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Communication and Conflict Resolution in Early Childhood

An Action Research Report
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Communication and Conflict Resolution in Early Childhood

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St. Catherine University
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Date _____

Abstract

The importance of teaching communication and conflict resolution skills in early childhood is explored in this action research. Previous research suggests that young children are capable of learning conflict resolution skills from an early age. After observing that conflict resolution was not successfully addressed in many different classroom environments, the need to research and model clear, compassionate language was apparent. This study was conducted in a Montessori classroom of 21 children, ages three to six. Within the framework of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), the children learned to voice their feelings, hear others, and have their personal needs met. I recorded reports on each conflict, along with a daily tally of conflicts and a daily self-reflection. During this intervention, the children were only beginning to show the ability to solve conflicts independently. Results showed an increase in conflicts successfully resolved. As the environment continues to practice NVC, the children would likely continue to expand their capacity to communicate clearly and resolve conflicts without the aid of an adult.

Two children were arguing, and I was attempting to mediate. I gave each a chance to speak. I restated the story I heard from each side. I suggested a resolution. But from the expressions on the children's faces, I saw that both were still feeling angry, hurt, sad, and more. All of the emotions that arose out of the conflict were still there, unaddressed, unresolved. The children were "stuck". Since the issue was unresolved, it was unrealistic that the children would forgive and truly move past their most recent argument. The three of us walked away because we had run out of ideas and time to dwell on this argument any longer. I left suspecting that because the argument had not been resolved, we would be back again tomorrow, likely a very similar situation to the one they had just had. Brick by brick a wall was built between the children, unable to empathize, trust, and hear each other enough to move forward together.

As an assistant in an elementary classroom, I had this experience over and over again. The more it happened, the more strongly I felt that something had to change. The children were impatient with the mediation process and they were losing trust in each other as well. The classroom began to feel like a minefield of unexploded, unresolved experiences that the children carried with them from day to day. I felt overwhelmed by the instability of emotion and routine that the frequent and sizable conflicts were having in the classroom. How could I turn the conflict resolution process into a positive experience for the children?

I reflected on myself: fears and anxieties I brought to the conflict resolution process, the structural time limitations of addressing conflicts, and my expectations for how I felt the process should go. Then I considered the classroom as a whole: how can we build the feelings of trust and community that are integral when conflicts occur?

Lastly I considered individuals: what steps do I need to take with individual students to help them better engage in the process of conflict resolution?

While forming those questions, I became the lead teacher in an early childhood classroom. In my new classroom, awareness of language and conflict resolution were a priority. Starting on the very first day, I listened to the language the children were using with each other. I observed how they interacted when they became angry. I recorded my observations so that when a pattern of harmful language or actions developed with more than one child, I knew to address all of the children as a group. During our group time I addressed words I was hearing, like “I’m not going to be your friend anymore”. We discussed as a group how that might make other children feel. Through these conversations, we opened up communication and became more aware of how we spoke to each other. Overall I observed the children became more considerate and patient with each other, understanding and empathizing with each other’s emotions more each day.

Later that year, I transitioned out of the lead position into short and long term substitute teaching positions, mostly working with children age three to six. Since I was impermanent in the classroom, I began to focus on conflict resolutions between two or more children. Yet when it came to conflict resolutions between two or more children, I was still feeling at a loss. I did not feel confident that the children were really being heard and empathized with during the conflict resolution process. Thus I focused more on how to aid this process. In my research I learned the language of Nonviolent Communication, which focuses on identifying the feelings and needs of participants. This was a way for me to teach the children to identify and connect their feelings with what they needed. Sometimes the children simply needed to be heard, so I would repeat their thoughts back

to them. Sometimes the children needed structure, so I would give them clearer directions on how to resolve a conflict. Once the children had the language to identify their emotions and needs, I hoped they would be able to resolve conflicts more independently.

To conduct my research, I chose a classroom of three to six year olds. My main goals were to increase the emotional awareness and communication skills of young children, resulting in increased engagement of students in conflict resolution. Nonviolent Communication provided the foundation for the language and flow of the conflict resolution process, with particular focus on identifying and voicing emotions. The participants in this study were 24 children in a private Montessori school setting in the Upper Midwest. The classroom was made up of 11 girls and 13 boys. The research question posed was: “How will Nonviolent Communication modeled by an adult empower the children to resolve their own conflicts in an early childhood environment?”

Literature Review

In recent research, focus and importance is given to building communication and conflict resolution skills in early childhood. Researchers have seen that through training programs aimed at enabling children to identify their emotions, empathize with others and communicate their feelings children are better able to resolve their conflicts

(Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; Pickens, 2009; Vestal & Jones, 2004).

