

Conflict Resolution Education to Elementary School Learners Building Peace for Life

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Abstract

Facing conflict is accepted and expected part of life and one cannot do anything to avoid it. Life in classroom, play field and school is not free of it. Teachers often complain that half of their classroom time is consumed in dealing with conflicts that their students face routinely, thereby inevitably ruining away the peace in the classrooms. It is a fact that a good experience learned at a young age is nevertheless forgotten. Breaking the conflict in the elementary classrooms is thus the first step in and an integral part of elementary classrooms to promote peace among young learners. The question is thus how? In this context, the paper identifies four common types of conflicts in elementary classrooms: touch-me-not, I am the boss, you love me / love me not, and I am the best. In continuation, it suggests four strategies such as role play, reflective listening, and dealing with feelings, and talks it out for resolving such conflicts among elementary school learners. Understanding the consequences of conflicts through the successful use of these strategies may empower the elementary learners with the skills of effective communication and emotional wellbeing which they can use in life outside the classrooms to build peace for life. This will ensure that they grow up into a responsible adult, thereby making a remarkable impact as positive agent of peace for a state of peaceful co-existence of all.

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We all face conflict in our lives as a matter of routine. It is expected, natural, and accepted part of life and one can do little to avoid it. Dewey (1922, cited in Coleman, Deutsch and Marcus, 2014) said that “Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving.”

The society at present is in crisis for it has utterly failed in resolving the conflicts. Since the school is a miniature of our society, the issue of conflicts has unfortunately seeped into our classrooms thus making the whole education system hollow. We have multiple conflicting issues in the classrooms and schools reflected through misunderstanding among student, teachers, between students and teachers, as well as between teachers and parents. The potential for conflict exists because students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders have different needs, competing interests, and varied views, scarcity of choices, distinguishable understandings, and possibly different value systems. These yield emotions running high on a variety of issues.

The nature of conflicts in the elementary classrooms is invariably different from what we see in our classrooms of secondary and higher secondary schools. The conflicts experienced by children are not about individual identities, but a reflection of the types of conflict, they

often come across in the society. The followings are the glimpse of some common types of conflict which a teacher encounters in an elementary classroom:

Type 1 Conflict: Touch-me-not:

Little Tina frequently shouts on her classmate if they touch her. Sometimes, her mood is so sour that she gets into fighting or shoving one of her classmates. Resultantly, she has no friend in the class and she feels lonely.

Type 2 Conflict: I am the boss:

Soham is the big boss in the class. He does not pay attention to his work and is often attracted to what others have brought. He does not bother to ask any of his classmates for whatever he needs but takes away anything which he likes. The teacher has a tough time with Soham because he never listens to her instruction. The classmates hate Soham and he has no real friends in the class.

Type 3 Conflict: You love me / love me not:

Juhi is teacher’s pet. Ms. Sundriyal often appreciates her for work and sincerity. One Day, Juhi is snubbed by Ms. Sundriyal for some reason which Juhi considered not that important. Juhi is deeply hurt and feels that her teacher no more loves her. Juhi has started hating Ms. Sundriyal and her study is being affected.

Type 4 Conflict: I am the best:

Suha and Zahra are classmates. They both are good in painting. The class teacher has asked them to decorate the bulletin board. Suha

wants the decoration to be little glitzy and pictorial while Zahra wants it to be simple and more descriptive. Both Suha and Zahra want their idea to be followed and start quarrelling. As a result, they have failed to complete the task as well as have lost their friendship.

The children at elementary stage are quite immature and mostly dependent on a mature person to guide them to check out the correct behaviour. The children are so desperate to sort out their conflicts that they often make wrong decisions. Their immaturity makes the whole situation increasingly volatile.

We often hear the teachers from kindergarten to twelfth grade complaining that half of their classroom time is consumed in dealing with conflicts that their students face on a daily basis. This time could have otherwise been used for quality teaching-learning process. It necessitates resolving conflicts.

