

CONFLICT MEDIATION BETWEEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract: *Conflicts between children refer to misunderstandings or hostilities between children of the same age. These often are occasional, unplanned and do not involve extreme violence. However, peaceful conflict resolution skills must be learned at an early age in order to prevent degenerate into violent acts at a later age. The aim of this study was to analyze the conflicts that appear in the elementary school classes. These were then grouped according to their intensity. One group of children was then exposed to conflict resolution activities. Our results demonstrate the validity of the working hypothesis and support the idea of introducing specialized hours in the school curricula addressing positive conflict management skills.*

Key words: *elementary school; children; conflicts; conflict resolution; mediation.*

Theoretical framework

Previous studies show there is increasing risk of violence and conflict in school settings among children (Hojbotă et al., 2014). There are two general positions regarding emergence of school conflicts: (1) one arguing that the school is a micro-system of the society and therefore, violence in society also translates into school settings (Johnson and Johnson, 1979); (2) one arguing that schools are safe places and, therefore, there is little violence happening in schools (Johansson and Emilson, 2016). One way to approach this difference of opinions relies in understanding the nature of the conflicts emerging in schools and the different theoretical perspectives on violence between children.

First, the conflict must be delimited from other concepts with similar connotations such as “competition”, “aggression”, “influence” or “domination”. *Competition* involves fighting against some people to reach a goal that only one or a few can achieve. *Aggression* refers to behaviors meant to hurt other people. While competition and aggression are accompanied by conflict, not every type of conflict necessarily reflects competition or aggression (Johnson and Johnson, 2009). *The influence* is related to the orientation of others in the direction desired by the person, and the *domination* refers to an influence in one direction (for example, from the teacher to the student or from a “good” student to a “bad”

student). When the conflict is confused with these related concepts, it becomes linked to extreme behaviors that are present only in a small fraction of the current disputes that arise in schools (McKibben, 2017).

Researchers in the field of conflict resolution have tried to contribute theoretically and practically to the definition of this concept, concluding that the concept is multi-faceted. Considered pioneers in the field, Deutsch, Coleman and Marcus (2006) argue that conflict can both have a constructive and destructive potential. Those conflicts that urge learning, personal and social development, or which lead to opportunities for change are defined in a constructive approach and such conflicts should not be avoided. Many other authors adhere to this idea: Abigail and Cahn (2011); Johnson and Johnson (2009); Johansson and Emilson (2011).

Knowing more about how teachers understand emerging conflicts can be of major educational importance, and it contributes to the development of teachers' professional language regarding these little discussed conflicts. In addition, it can inform how this problem can be addressed in the education and training of new teachers (Granström, 2013). Hakvoort, Larson and Lundstrom (2020) argue that there are nine different ways of understanding visible emerging conflicts and form a professional language with which to discuss these kinds of conflicts. These nine could be divided into three clusters: *the social practice of the classroom*, *something that stems from outside the classroom*, and something that characterizes *all human interaction*.

Lewi (1989) argues that public school curricula have traditionally treated conflict as a body of knowledge rather than an opportunity for skill development. Increasingly, however, programs that feature mediation, cooperative learning, and cross-cultural communication have become more common. Those designing conflict resolution (CR) curricula must carefully consider purpose, audience, and outcomes.

An interesting article proposes solving conflicts through role-playing games in which children, parents and the teacher participate (Borbely et al. 2005). They used conflict resolution role play vignettes to examine associations between students' conflict resolution effectiveness and social skills. Vignettes covered 3 social contexts, conflict with a peer (disagreement over activities), with a parent (rise in allowance), and with a teacher (low grade on report). They concluded that students were more often effective in resolving conflict with peers than with parents. Another conflict resolution strategy is presented by Droisy and Gaudron (2003) who propose a father-child collaboration and co-construction. In the UK, Sellman (2011) published an article about a study conducted at nine schools (seven primary, two secondary) which had previously implemented a peer mediation service for students experiencing interpersonal conflict. The research findings highlighted the need for realistic anticipation of the degree of cultural transformation required to fully support students' empowerment initiatives in schools. Peer mediation was most successful in schools where there was a considerable shift in the division of labor, accompanied by the production of new

cultural tools that promoted new ways of thinking, speaking and acting with a view to conflict.