Furthermore, this ability indicates future success both academically and socially (Deutsch et al., 2006). This review will analyze how others have attempted to develop emotional awareness and communication skills through programs implemented with success to train children, parents, and educators about conflict resolution. The importance of self-awareness and self-reflection of personal language habits will also be considered, as

research has shown that the attitudes of the adults provide a model for the children. This review will examine how conflict resolution and behavior management are approached in the different philosophical traditions of the Montessori, Quaker, and traditional school communities. It will consider Nonviolent Communication (NVC) as a method to educate communities about open communication that has more opportunity for conflict resolution. Through the inclusion of NVC in Montessori classrooms, communities can build awareness and skills to handle everyday conflict. This review will also show that different types of emotional awareness and communication development programs will likely be successful. Through coordinated, and self-reflective approaches, school communities can educate children to communicate well, especially giving them the words and the tools they need to feel safe and confident when situations of conflict arise.

Developing Emotional Awareness and Communication Skills

Current research has suggested that introducing emotional awareness and communication skills to children in their early years provides a stronger foundation for their lifelong acquisition of competencies, including being an indicator for academic success (Deutsch et al., 2006; Pickens, 2009; Vestal & Jones, 2004). In Pickens' (2009) research, both teachers and parents participated in a two-day training course following the Peace Education Foundation's "Creating Caring Children" and using "I-Care Rules and Language." The I-Care Rules are: 1) We listen to each other. 2) Hands are for helping, not hurting. 3) We use I-Care Language. 4) We care about each other's feelings. 5) We are responsible for what we say and do. I-Care Language includes saying "please", "thank you", "I am sorry" and "excuse me" as well as the questions "Are you okay?" and "May I help you?" (Beacon Learning Center). Teachers and parents were instructed in

how to use and teach this language with their children. After instruction, the parents and educators demonstrated an increased understanding of conflict resolution through a pre and posttest. I-Care Rules were posted in participating classrooms. Books that revolved around each of these topics were part of the curriculum as well. The children in the classrooms of the trained teachers and parents showed more positive interactions than those children whose teachers did not participate (Pickens, 2009.) Educating a school community (children, parents, and teachers) in social-emotional learning, as was done in this study, provides a clear and consistent message to the children concerning communication and conflict resolution, which is vital to the children internalizing healthy communication skills (Deutsch et al., 2006).

Vestal and Jones (2004) found that children demonstrated an increased capability of conflict resolution after their teachers completed a college level training course on that topic. The teachers integrated themes they learned during the college course into their own classrooms, which built the children's capability to identify their emotions and tell others when they had a problem. This study focused specifically on children that had already been exposed to violence in their life, further demonstrating the importance and resilience of children who are taught the necessary tools to resolve conflict on their own.

Deutsch et al., (2006) compiled research and gathered information about developmentally appropriate ways to model and teach communication skills and conflict resolution. Their in-depth analysis includes a breakdown of different skills involved in conflict resolution, like empathy and perspective taking. The authors indicate that empathy exists in infants from birth, and by age three children can begin to empathize to consider others point of view. They also reiterate that the teachers (and other adults)

provide a role model for strong communication skills.

Self-Reflection of Personal Language Habits

Because the adult is so pivotal in helping children to learn clear communication, this study plans to follow a self-reflective approach to implementing communication and conflict resolution strategies. Thus, examining the language and speech patterns of the researcher also plays an important role in implementing and analyzing data.

Psychologists deem some language and habits emotionally abusive.

“Gaslighting” is when an abuser denies the truth, making their victim doubt their perceptions of reality (Engel, 1992). One common way adults “gaslight” others is through being dismissive: the listener does not acknowledge the emotions or perceptions of another person. This behavior is translated into the school community when the adult tells the child to stop “tattling” or to “go play” without attempting to hear or resolve the issue. Over time, this signals to children that their problems are not only unimportant, but leads the child to doubt that there even is a problem. Dismissing emotions contrasts new neurological research, which suggests that emotions are more logical than previously thought (Deutsch et al., 2006). There is a valid reason for the emotion the child is experiencing, and care should be given to understand why.

Another pattern considered abusive by Engel (2002) is verbal assaults. Verbal assaults are transparently done through name-calling or put-downs, but also are done in less obvious ways. Other ways include comparing the work of one child to another, often expressed through comparisons, like wishing, sometimes aloud, to one child, “Why can't you be more like James”. Social exclusion or “time-outs” are also an extension of this type of shaming, when given to the child with the attitude they aren't “good enough” to

participate in the group activity. Montessori discusses this sort of abuse in her work as well, surmising that it leads to “distrust of his powers and of fear which is called shyness, and which later, in the grown man, takes the form of discouragement and submissiveness” (Montessori, 1971, p. 23).

Adults also have a tendency to respond to a situation the child is telling about with a judgment. For example, if a student approaches and says that another child hurt her, and the adults usually responds, "That is not good." The adult makes a judgment based on what they heard. By providing a judgment, whether good or bad, it restricts the child's ability to identify and engage in a solution. Instead, the adult should ask, "How do you feel about that?" and help the child to navigate and mediate the problem. This tendency to judge immediately is discussed by Rosenberg (2003) as an impediment to Nonviolent Communication. He states by classifying acts, or people, as “lazy” or “bad,” humans are not able to see that the person may be acting a certain way because their needs are not being met. This idea is further explored by Payne (2015), who states that children who are acting out often do not have the skills they need to regulate themselves, therefore their behavior is never “bad.” The child exhibits what the adult deems poor behavior because the child is trying to regain his orientation, to decipher the rules of the situation. Thus it is the task of the adult to reorient the child and provide more context so the child knows what is and is not acceptable behavior.

