this approach dismiss everything I can rely on, are there no rules so to speak that everyone has to abide by, because it is kind of,

basically you don't have to do anything and everything is individual and all that made me feel disoriented.

However, processing the meaning of and discussing these terms was also felt to be essential to integrate EP into one's actions. As stated, teachers and pedagogues initially maintained general rules and directives for guiding children, but subsequently learned to move away from that. Nevertheless, adopting general rules was seen as ambiguous when using an EP approach. However, teachers and pedagogues also experienced that rules did not or hardly ever worked out the way they wanted. Teachers and pedagogues observed and experienced that no fixed rules exist, but that they had to respond to the child's needs individually and flexibly. In this sense, a holistic view of the child and his/her learning behavior and values but not of the subject matter is at the core of EP.

> What I [think] is that it is really especially good, maybe it is a challenge at the same time, the individualized, this individualized perspective. I remember the beginning very much when it was about, well if I let this child do something, I have to let all the other children do something as well, because otherwise it would be unfair. To really step away from that and say, no, it doesn't work that way.

Thereby it is also necessary to consider that emotions might hinder the child's learning. Thus, emotions have to be included in the holistic view of the child. This also means that emotions have to be understood by the teacher and the pedagogue and worked with in order to be able to fully address the child's needs and promote the child's learning and development.

> […] If he [the student] has a bad day, I have a bad day as well, then many things don't work out.

Emotions can hinder or promote concentration, learning, actions, and also life; dealing with emotions on a personal and appropriate basis consequently results in a calmer atmosphere.

Focusing on students was seen as essential, even when giving the same attention to the individual student in big schools with up to 1,000 students is more challenging than in small schools with fewer than 100 students. On the other hand, this school with students who have emotional and social problems is challenging in a different way and has to have smaller classes. It is clear that the goal of this school is to focus on life, social and emotional competencies, in addition to learning objectives. Thus, teachers and pedagogues were aware of their special situation in the sense that this school made it possible to focus on children individually outside the mainstream.

> […] we have a luxury situation, being able to work in this setting with ten children and two pedagogues and just a lot of space, and I would agree with anyone from the outside who says yes, that sounds very good, but you need these general conditions. If I were alone with that many children, I would have no time for the things I planned to do.

In this sense, EP is not restricted to teachers and pedagogues adopting this approach. Also the environment in terms of infrastructure was seen to be helpful for using EP. Therefore, being able to work with the child's emotions was seen as possible thanks to the school's infrastructure and general conditions. The school's general conditions, such as the school environment and support from the school's administration, were perceived as positive and helpful. However, they were not regarded as prerequisites for using an EP approach.

Impact of EP on children

EP and the school where it is practiced are sometimes discussed as indistinguishable and inseparable. On the one hand, the school is perceived not only as a school for the purpose of education but also as space for living. Teachers and pedagogues derived this perception from students' statements that they do not want to leave the school and that they feel welcome and enjoy this type of school. Teachers and pedagogues also experience that children develop a sense of community and that this is noticeable in the interaction between children. Teachers and pedagogues contrast this sense of community and the time when children started to attend this school and drew an image of lone warriors in a class with no sense of community.

> I was just thinking about my class, when I remembered them being in 1st grade. They were 13 individuals who demanded their rights, more or less in their own special way. And when I see them today, they are a kind of community, a group with all the kinds of difficulties such a community has.

As noticeable in the quote above, teachers and pedagogues reported that they observed change in children over a period of time. Thus, EP has to be seen as a process that requires time.

Overall, changes observed in the children attending this school were perceived as positive. EP promotes the accessing and getting into touch with one's emotions and thus also emotion regulation. Children enhanced their ability to regulate their emotions and to understand their emotions—changes attributed to EP.

> It is really, it is very hard work because we have so many, so special children in this class and I think that when they are in the 6th grade [last grade of school] and when they have really experienced this kind of pedagogy for six years, they will still be special children, but I think they will have experienced some kind of development and that development will be positive.

Teachers and pedagogues experienced change in the children, but also expressed that EP should not be mistaken as a cure for emotional and behavioral problems but rather be perceived as stimulant to children's' socioemotional development.