Some countries (e.g. USA) implemented school conflict resolution programs and the Association for Conflict Resolution sets standards for conflict resolution based on Peer Mediation Programs. These programs aim to teach students to manage conflicts and find peaceful solutions to their problems. Thus Hart and Guntz (1997) analyze the impact of the Peer Mediation Program in an elementary school. In 1994 Johnson, Johnson, Dudley and Akicgoz conducted research on the effects of conflict resolution training on elementary school students. The peer-mediation training program was implemented in four classrooms in an American, suburban, middle-class elementary school. The training focused on negotiation and mediation procedures and skills and showed to be successful. The students were able to transfer the procedures and skills and apply them in real conflicts among classmates, reducing the number of conflicts referred to teachers. Discipline problems that previously drained teachers' attention, time, and energy were eliminated as students became much more autonomous in managing their conflicts constructively. Johnson et al. (1995) studied the effect of the Peer Mediation Program in elementary schools in the western United States, indicating that students who successfully learned the negotiation and mediation procedures, were able to apply the procedures in current conflict situations, and maintained this knowledge throughout the academic year.

In a recent article Ay et al. (2019) argue that conflicts in schools cannot be resolved by constructive and peaceful means and teachers cannot support students sufficiently. Mayorga (2010) describes the effectiveness of peer mediation and how it may play a role in helping students resolve conflict in a constructive rather than a destructive manner.

It seems that the Peer Mediation Program also has the effect of reducing aggressive behavior in children. Some authors argue that there are gender differences in the effectiveness of these programs either due to aggressive behavior (Klein et al. 2009) or communication problems (Breaz, 2019b). The results obtained by Klein et al (2009) suggest that the impact of the intervention is gender-related. According to teachers' evaluations there was an improvement of prosocial behavior of boys in the intervention classes. In addition, they showed a decrease in direct and indirect aggression and victimization. In contrast, teachers reported a deterioration of prosocial behavior as well as an increase in direct and indirect aggression among the girls. In contrast, teachers reported deterioration of prosocial behavior as well as an increase in direct and indirect aggression among the girls. Breaz (2019a) argues that there is a close relationship between the family educational climate and deviant behavior of children.

Turnuklu et al. (2011) analyze the effects of Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation (CRPM) training on the levels of aggression of 10-11-year-old Turkish primary school students. Data analyses revealed that CRPM training was effective in lowering the aggression scale scores of the students. Boys seem to have benefited more from the training than girls. CRPM training was found to reduce

student aggression which may lead to more constructive, restorative and peaceful behavior in classroom and school settings. Since less energy and time will have to be allocated to resolving problem behavior, academic success may increase, and a safer school atmosphere may be attained. Similarly, Schellenberg et al. (2007) examined the effectiveness of an existing peer mediation program in a diverse, suburban elementary school, concluding that all mediation sessions were successful in resolving conflict, and mediators as well as participants viewed the peer mediation program as valuable.

Turk (2018) evaluated the effects of conflict resolution, peace education and peer mediation in a meta-analysis paper on 23 studies that were determined to be in accordance with the study criteria. According to research findings conflict resolution, peace education and peer mediation education programs have a wide range of effect on students' conflict resolution skills. It may be stated that conflict resolution, peace education or peer mediation is effective in the constructive development of students' conflict resolution skills.

Tzuriel and Shamir (2007) argued that peer mediation with young children is a relatively novel approach aimed at teaching young children how to mediate to their peers. The main benefits of peer mediation are in developing children's mediation teaching style and cognitive modifiability. Higgins and Priest (1990) said that violent incidents at schools have adverse effects on the physical and psychological health of students while also preventing the perception of schools as safe locations and hindering the education process. Hence, it is a topic that concerns the society as a whole. Perceptions and opinions regarding the increase in violent incidents at schools around the world result in increased attention to this issue.

