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Conflict resolution

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Conflict resolution

Abstract

Almost every day children experience some type of conflict with their peers. As counselors and educators, many of us are concerned about a lack of classroom harmony and inadequate interaction and conflict resolution skills among our students. This paper explains some of the definitions, causes, and developmental issues of conflict. It will also explain some of the conflict resolution styles children use. Various conflict resolution programs and the implications for counselors and educators will also be explored.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Introduction

Almost every day children experience some type of conflict with their peers. As counselors and educators, many of us are concerned about a lack of classroom harmony and inadequate interaction and conflict resolution skills among our students. This paper explains some of the definitions, causes, and developmental issues of conflict. It will also explain some of the conflict resolution styles children use. Various conflict resolution programs and the implications for counselors and educators will also be explored.

Early research on interpersonal conflict treated it as destructive, and suggested conflict elimination as the desirable method of management (Deutsch, 1969). Later authors Coser, Blake, Shepard, and Mouton; (cited in McFarland, 1992b) Hall; (cited in McFarland, 1992a) and Kolb and Glidden (cited in McFarland, 1992b) proposed a more positive view of interpersonal conflict. These authors proposed that conflict promoted cohesiveness, maintained a balance of power between the parties, generated creative approaches to problem solving, and facilitated change.

The current view of interpersonal conflict is that it can be a positive process, promoting understanding and growth if it is understood and constructively managed. Unfortunately, educators and counselors do not always know how to teach the cooperative skills needed to manage interpersonal conflict. When conflicts arise, both teachers and students

are inadequately prepared to effectively manage that conflict (Johnson, 1971; Blake & Mouton, 1970; Deutsch, 1969).

In the past, educators often tried to ignore or suppress conflicts or use their positions of authority to resolve conflict. "By avoiding and suppressing certain types of conflicts, teachers lose valuable opportunities to increase student motivation, creative insight, cognitive development, and learning. Conflicts have the potential for producing both highly constructive or highly destructive outcomes, depending on how they are managed" (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, p. 51-52). Poor conflict management can arrest or delay a child's social-emotional growth. Good conflict management can help the child grow and move into deeper, more meaningful relationships with others.

Mild (1990) suggested that numerous educational treatises identified the need for students to behave in a civil manner in the classroom as one of the major concerns of education during the 1980s. Schools can contribute to student's academic success by establishing, communicating, and enforcing fair and consistent discipline policies. This is where effective management of conflict can play a major part.

What Is Conflict?

Conflict has been defined in several different ways by various authors. Boulding (1963) defined conflict as "a situation of competition in which the parties are aware of incompatibility of potential or future positions." Bradshaw (1981) stated that "conflict is caused when there is opposition of some kind to our wants, needs, and desires" (p. 52).

Deutsch (1969) stated that a conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur. Johnson and Johnson (1979) defined controversy as conflict between people's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions. Johnson and Johnson further refined the definition of conflict into three categories which are (a) conflict of interest, (b) conceptual conflict, and (c) developmental conflict. Conflict of interest is when the actions of one person, attempting to maximize his or her own goals or needs, interferes with another person's goals or needs. Conceptual conflict is when incompatible ideas exist simultaneously in a person's mind. Developmental conflict is conflict arising from developmental stages of emotional growth.

Arrington (1987) stated that there has been a change from the old view that conflict is destructive. He believed that it is important for managers of conflict to understand the differences between destructive and constructive conflict. Jandt (1976) wrote:

If we survey people's attitude towards interpersonal conflict, we might find that conflict-quarreling, arguing, fighting-is disruptive and should be avoided. However, we must keep in mind that while conflict may be inevitable, it is through conflict that existing norms and practices are challenged and changed, and through conflict that we are frequently most creative and innovative. Since conflict can be either destructive or productive, how to avoid conflict is not the issue. Rather, managing

interpersonal conflict for maximum benefits and minimum costs is the skill to be developed (p. 165).

