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Conflict resolution in teacher training: Understanding teachers' needs

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Abstract

One of the current themes in identity and citizenship education is conflict resolution. However, children must be helped to find nonviolent alternatives for solving their conflicts. Cowie, Dawn and Sharp (2003) argue that schools have an important role in reducing the risk of pupils becoming violent. Peace Education is thus crucial for establishing peace in a consensual way and for maintaining it over time (Johnson and Johnson, 2005). According to Johnson and Johnson (2005), students need training in how to nurture a peaceful society. It is in their first years that children build their social and emotional competences, making this the best age to introduce conflict resolution skills. The objective of this project is to develop and implement a peace education conflict resolution programme that will enable preschool teachers to promote the development of social and emotional skills in preschool children. The specific aims are to understand what preschool teachers think about conflict and conflict resolution; to understand how preschool teachers solve conflicts on their classes; to understand which methods or applications preschool teachers use; to understand their difficulties in using conflict resolution strategies; to develop a new programme based on preschool teachers opinions; to integrate this programme on initial teacher training at universities and to implement the programme in preschools. The results of this project are expected to be the basis for the development of a peace education conflict resolution programme that will have an important application in schools and in teacher training universities.

Keywords: *conflict resolution; peace education, teacher training*

Introduction

The use of violence and bullying towards teachers and peers has been increasing as an expression of existing conflicts in schools. Johnson and Johnson (2005) define conflict resolution as solving the problem so the conflict is ended. The social context plays an important part since conflict can arise from interpersonal relationship difficulties, from tensions between groups or gangs, or may be embedded in the social systems of the school or community. Some children are able to use their own inner resources to deal with conflicts. This quality of resilience may arise from the young person's emotional make-up or their history of friendship and close attachments (Cowie, 2011). However, children do not necessarily have the skills to do this on their own. Many children and young people must be helped to find nonviolent alternatives for resolving their conflicts in non-violent ways. Cowie, Jennifer and Sharp (2003) consider that schools have an important role in reducing the risk of pupils becoming violent.

Being a growing problem, several initiatives concerning violence reduction around the world have been taking place. Some of the initiatives involve telephone helpline services (Austria, Spain, United Kingdom), or school guards (Portugal), as indicated by Smith (2006). However, the author highlights that this approach is giving way to an approach based on pedagogical principles and on the encouragement of pupils' self-esteem and responsibility, facilitating conflict resolution.

Other initiatives for conflict resolution involve research groups (The Australian Institute or the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research in Sweden), training programmes (e.g. the Centre of Peace and Conflict Studies, Australia; the Conflict Resolution Network; the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies, UK; the ADR Institute of Ontario; the MMM Training Solutions, India; the International Program in Conflict Resolution and Mediation, Israel), on-line information (e.g. Transnational Perspectives, France; Culture of Peace News Network) or school programmes (Conflict Resolution Schools Development or People for Peace, Australia).

In this context, Peace Education is a key for establishing peace in a consensual way, maintaining it over time (Johnson and Johnson, 2005). Conflict resolution educators consider that a "broader repertoire of behavioural skills for dealing with conflict would result in a significant reduction of the violence" (Reardon, 1999, p. 13). The author stresses that violent behaviour often occurs because the perpetrators lack skills or knowledge of alternative nonviolent strategies for conflict processing and resolution (Reardon, 1999). Thus, peace education must considerer that education is for all children, building a common identity, through the use of cooperative learning. According to Johnson and Johnson (2005), 'these include building and maintaining cooperative systems, making decisions about the difficult issues involved in maintaining pace, and resolving conflicts among the relevant parties in constructive ways` (p. 280). The authors state that students need training in how to nurture a peaceful society. In this sense, conflict resolution programmes aim to teach students the abilities they need to regulate their own and their peers' behaviour so that conflicts may be resolved constructively (Johnson and Johnson, 2005).

These programmes may be aimed at specific age levels and development differences need to be taken into account. Young children are more rule oriented, less able to be empathic and to understand concepts such as reciprocity, as well as less able to engage in higher level reasoning (Johnson and Johnson, 2005). However, it is in these first years that children build their social and emotional competences, which makes these ages the best to introduce conflict resolution skills.