Aspects promoted by EP

EP not only impacts children on a general level, but specific aspects that are promoted by EP have been illustrated. For example, teachers and pedagogues stated that children learn to accept themselves with a mind of their own. They discover their interests and learn to pursue their interests and the goals they set for themselves. Additionally, children learn how to defend their interests when some adults (usually from outside the school) do not understand why the child behaves the way it does or try to guide the child in a different direction. Thus, children learn to be self-determined. This should also be seen in the context of other guiding principles, such as children being invited to state their opinion and to participate in decision making for oneself, in the classroom, and in the school.

> Basically this begins in class 1. Before noon children have this kind of council once a week, and I think that this kind of routine, these rituals […] the shared decision-making that was established from the beginning [when they start school], to discuss something together and to abide

by the rules discussed […] children abide by these rules to a greater extent if they were involved than if we had established them without them, and that this [shared decision making] actually promotes some kind of action or activity, I believe that changes a lot.

The students also set their own limits in terms of being able to pursue learning objectives or goals set by themselves at their own pace. This is also promoted by teachers and pedagogues who try to teach children that they should learn and develop at their own pace.

Discussion

This study focused on the perception of EP as described by pedagogues and teachers at an elementary school. Given that this school focuses on children who have had problems fitting into the conventional education system and who presented some kind of emotional and behavioral problems, an approach that takes into account life, questions of life and values, and social and emotional competencies is more than appropriate. Currently, the EP concept is not widely known in education and is a relatively young approach. This was also noticeable in focus group discussions as some participants stated that they never heard about EP prior to working at this school. In this sense, some participants in this study have already dealt with EP for a longer time than others. Consequently, experience with and knowledge about EP can vary.

This study shows that teachers and pedagogues experience the EP concept as helpful when dealing with children who have emotional and behavioral problems. However, some educational approaches bear a resemblance to some aspects of EP. As already shown in other school-based programs focusing on social and emotional competences (e.g., programs on addiction prevention, programs targeting emotional and behavioral problems, targeting social skills, promoting agency, and behavior management) (Massey & Burnard, 2006; Payton et al., 2008; Reeve, 2006; Spaeth, Weichold, Silbereisen, & Wiesner, 2010; Thuen & Bru, 2009; Wilhite & Bullock, 2012), positive changes in children were also reported by teachers and pedagogues in this study. Thus, it can be assumed that these programs share the basis for promoting social and emotional competencies, thus provoking similar changes in the children. However, to the authors' knowledge such other programs have not included questions of life and values. Thus, questions of life and values might also be connected to the changes teachers and pedagogues experienced in themselves. Consequently, EP impacted teachers, pedagogues, and children.

The internalized conception of the human being and his/her striving for sense making is crucial in EP. This conception is guided by the spirituality of human beings. Therefore the conception also leads to an attitude of taking someone seriously and respecting and appreciating others. This attitude might evoke significant change in teachers and pedagogues, and change is strengthened by consequently adopting this existential responsive attitude, and clarity regarding his or her own responsibilities. Knowing that change can be evoked only by oneself, teachers and pedagogues were reflecting on themselves personally and on their work.

Few studies focus on changes in teachers instead of children when introducing alternative concepts of education. As mentioned by one teacher, EP is an approach that also focuses on the person (i.e., teacher or pedagogue in this study) working with the approach, not solely on the children. Thus, EP is not only an approach adopted in educational settings, but it is

also perceived as an attitude that has to be adopted. Put differently, this relates to the attitude that results from the constant interaction and involvement with EP, the child and her/his spiritual dimension. In the EP approach it is critical to sharpen one's attitude toward values and to support the development of values in the children. This can also be seen in that EP is not performed, but is lived. Consequently, teachers and pedagogues have to constantly work on their emotions, reflect on their attitude toward teaching and life, and pursue the goal of affirming their actions in order to live authentically and be authentic. Other studies have also shown that authenticity was perceived by pre-school teachers as one prerequisite for being supportive (Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015). Such a comprehensive attitude toward life consequently affects one's own life, namely both the private and professional environment. For example, EP was seen as impacting one's emotion regulation and cooperation in teams. Focus group participants focused widely on their own changes and how EP had an impact on them personally. This can be seen in concordance with EP itself, as EP demands that we confront the questions of life (Waibel, 2013). Thus, EP is expected to have a profound impact on teachers and pedagogues. As shown by this study, EP was not found to be suitable for everyone. Whether those who left the school could not identify with EP or with the school is left unanswered as there are naturally many reasons behind every change.