Developmental Issues of Conflict in Children

Bastianello (1989) stated that in order to have appropriate expectations in handling conflict, it is important to have a knowledge of the developmental levels of children. Unrealistic expectations would be frustrating to both the children and the adult. The friendship status, the ages, and the sex of the children involved are additional factors to consider when handling conflict situations. She suggested that it is also important to be aware of the children's cognitive stages because their stages of moral reasoning and ability to be aware of the other's point of view in a conflict are based on the cognitive developmental level stage.

Banville (1978) researched how conflict is manifested in young children. He contended that children fight when they are frustrated because they can not verbalize their hostile feelings. "Young children have not developed the social skills to negotiate conflicts so their frustration leads to fights" (p.55). He maintained that as children get older (middle school age) they are less likely to engage in fights, and instead resort to avoidance and verbal criticism to resolve conflict.

Young children are also likely to provoke fights with more fortunate and popular children to overcome their feelings of rejection. When children reach middle school age, they are less likely to engage in fights and will use other methods such as avoidance, polarization, and verbal criticism to settle scores with aggressors (Arrington, 1987).

Causes of Conflict

Satchel (1992) described antisocial behavior, such as fighting, name calling, using loud and abusive language, lying, stealing, noncompliance, and cheating, as problems faced by educators that can be addressed through a Conflict Resolution Management program. Changes in familial patterns and poor interpersonal relations exhibited by children are two reasons why antisocial behavior is a problem. The lack of cognitive problem-solving skills by children and the lack of skills demonstrated by school staff members to promote the development of prosocial behavior further accentuate the problems faced by school personnel today.

Maruyama (1992) also described various causes of conflict. For one, the diversity of the student population is increasing rapidly, and educators are having to deal with classrooms in which the range of student backgrounds and values is immense. It is estimated that 25% of U.S. children under 6 years of age come from families that have been living below the poverty level, and increasing numbers of children come from single-parent families (e.g. "Study," 1990). Secondly, measures of student outcomes provide striking examples of the shortcomings of the educational system. Poor performance is reported in both the mathematics and writing areas. Thirdly, increasing numbers of children come to school experiencing moderate to severe emotional problems. This places a new set of demands on classroom teachers unable to direct enough of their problem children to supplemental education services. A

fourth problem faced by the school personnel today is that students are becoming more ethnocentric and less tolerant toward others who are different, forcing school personnel to be peacemakers, conflict managers, and even social workers.

Deutsch (1969) proposed several causes of interpersonal conflict. He stated that unclear communication and the pressure for self-consistency are two factors that contribute to interpersonal conflict. Ineffective communication between people can lead to unclear limits and vague jurisdictions in the relationship, as well as create an absence of participative decision-making concerning issues that affect both parties. Because people's actions have to be justified to themselves and others, unwitting involvement in and intensification of a conflict can occur despite what seem to be rational reasons for its termination. It can be difficult to admit that the disagreement has no purpose once people are involved in a conflict.

Misperceptions and misjudgments are also contributing causes of interpersonal conflict (Deutsch, 1969). Misperceptions occur because the participants get so emotionally involved in a conflict that their perceptual and cognitive processes are impaired. Misperceptions also occur because of people's limited ability to place themselves in another person's shoes. When engaged in conflict, most people maintain a favorable view of themselves, but are less likely to hold such a view of the other conflicting party. When each side in a conflict perceives its motives and behaviors as

more benevolent and legitimate than those of the other side, conflict gains momentum.

Folger and Poole (1984) reported that trained incapacities, climate, power, and face-saving behaviors further hamper conflict resolution skills.

Trained incapacities include:

1. Goal centeredness--which occurs when one enters a discussion with the outcome already in mind.
2. Destructive redefinition--which occurs when one redefines conflict so that winning is the major objective.
3. Evaluative tendency--which allows for critical thinking, but prevents the parties from suspending judgment.
4. The use of objective standard--which causes people to search mistakenly for the one right solution.
5. The use of structured procedures--which suppresses differentiation by restricting exploration of the conflict issue. (p.175)

The themes that can characterize the conflict climate are:

1. Dominance--when there are authority relationships between the parties that create a winner and a loser.
2. Supportiveness--when the parties feel degrees of encouragement from each other as the conflict is worked through.
3. Identity--when the conflicting parties associate themselves as part of a larger group as a result of the conflict.