Adults should be clear about the difference between thoughts and feelings, which in English are commonly expressed as one and the same (Rosenberg, 2003). This leads to confusion, as many times adults start a sentence with “I feel...” but never actually identify a feeling. “I feel that you are in my space” is an example of confusing thoughts

with feelings. There is no feeling expressed in the previous example. It is important for the stakeholders involved in educating children in communication to be aware of this tendency, so that each adult can set clear examples of expressing thoughts, and clear expectations of dialogue. As discussed in previous research articles, the importance of the adult in setting the example of clear and consistent expectations is incredibly important to passing lessons on to the child (Deutsch, et al., 2006; Payne, 2015). It can be surmised from Pickens' study (2009) that stakeholders may have seen success because parents and teachers provided clear expectations through I-Care Language and Rules. I-Care language focuses on helping the child to name the feeling and encourages peer listening skills, aligning itself with the goals of Nonviolent Communication as well.

Alternative Approaches to Conflict Resolution

The Montessori classroom is designed so that the children may independently choose activities throughout the day. Through this freedom, the children have opportunities to practice sharing, working with others, and resolving conflicts when they arise. McFarland (2004) outlines six main tenets of the Montessori model, including a spirit of love, self-awareness and community awareness. These ideas as they relate to communication and conflict resolution are given through "Grace and Courtesy" lessons that address how children can handle different social situations. These lessons include acting out a scenario with language to aid the children in recognizing and expressing their emotions with others. As the children get older, "Grace and Courtesy" lessons handle more complex emotions and scenarios.

The Quaker philosophy is founded on tenets of peace, justice, simplicity and integrity. In supporting this mission, the Quaker school has a school and community wide

communication training program to teach children about recognizing their emotions and conflict resolution. The training DVD I-to-I: Integrating Conflict Resolution into the Elementary School Community shows the children in real life resolving their conflicts, and the corresponding training manual aids children, teachers and parents in an authoritative method of communication with their children (Conflict Resolution, n.d.).

The traditional school setting also has focused a great deal on behavior management and conflict resolution goals. In general, traditional schools more often adopt behavior management policies that don't encourage more dialogue and reflection on the behaviors and emotions of the children, but instead focus on punitive measures.

One of these approaches to amending student behavior has been presented through the Positive Support Behavior and Interventions Supports (PBIS). Beard, Moe, and Wieczorek (2015), through an attempt to curb and reverse a rise in negative student behaviors, implemented PBIS in three different classrooms over a period of six weeks. The researchers outlined a process with the children where positive behavior would be rewarded with slips, which could be redeemed for a pencil, iPad time, or being at the front of the line in the hallway (p.15). Negative behaviors resulted in a warning, then a time-out, then a time-out in a "buddy" classroom, and finally being sent to the office if the behavior continued to escalate. Students were also taught methods to calm themselves down and reflect on their behavior. At the end of the six-week period, the researchers concluded that the students in their classrooms were able to identify what behaviors would earn them a reward or punishment. Though the researchers also reported that the students better understood how to calm themselves down, they did not discuss whether the students had a time or space for their emotions to be acknowledged. It was not

apparent from this study if the students had the time or opportunity to identify or understand why the emotion occurred with their peers or an adult. Other researchers have seen without consistency and context, punishing bad behavior does not have lasting long-term results. (Deutsch et al., 2006; Payne, 2015). Results from the researchers Beard et al., (2015) also did not demonstrate that PBIS resulted in lower rates of “misbehavior.”

Integrating Nonviolent Communication into the Montessori Classroom

According to Rosenberg (2015), Nonviolent Communication (NVC), also called compassionate communication, is a way of communicating that enables compassionate words to flow between individuals. Though many adults are not aware, the words and phrases we use to communicate can be “violent”, meaning they could unintentionally lead to pain for another person. NVC has four basic components. The first is to observe the situation and say without judgment what you see. The observation should be scientific, not based on the person’s personal thoughts or opinions. The observation should also not seek to manipulate the situation. The second goal is to identify the emotion we feel about the observation. The third part of NVC is to communicate what need the person has in relation to the observation and feeling. Rosenberg (2015) gives the following example, “ ‘When I see two balls of soiled socks under the coffee table...I feel irritated because I am needing more order in the rooms that we share in common.’” Through this statement the person said an observation, stated his or her feeling, and related a need to that situation. The final component is making a request after stating the observation, feeling, and need, like “Would you put your dirty socks in the laundry or your room?” Through this four part process, each person is able to express their feelings and needs without resorting to language that seeks to judge, shame or blame.

The Montessori classroom is uniquely positioned to embrace NVC and remove the fear and punishment connotations from the process of moral development in the early childhood environment. Montessori teaches conflict resolution, social skills, awareness and empowerment through lessons in Grace and Courtesy. Through these lessons, the adult helps the child to identify their emotions (McFarland, 2004; Cain, 2005).