As childhood is a reflection of the personality of the young age we need to identify and use or apply measures to resolve conflicts at this innocent stage rather than nipping it later. One needs to understand that a good experience learned at a young age is nevertheless forgotten. The challenge for schools, as also for the wider community, is to find ways of managing conflict constructively so that the young learners can learn and grow with this experience. Teachers need to find ways for assisting

students in making them understand conflicts and their consequences, resolving conflicts, and keeping their behaviour problems arising out of conflicts to a minimum which are inevitably ruining peace in the classrooms. Breaking the conflict in the elementary classrooms is the first step to create a just and peace loving society. The goal is, thus, to equip the learners with skills to resolve conflicts that they can use in life outside the classrooms and school. Resolution of conflict, thus, should be an integral part of elementary classrooms. The question is thus how?

HOW TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS?

The common general response to conflicts among elementary learners is fights, insults, threats or becoming passive by either ignoring the conflict or walking away or refusing to listen, or giving in. Another common response is to demand or expect the solution to come from an authority figure such as a parent, teacher, or principal. Teaching conflicts to students is another potential means. In the words of Kreidler (2005), "If you take time to teach conflict resolution, you'll eventually have more time to teach". The theorists like Piaget, Erikson, and Vygotsky believed that conflict helps the child to develop many important life skills. Conflict may be healthy if guidance approach, rather than traditional discipline, is used when dealing with elementary learners' conflicts. While each of

these responses is appropriate under some circumstances, a collaborative approach to resolve conflict is often the most appropriate and sometimes the only method to obtain satisfactory and long-term results.

Conflict is not the culprit rather how we respond to it is the issue. Destructive conflict can result in violence, loss of friendship, or unnecessary emotional turmoil. On the other hand, constructive resolution of conflicts can lead to higher motivation, better communication, and innovation.

The teacher needs to make the learners understand the importance of calming down their pent up emotions. In the words of Goncu and Cannella (1996:60), "It is the responsibility of the teachers to make available to children, during their effort to resolve children's conflicts, culturally valued skills that children can use later without the adult's assistance". The action of calming down stops the individual from being impulsive and helps her/him to reflect upon her/him behaviour. Children though very young at this stage, are quite aware of their feelings. The interference of a mature mind helps them to channelise their emotion in the right direction. The teacher needs to make the learner understand that they need to express their emotions assertively and not aggressively. Thus, conflict resolution education is the best alternative to resolve conflicts among young children.

WHAT CONFLICT RESOLUTION EDUCATION IS?

Conflict resolution education, in general, refers to strategies that enable students to handle conflicts peacefully and cooperatively outside the traditional disciplinary procedures. Hunter (2008), author of *Creating a Culture of Peace in the Elementary Classroom*, opined that 'It is important to teach children about the diversity in the classroom and community around them. When learners are informed about the differences among the peers, they can be more culturally sensitive and accepting. Conflict resolution is designed to provide students with a neutral, yet safe, environment where they can express their point of view and discuss issues in a mutually satisfactory manner'. Conflict resolution education models, teaches in developmentally relevant and culturally appropriate ways, a variety of processes, practices, and skills designed to address individual, interpersonal, and institutional conflicts, and to create safe and welcoming learning environments (Prichard and Druliner, 2002). These skills, concepts, and values help individuals to understand conflict dynamics, and empower them to use communication and creative thinking to build healthy relationships and manage and resolve conflicts fairly and non-violently. According to the Crawford and Bodine (1996), "The purposes of conflict resolution are

to provide an environment in which each learner can feel physically and psychologically free from threats and danger and can find opportunities to work and learn with others for the mutual achievement of all. The diversity of the school's population is respected and celebrated." Conflict resolution education is thus an imperative part of classrooms which tends to make the learners discover and learn approaches and strategies to resolve their conflicts. In conflict resolution education, the skills used in mediation are learned experientially and applied to different situations in life, including that of in classroom, play field, school, and wider community.

INTERVENTIONS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG ELEMENTARY LEARNERS

In view of four common conflicts being faced by the elementary learners, we suggest following four different strategies as interventions which for time and again have proved efficient for sorting the things out for young learners:

Role Play Strategy

Role play as a strategy definitely works out for those who are in conflicting situations. It helps the individual to identify the problems with the victim's perspective and also helps in developing empathy and compassion. Putting yourself in other's shoe is always good as you get a fair chance to know the correct

reason as to why they are behaving in that way. The strategy could be used as a group activity as well as an individual activity for the aggrieved party concerned. The teacher could provide the learners with hypothetical situation or make them work for real conflict situation arising as and then in the classroom.

