Conflict talk

Alejandro Iborra-Cuéllar and Carmen Santamaría-García

Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Part 1: Practical Guidance and Didactical Approach

Background and keywords:

Conflict talk is a common but complex phenomenon. Research on conflict has been covered from different fields, e.g., philosophy, rhetoric, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and linguistics. Conflict is often seen as aggressive and hence destructive behaviour, arising from deficiencies in social skills and communication. However, conflict can also be understood as a constructive process with positive consequences (Iborra 2004, McWhirter 1999, 2000). Despite previous investigation into conflict in the social sciences, the study of actual discourse within conflict episodes and its corresponding features is relatively recent.

Keywords:

Conflict talk, verbal aggression, community, team work, decision taking

Materials:

- A sheet of paper
- Pen
- A set of cards for any card game
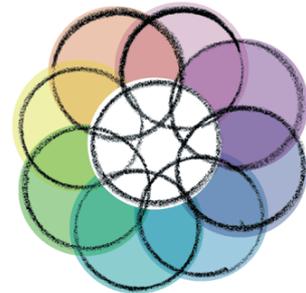
Duration:

3 one-hour class sessions

Number of participants:

- Five or more
- The ideal size for a group would be 20-25 boys (and girls)

### Age:

10 -11 year old boys (and girls)

Aims:

- To understand the factors involved in taking decisions in conflict contexts.
- To learn the skills needed in order to achieve "perspective taking" competences.
- To foster the cognitive-emotional development of the students.

(Short) Explanation:

By exploring real conflict scenarios students will be able to develop their perspective taking competences. Instead of performing artificial role playing boys will commit themselves to the exploration of actual conflict lived in class, leisure-time or their family context. Activities will move on from objective towards more subjective analysis.
Guidance for the game or exercise:

1. In groups of five to six people, boys will discuss what they know about conflict. If they like conflict or not, different examples, what they feel when they live a conflict, what they think. The purpose of this is to activate their previous experience about the topic of interest.

2. Students think of at least three examples of personal conflict experiences lived in two or more different contexts (school, family, friends, etc…) Once they have thought about the examples they can share them with their group. Sharing conflict stories provides an opportunity to "objectify" and externalize problems through talking. Sharing real conflict stories is also a way to identify common sources of problems among students and facilitates awareness of lived experiences. It may even serve to mitigate their importance.

3. New groups are formed of 4 students. Each student will explore one of his conflicts by turns as follows. They will take four different roles in rounds.

- Boy A will tell his experience from his perspective.
- Boy B will take the perspective of the other person involved in the conflict situation. He will try to express what he thinks that person was feeling or thinking.
- Boy C will take an external perspective expressing what he thinks that happened taking into account both perspectives.
- Boy D will make a summary of three perspectives A, B and C. He also will express the result of his observation of the performance of A, B and C.
- As a final round all boys (boy A above all) will express what they felt during the exploration and what they think at this particular moment.
- Roles swap so that boy A becomes D, boy B becomes A, boy C becomes B, and boy D becomes C.
  - The purpose of this activity is to facilitate the exploration of real interpersonal conflict from different perspectives.
  - Each perspective is practiced with different examples so it is easier to see what is remarkable about them.

2st Position	1st Position

| 4th position | 3rd MetaPosition |
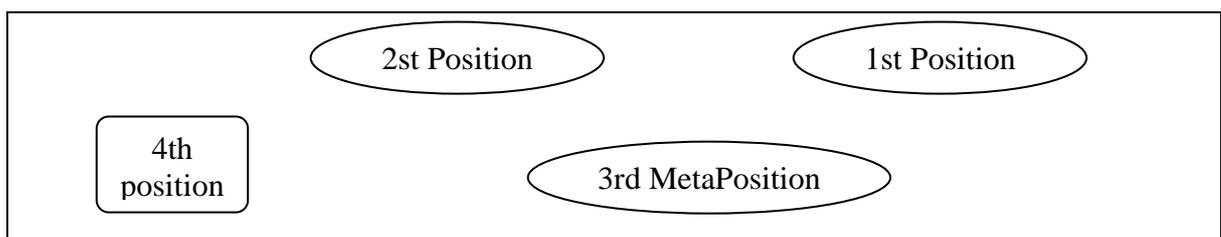
4. There is a feedback session with the whole group in order to share experiences, questions, misunderstandings and insights.

5. The final activity, in groups of three boys, involves exploring again the same interpersonal conflict but this time each boy will take all the four different perspectives.

- Boy A draws a point on the floor (or marks it by using a piece of paper or card) which represents his own subjective perspective. Then he draws another point representing the "other" perspective just opposite point A. At the same distance from A and B, the boy draws point C (the relational perspective). Finally, point D is marked a bit further in order to represent all the experiences from an external point of view.
- Once all the points have been marked, boy A begins to live the experience from the perspective of each point. Boy B leads student A in this task just listening to what he says from every point. Boy C watches the relationship between A and B and whether they are following the instructions or not, whether boy A has any difficulty in adopting any perspective, etc…
- Every boy takes the four different roles in turns.
- Finally, all three boys share their experiences.
    - The purpose of this activity is to live the conflict experience again but from a subjective perspective as each perspective is directly lived by every student.
    - At the same time, the series of perspectives range from the subjective towards the objective end, in order to integrate the experience. Once it is "objectified" it is easier to think about it.

