The Impact of Perceptions on Conflict Management

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Abstract

This article describes research that explored student and teacher perceptions and management of conflict within the primary school context. It was found that both teachers and students shared similarities in their views of conflict and in their management of interpersonal problems at school. Conflict was generally perceived to be a negative phenomenon. In addition teachers and students commonly used a limited range of strategies, relying mostly on familiar and reactive conflict management techniques. Resolving conflict though compromising and problem solving was rare. Student and teacher perceptions of conflict accounted for their handling of conflict. The need to re-consider the value of conflict as positive for learning and living within and beyond the school is raised.

Conflict is not a new phenomenon, however it receives incessant attention and much consideration because both students and teachers have difficulties in dealing with the complex issues surrounding it. The implications for teachers and students are many.

This qualitative research set out to explore the nature of children's conflicts at school. It examined the extent to which children's and teachers' perceptions affect the management of conflict. This article draws upon literature and findings of this research that included the perceptions and management strategies of both teachers and students in an Australian primary school. Six primary teachers and eight Year 4 students (10 year old) participated in the study. It involved teacher and student interviews, participant observations in the classroom and playground, and document analysis. Triangulation of data sources, member checking and auditing was used to verify the accuracy of data interpretation.

The terms 'conflict' and 'conflict resolution' are used frequently in this article. The description of conflict as the result of individuals' or groups' incompatible goals and as overt opposition by one person to another person's actions or statements is similar across various definitions. Folberg and Taylor's definition (1984 pp. 7-8) of conflict resolution will be used here for discussion purposes. 'The participants in a conflict isolate the issue, develop options, consider alternatives and reach a consensual settlement that will accommodate the participants' needs either between themselves or with a neutral third party'.

Brief Overview of the Literature

Traditionally, many adults have viewed conflict between children as an undesirable event, 'senseless, wasteful and destructive' (Opotow 1991, p. 416), and have tried to intervene or to prevent disputes. In her study of the nature of conflict at school, Opotow (1991) found that when asked about student conflict teachers mostly recalled overt physical confrontations between students. Teachers overestimated the frequency of physical fights and underestimated the harmful potential of less obvious types of conflict (p. 425) such as teasing. She also found that teachers viewed conflicts as less significant than do students; their descriptions emphasized the pettiness and irrationality of conflicts. For instance, one teacher commented, 'Nine times out of ten they [children] don't know why they got all worked up' (p. 430).

In their everyday experiences, teachers form opinions about their students. Research indicates that they form negative opinions of those involved in conflict, describing students as lacking in appropriate social skills and being unable to adhere to social rules. For instance, Opotow (1991) discovered that teachers respond as though conflict is 'something only done by troublemakers' (p. 425) and they cast these students as developmentally inferior.

A growing amount of research in recent years has concerned itself with the question of whether conflict need always be destructive. Deutsch (1973) proposed differentiating between 'destructive' and 'constructive' conflict. The former expand

beyond the primary issue to related issues, escalate with the use of threats and coercive strategies, and end in the dissatisfaction of both parties. Constructive conflicts stay focused on the main issue while the parties engage in problem solving, and end in mutually satisfying outcomes.

Conflict is inevitable during children's classroom and playground interactions, and when viewed more positively, as a natural and fundamental part of everyday life, and when constructively managed, has an important role in social development (Deutsch 1973; Opotow 1991; Shantz 1987; Shantz & Hobart 1989; Opotow & Deutsch, 1999; Marsick & Sauquet, 2000; Weitzman & Weitzman, 2000; Sandy & Cochran, 2000; Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). But the benefits of conflict in the interactions either of children or of adults are rarely promoted.

When skillfully managed conflict can produce successful outcomes (Deutsch, 1973;Shantz & Hobart 1989; Opotow 1991). The possibility of reducing and regulating conflict and aggression by more effective teaching of the values of co-operative, non-aggressive modes of interaction have been explored (Goldstein, Can, Davidson and Wehr, 1981). Outcomes include higher self- esteem, the development of skills in communication, decision making, critical evaluation, reasoning and thinking, and more positive relationships amongst students (Johnson & Johnson 1994, 1996). The impact of negative perceptions on the management of conflict by teachers and students warrants further research attention.