Peer conflict is not necessarily a bad thing; disagreement and conflict are part of life, and children and adolescents need to develop skills to resolve disagreements (Tezer and Demir, 2001). However, peer conflict can cause significant emotional and physical harm and can lead to aggressive behaviors when youth and children lack the social skills necessary to cope with their frustrations. To prevent peer conflict and facilitate the development of peer support systems, create age-based programs that teach social skills (Troop-Gordon, Ladd, 2005). For elementary school-age children, social skills include building friendships, being supportive, emotion regulation, and social problem solving skills. In elementary school-age children, the types of social environments that most often give rise to conflicts are related to the following circumstances: possession and use of objects; limited resources, such as toys and games; negative interactions with peers, such as aggression, jealousy, and exclusion from groups; and violation of rules. (Alexander and McConnell, 1993; Shantz, 1987).

Research has revealed that there are also gender differences between boys and girls in conflict involvement. Thus: boys tend to engage in more disputes related to status or dominance, such as arguing over who is better at specific sports, whereas girls tend to engage in more disputes related to relational issues, such as disclosing a secret or not being invited to a party (Noakes and Rinaldi, 2006). Boys

tend to engage in aggression by physically hurting others, whereas girls tend to display more relational aggression through social exclusion or spreading rumors (Sims, Hutchins, Taylor, 1998). Because girls engage in more relational than physical aggression, they are often better at hiding aggressive activities from observing adults and are thus less likely to be given consequences for this behavior (Pepler and Craig, 1995).

Hypothesis and objectives

The main purpose of the research was to teach children coping techniques with conflict and their peaceful and amicable solution methods. It has been hypothesized that if a conflict counseling and mediation program is introduced at the class level, the number of conflicts and their intensity will decrease.

Sample

Two classes from a general school were studied - an experimental class (EC) and control (CC). The classes had an approximately equal number of children: 23 for EC and 22 for CC, with ages between 8-9 years (3rd graders).

Methodology

The conflicts were noted for a month and then their classification was made according to their duration. Considering that in the literature, conflicts are not identified as having an aggressive side, these types of actions were excluded from the research. The intensity of the conflicts was assessed according to their duration: one day - mild conflicts; 1-3 days medium conflicts, over three days - severe conflicts.

At EC we worked for a month to develop some conflict management skills in children. The children involved in the conflicts were advised by the social worker. During the class, conflict resolution activities were carried out twice a week. These consisted of proposing for children a conflict situation and then suggesting solutions to resolve the situation without reaching the conflict escalation.

Results and discussions

As mentioned above, the conflicts between children during a month were registered for both EC and CC classes. In total, there was approximate equal number of recorded conflicts: 73 at CC and 77 at EC. The conflicts were then classified according to their duration (Table 1).

Table 1. The number and classification of conflicts during the initial phase

Conflict intensity	EC	CC
Light	33	31
Medium	28	30
Severe	16	12
Total	77	73

We observed that in both groups, the light conflicts predominate (EC - 33 situations; CC - 31 situations) and medium conflicts (EC - 28 situations and CC - 30 situations). This shows us that, in general, conflicts were resolved on the same day or within three days of their occurrence. However, there are also a number of severe conflicts 16 for EC and 12 for CC whose resolution took more than three days and the child's upset lasted longer.

The reasons for these conflicts were diverse: “he took my pencil or my rubber”, “he made me spell wrong”, “my homework notebook was hidden”, “they didn't let me play with them”, “I don't like him/her”. We noticed that in general, the nature of conflicts for children from our sample is similarly to that described by Alexander and McConnell (1993) and Schantz (1987).

The intervention for EC lasted for six weeks. During this period, the children involved in conflicts were called by the social worker and they were offered individual counseling sessions focusing on understanding the causes and the nature of the conflict reported and developing alternative ways to conflict resolution in supporting an optimal peer relationship with classmates. In addition, twice a week, the entire class was subject to sessions on developing skills for conflict management. During these teaching sessions the children proposed various conflict situations and then suggested ways to solve them. Role play has often been used to illustrate a conflict situation and its resolution. In this way, the children found the sessions more interesting and became more engaged.

In the same time, CC group did not benefit from any kind of program focused on conflict resolution and they used to carry out their regular school program.

After six weeks, the conflicts between the two classes were registered again for a month. These were again classified according to the criteria established at the beginning of the research.