Identification would begin with the four most easily recognized emotions, happy, sad, angry, and scared, as recommended by Deutsch et al., (2006).

Conclusion

In summary, research has shown that early childhood is an ideal time to set clear expectations in regards to behavior and communication. Adults who have been trained in conflict resolution have a greater capability to instruct children in identifying their emotions and using language to aid the children in conflict resolution. Though there are many different approaches to teaching communication and conflict resolution skills, the importance of teaching those skills early to prepare and equip our children are clear. Schools can be an initiator of this conversation with parents, among themselves, and with the children to which approach best suits the culture and needs of the children. To find out more, I structured my action research to explore the problems and difficulties of children and adults during the conflict resolution process. Through my action research, I hope to find how Nonviolent Communication modeled by an adult will empower the children to resolve their own conflicts in an early childhood environment.

Methodology

During my intervention, I focused on the language children used, and were taught to use, in regards to conflict resolution. I decided the best language to for me to use as a framework was Nonviolent Communication, which allowed the children to express their

emotions clearly. I used Nonviolent Communication (NVC) when speaking, especially when the children came to me for help resolving conflicts with their peers. I modeled and assisted children in speaking more clearly about their observations and emotions. I used NVC while helping the children to mediate conflict, and hoped that NVC gave children the ability to speak clearly and listen to each other, which ideally would lead them to resolve conflicts independently.

Before I began my intervention, I observed the classroom and used a tally sheet to record how many and what kinds of conflicts were occurring each day (See Appendix A.) I also kept track of whether children attempted to resolve the conflict on their own and how many times that attempt was successful. This conflict tally gave a baseline of conflict occurrences before I began my research project, as well as informed me about the conflict resolution abilities and difficulties of each child. I also observed the language and approach of my classroom colleagues to understand the current lessons that children are taught in regards to conflict resolution.

Once baseline data was collected, I began using NVC whenever children sought help in conflict resolution. In general, I used the following pattern with the children in the conflict resolution process. When a child approached me with a conflict,

- 1) I helped the child identify the emotion they were feeling by asking them questions based on my observations. For example, if I saw that Child A took something from Child B without asking, I would ask Child A “Are you angry that Child B took that from you?”
- 2) I stated what I observed.
- 3) I listened to the child, then repeated back what they said.
- 4) If another child was involved and present, he or she spoke, following steps 1-3.

5) I proposed a solution. I based my solution on established classroom rules and norms, as well as my observations and knowledge of individual children. Sometimes this required seeing beyond the immediate request of one child to fulfill the needs of both children. If, for example, Child A was feeling sad because Child B did not want to play with them at recess, I would first help both sides communicate their feelings and needs. Then after each child is heard and understands the point of view of the other, I would ask that Child A let Child B play by themselves for awhile, and Child A could ask Child C if she or he wants to play instead. In this scenario Child A came to me with a problem, and through conflict resolution she did not get what she requested, to play with Child B. Instead the goal is to hear what both children need and try to meet both of those needs. Child A needs a playmate, and Child B needs some space.

6) I helped the children follow through on the solution.

Some children struggled with certain steps of the process, so I modified the approach. For one child, even acknowledging that he felt angry was difficult. My primary concern was that each child was able to acknowledge the emotion they were feeling. First I would ask the child, "Are you feeling angry? Are you feeling sad?" and so on until they said "Yes." For most children, sad or angry was easy to visibly identify and the children would affirm the emotion after one or two questions. If the child looked visibly angry (or sad) and did not affirm that they were, I would state my best guess of the emotion, and proceed with a question about why, based on my observations, I thought they were feeling that way. "Are you feeling angry because you don't have enough space in line?" This question might be closer to why they were upset, and trigger them to communicate about what happened. Sometimes the child would still not affirm that this is what

happened. If the child was completely unable or unwilling to verify that my question was true, I would state my best guess, and proceed with proposing and following through with a resolution. At this stage, proposing a solution and helping the child to follow through was often reinforcing or restating a classroom rule or expectation. “We don’t push each other. You may tell them you need more space.” Because the child involved is not engaging in the process, following through is also more to meet the needs of the others involved in the conflict. This lack of engagement also signaled to me to check in with the child later, observe their interactions more closely, and find one on one lessons to help the child navigate the conflict resolution process.

In most scenarios, the child was able to identify the emotion and then we proceeded to the next step together. After receiving confirmation from the child, I repeated the statement. “You are feeling sad.” Sometimes I merged this with my observation of why I guessed they were sad. “You are feeling sad because your friend pushed you?” I would again wait for the child to confirm this was true, and then repeat the statement back to them. “You are feeling sad because your friend pushed you.” Then I would repeat this process with the other child or children involved. After listening, hearing, and repeating back the information from the children, I sometimes needed to add more of my observations in conjunction with proposing a resolution. “I hear that you are sad because your friend pushed you. And I hear that Child B is angry that he did not have enough space in line. When you do not have enough space in line, you can say, ‘Can you give me more space? I am squished!’” Then I helped each child to follow through on our agreed upon solution, in this example practicing language to communicate what the child needs.