The *PrÉ:Programa de Competências* (PrÉ: training skills programme) is a prevention programme in preschools in Portugal, in implementation since 2006. Children are led to develop their self-control and emotional skills. Later on, children' self-esteem and social skills are also developed. The results indicate the benefits of this project for children and for teachers. More specifically, there is an improvement in children's behaviour, self-control and individual or group self-confidence. Children are more able and willing to talk about their feelings, and there is an increasing cooperation between peers, with more respectful and helpful connections amongst children. Teachers also consider that this programme led them to new knowledge and new learning experiences. Evidence

indicates that this is a structured programme which facilitates working with the group and enhances teachers' practices, improving their conflict resolution skills (*PrÉ: Programa de Competências*).

To summarize, the increasing violence in schools around the world and in Europe, specifically, is of major concern. The development of peace education conflict resolution programmes will promote the development of social and emotional skills that will help children to find nonviolent alternatives for solving their conflicts.

However, and despite the efforts, the number of peace education conflict resolution programmes is still not enough to prevent the increasing violence in European schools. On the other hand, these programmes are seldom applied at preschool ages. In this sense, the 'Peace education and conflict resolution in the classroom in teacher training – a comparative perspective' project has the following aims:

- To understand what preschool teachers think about conflict and conflict resolution;
- To understand how preschool teachers solve conflicts on their classes;
- To understand which methods or applications preschool teachers use;
- To understand their difficulties in using conflict resolution strategies;
- To develop a new programme based on preschool teachers opinions;
- To integrate this programme on initial teacher training at universities;
- To implement the programme in preschools.

The means to achieve this aims are through the application of a teacher's survey that will enable the researchers to achieve their goals. It is expected that the results of this survey will give useful information on teacher's perceptions and practices on conflict resolution as well as an understanding of their major difficulties in helping children solving their conflicts. These results will be the basis for the development of a peace education conflict resolution programme that will have an important application in schools and universities around the world.

Teachers survey sheet

The Teachers survey sheet on conflict resolution was developed by EbruAktan, in Turkey, to assess teacher's practices, thoughts and needs regarding conflict resolution in preschool children. Besides a series of socio-demographic questions, the survey addresses the following subjects:

- Basic thoughts on the concept of conflict
- Concepts related to conflict resolution skills
- Which activities would be more important in addressing concepts related to conflict?
- Concepts of conflict in the physical environment
- How often teachers work on concepts regarding conflict resolution skills in different corners of interest

- How often teachers work on concepts of conflict in different activities
- Who do teachers think would support them in order to make arrangements regarding the concepts of conflict in the physical environment of the group?
- The equipment / materials regarding the concepts of conflict in the interest corners
- Teacher's rank of the reasons they think cause the most conflicts among children
- Teachers views on how frequently children in the preschool period react to situations that create conflict
- Teachers views on the importance of different social skills
- How often teachers use the methods of conflict resolution skills
- Ideas for a program which is intended to be developed regarding conflict resolution skills

Participants

The Teacher Survey Sheet was answered online by 79 participants in a two month period; 90% of the schools where participants worked or had internships were in urban areas. Of the participants only 6% were male, which makes this an almost exclusively female sample. As for the nature of the school, 55% worked in private schools, while 45% worked in public schools. As to what concerns the age of the groups, 22% taught in 3 to 4 classes, 14% in 4 to 5, 17% in 5 to 6, and 45%, the biggest group taught in heterogeneous classes. The average number of students in classes was 21, ranging from 10 to 26. This presents a picture of highly populated preschool classes.

As to what concerns the diversity of the classes, 36% of the participants had disabled students in their current classes, 33% had immigrant students, 22% and 18% had respectively racial and ethnical minority students. The number of classes with linguistic minority students was 18%; and 25% of the participants had students belonging to more than one of the previous categories.

Results

When questioned if they would consider participating in a seminar, a meeting or a conference regarding 'Conflict Resolution Skills' in pre-school education, all of the participants, answered affirmatively. Likewise, when questioned if after receiving an education related to conflict resolution skills in preschool education they would practice it in their own program, all answered yes.

Also, when questioned if people working in schools (teachers, administrators, auxiliary personnel, etc.) should be given training for conflict resolution skills, 44% agreed and 53% strongly agreed. As to what concerns the teacher's thoughts on conflict, the mean answers to the related questions are presented in the following graphs.