Type 1 Conflict: Touch-me-not: Tina has fought with Rahul because he has touched her pencil-box. Tina is terribly upset.

The teacher intervenes and asks Tina and Rahul to sort out the issue by using role play. They are both told that they will be playing the corresponding roles. Here is a check at the conversation they have:

Teacher: Rahul and Tina listen now. You are going to play the role. Rahul will be Tina for a while and Tina you will be Rahul. Let's see how you two sort the thing out.

Rahul (Tina): Hey stop! Stop! How dare you touch my pencil box?

Tina (Rahul): No, no I just meant to see it Tina. I was just to have a look. By the way, your pencil box is beautiful.

Rahul (Tina): Shoves Tina (Rahul). How could you touch it? It's mine (snatches and pushes Tina).

Teacher: OK, children it's over.

Tina and Rahul you acted really well. Now you both tell me what you learned.

Rahul: I realised that it was my mistake that I took Tina's box without her permission. I will take care of it now. Sorry Tina.

Tina: Oh Missy I realised my mistake. I did not like the way Rahul snatched away the pencil box from my hand. I was just taking a look. By the way, I have understood how he must have felt when I did the same with him. I am really sorry Rahul.

Tina: Miss, I am really sorry to you but I will check myself next time.

Comments: The teacher needs to develop patience and compatibility while solving the conflict. The problem has to be sorted out from the learner's perspective and not that of the teacher. It will help in making the impact long lasting.

Reflective Listening Strategy

Teachers often know that conflict among the young learners is mainly due to the fact that no one wants to listen but loves to impose his ideas and thoughts on others. Children at this stage are so filled with energy that their mind is more in the action. The teachers need to train the young learners the importance of reflective listening. Reflective listening means to listen with an open mind. The teacher needs to promote reflective listening as it helps in understanding the other person.

Type 2 Conflict: I am the boss: Soham has eaten away Namit's lunch. Namit has objected to Soham's action but he was warned by Soham not to tell it to anyone. Namit is teary and feels insulted.

Some children who have watched the incident have complained it to Miss Lisa. Miss Lisa calls Soham and Namit to meet her after the class.

Miss Lisa: "Soham and Namit you both are good boys. What happened in the class?"

Soham: Miss I did not do anything. You must believe me.

Miss Lisa: OK Soham, Let Namit speak.

Namit (almost in tear): Miss he took away my lunch and just ate it. I have nothing to eat. My mother has prepared my favourite, Cheese Sandwich, and I did not even have a single bite.

Soham: Miss I am sorry but I was hungry too. Miss I did not bring my lunch and Namit had a big box for himself. I wanted to return after having a small bite but it was so yummy.

Namit: I hate you Soham, you are trouble in the class. Nobody loves you.

Miss Lisa: Namit stop arguing among yourselves. I understand that Soham has done a wrong thing but that does not give you an opportunity to speak like this. Soham, don't you think what you did was wrong.

Soham: Miss I understand you are right but I was hungry you know. However, I can say sorry to Namit.

Comments: The teacher understands that this particular conflict requires involvement of an external party. Soham's problem has got a link with his problems at home. Soham needs immediate intervention before he becomes a trouble at school.

Talk it out Strategy

The elementary learners are often unaware of the feelings of others and

casually end up hurting each other. The teacher at this stage can play the role of facilitator and intervene in case of a conflict. The children in conflict are motivated to talk about their problem and the resolution reached is often by making them take a decision. The basic purpose is to make the child independent in decision making process and also to develop problem solving skills.

Type 3 Conflict: You love me / love me not: Juhi is teacher's pet. Ms. Sundriyal often appreciates her for work and sincerity. One day, Juhi is snubbed by Ms. Sundriyal for some reason which Juhi considered not that important. Juhi is deeply hurt and feels that her teacher no more loves her. Juhi has started hating Ms. Sundriyal and her studies are being affected.

Ms. Sundriyal: Juhi, can I have a word with you in private?

Juhi (hesitantly): Sure Miss.

Ms. Sundriyal: What has been troubling you my child? You look so upset.

Juhi: Nothing miss. I am alright. I do not have a problem.

Ms. Sundriyal: Yeah Juhi! Will you just help to carry these books to my cabin? I think we will sit there and talk.

Juhi: Of Course Miss.

Ms. Sundriyal: So Juhi what did you have for lunch? By the way, you painted the board really well.