This study shows how teachers and pedagogues perceived the changes they underwent when starting to adopt this approach. In this case, it ranged from rejection because of being undecided about how to keep control without enforcing rules to relief at taking an alternative approach to educating children. The presumed lack of universal rules should not be mistaken for a lack of structure or concept. General rules and behavioral instructions do not live up to the uniqueness and individuality of the child and its particular situation. The provision of structure can also be traced in the individualized perspective that was discussed. Thus, the individualized view of and the approach to a student led to various degrees of student involvement depending on the students' stage of development. Hence, the teacher or pedagogue is expected to act on the student's need. Structure as an agreement on goals, expectations, and feedback (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012) also exists in EP and is negotiated with the child in so-called clarification processes or discussions, thereby providing structure in classrooms.

Nevertheless, EP is neither a miracle approach nor an approach suitable for everyone. In this sense, EP allows confrontation, criticism, and failure and it also promotes an individualized and appreciative approach to people. In this way, the development of school and teaching as well as staff development are facilitated by EP and grow out of EP along the way. This refers to EP changing learning situations/arrangements, and these adapted accordingly, thus teaching and the school change. As EP also promotes change on a personal and individual level in terms of strengthening the personality of teachers and pedagogues, it also implies change in staff development.

So far, the findings from this study will be integrated into EP training programs, special focus will be placed on self-reflection, especially regarding the basic motivations as illustrated by Längle. This will serve to clarify and strengthen values and authenticity.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It can be perceived as positive that the focus group discussions were led by a person known to the school staff. Thus, some level of trust was already

established, thereby allowing the focus groups to be conducted in the first place. However, it can also be perceived as a limitation that participants wanted to impress the focus group leader and neglected topics with a critical perspective on EP. Additionally, participants might not have explained their experiences in detail, as the moderator was known to be an EP expert who did not need explanation. Focus groups were also not divided into more or less experienced staff. Thus, these different degrees of experience could not be differentiated in the analysis. In this sense it would also have been interesting to discuss EP with those teachers and pedagogues who left the school because it worked according to the EP approach. Another limitation of this study refers to the limited interaction between participants in the focus group discussions. This lack of interaction could be attributed to adoption of the EP approach. It can be hypothesized that group dynamics were reduced because participants were trained to not interrupt each other when talking and to respect opinions shared. It is possible that experiences reported in the focus groups matched to a large extent. Participants stated their experiences in turn, thereby complementing narrations. As also stated by participants, EP had a substantial influence on their own actions and interactions with others, possibly resulting in working with a person's narrations without trying to guide them in a different way. The last limitation on this study refers to generalizability. Thus, staff came from one small school that focuses on children with emotional and behavioral problems who were no longer able to attend regular schools. Thus, the unique conditions prevailing at this school (e.g., small classes, much space, pedagogues, and teachers) were adapted to the children's needs and consequently allow these findings to be perceived only from this point of view. Further studies on EP might help elucidate the generalizability of these findings.

Conclusions

It is worth posing the question whether EP is a stand-alone pedagogy and whether it can be used in conjunction with other approaches. It is certainly not a one-size-fits-all approach, but evolves by constantly interacting with other persons, reflecting on one's attitude, motives, and behavior. However, it is debatable whether EP can be a teaching approach adopted at regular schools or whether it is mainly suitable in small and alternative schools. This study shows that these teachers and pedagogues experience EP as helpful and facilitative when working with children with emotional and behavioral problems. Furthermore, additional studies need to be performed to determine whether and how EP can be applied in conventional settings.

Acknowledgment

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