

What Do You Mean "Think Before I Act?"
Conflict Resolution With Choices

A Teacher Inquiry Project

Submitted as Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
For the Degree
Master of Education

by
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"Stop laughing at me," yelled Michael as he shoved a classmate with full force into the bulletin board. His forehead was creased with lines, his eyes glared, and his mouth was one straight line. His clenched fists and stiff body showed me that he was not in the ~mood" to talk about the problem. As a first-year teacher, I confronted the issues of conflict daily in my classroom. My students did not come to first grade with the skills they needed to successfully and productively solve conflicts. Their first instinct was to hit, shove, push, and yell.

As a teacher, I wanted to guide my students into solving conflicts in a productive manner. Most of my students witnessed verbal and physical aggression in their neighborhoods and homes, so they used the models they emulated to find solutions.~ The solutions my students used were in a negative context, but they were not aware of other forms of conflict resolution. Thus, my goal for my action research project was to provide my children with various forms of conflict resolution, and model how to use them. I wanted my "babies" to use constructive social skills to seek solutions to the arguments, disagreements, fights, and differences of opinion they encountered, both directly and indirectly.

Purpose

The students in my first grade class live in a world where violence, both gang and domestic, is commonplace in their every day lives. My class consists of all minority students who live in low-income families where several families live in one home, and mobility (either family members or from home to home) is a constant. These children act out what they see in their environment, whether it be hitting, yelling, fighting, or more severe types of resolutions to conflict. Each week I had to complete numerous referrals to the office for children who solved conflicts in physically or verbally aggressive ways. By implementing the "Wheel of Choice" from Positive Discipline in the Classroom (Nelsen, 1997), I wanted to engage my students in positive forms of conflict resolution by giving them choices for solutions.

The research question I developed to focus my inquiry and investigation was "Will physically and verbally aggressive students solve conflicts in a constructive manner if provided (and given examples of) pro-social alternative solutions? I wanted my young students to decrease the use of physical and verbal aggression to solve conflicts, begin to increase the use of the" Wheel of Choice", and be able to verbalize the prob-

lem, their feelings and a constructive solution. My goal for my class was for the children to become prepared for the society-at-large by learning and utilizing constructive forms of conflict management as a six year old.

Literature Review

Numerous researchers have studied the effects of pro-social behavior and social skills on young children. Children are very egocentric, seeing the world from their own perspective. They focus on an aspect of a situation that is important to them (Bailey, 1994). Adults play an important role in helping children develop pro-social attitudes and behaviors. Children live what they learn (Wittmer & Honig, 1994; Nelsen, 1996). A major reason kids fight is that the adults in their lives haven't taught them other possibilities for resolving conflicts (Nelsen, 1996). Adults need to teach children to express their feelings, and to understand the feelings of others. Children also need to

be able to think through a problem step-by-step, and develop alternative solutions. If teachers take time to encourage, facilitate, and teach pro-social behaviors, children's pro-social interactions increase and aggression decreases (Wittmer & Honig, 1994).

Bailey (1994) states that children need to take responsibility for conflict resolution, allowing them to speak out in times of conflict. Conflict resolution turns the problem over to the students a little at a time. Students develop problem-solving skills by finding resolution ideas that work, and realize that using words is a more effective technique when solving conflicts (Sloane, 1998; Bailey 1994). Students become effective problem-solvers when teachers take the time to train students in problem--solving, and give them opportunities to practice these skills (Nelsen, 1996). When teacher intervention is not necessary, students should be able to follow the conflict resolution steps, which are (1) define the problem; (2) generate solutions; (3) reach agreements; (4) implement solutions; and (5) evaluate whether or not the problem was solved (Sloane, 1998). With these problem-solving steps in hand, and by taking responsibility for their actions, students will learn to listen, understand other perspectives, recognize problems, and look for alternative solutions (Bailey, 1994).