4. Interdependence--when the conflicting parties accept the benefits of a mutually agreeable solution. (p. 187)

There is danger in using power or positions of authority to resolve interpersonal conflict. If power is based on fear, there is a chance that the children will no longer fear the person with power, thus making its use ineffective. Also, the use of power to resolve interpersonal conflicts can cause the weaker party to give up any motivation to cooperate. Face-saving behavior is directed at self-preservation rather than at the conflict issue. The person becomes primarily concerned with his or her own perceived security rather than with understanding and cooperatively resolving the conflict issue (Folger & Poole, 1984).

Conflict Resolution Styles

Many conflict resolution theorists indicate that concern for self with a simultaneous concern for others is the attitude most conducive to effective interpersonal conflict resolution (Deutsch, 1969). It is also thought that communication using effective interpersonal skills is the critical element in most conflict resolution styles (McFarland, 1992b).

Dace (1982) named collaboration, compromise, accommodation, control, and avoidance as five conflict strategies. The collaborator's approach to conflict is to manage it by maintaining interpersonal relationships and ensuring that both parties to the conflict achieve their personal goals. The collaborator acts not only on behalf of his or her self-interest, but on behalf of the opposing party's interests as well. This is a win/win posture for both parties involved in a conflict.

The compromiser's approach to conflict is to assume that a win/win solution is not possible. A negotiating stance is adopted that involves a little bit of winning and a little bit of losing with respect to both the goals and the relationships of the involved parties. Persuasion and manipulation dominate the compromiser's approach.

The accommodator's approach to conflict involves maintaining the interpersonal relationship at all costs, with little or no concern for the personal goals of the parties involved. Giving in, appeasing, and avoiding conflict are viewed as ways of protecting the relationship. The accommodator's stance is to yield/lose, allowing the other to win.

The controller's approach to conflict is to take the necessary steps to ensure that his or her personal goals are met, whatever the cost to the relationship involved. Conflict is viewed as a win/lose proposition, with winning somehow equated with status and competence. This is a power-oriented mode in which a person uses whatever power seems appropriate to win his or her own position, defend a position which he or she believes is correct, or simply attempt to win.

The avoider's approach to conflict is to view it as something to be shunned at all costs. A central theme to the style is hopelessness, which results in a high degree of frustration for all parties involved. Personal goals are usually not met, nor is the interpersonal relationship maintained in this style of conflict. It might take the form of diplomatically diverting an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation. This is a leave-lose/win posture, in which the

avoider's stance toward conflict management is to leave-lose, allowing the other to win.

Conflict Resolution Skills

As stated before, communication using effective interpersonal skills is the critical element in most conflict resolution styles (McFarland, 1992b). It is through communicative behaviors that conflicts are recognized, expressed, and experienced (Frost & Wilmont, 1978).

Nattiv, Render, Lemire, and Render (1989) reported that conflict resolution is a complex skill built upon practice and mastery of simpler communication skills. The ability to interact requires awareness of others, awareness of the distinction between self and others, and a desire to connect with others. Other skills include the ability to (a) lower negative psychological defenses, (b) listen and hear, (c) become aware of one's feelings and thoughts, and (d) respond to the feelings and thoughts of others.

Resolution of conflict can also be approached by using cognitive decision-making strategies (Okum, 1979). These strategies stimulate the cognitive process using basic problem-solving steps. The steps include:

1. State the problem clearly.
2. Identify ownership of the problem.
3. Propose every possible alternative to the problem (brainstorming).

4. Evaluate each proposed alternative in terms of implementation realities and hypothesized consequences (values clarification).
5. Reassess the final list of alternatives, their consequences, and the risks involved.
6. Decide to implement one or more alternatives.
7. Determine how and when to implement the plan.
8. Generalize to other situations.
9. Evaluate the implementation. (pp. 122-123)

These strategies are effective for problem solving in almost any life situation.