Conflict Management: Strategies and Styles
A repertoire of strategies is needed to manage a variety of conflicts: different people use different strategies and the importance of personal goals can affect the decision to use a particular style (Kilmann and Thomas, 1975). The literature offers a range of classifications of the types of strategies used by both children and adults (Deutsch, 1992; Smith, Inder and Ratcliff, 1995; and Johnson and Johnson, 1996). Although different terms are used, similarities in the strategies are clear.

There seem to be few relevant studies that explore the factors that influence the development of a child's perception of conflict management. Developmental theorists recognize that maturational processes, experience and environment contribute to perceptual development. In relation to conflict management such factors include past experience, socialization and the exposure to different management styles. The child's strategy may be influenced by how he or she sees other disputes handled: this underlines the importance of teachers as role models.

The literature describing strategies selected by students reveals that many disputes are being ineffectively and destructively managed. Students commonly select unproductive methods such as physical force, contention, verbal abuse and retaliation and reactive strategies (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley and Acikgoz, 1994). Research indicated that contending (the use of physical and verbal tactics) or trying to impose one's solution on the other party was the preferred strategy (64%). Yielding (9%) and problem solving (2%) were the most unusual (Smith, Inder and Ratcliff's, 1995). Our conclusion is that students lacked the skills to manage conflicts in constructive ways and were generally limited to two extreme reactions - fight or flee (Opotow 1991). This is disheartening, but not surprising when conflict management strategies used by teachers are considered.

Teacher Involvement: Different Perspectives
There seems to be a contradiction in findings regarding teacher involvement in children's conflicts. In reviewing conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in primary and secondary schools, Johnson and Johnson (1996, p. 459) indicate that 'Classroom teachers spend an inordinate amount of time and energy managing children's conflicts'. But results from Smith, Inder, and Ratcliff (1995) and Opotow (1991) offer a contrasting perspective: that the teachers' role in children's conflicts was minimal (inside and outside of the classroom), and that students were unwilling to approach teachers, unless help was needed. It was unclear in the literature whether teachers decided not to intervene or that they were missing minor conflicts.

Deterrents to adult involvement directly relate to the negative ways in which teachers perceive and manage conflict and the disputants. Students' discussion of conflicts with teachers is explained as: one-way communication, an interrogation or a lecture, not as an exchange. Conflicts were largely neglected by teachers or suppressed by students. Student comments included: (a) 'adults think conflict is for kids' (b) 'they [teachers] think fighting is not necessary'. They realized that (c) teacher involvement often led to disciplinary action, and (d) involving teachers risked humiliation with peers. These perspectives may be well founded.

Teachers handling conflict assumed an authoritarian persona. The central focus for teachers' intervention in children's conflicts is often a forceful statement of school regulations, which reinforces the idea that conflict is about power, threat and coercion. Serious conflict was often referred to administrators who dealt with it in impersonal, bureaucratic manners.

Teachers play a pivotal role in children's conflicts. Research findings by both Shantz and Hobart (1989) and Opotow (1991) suggest that there is a significant link between the depreciative perceptions and blame placed upon the students, and the management strategies employed by the teacher. Many teachers felt that managing conflict wasted an undue amount of time and energy. Resolving conflict was seen as tedious, hence an authoritarian and bureaucratic approach often resulted. However, students did not seem to share this viewpoint. For instance in Opotow's study, students described the constructive outcomes of conflict. They stated:

> "You can find out how another person reacts to certain things. . .You can find out more about persons. Sometimes even the fights help you establish a relationship with somebody".
> "Without conflicts and fights you will never find out who you are and what type of person you like and what you want out of life." (1991 p. 420)

Overall conflict management in schools seems a misnomer, given the literature. Many teachers used strategies they believed

would manage conflict, but these did not enable students to develop important skills.

Findings of this Study

This study was exploratory in nature and consequently took a deliberately broad focus. The sample size was small to enable an in-depth investigation of issues from the perspectives of 'insiders'. Therefore, it is not claimed that findings can be generalized and it is acknowledged that the sample is not representative of all primary schools; the data reflects existing patterns of conflict and the perceptions of students and teachers in one Year 4 classroom in one primary school. However, the findings are consistent with conflict management literature and on-going informal discussions with teachers.

Student Behaviors

The findings indicate that conflict is a regular part of students' social interactions. A high proportion of disputes in both the playground and classroom involved issues of access and possession (of materials and equipment). Of the 48 incidents observed, only 13 were in the classroom; 10 of these involved access and possession (for example, joining in a group activity, taking stationery without permission), two involved physical contact (snatch, push) and only one involved put-downs and teasing. Thirty-five incidents were observed in the playground: 14 were related to access and possession, 11 involved physical contact and 10 involved put-downs and teasing.

Students' impressions and reports of conflict included physical actions and contact ('angry', 'fight', 'push', and 'kick'). They viewed it as an actively aggressive event, an event that leads to discord, differing perspectives ('don't agree', 'think differently', 'break up') and distressing outcomes ('upset', 'sad' 'sometimes frustrated').

Concurring with Opotow's (1991) study, perhaps because of the students' age and developmental levels, the data showed that students used a variety of simple, rather than more complex and

advanced methods of resolution, and that they responded to conflicts rigidly and reflexively. The most commonly used management strategies involved contending: the use of force, threat, verbal and physical tactics (55%).

Calling in a third party (seeking a teacher's assistance) and emotional responses (anger) were frequently demonstrated (10%). Resolving conflict through talk (compromising and problem solving) were strategies minimally practiced (6.5%) by students. Withdrawal (running or walking away) and smoothing (apologising and giving in) were seldom used.

The high proportion of conflicts destructively managed or 'dealt with' may be explained by several factors such as the students' developmental levels, social skill deficiencies, and the lack of learned and modeled alternative strategies. These findings concur with results of research conducted in schools in the United States of America and New Zealand. Both highlighted contending (the use of force and aggressive verbal and physical tactics) as one of the preferred management strategies used by students in conflict (De Cecco & Richards, 1974).

Teachers' Management Strategies

The teachers participating in this research held similar beliefs to those identified by researchers in previous studies of this kind (see for example, Shantz and Hobart, 1989 and Opotow, 1991). They perceived conflict to consist generally of physically combative actions and to be undesirable behaviour that led to adverse outcomes, referring to it in terms such as 'fight', 'argument', 'grizzle', 'hassles', and 'messy', views similar to those of the students. However, the data indicates that even though all viewed conflict to be negative, teachers responded in a variety of commanding ways. The most common reactions involved contending strategies, traditional and authoritarian tactics such as prejudging the situation, lecturing, and separating the disputing students from each other and imposing solutions.

Intervention was a commonly used strategy. It was common practice for students to 'tell teachers' and for teachers then

to 'fix it' rather than for students to utilise more effective conflict management and resolution skills. Teachers often reported feeling 'annoyed' and 'frustrated' by taking on the role of arbitrator, however observations revealed that teachers frequently chose to intervene in students' conflicts without giving students the opportunity to attempt resolving it on their own.

Teachers believed stopping conflict through intervention (playing the role of third party, discussions, problem solving, arbitration and appeasing students) to be successful in the playground and the classroom. Intervention was the preferred strategy as according to their judgment it quickly stopped the negative behavior and unpleasantness.

The majority of responses used by teachers in the playground were contending strategies (40%), including verbal abuse and physical involvement. Withdrawal (inaction, referring to other teacher, ignore and send away) was less frequently used (12%). Teachers occasionally responded to students' conflicts emotionally (anger and frustration, 9%). Although problem solving was recognized by teachers as an important classroom routine it was the least common approach (8%) for conflict management contexts. This is very similar to the findings of Smith, Inder and Ratcliff (1995). It is noted that not one teacher used smoothing or compromising.

The results of this research reveal that in the playground, preventative approaches were employed before conflicts arose or escalated. Teachers used techniques to suppress and discourage their development; these consisted of arbitration, strategies such as using humour and praising the positive in the student's negative behavior, withdrawal strategies (particularly avoidance tactics and ignoring behavior) and many contending strategies. Asserting authority over students was a common method used both in the playground and in the classroom. This was done, for example, by reprimanding without listening, by directing or by separating students. Findings reveal that when contending strategies were employed to manage disruptive behavior or escalating conflicts, the outcome generally involved disciplinary action such as demanding

students to be quiet, separating them or giving them time out or other consequences.

Discussion

Teacher Perceptions and Management

In this research there was a match between teacher and student perceptions of conflict and their selected management strategies. Teachers commonly described conflict as, ". . .an argument", ". . . an aggressive means to resolve an issue", involving, ". . .no compromise". When asked how they felt during conflict teachers expressed their feelings and emotions in the following terms," . . .cross", ". . .angry", ". . .hurt", upset". Not one teacher viewed conflict as positive, and this was reflected in the negative ways it was dealt with. For example: during 40 observed incidents there were 10 cases of teacher yelling; 14 imposed decisions; 2 physical actions (grabbing students); and 4 incidents where students were blamed and punished.

Teachers who considered student conflict to be 'grizzles', and not serious, often minimized the situation by suggesting alternative actions such as 'walk away' or 'play a different game'. Teachers who believed conflict to be the 'inability to compromise' and to have 'very clear rules', used an authoritarian approach regularly involving lecturing about school rules and incorrect behavior in a firm voice.

Students who believed "saying sorry"[1] to be important were inclined to resolve quarrels by smoothing the situation - apologizing, conceding, making suggestions to change the games and "be friends". Students who viewed conflicts to be "...fighting" and " . .getting into trouble" withdrew, avoiding the dispute or trying to keep the peace. Those who believed conflicts to be ". . .fighting, pushing and hitting someone" tended to use contending strategies such as physical action and verbal abuse.

As suggested in the literature, the results of the research support the notion that the way teachers and students perceive conflict often shapes the way they handle it. Furthermore, it mirrors

the way conflict is widely viewed in society: that it is a negative phenomenon, an event that should be avoided (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995). The view of conflict as an opportunity for student development was not observed in teacher responses.

The high proportion of destructively managed conflicts reported in this research suggests that students have not been taught or have not learnt the necessary skills for effective conflict management and resolution. Furthermore, it is likely that teachers do not understand, and therefore do not enact, constructive conflict management. Both students and teachers viewed intervention to be a successful strategy, as it stopped the disturbing and inappropriate behavior. The findings, however, reveal that conflicts recurred even though the destructive behavior was stopped, and many were left unresolved (i.e. without reaching satisfactory solutions).

Ideally the teacher should model and teach children the skills necessary to manage their conflicts constructively; that is, to teach the interpersonal skills necessary for effective communication and positive relationships (for example active listening, assertive speaking and interpreting non-verbal cues), and to show students effective and nonviolent methods of resolving conflicts (Cohen 1995). We suggest that the teachers' role in skilling students is of the utmost importance and that they need to reflect on their own beliefs and practices when reviewing conflict management techniques.

Conclusion

As teachers deal regularly with student conflict, their perceptions and management of conflict can have a powerful influence on students. Teachers need to consider and question their part in enhancing productive conflict management. What role do they have? For instance, is it to intervene to stop fights and sort out the students' problems to ensure playground and classroom harmony? Is it to be 'referee' or 'judge' between disputing students?

Schools are the main setting outside the home where students are able to learn, develop and trial social skills, concepts and tactics of dispute resolution. In schools where a positive

classroom prevails teachers are able to guide students towards social and interpersonal growth, and skill them to become effective conflict managers. As educators, it is vital to remember that schools and classrooms should be stimulating and rewarding places where students are able to develop constructive relationships. Effective use of conflict as a tool for learning fosters positive interpersonal relationships and impacts dramatically on all aspects of schooling. If teachers teach students to manage their own disputes productively, schools and classrooms will become more conducive to learning and development.

Conflicts will not be eliminated, but skilling students to effectively manage them, is both possible and necessary, and teachers play a vital role in helping students to do this. Teaching the principles and skills of conflict resolution relates to the fundamental mission of the school, which is to provide students with the skills necessary to function effectively in society. These life skills could help broaden individual perspectives and contribute significantly to more constructive relationships and learning success.

Notes

[1] -s have been used in this section to denote student responses

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