There were instances, especially during times of class transitions, where I had three or four simultaneous conflicts to consider. When this happened, I was not able to follow the method I set out for myself. In those instances I asked questions of the children involved to make sure I correctly understood the problem, then decided a resolution and helped the children to follow through. During those times, identifying emotions was still highly relevant, but I did not have the extra time to work through this process with the children. If time constraints caused me to resolve a conflict this way, I also continued to observe the children involved to make sure they were able to move forward. If I observed there was an issue the children were unable to move past, then I spoke with the child or children individually about how they were feeling and what they needed.

I recorded observations and data for every conflict the children requested my help with (See Appendix B), guiding them through the conflict resolution process. Through each Communication Log, I wrote details about each conflict including what it was about, the language the children used, and observations about their behavior. I also recorded if each child involved was able to state the problem, identify their emotions, listen to each other, and be guided to a resolution. When there were three children involved in a conflict, I created another Yes/No column alongside the first two.

Throughout the intervention, I tallied how many times children came to me with conflicts that involved one or more children (See Appendix C.) This tally showed whether the number of conflicts increased decreased, or remained the same.

I also wrote a daily reflection journal (See Appendix D) noticing trends of the day, common problems in the conflict resolution process, and if any changes needed to be

made. I rated every day on a scale of 1-5 to give an overall indication of how the children are receiving the lessons for conflict resolution. Occasionally, there was not time at the end of the day to write an extensive reflection. In that case I completed the reflection to the best of my ability later in the evening.

Data Analysis

During the week of recorded observations prior to the intervention, children were successful resolving conflicts independently only three times, as shown in Figure 1. In the remaining conflicts, an adult intervened to help resolve the conflict or the children were not able to resolve the conflict at all.

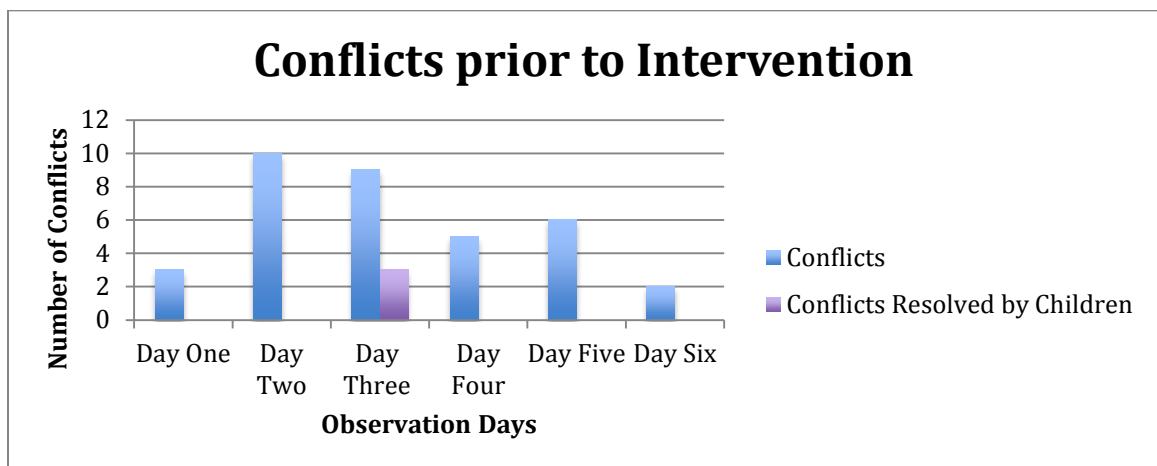


Figure 1. Conflicts prior to Intervention

During the intervention, I introduced a new method of conflict resolution using the language of NVC. I was particularly interested in whether children were able to identify their feelings, and if communicating those feelings clearly to the other children involved in the conflict would aid both children to find resolution. With the introduction of the language of Nonviolent Communication, the results suggest that many of the children involved in each conflict were both able to state the problem and identify how they were feeling (see Figure 2).