Conceptual and empirical work using a cooperative goal structure framework has yielded a model of conflict resolution developed by Deutsch (1969) and refined by David Johnson (1971). The users of this model teach students the skills needed to argue effectively and to make the controversy experience a constructive one. It provides a clear structure that guides students through a discovery process. An important aspect of the process used by Johnson and Johnson (1979) is a role-reversal stage in which participants argue for a position opposed to the one they actually support. Role-reversal has been found to increase understanding of the views of others and of the shortcomings of one's own views as found by Johnson (1971) and Munez and Deutsch (1968).

Conflict Resolution Programs

There are now thousands of school-based conflict resolution programs in the United States. Students are learning a new way of fighting-listening to the other person's viewpoints and discussing their differences until they can work out a compromise.

One of the oldest mediation programs began in Hawaii in 1981 (Stuart, 1991). Mediators/students were taught skills such as active listening, restating, and open-ended questioning. Students described themselves as feeling angry, stupid, nervous, or uncertain before going into mediation. They reported feeling calmer and more relaxed after mediation.

The active school mediation program in San Francisco began in 1982 (Stuart, 1991). This was modeled after Community Boards, a mediation program organized to settle neighborhood disputes outside the courts. Conflict managers worked in pairs during recess and lunch to help resolve disputes.

The philosophy of Community Boards stated that:

1. Conflict is positive. Diversity is a positive value.
2. Elements of peaceful resolution can be found in the conflict itself.
3. Conflict resolution is a method of empowerment.
4. Conflict builds better and more lasting relationships.
5. Conflict resolution can help students learn about themselves and others.

In the primary grades, elementary teachers, principals, and guidance counselors facilitate the program. Peer mediators are used at the secondary level. Communication skills such as perceptions, assumptions, barriers, listening skills, "I" messages, restating, reflecting, affirming, and brainstorming are all implemented in the Community Boards model.

Another well-known program is the Children's Creative Response to Conflict model (Prutzman & Berger, 1988). The CCRC seeks to deal with the roots of conflict, not just the symptoms. Teachers and others who work with children are encouraged to move beyond the treatment of isolated crisis situations by developing a positive dynamic that motivates children to respond to conflict constructively. By building a positive classroom environment where violence seems totally out of place, the children's actions show that they have learned constructive approaches to problem solving. Children learn tools to enable them to find their own solutions.

The CCRC maintains that conflict does not have to be a win/lose situation, and growth comes through conflict (Prutzman & Berger, 1988). The goal is to promote growth toward a community in which children are capable and desirous of open communication. It also helps children gain insights into the nature of human feelings and share their own feelings. The children explore the unique and personal ways in which they can respond to problems and begin to prevent or solve conflicts.

Four foundation blocks are stressed in the CCRC:

1. Cooperation
2. Communication
3. Affirmation
4. Conflict resolution (bias awareness, mediation, and problem solving).

A third model is Davis and Roger T. Johnson's (1979) "Creative Conflict" program. Proponents of this model maintain that conflicts are inevitable. Conflict, when constructively managed, has value and can result in self-understanding, enriched relationships, healthy social development and can stimulate creativity and higher level reasoning. The Johnsons contend that conflict should be resolved in a cooperative setting.

This users of this model teach negotiation and mediation strategies. Each person tells what happened and states how he or she feels. Then each person reverses perspective and paraphrases the other side. They brainstorm solutions and come to an agreement.

The Educators for Social Responsibility program developed by William J. Kriedler (1991) follows the philosophy that conflict is a part of life. Without conflict, there is no growth or progress. People of any age can acquire skills and understandings that will help them to deal with conflict in constructive ways. Learning about conflict at the interpersonal level provides students with an analogy to better understand conflict at the community, national, and international levels.