6. There is a final feedback session with the whole group to share their experiences and give some theoretical background related to conflict and perspective-taking.

7. Finally, all the students write what they have learnt on a sheet of paper during the session. Some of the experiences are read aloud by the facilitator.

Reflection:

With this series of activities following an experiential methodology, students will be able to practice the competences required to take several perspectives of one experience into consideration. It will be interesting to observe the complexity of social interaction, the differences in their discourse while holding a particular perspective and their awareness of their own and others' intentions, interests and emotions. It is also a good opportunity for them to go beyond their own perspectives.

Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

Conflict is generally understood as something that has to be coped with and solved. From a developmental point of view, however, we expect that conflict helps us "to solve ourselves" instead. This means that conflict is considered a chance for personal development.

Children aged 10 and 11 years old already have the ability for hypothetical reasoning. According to Piaget (1972) this ability allows their interest to expand beyond what they have immediately experienced and consider many other social possibilities.

Exploring interpersonal conflicts with experiential activities as the ones suggested above gives a chance to take psychosocial elements into account which will promote children's development.

The activities are based on the process of "social perspective taking" developed by Selman (1980). According to Selman (1980) "perspective taking" is the ability to assume the perspective of another person in order to understand their thoughts and feelings. This ability evolves from the age of three till 15 through four different stages. Children of 10 and 11 are situated between stages 2 and 3. Stage 2 is called "Reflexive Perspective Taking". It implies that the child understands that any individual knows the perspective of others and this influences the point of view that one has about the others. To take another's perspective is one way of evaluating other's intentions, purposes and behaviour. The child can create a sequence of perspectives but at this stage he cannot coordinate and integrate all sequences as a whole. It is at stage 3 "Reciprocal Perspective Taking" when the teenager understands that individuals can perceive themselves as a whole. This implies going beyond oneself and the other in order to perceive the relationship from the point of view of a third person (Kegan, 1994). The fourth and last stage means going beyond the relationship to include social conventions or rules and the general context where the interaction is taking place. The teenager at this stage understands that a reciprocal perspective taking does not provide a complete understanding of a situation if there is a lack of this social context where social interaction gets its full meaning.

In order to understand oneself one must first understand the others. Then the individual must determine how he or she is both similar and different from others. As Markstrom (1992, p. 183) states "*social perspective taking establishes such a process by allowing the individual to reflect upon the self from the perspectives of other individuals, other groups and society as a whole.*" An overemphasis on the perspective of others is said to lead to rigidity, while too much emphasis on the self's perspective may lead to egocentrism.

Activity number 3 above has been designed to provide an opportunity to take four different perspectives in relation to a particular interpersonal conflict lived by the children as a relevant experience for them. Its purpose is to establish different perspectives or points of view towards the same experience, a typical stage 2 of Selman's model: the possibility of taking another's perspective. After reflecting on this in step number 4 from a more external and general perspective created by the community (represented by the class and the teacher), we present activity 5. This activity is based in the "Meta Mirror Format" formulated by Dilts (1990). The key assumption is that dealing effectively with challenging relationships and interactions requires the ability to perceive and integrate a number of different perspectives or "perceptual positions". The Meta Mirror procedure helps people develop the ability to define and coordinate multiple perspectives, especially in situations involving emotional struggle and conflict. In terms of Selman's model this would imply achieving a third stage of "reciprocal perspective taking". The rationale of this procedure is based on the assumption that the place where you find the most difficult for communicating with another person is a mirror image of how you are relating to yourself in that situation. It creates a context in which you can keep shifting the

perspective from the most subjective (first position) towards the most objective (second, third and fourth positions) until you get a more integrative and comprehensive understanding of that social situation. Again in activity 6, all students take the perspective more typical of stage fourth of Selman's model, that of a community or social convention in order to share and discuss the lived experiences.

The sequence of seven steps provides a developmental challenge to this group of children due to the fact that most of them would be situated in a stage 2 of Selman's Social Perspective Taking model. This means that they would find it more difficult to finish activity 5 which implies not only experience a sequence of different perspectives for the same social event but the coordinated integration of all these perspectives. This difficulty is not only normal but desirable in terms of the concept of Zone of Proximal Development, "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). From a developmental point of view we would not only be training a social skill but trying to promote socio-emotional development through the use of concrete conflict experiences.

Methodologically speaking we are going beyond typical cognitive-behavioural practices generally working with artificial role playing techniques (Iborra, 2004). The purpose of this is double. First we think that experiential methodologies oriented towards the exploration of key processes (Iborra, 2007; Kolb, 1984) can facilitate the transfer of these new abilities to different contexts out of the training scenario. Second according to the intervention recommendations stated by Zacarés and Iborra (2006, p.38) any developmental intervention *"should be consistent with a theoretical background making sure all procedures are relevant and have personal meaning for the participants so that the intervention can really influence their life course"*.

According to this we have proposed a sequence of activities based on developmental theories taking into account the own and relevant experiences of the participants to the seminar. The sequence of activities is also based on a general outline of experiential learning focused on processes which stress the following steps (Ingarfield, 2007):

- The trainer or facilitator introduces a topic. It is open enough to provide a general understanding for the participants that will explore it.
- Participants do (explore).
- Participants check what they have found in their exploration.
- Participants share their experiences and meanings.
- The trainer demonstrates or introduces a formal model.
- Participants check this formal model with their own and previous experience.
- All discuss the variations of results and the limits of the model.

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