Class meetings provide an opportunity for utilizing social skills. The two main purposes of

class meetings are to help one another and solve problems. Class meetings help students develop a sense of value and belonging, by allowing them to share concerns, anxieties, celebrations, and venting frustrations. They are able to express concerns and solve conflicts non-threatening environment. During class meetings, students take a critical role in the decision-making process, using the goals of mutual respect and logical consequences. By learning to develop solutions

that are related, respectful, and reasonable, students learn skills that enable them to solve problems when they occur. Class meetings teach students skills they can use everyday of their lives (Nelsen, 1996; McEwan, Gathercoal, Donahue, Greenfield, & Stranglo, 1998).

Methods and Procedures

I implemented my action research project at Houston Elementary in Austin, Texas. Houston consists of a 95% minority population. A majority of the students come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. My first grade class consisted of twenty students, 12 boys and 8 girls. A fourth of the class was African American, a little less than three-fourths were Hispanic, and one child was White.

The research question I developed to guide my students into being responsible problem-solvers was, "Will physically and verbally aggressive students solve conflicts in a constructive manner if provided pro social alternative solutions?" My focusing questions were (1) Do the number of physical aggression incidents decrease? (2) Do the number of verbal aggressions decrease? (3) Which students are having the most difficulty with conflict resolution? Will this change?; (4) Are students able to verbalize problems, feelings, and solutions? and (5) Do the students use the " Wheel of Choice more to solve conflicts?

Before my research began, I observed five students that were having difficulty with problem solving. Their first instinct in times of conflict was to either physically or verbally act out-by hitting, pushing, fighting, yelling, or telling the teacher. I chose these five students as target students for my research. I wanted their behavior in times of anger to change to constructive problem-solving. During the eight-week study in my classroom, I implemented various forms of data collection and accountability for myself and my children. First, I introduced the "Wheel of Choice" to my class during a class meeting (see Sample A). The "Wheel of

Choice" provided eleven alternative choices for solving disagreements. A few of these strategies include (1) Apologize; (2) Tell them to stop; (3) Walk away; and (4) Give an I" message (Nelsen, 1996). Each step of the "Wheel of Choice" was introduced through role play (by myself and the students) and discussion. A large poster of the "Wheel of Choice" was hung on the classroom door for the children to easily use whenever the conflict required it. The students could also use the four problem-solving steps, which were (1) Ignore it.; (2) Talk it over respectfully with the other student.; (3) Agree with the other student on a solution.; and (4) Put it on the class meeting agenda.

Student surveys were verbally given to see how students viewed their own problem-solving strategies (See Sample B). Did they hit, yell, or work it out by talking and agreeing on a compromise? These surveys were conducted the first week and the eighth week to help the students and myself see their progress in terms of conflict resolution. A second form of data collection, was student conflict-resolution journals. Each of the five target students had conflict-resolution journals for writing about conflicts after they happened. The three questions the student had to answer were: (1) What was the problem? (2) How did you solve it? and (3) What is another way to solve it? At this point, I wanted the student to mentally think about the problem and how he solved it, write it down, and discuss it with me. A third resource for data collection was tally sheets for physical aggression, verbal aggression, and the "Wheel of Choice"

(See Page 110 of Positive Discipline in the Classroom). Each sheet was divided into eight weeks, where I made tally marks for the number of times these forms of conflict-resolution strategies occurred. By each tally mark I wrote the first letter of the student's name and what he did. I added up the tally marks at the end of each week. A fourth type of data collection, was a teacher reflective journal. In this journal, I weekly wrote about the occurrences in my classroom. Were the students having many conflicts? Were they using the "Wheel of Choice"? Was there any particular student who was having more trouble than others? As I kept this journal, I looked for trends in their behavior and the conflict-resolution strategies they chose. These four types of data guided me in viewing the success of my students as problem-solvers, and the use of choices in times of conflict.

After several weeks of writing observations in my journal, I noticed a target student who was having more difficulty with conflict resolution. I chose to keep observational notes on this child to see how he inter-

acted throughout the course of the day, and what may be setting the stage for the more difficult times where he was hitting, shoving, and yelling. He was observed for twenty minutes to one hour at a time.

Class meetings, from Positive Discipline (Nelsen, 1996), were introduced to my class in the first week of school. When the "Wheel of Choice" was introduced during my research, I analyzed the "agenda" to see if the students were using the strategies from the "Wheel of Choice" to solve conflicts as a group. The "agenda" was used to write down the problem or issue of concern of a particular child, and the list of solutions the class developed. In this agenda, I was looking to see if the types of resolutions had changed from "go to Dill", "take them to the principal", "go to time out", or "move their clothespin to red."