In this model conflict resolution skills and concepts are taught in the context of a caring community that includes: cooperation, communication, emotional expression, appreciation for diverse points of view and multiculturalism, and conflict resolution. Students learn how conflicts begin and escalate, how to solve problems, develop solutions, express feelings, and communicate clearly.

The PeaceWorks model established by the Grace Contrino Abrams Peace Education Foundation embraces the philosophy that peace education is holistic and life-affirming (Schmidt & Friedman, 1985). It is aimed at the physical, emotional, intellectual and social growth of children. It teaches love, compassion, trust, fairness, cooperation and reverence for the human family and all life. Peace education is skill building. In this model, the goal is to empower children to find creative and non-destructive ways to settle conflicts and to live in harmony with themselves, others and the world. Peace-making is an ongoing process. The goal of "fighting fair" is to make everyone a winner.

Many elementary curriculum programs that teach conflict resolution skills include the use of active and interactive approaches, such as puppets, role-plays, small group games, discussions, and drawing activities. Children practice skills including brainstorming, problem-solving, active listening, group decision-making, negotiating and mediating (Warner, 1992). The goal is to help children acquire decision-making skills. Students also explore such concepts as win/win resolutions,

escalation, de-escalation, the difference between conflict and violence, and the idea that conflict can be constructive (Kriedler, 1991).

Shatles (1986) has developed a conflict resolution program in which children learn creative ways to solve conflicts by reading and writing stories about conflicts. The children start by developing an understanding of conflict. They brainstorm their experiences with a particular aspect of conflict, such as fighting or stealing. The children then either listen to or read a story containing a fight. The story is read up to the point where the conflict needs to be resolved. They then start to employ problem-solving techniques to generate their own possible solutions. When the children continue reading the story, their solutions are compared with the one the author selected. Follow-up activities include book and journal writing and role playing. Mediation techniques are taught and practiced.

With all their variety, school-based conflict resolution programs share a common goal: to show young people that they have many choices besides passivity or aggression for dealing with conflict. These programs are designed to give students the skills to make those choices real in their own lives (Roderick, 1988).

Implications for Counselors and Educators

According to Arrington (1987), the role of elementary and middle school counselors is to help teacher manage conflict in schools. Teachers must be educated about the adverse effect that conflicts can have on the child's learning process. Lewin, Nelson, and Tollefson (1983) found that the best method for managing these children is for the counselor to serve

as a consultant to the teacher. Lewis and Lewis (1977) proposed that the school counselor is responsible to two separate, but interlinked communities--the school and the neighborhood in which the institution is located. It is important for the school counselor to act as a coordinator of services for managing conflict and create teams of conflict managers from community resources.

Counselors are in key positions to institute peer mediation programs. Many of the skills and concepts are directly related to a developmental counseling philosophy. Positive self-esteem and self-regulation can be fostered in students when they have the opportunity to participate in decisions relating to their own lives (Maxwell, 1989).

McClure, Miller, and Russo (1992) suggested that children's groups provide excellent opportunities for counselors to teach children how to effectively express and resolve conflict. Cooperative strategies through team building can be incorporated into almost every aspect of group development for children.

McFarland (1992a) suggested that counselors could develop programs that help individuals develop the communication skills required for successful conflict resolution. Skills such as empathy, active listening, concreteness, personalizing, self-disclosure, and action planning all contribute to more effective communication.

Counselors can also help students explore and express personal feelings (McFarland 1992a). They can familiarize individuals with feeling words, demonstrate the differences between feeling and thinking, and

have people practice expressing the intensity of these feelings (Carkhuff, 1983). Counselors could train people to recognize the physical symptoms of stress and exhaustion that interfere with conflict resolution. Relaxation exercises could be taught to aid in the management of stress (Carnahan, 1985).

Conclusion

Currently, few schools systematically teach students the procedures and skills required for constructive conflict resolution. A plan to provide children with help in managing conflict is long overdue. The counseling profession is ready to empower people, through education and training, to work cooperatively and peacefully together to resolve interpersonal conflicts.

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