Juhi: Miss I want to say something. I hope you will not be upset with me.

Ms. Sundriyal: Yes Juhi tell. I am listening to you.

Juhi: Miss I thought you hated me.

Miss Sundriyal: Oh Juhi! What gave you that feeling?

Juhi: But Miss you scolded me without reason and you never gave me an opportunity to explain.

Miss Sundriyal: I am sorry Juhi but I never thought that you will feel so bad about it. I am really very sorry if it is the thing which has made you so upset.

Juhi: Miss it's fine. I am happy to know that you still love me and you are my best teacher and my friend too.

Comments: The teacher needs to come down to the level of the individual learner who is in conflict. Accepting mistakes and calming down often helps in patching the misunderstanding. If the teacher would not have taken the pain to talk about the problem with the child, she might have never understood her problem and would have lead to an emotional blockage. This would have surely disrupted the child's personality.

Dealing with Feelings Strategy

Emotional awareness is a key to resolve conflicts. The teacher needs to teach the learners to identify their feelings and emotions and to communicate effectively in case of disagreement. The teacher must make the learners learn the skill to find solution in case a learner is in anger, fear, or pain. Communicating feeling is the best way to guarantee that they

are neither sedated nor ignored to create an emotional impairment. The teacher can use certain activities for developing the required skills among the learners.

Type 4 Conflict: I am the best: Suha and Zahra are best friends. They have fought on a petty issue. Suha and Zahra are feeling miserable.

Teacher: What is the problem with you Suha? You look troubled.

Suha: Miss Nothing, it's only because of Zahra.

Teacher: But she is your best buddy.

Suha: I know Miss but I think she does not love me.

Teacher: Why? Did you two fight?

Suha: No Miss. We behaved very well. She misunderstood me while we were working on the bulletin board.

Teacher: Oh! Let me call Zahra. Why you don't speak straight to her?

Suha: Miss I don't know. She may not want to talk.

Teacher: Suha are you angry or upset with Zahra?

Suha (mumbling to herself): Miss I don't know.

Teacher: Suha, Zahra is your friend, just go and ask her for it.

Suha: OK Miss, I hope she does not mind.

Teacher: No, Suha go and talk to her and do tell me today before leaving what Zahra told you.

Suha: Oh! Miss Thank you.

Comments: Teacher needs to make the learners accept the situational feelings which arise because of a conflict. The teacher has to instill faith and confidence in the learning environment in which the learners are ready to share their conflicts. It's not compulsory that the method suggested will surely work in case of a conflict. The teachers may devise suitable interventions as required by the situational crisis happening in the classroom.

WORK OUT BY TEACHER FOR RESOLVING THE FOLLOWING CONFLICTS AMONG CHILDREN

Activity 1: One boy is waiting in line to drink water from the tap and another child cuts into the line ahead of the first child.

Activity 2: Your friend has taken your assignment and promised to return the next day. She/He forgets it. You are mad at her/him because you need to submit to your teacher.

Activity 3: You have fought with your friend because she/he did not show you her/his new pencil-box. You are upset because you want to resume your friendship with her/him. You are worried because you feel that she/he will not accept your offer to talk.

Activity 4:

My friend did not show me her armband. I am angry and sad.



Miss Lisa scolded me today. I must not listen to her now.

CONCLUSION

Conflicts in the form of consistent confrontations, disagreements and misunderstandings are normal part of life in classrooms, and school. Instead of viewing conflicts as negative, it must be seen as a part of human nature. The young school learners must be made to understand that differences are inherent in individuals and they must see their immediate world differently. Acceptance of these facts as truth will not only open the option of getting more time for teachers to teach but will also make the learners learn with a peaceful state of mind in and around the school.

Exposing students to the personal joys of service, and giving them a chance to become other-centred but not self-centred are a crucial part

of education as viewed by Martin Luther King. In case of conflicts, letting the young learners verbalise their thoughts and feelings, listening to views of others with patience and reflection, understanding about the value of working things out, and talking about the effects of their resolution can provide the learners an opportunity to develop effective communication, mutual understanding, empathy, self-confidence, independent thinking, and emotional wellbeing. This will ensure that the young school learners grow up into a responsible adult, thereby making a remarkable impact on their role as positive agent of peace, building peace for life and to promoting a state of peaceful co-existence.

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