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Conflict Resolution for the Classroom

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Conflict significantly disrupts achievement within classrooms. It effects individuals but also influences group members and potentially a wider community. Minimizing conflict optimizes opportunity and this is the goal of sharing these insights.

WHAT is conflict?

Barsky (2007) defines conflict as existing "… when two or more parties have differences in beliefs, values, positions, or interests, whether the divergence is real or perceived" (p. 2). Using this definition for conflict makes it easy to see how that conflict is a common occurrence in the school setting each day… whether public, private, or faith-based.

WHY plan resolution?

Training students for conflict resolution helps to equip them to become independent problem-solvers, prevents additional behavioural concerns, has a positive effect on the learning environment, and supports the responsible learning atmosphere desired by all schools. A choice to use the following processes should 'nest' within the school educational 'visioning'. Wiles and Bondi (2004) assert "The issue is what kind of learning you wish to promote and how classroom management and discipline conform to that conception" (p. 77).

HOW can it be done?

"A prepared teacher approaches child-child classroom conflict by being supportive to children in very intentional ways" (Finch & Wirtenan, 2012, para. 9). A more traditional response to student conflict is for the teacher to refuse to take time to follow due process, but rather to assign punitive consequences to both parties. Another popular and traditional view is to simply make the students "apologize and make-up." The problem with these views is that they do not allow the problem to be responsibly addressed and resolved. Thus, this type of conflict management can actually increase the problem. Additionally, it does not equip students to resolve their own conflict.

The biggest complaint from teachers is that they don't have time to train students to deal with conflict resolution. To teach the required standards while seeking to keep the peace is all they can do. However, Porro (1996) provided an alternative viewpoint that suggests that you gain more time to teach if you first explain resolution of conflict. In other words, a small investment of time at the beginning can work wonders throughout the year to enable students to be equipped to resolve their own conflicts.

The key to eventually saving class time by teaching conflict resolution is to coach students to become advocates for their own conflict resolution. This type of valuable training of students to be advocates for themselves during conflict resolution is a three-part process:

1. *Attitude assurance*: Ensure students have the right view of, and attitude about, conflict.
2. *Cooperation coaching*: Train students, and give them plenty of practice, in cooperating with their peers.
3. *Negotiation 'know how'*: Teach students how to negotiate Christianly by supplying them with the right tools and guiding their practice.

Equipping tools

The 'equipping tools' for student advocates include:

Tool 1: *The Bible*
Matthew 18:15-17 directs Christians to resolve conflict in a way that is pleasing to God. That way begins with going to the person alone and telling them the problem, in order to restore the relationship. Then, we may take a witness. If unsuccessful, it ends with working with the person and authority (church is the authority listed, but teacher is an authority figure at school).

Tool 2: *Prayer*
Prayer should be taught, modelled, and expected of children.

Tool 3: *Honest Evaluation*
Biblical advisement encourages people to evaluate themselves on an ongoing basis.

Tool 4: *Effective Communication*
Effective communication involves two

> *you gain more time to teach if you first explain resolution of conflict.*

main factors: honest communication and full communication. Communication is most successful when students know how to establish their own ground rules. Of course, those who follow the "Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12) first and foremost will be in a prime communication beginning point. Webne-Berhman (2011) also suggests the following ideas for establishing ground rules for communication:

a. One person speaks at a time.
b. We will make a sincere commitment to listen to one another, to try to understand the other person's point of view before responding.
c. What we discuss together will be kept in confidence, unless there is explicit agreement regarding who needs to know further information.
d. We agree to talk directly with the person with whom there are concerns, and not seek to involve others in "gossip" or "alliance building."

> *these skills will serve students well for the rest of their lives, since conflict is a regular and natural part of life.*

Negotiation

Negotiation is a valuable tool for resolving conflict. One very acceptable goal to teach students is the concept of a "win-win" resolution, such as through compromise. According to Rafenstein (n.d.), a compromise requires "that both parties give up something in order to solve the problem. In the long run, however, giving up something can really be like getting something if the conflict is resolved" (para. 5).

A negotiation plan can be created through class collaboration efforts. The following is one example of a plan suggested by Denton & Kriete (2000) [embellished by the author]:

- Calm down (walk away, count to ten, pray, if you can forget – choose to)
- Explanation of the upset party ("I-message")
- Discussion and negotiation (i.e. a counter "I-message")
- Some kind of acknowledgment (handshake, "I forgive statements", etc.)

WHERE to begin?

At the beginning of each school year, masterful teachers automatically dedicate class time to teaching procedures for that classroom. They understand that rituals and routines are a necessary part of the classroom environment because they enable the class members to focus

more fully and successfully on learning. This is the perfect time to add just a consideration of conflict resolution. During that training time, simply include the following plan into the classroom training.

1. Introduce the concept of conflict resolution, including its components of attitude, cooperation, and negotiation.
2. Equip students with proper negotiation tools of The Word, prayer, honest evaluation, and effective communication.
3. Develop class expectations about conflict resolution and proper negotiation. Work collaboratively to set a negotiation plan that the whole class can explain and follow.

By equipping students to resolve their own conflicts, teachers are able to focus on the most important goals for the classroom. These lessons, however, remain a valuable expenditure of time, as these skills will serve students well for the rest of their lives, since conflict is a regular and natural part of life.

Some may think that students in the primary grades are not able to resolve their own conflicts. However, students at all levels are able to learn these same concepts on their own levels. Further, teachers can teach the same concepts and offer varying levels of scaffolding until students are able to successfully implement these concepts independently. **TEACH**

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