Data was collected in six different ways to analyze the importance of conflict resolution to my students. Would they be able to understand and utilize the alternative forms of problem solving from the "Wheel of Choice" to handle angry and frustrating situations?

Analysis of Data and Findings

The first step in analyzing my data was to code my journal responses, student journals, and observational notes for evidence of physical aggression, verbal aggression, and the use of the "Wheel of Choice? According to my coding at the beginning, the most reoccurring form of problem-solving was physical aggression. My students were choosing to hit, push, or fight to handle the problem. Later analysis showed that the students were able to utilize the "Wheel of Choice", especially during class meetings, and when contemplating conflicts and solutions in conflict-resolution journals.

When analyzing the student surveys, I chose to look at the last two questions where the students had to draw and dictate a time of conflict and how they solved it (See Sample B). I observed through these surveys that my students first reaction was to act out of anger rather than think about the problem. Once given the chance to analyze the situation and how to solve it, they could generate a more positive form of solving a problem. For instance, when Karen had a conflict with Lisa her initial reaction was to laugh at her and push her. She then thought about the problem, and solved the disagreement in a more productive fashion (See Figure 1). She was able to implement what she had learned from the "Wheel of Choice", and from class meet-

ings to tell a friend exactly how she was feeling, and what the problem was.

A second part of the student survey that I looked at was question 2 (See Sample B). I wanted to see if my students considered themselves independent problem-solvers, or did they need to ask for assistance. In the first survey, only two children (out of five) viewed themselves as independent problem-solvers. In the second survey, there were three children who felt like they could handle problems on their own. Two children still looked at assistance in problem-solving as essential to solving a conflict. The three who were able to solve conflicts with the other child involved felt more confident in their abilities as problem-solvers because they knew alternatives to hitting, pushing, yelling, and always asking adults to help.

Conflict-resolution journals were used to guide students into thinking about the problem, and the solution they chose to use. Through the journals, I was able to see what type of conflict-resolution strategy was used (e.g., if students were able to think of alternative choices for conflict management). I was also able to see which students had the most difficulty when conflicts arose. The most frequently used type of conflict resolution strategy was physical aggression, which was used 64% of the time while verbal aggression was used only 36% of the time. What was noted in the journals was that students were able to write positive forms of conflict resolution down after thinking about the problem. These solutions were usually based on the choices from the "Wheel of Choice." For example, Aaron was able to verbalize his feelings after a conflict with another child. His first reaction was to "push back", but when he thought about the conflict he thought of another more positive way to solve it. He chose to 'tell the other child how he felt' (see Figure 2).

After the weekly tally sheet totals were added, I then constructed a graph to visually see the increase and decrease in use of physical aggression, verbal aggression, and the "Wheel of Choice." As shown in Figure 3, I saw that verbal aggression decreased considerably from the first week of the research. The total for week one was 22 times, and the total for week eight was 4 times. I also saw that physical aggression decreased the first three weeks, but then increased dramatically during week four (from 4 times to 8 times). After seeing this increase, I analyzed the names on the tally sheet to see which student(s) were solving conflicts in this way. The same student had used this strategy for all eight conflicts. The number of physical acts of aggression did decrease from 8 times to 2 times by the end of the research. Although the number of incidences of physical and verbal aggression did decrease, there was not a great number of times that the 'Wheel of Choice' was used

based on the data on the tally sheet. The highest number of times the students used the "Wheel of Choice" was 4, during week 2 of the research, one week after the "Wheel of Choice" was introduced. My students were learning to solve conflicts in ways that did not need physical and verbal aggression.

My reflective journal and observational notes were color coded similar to the student journals and surveys. I was looking for trends in types of conflict resolutions used. I also wanted to see which students were successful at using the "Wheel of Choice," and which students needed more assistance. My journal was a roller coaster of colors. The first few entries showed only physical and verbal aggression. Then, one or two days with the "Wheel of Choice" used at least once. By the middle of the research, the "Wheel of Choice" was being used more by students, especially in

class meetings. Strategies such as "I" messages, walk away, and ignore it, were used to help other students during times of conflict. Through my journal I found that my students were capable of using the "Wheel of Choice" when given the opportunity and time to think about the problem.