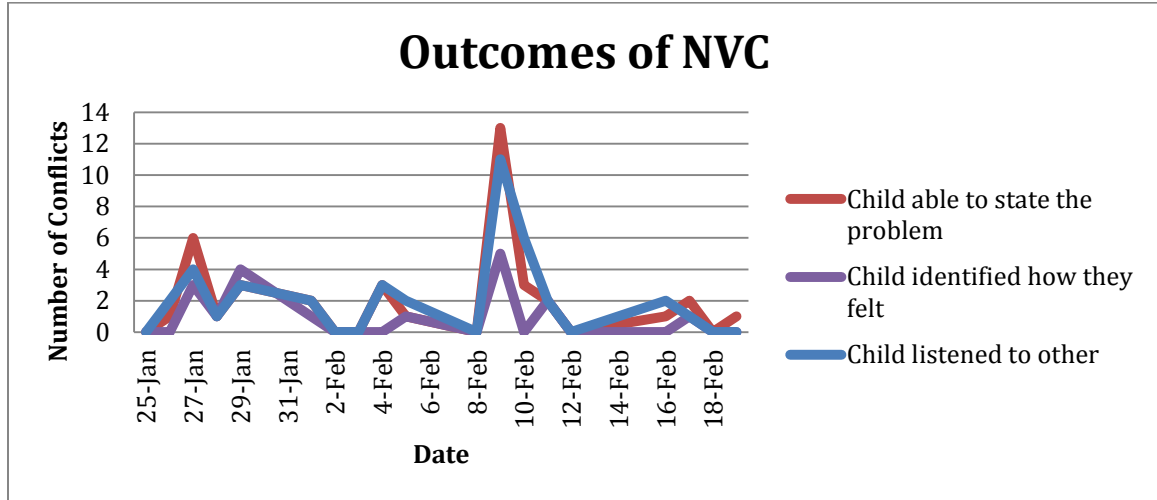


Figure 2. Outcomes of NVC

Furthermore, children were also open and able to listen to the other child or children involved and I, showing an openness and trust in the conflict resolution process, also shown in Figure 2. As a result, 70% of the conflicts were gracefully resolved (See Figure 3.) Conflicts were recorded as gracefully resolved when the children were able to follow through on a proposed solution and continue with their normal daily activities.

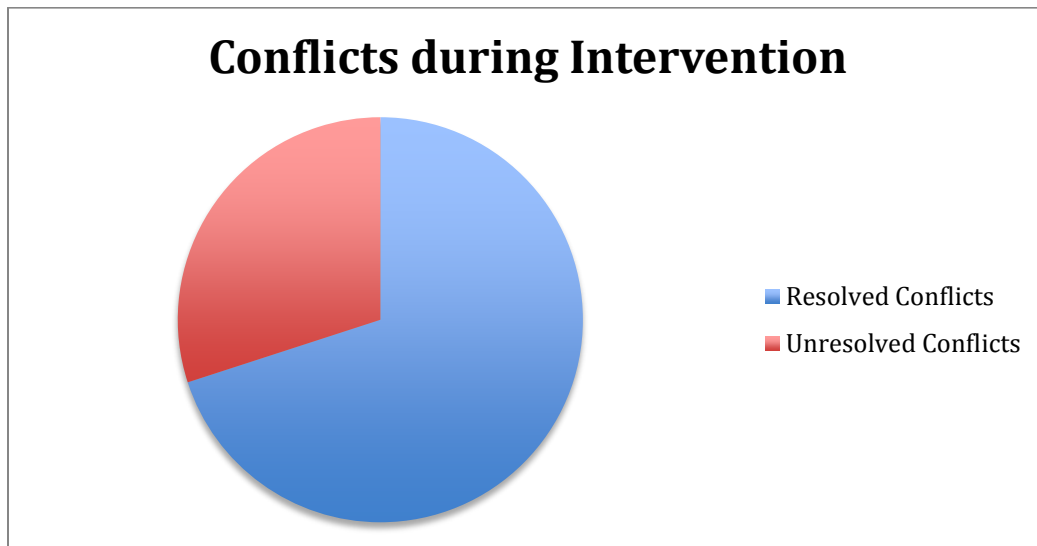


Figure 3. Conflicts during Intervention

The results do not show that over the research period children resolved more conflicts independently, as the new process of conflict resolution took adult guidance. If the implementation would have continued for a longer period, the children may have been able to resolve more conflicts on their own using this method.

One of the main reasons I chose the NVC approach to conflict resolution was I was feeling very unsatisfied with how I listened to and helped children to navigate the conflict resolution process. I was very happy to find that when using the NVC process I would generally leave with a feeling of resolution and satisfaction from the day. During the intervention, I gave each day a rating in relation to how I was feeling the process was going with the children.