Table 1. Basic thoughts on the concept of conflict – About the self

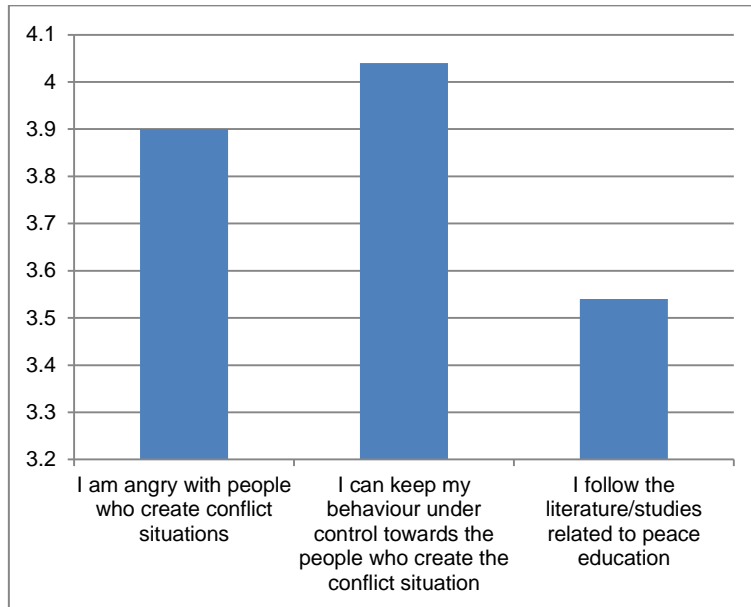


Table 2. Basic thoughts on the concept of conflict – Knowledge about the children

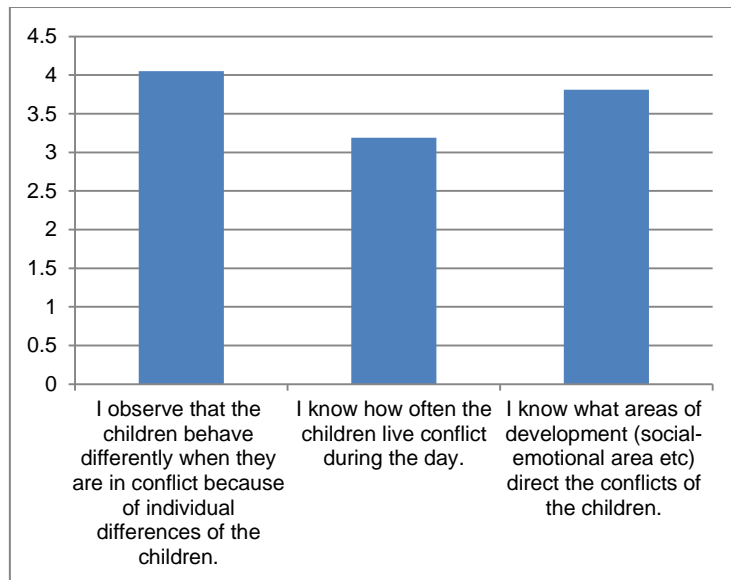
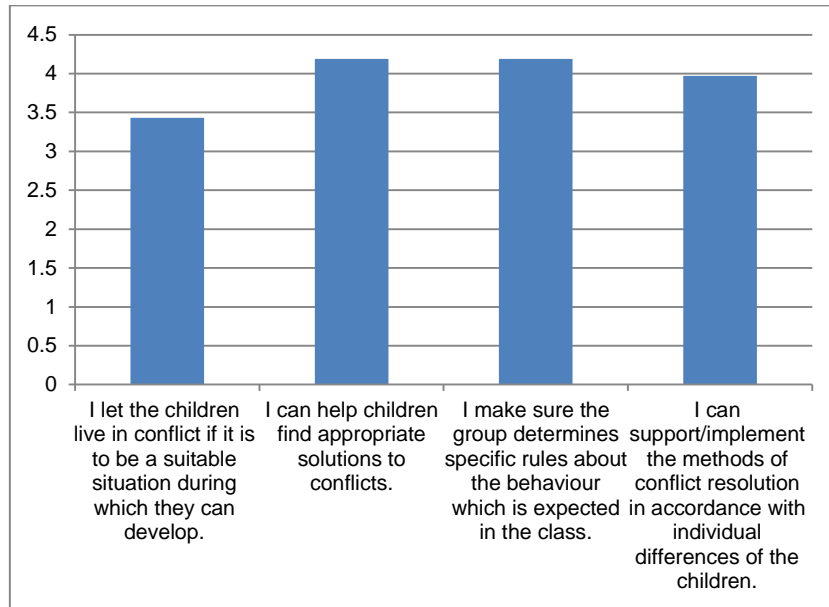
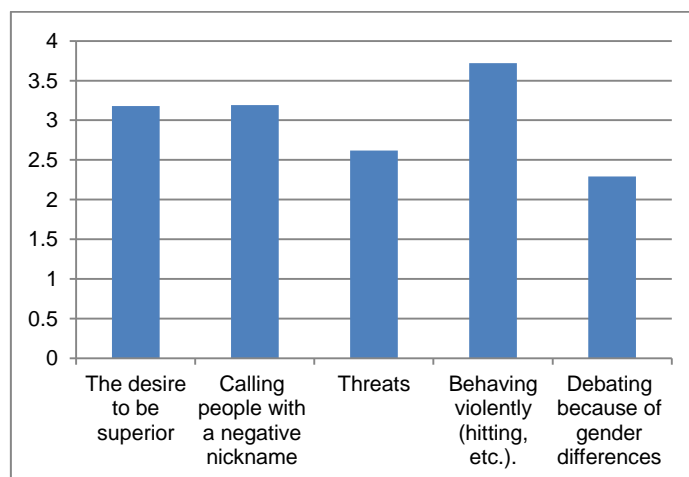


Table 3. Basic thoughts on the concept of conflict - Procedures



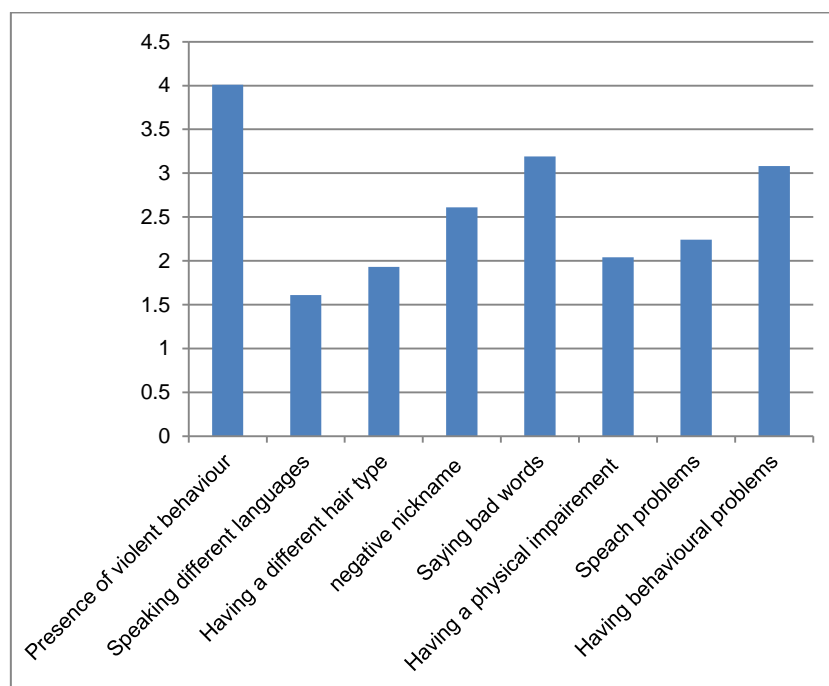
As can be seen from the previous figures, most teachers find they can handle conflict, although the average shows this confidence is not absolute. Also they are slightly hesitant towards their knowledge of conflict, with averages below four (agreement) in important questions such as the knowledge of the frequency of conflicts and the developmental areas that direct them.

Table 4. Causes of conflict



As can be seen in the previous graph, the ranking of causes of conflict was varied. It seems teachers do not have a unique view as to what most commonly causes conflict amongst children. However there seems to be a tendency to view violent behaviour as the main cause of conflict followed by the desire to be superior and calling people by a negative nickname. As to what concerns Teachers views on how frequently children in the preschool period react to situations that create conflict, the following figure presents the results.

Table 5. Situations that create conflict

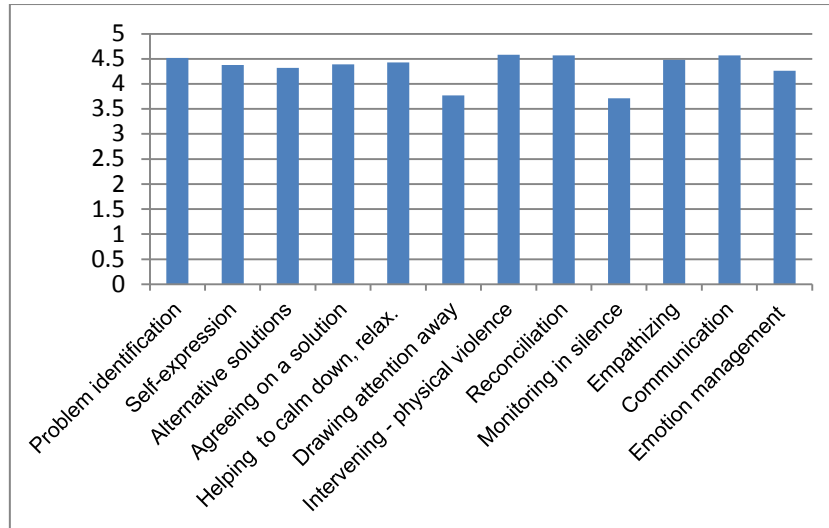


As can be seen in the graph, violent behaviour seems to be the conflict situation most children respond to, followed by bad words and behavioural problems. The issues about differences, which could generate discrimination and conflict, seem to rarely develop into conflict. Different languages and hair types, physical impairment and speech problems seem to be accepted and never or rarely give way to conflict. This data seem to show inclusive and tolerating classrooms, where noticeable differences do not usually cause conflict situations.

Methods to develop conflict resolution skills

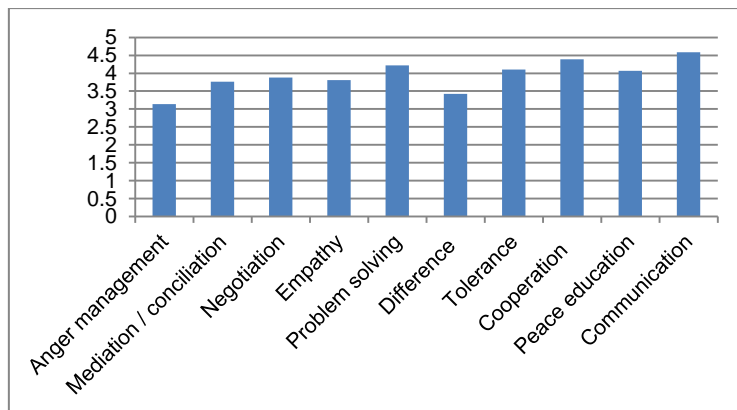
The results concerning the frequency of use of methods to develop conflict resolution skills are presented in the next figure.

Table 6. Methods of developing conflict resolution skills



These results show that teacher report the frequent use of a wide range of methodologies. Tellingly the most passive ways to deal with a conflict - drawing attention away from the conflict and to a different location and monitoring the situation in silence- seem to be the less reported. Although almost all the conflict resolution skills methods are highly reported, intervention in the presence of physical violence and reconciliation seem to be the most common. Teachers were asked about the frequency they approached Concepts Related to Conflict Resolution Skills. In average all concepts were approached at least sometimes (3), with many being treated usually (4), as can be seen on the following graph.

Table 7. Concepts related to conflict resolution skills



Analyzing the figure, communication skills, cooperation and problem solving are the most addressed concepts. Peace education and tolerance are also mentioned by teacher as concepts approached usually. Anger management is the concept least dealt with.

Discussion

The teachers sampled in this study seem to agree on the need for peace education and for the acquisition of knowledge for the promotion of conflict resolution amongst children. Although mostly positive in their answers about their dealing with conflict and teaching of conflict resolution skills, teachers seem slightly hesitant towards their own feeling about conflict and their knowledge of the frequency and developmental interactions regarding conflict in children.

Teachers seem to consider physical conflict as the main cause for conflict amongst children also as the situation most likely to lead to conflict, and, not surprisingly, as the main area of teacher intervention in the promotion of conflict resolution methods. This shows that for many teachers, conflict is mostly physical conflict, which may signify that other forms of conflict are being ignored or denied. Also, the study shows inclusive classrooms, where visible differences and handicaps only rarely give way to conflict. This can be the result of how high teachers promote or address empathy and cooperate on. However, although most of the results give a positive view, teacher acknowledge their difficulty to deal with people who cause conflict situations and refer anger management as a concept not usually addressed, and emotion management as the third last used method of conflict resolution. This can indicate that the issue of emotional self-control is a side of conflict resolution where the teacher's samples seem to be less comfortable.

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