Due to the notes in my reflective journal and my own observations I selected one target student who appeared to have more difficulty when solving conflicts. Michael's initial response was to hit, shove, or yell, "STOP!" I chose to take observational notes of Michael when interacting with others in the class to see when he had the most difficulty. From the color-coding of physical aggression and verbal aggression, and comparing the conflicts in the observational notes and the student journals, I clearly saw that Michael had more difficulty with conflict when he was individually engrossed in an activity, and another child disturbed him. One illustration of this is when Michael was reading, and he was bumped by Tim. He hit Tim on the arm, and yelled, "You did that!" He then went back to his work, almost unaware of the feelings of the other student. What I did notice from the notes was that if Michael had time to consider the choices for conflict resolution he would make a positive choice. I especially noticed this in his conflict-resolution journal where he wrote "Wheel of Choice" solutions for the resolutions to all the problems he had.

Class meetings provided my students with an atmosphere of mutual respect and security to appreciate each other and solve conflicts. For each class meeting, I wrote one child's specific problem or issue of concern, and the list of solutions the class developed to help solve it in the class meeting agenda. During my research, I color-coded the solutions that used the "Wheel of Choice" in orange. At first, only one or two solu-

tions used the "Wheel of Choice" strategies. The other solutions revolved around punishment for the child, such as "send him to the office", "move his clothespin to red", or "call his mom." As my research continued, I noticed that more and more of the solutions related to the "Wheel of Choice." The solutions my student were using were (1) Tell them to stop; (2) Tell them how you feel; (3) Walk away; and (4) Ignore it. My children also knew to ask someone else for help (like the counselor) if another solution doesn't work. Given the opportunity to discuss problems as a group, and develop solutions helped my young students become effective problem-solvers.

From my research, I found that my students needed the time to think about the problem in order to provide and utilize a more constructive form of conflict resolution. My students could verbally and in writing give productive and positive strategies for conflict management if allowed time to think. During a time of conflict, the initial response was to hit, push, call names, yell, or tell. My students were capable of developing the skills they needed to become successful problem-solvers if given more practice with the strategies necessary to handle their anger and frustration during a time of conflict.

Conclusion

Young children are eager to imitate the adults in their environment Children role--play what they observe the adult role models in their lives doing. My class came to me with a background of violence and negative forms of conflict resolution. I could not take away the environment or role models of my students, but I could teach them better ways of handling anger, frustration, and differences of opinion.

My students are on the road to successful problem-solving, both at school and beyond. Through this research I learned that students need time and practice to change habits of negative conflict management. They need to practice using constructive strategies for handling problems to be able to utilize positive conflict resolutions as their first reaction, instead of fighting or yelling. The "Wheel of Choice" has empowered my students as problem-solvers. It provided them with the knowledge and ability to make a difference when conflicts arise.

Although my students did not initially solve conflicts in a productive manner, I knew they understood the role of problem-solving as a group. At the end of the year, I asked the students why we solved problems and concerns as a group during class meetings. A successful accomplishment of my research became apparent

when Lisa said, "When we solve problems together we have more than one idea. if one doesn't work we have more to try. If we tried to solve problems by ourselves there would be only one thing to do.' By implementing class meetings and using the 'Wheel of Choice' my "babies' were given the resources they needed to use constructive social skills to seek solutions to the problems they would encounter as they grow.

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3. Draw a picture of one time

U.j

4. Draw a picture of how you solved

You

Figure 1

Student Survey

Name: Date:

1. When you get mad at a friend do you....

- A. hit your friend
- B. yell at your friend
- C. tell an adult
- D. tell your friend how you feel

2. When I have a fight I fix it myself

- A. yes
- B. no

3. Draw a picture of one time you had a fight with a friend. (Teacher will dictate.)

4. Draw a picture of how you solved that problem. (Teacher will dictate.)

Tally Sheet
Verbal Aggression

Week #1:

Week #2:

Week # 3:

Week # 4:

Week # 5:

Week # 6:

