

Teaching Conflict and Conflict Resolution in School

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Literature Summary

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Introduction:

Schools typically are engaged in “negative peacemaking” when it comes to conflict resolution. This type of resolution is rather an avoidance technique rather than solution-based and uses bargaining to dissolve the issue.

Conflict resolution and “positive liberty” are taught concepts that can be incorporated into student governance, literature, mathematics, sciences, and social studies, to promote non violence as a learned behavior.

“Many young people are involved in violent activity, without necessarily understanding themselves as social actors who make choices that influence the course of that activity.” This type of unconscious behavior is one that educators have the ability to bring to light and teach alternatives and awareness to children who are engaged in violent (although sometimes unintentional) behavior.

School classrooms and youth settings are important places where this learned behavior takes place. These environments help children and youth develop:

- Understandings of conflict and its consequences
- Skills in recognizing and nurturing healthy relationships with people like and unlike themselves
- Knowledge of (and the capacity to navigate) the workings of power in social and political systems
- Skills and inclinations to use a broad repertoire of conflict resolution processes

School Discipline and Violence Prevention

Both indirect and direct learning of discipline and behavior management influence the youth and their understanding of themselves, conflict resolution and management, and peace facilitation.

“If classroom rules are negative, restrictive, unexplained, or delivered in a rigid legalistic manner, then students may be provoked to subvert or ignore the teacher’s goals, especially when not under direct surveillance.” When students are learning this in schools, it can and will translate outside of the classroom and shape their response to authority and discipline.

Addressing boys, lower-status students and minorities disproportionately is often a method used by teachers as these students are deemed ‘difficult’ and often offer the most severe consequences. These practices do not adhere to positive liberty and are often discouraging students from having democratic discussions in the school setting.

“The unintended consequence of negative peacemaking programs may be to marginalize people who have engaged in violence, rather than to educate the broad population of students regarding nonviolent alternatives.” Schools that have adopted a zero tolerance policy may seem as if they are taking a stand against violence and bullying but are failing to do the work and education necessary to prevent future violence. This technique of punishing the child or even expulsion does not directly address the resolution to the issue.

Peer Conflict Resolution Programs

Most conflict resolution programs are assessed based on the conflict resolution theory which shows:

- How many integrative (win-win) rather than distributive (win-lose) settlements were proposed
- To what degree particular skills and conflict management procedures are retained and used spontaneously

Many schools have implemented peer mediation groups in which a group of 20-30 students are trained in skill building workshops to mediate conflict to help their peers self resolve. The problem with this technique is school typical pick mediators who are students who are “doing well” in school and do not represent all populations nor students who are “at risk” for experiencing conflict.

Another conflict resolution program implemented in schools which was based on the cognitive development theory emphasizes “activating children’s reasoning processes for the promotion of their social development.” These practices provided a holistic approach to conflict resolution which included the teachers and students in discussions on strategic approaches to working out problems when they occur without the need for mediation or discipline. This approach did improve the overall ability amongst students in reasoning and solving problems.

Implicit curriculum about conflict: Involving diverse students school based leadership

“Only rarely do student organizations engage in comprehensive decision-making regarding significant school issues, giving careful attention to the inclusion of minority constituencies.”

By giving students even little leadership opportunities, it allows them to develop skills in conflict and peacemaking which can then be translated into the everyday classroom setting as they apply their knowledge of justice to their peers and set the example.

Many people see the disengagement in leadership amongst diverse groups as a disinterest rather than an implicit form of exclusivity. When teachers continuously refer ‘good’ students to leadership programs, diverse students see the issue as one that is irrelevant to them which results in further misrepresentation.

“Bringing student governance activities into the mainstream of school life, for example making them part of the classroom activity or scheduling governance meetings into regular slots during

the day, gives proportionately more students the opportunity to participate in democratic decision-making, and thus in developing an understanding of conflict and its resolution.”

Explicit curriculum about conflict: Pedagogies and subject-matter for active participation

Education on ways to mitigate conflict can be directly incorporated into current curriculum through the analyzation and conversation of conflict in stories embedded into literature and language classes as well as war, politic, and social studies issues.

“Comprehensive infusion of cooperation and conflict resolution into *both* school processes *and* core curriculum is more likely to yield significant and lasting learning, compared with more limited interventions.”

Encouraging students to have an active role in conversations surrounding conflict can have a positive effect on their willingness to engage in real life situations. The opposite is applicable when encouraging a passive role amongst students.

Because discussing conflict can be a triggering conversation based upon students' diverse backgrounds and prior knowledge, teachers and facilitators should prepare heavily and take considerable time planning on how they are going to listen and intercept into the conversation when the time is right.

Typically, debates are a common form of learning conflict resolution but there is caution to be had when planning a debate in that there is careful consideration towards including all students, especially those who aren't as aggressive or 'high achievers,' making sure that all have a voice and the comfort of speaking up during the debates.

Conclusion

“It is tempting to respond to educational problems with quick fixes, and thus to respond to the social problem of violence with 'negative peacemaking' strategies that put the lid on the symptoms of the problem.”

Long-term and sustainable conflict resolution education occurs not only through the curriculum but also everyday interactions and including all students in the conversation. Conflict is part of everyday life and should be taught in that way.

“At the times when conflict can be avoided in school, it often shouldn't be.”