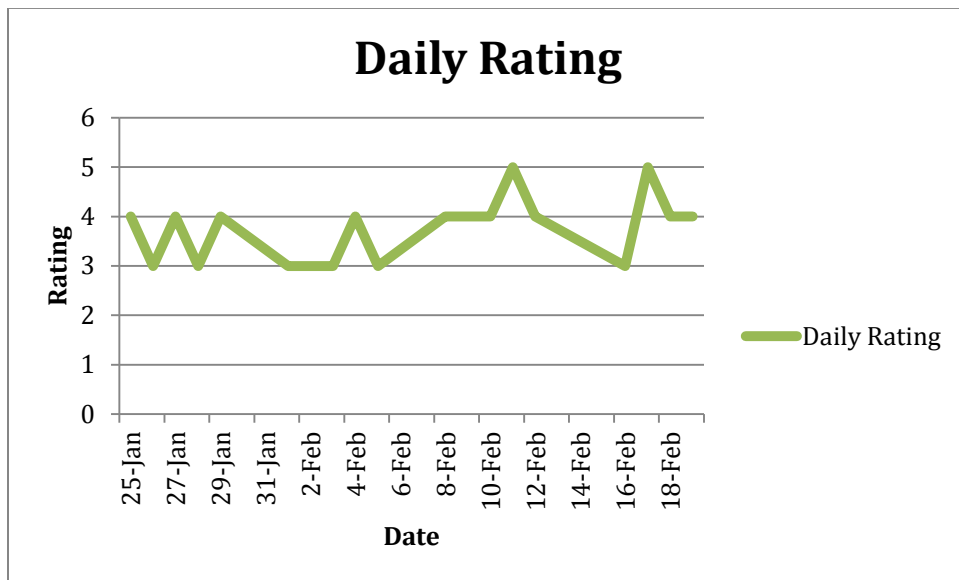


Figure 4. Daily Rating

This daily rating was especially important for me to reflect on each day's progress, as I surmised the children (ages three to six) were generally too young to give an evaluation of whether or not the intervention was helping them to find their voice and navigate conflict resolution more confidently.

During the first week of the intervention, I felt overwhelmed by the instances where NVC did not seem appropriate. There were issues of taking turns, following directions, and other disagreements where at the time, it did not seem relevant to have the children identify the emotion they were feeling. Upon reflection, I realized there were ways to use NVC in those situations, and modified my approach. In the second week, I looked closer at how I could use NVC with the children. I remembered that an important aspect of NVC was not making assumptions. I slowed down my approach with the children so when I intervened in a problem, I was asking questions more than stating my observations. Then I added in my observations if it was necessary to help the children to hear each other. I was also careful with the language and tone of voice that I was modeling to the children, using non-judgmental observation as much as possible. Non-judgmental language is concerned with stating scientific observation of what I saw happened, instead of jumping to conclusions of what I think the child was doing. In one situation, Child A was trying to get Child B to stop singing to herself while she worked:

Child A: "We don't like that. Stop. Stop it. You're distracting us."

Me: "I heard you say, 'You're distracting us. But you actually don't have any work out yet...'"

Child A: "Well, it's annoying."

Me: "That's different [than being distracting.] You can say, 'Please sing quieter.'"

By using non-judgmental language, stating what I heard and saw, I helped Child A to focus on his problem that the noise was annoying him. Then I helped him to make a request. It was difficult to be non-judgmental in stating observations when I also knew the rules of the classroom needed to be maintained. With the previous example, the

general rule of the classroom was that the children should not sing even softly to themselves, as it was distracting to others. Child A was in fact reacting much the way the classroom teacher would. However in that situation, it was more important to me that each child was heard and understood instead of just telling Child B to stop singing. This assesment was to move the children forward with NVC, but disregarded the classroom rule in that moment.

For the remainder of the intervention, I focused on using NVC consistently throughout the day, even when having casual conversations with the children. I did this so that when conflicts arose the children were used to me asking them questions and guiding them instead of telling them the solution.

Towards the end of the intervention I was beginning to tire of practicing NVC. While I consistently felt better about my role in helping the children during conflicts, I was also impatient and unsure that the chidren were able to use NVC on their own. One day, two children had a disagreement, and I spoke with Child A who had been making a face at Child B. Child B asked Child A to stop a couple of times before coming to me, but Child A had not stopped. I asked the Child A how she felt when others asked her to stop. She held up a thumbs down sign near her forehead. "Does it make you sad?" I asked. "No, angry." was her reply. I felt happy that she had told me, as then we talked about a different way for others to ask her to stop. We agreed that if another person told her it was making them sad, or hurt, or angry, then she would stop. The very next day, she was growling softly at another child.

Child A: "Stop it! That scared me."

Child B: "Remember when you say 'stop it' it makes me angry."

The conversation began, and the two talked for a little while about their problem. I was shocked. These two children routinely had minor conflicts, and yet today they were using different language to prevent a breakdown in communication. There was empathy between them, and I felt overjoyed that they were able to talk instead of getting more upset at each other.

Throughout the research period, there were a few children who were struggling with the same problem over and over again in different ways. One child would look angry, and when I would ask him questions to help him identify and solve the potential problem, he was not willing to engage. I would ask this child, "Are you angry?" and though he would not indicate a response, I would try at least to acknowledge that I saw his anger and was available to help if he wanted it, by saying exactly that, "I see that you are angry right now, and I'm not sure why. If you want to tell me why your angry, or if I can help I will wait for you over here." For this child, and others, I realized that one on one lessons about emotions, especially expressing anger, were necessary. Anger was an emotion that was particularly hard for the children to express without name-calling or blaming language. When anger was part of conflicts, it was important to reestablish the facts of what happened with the children to understand why the child was feeling angry.

I also found, surprisingly, that many times when I repeated back the words the children said to me, like "You are feeling angry because she asked you to leave her alone?" the child would return to their activity without needing to go through the conflict resolution process with the other child. This was a satisfying realization, as part of the hardship of the conflict resolution process is a lack of time to sit down with the children involved so that each side is heard. Then in those busy moments, I felt comfortable

saying to the child “ I hear that you are angry, but we are all going to walk to the lunchroom right now.” I wanted the child to know I heard their feelings, but it is not always possible to have an immediate resolution. I also then watched the child and their interactions to see if they were redirected in this way, or if they were still angry and needed more from me to move forward.