The results of the intervention program were evaluated according to the number of conflicts and their intensity at EC after completing the intervention program. These are shown in figure 1.

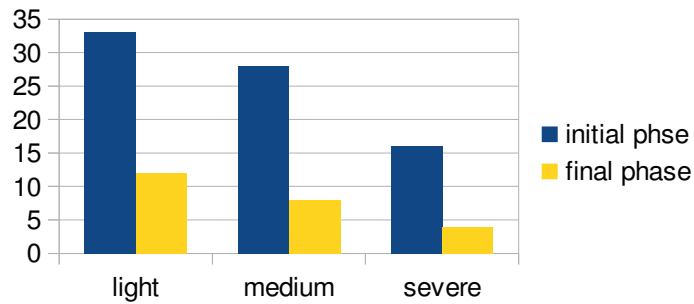


Figure 1. The number and classification of conflicts for EC group

There is a significant decrease in the number of conflicts: from 75 to 24, almost three times fewer conflicts in the final phase compared to the initial phase. The conflicts that were recorded are mild and medium range (12 and 8, respectively). There are still 4 severe conflicts whose duration was longer than three days and which had as subject the fact that the children did not like one or another of their colleagues.

To emphasize that the results obtained by us are really due to the method we used, we will compare the final results of the experimental class with the results obtained in the control group. The comparative results between the two classes in the final phase are presented in figure 2.

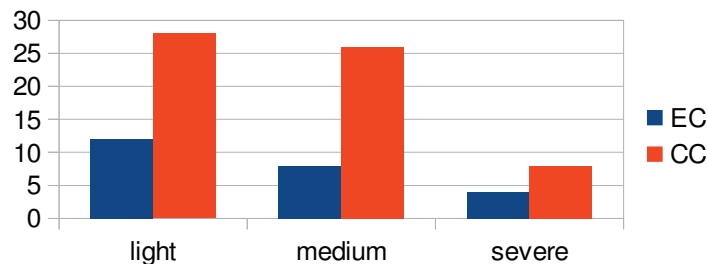


Figure 2. The number and classification of conflicts at final evaluation

We can notice that in the control group there is also a decrease in the number of conflicts, but this is much smaller than in the experimental group. The number of conflicts between children in the CC is maintained approximately at the same level and a decrease in them is due to the evolution and natural growth of children, accompanied by an intellectual maturation. However, for the EC, the decrease in the number and intensity of conflicts is significant, demonstrating that the children have learned strategies for the friendly management of conflicts and for the peaceful resolution of the stressful situations that may occur in their everyday's school life.

The hypothesis formulated at the beginning of the research was therefore validated by this small study: the counseling and mediation sessions introduced to the class led to a decrease in the number of conflicts and their intensity. The main objective was achieved: children learned strategies for friendly conflict management, which helped them to achieve assertive behaviors and to better integrate into the daily life of the class.

Conclusions

The programs of mediation of conflicts between children in the primary cycle must be part of the daily activity of social workers in schools. We believe that such intervention programs can be easily used by social workers, thus contributing to the creation of a truly academic climate in the school, in which children learn and acquire social skills that will help them integrate more easily into adult life.

We believe that such intervention programs should be piloted, together with the social workers, at macro level as well in order to ensure that all schools are receiving proper training and to ensure that the program is included in the school's curricula. We also believe that is important to integrate teaching children social and emotional skills, because this seems to be something that they are struggling with when they are at school. We recommend piloting an approach in which skills are taught for conflict resolution and where students are also taught the differences. By perfecting these skills, children can become themselves mediators in conflicts between their peers, helping them understand the causes of the conflict and providing them with opportunities to resolve the conflicts so that they can change their behavior into one positive and constructive.

Brackett and Salovey (2006) proved that there is a connection between classroom climate and students academic achievement. This means that by helping children managing conflicts, leads to a better relationship among students and furthermore help students to achieve better results.

Acknowledgement: We hereby state that the subjects involved in our research were informed about the voluntary character of their participation in this research, about the understanding of information and of that fact that withdrawal from research is possible at any time without negative consequences upon the participant. The research complied with all ethical research standards, the research participants/participants` guardians giving their consent to participate in the research.

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