Conclusion

Over the course of my intervention, I found that hearing and resolving conflict with the children using NVC to be a very rewarding process. I felt that I was better able to hear what the children needed and slowly remove my own perceptions and judgments from the conflict. For the children to be equipped to practice NVC independently, I would need to teach NVC through group lessons, one on one lessons, as well as use it during conflict resolutions. I also found that in this environment the children were already trusting of adult guidance and receptive to trying new methods for solving problems with classmates. In other scenarios, there may be more trust building that would need to be done for the children to trust the adult in this process. I also felt that using NVC allowed the children to accurately express what was going on in each situation. Instead of saying “I don’t like that” they were empowered to say what they felt, which built a bridge to empathetic problem solving.

While I observed some children were beginning to solve conflicts on their own, the quantitative data does not show a clear increase in this ability. Over a longer intervention period, there may have been a more significant difference. The quantitative data does suggest, however, that by using compassionate language the children had more success resolving conflicts than prior to the intervention (Figure 3.) Figure 2 also

indicates that the children were able to state the problem and listen to the other child and adult during conflict resolution, an ability they had before the intervention began. This ability paved the way for the use of NVC, and is an indicator that the children have the basic skills necessary to resolving conflicts independently.

Action Plan

This research has reinvigorated my role and abilities as a mediator during conflict resolution. Working through the framework of NVC, I am more capable of navigating difficult conflict resolutions. I found that when situations were complex, I could slow down the conversation by first identifying what each child was feeling. Then once the children felt heard and understood by me, I could ask questions of both children and combine that information with my observations to discover what actually happened. This process of asking the children, instead of assuming what happened, led me to feel more confident that each conflict was being more fully addressed. I was able to make more consistent, fair, and developmentally appropriate suggestions to resolve each conflict. My suggestions were often based on prior knowledge of what works well with each child. Some children were unable to engage in the conflict resolution process, and I recognized the need to work with them one on one to identify how to help them engage more successfully with their classmates.

While there was not an observable decrease in overall conflict, the number of conflicts that were gracefully resolved increased. At this stage, the adult was often involved in conflict resolutions to introduce the language for the children to use. I anticipate that the language of NVC would need to be used longer and more consistently in the classroom for the children to begin using it on their own. In the future I would also

introduce ideas like expressing anger through one on one presentations with children that need that support. For example, with the child who experienced anger frequently, I could establish a place in the classroom he could go when he feels angry. This would provide him space and a plan of action for where to go. If that helped, I would then suggest an activity to do in that place when he was angry, to further help in acknowledging and diffusing the anger. In addition I would address topics of NVC during collective time with the whole classroom to illustrate how to more successfully engage in the conflict resolution process.

Though I did not intentionally collect data in regards to the gender of the children most often engaged in conflict resolution, the majority of the participants were females. This may suggest that female children need more support and direction in the area of conflict resolution than male children. I also suspect that females are more likely to voice their concern when someone has hurt their feelings. I would like to observe more interactions to identify how gender influences the child in regards to conflict resolution in the future.

To continue helping the children in coming to their own resolutions, it is also vital that staff members and others in the child's community are trained in NVC. I would like to plan at least one parent education night about NVC, or begin a parent/teacher book group to study Marshall Rosenberg's work, *Nonviolent Communication*. The group would learn more about NVC, language, or resolving conflicts with young children. While NVC is not the only method to accomplish compassionate communication, it is a good place to start conversations with teachers and parents that are around the children. Knowing that we all want to help the children better navigate the world, it is a powerful

and necessary that the school community is more aware of the language they use with the children, and are taught to observe if this helps the child, or makes the situation worse.

This effort is to empower parents and staff to help the children, much as this process empowered me.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Data collection tool #1: Daily observation tally

How often did you witness the following?

A child calls another child a name

A child excludes another child from play

A child hurts another child physically

Other types of conflict (list type)

How many times (from the above scenarios) did you or another adult intervene:

A child calls another child a name

A child excludes another child from play

A child hurts another child physically

Other types of conflict (list type)

How many times did you see the children attempt to resolve conflicts on their own?

How many times does that attempt appear successful?

Appendix B

Communication log		Date:
Number of children involved _____		
Child One	Child Two	
Observed Interaction		
Child able to state the problem?	Y N	Child able to state the problem? Y N
Child able to identify how they felt?	Y N	Child able to identify how they felt? Y N
Child able to listen to the other?	Y N	Child able to listen to the other? Y N
Graceful resolution?	Y N	Graceful resolution? Y N

Appendix C

Data Collection Tool #3: Tally of Communication logs/Conflict				
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday

Appendix D

Data Collection Tool #4: Daily Reflection				
How many instances of conflict did you record?				
How many conflicts did you record as “Graceful resolution”?				
How do you think the day went in regards to Nonviolent communication?				
1	2	3	4	5
Very poor	Poor	Okay	Good	Very Good
Reason for rating:				
Other notes:				