Conflict Resolution in a Preschool Constructivist Classroom: A Case Study in Negotiation

Rena Arcaro-McPhee
Dean College
Elizabeth E. Doppler
Debra A. Harkins
Suffolk University

Abstract. The purpose of this study was to document a child’s development of conflict resolution skills when a peer problem-solving model was used in a constructivist-designed classroom. At a laboratory preschool in an upper middle-class community, a 4-year, 11-month-old male, Stephen, was observed through audio- and videotaping 3 times weekly for 9 months by his preschool teacher. Findings revealed that Stephen progressed from a power assertion style of conflict resolution to a more sophisticated form of negotiation. Although only suggestive, this research supports current thinking that young children will engage in more developmentally advanced conflict resolution strategies when provided with opportunities to practice these skills. The emphasis that constructivist-oriented classrooms place on fostering more autonomous moral development is discussed.

Conflict in children’s relationships is a topic of great interest in the field of early childhood education and development (Arsenio & Cooperman, 1996; Brislin, 1988; Chen, Fein, Killen, & Tam, 2001; Gönçü & Cannella, 1996; Hofstede, 1986; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1992; Lewis, 1996; Thomson, 1993; Turiel, 1983). Conflicts provide a critical context for the development of social and cognitive competencies (Arsenio & Cooperman, 1996; Doppler, Harkins, & Arcaro-McPhee, 2002). As disagreements are an inevitable part of any early childhood classroom (Shantz, 1987), these conflicts are readily available, practical, educational tools. Considering the importance of conflicts in the classroom, two important questions follow. First, what kind of environment would best support children’s social growth and development of conflict resolution strategies? Second, how might teachers utilize these conflict situations to help children grow and develop into more independent problem solvers?

Piaget’s work (1932) suggests that children construct more mature social skills when given the opportunity to actively participate in the resolution process. Unfortunately, many educational environments are more concerned with maintaining peace by ending conflict rather than using conflict as an opportunity for developing sociomoral behavior and perspective taking (Bayer, Whaley, & May, 1995). Contrary to the beliefs of many parents and teachers, research suggests that young children are able to resolve peer conflicts on their own without adult intervention, in both structured and unstructured settings (Chen et al., 2001; Doppler et al., 2002; Killen & Turiel, 1991; Nucci & Nucci, 1982; Nucci & Turiel, 1978). Given that children may be more skilled than traditionally believed at resolving conflicts among themselves, the role of the adult as the authority in the conflict resolution process is called into question.

Research on adults’ influence on children’s moral development and conflict resolution supports the assertion that a constructivist approach fosters children’s development more effectively than does the more traditional nonconstructivist approach (Arsenio
how to elicit each side's needs and understand what leads to conflict as well as resolution (Lewis, 1996).

This research sought to examine the role of constructivist strategies in the development of conflict resolution in preschool children. Levin and Carlsson-Paige (1992) describe a constructivist model of conflict resolution referred to as peer problem solving. Within this framework, the teacher acts as a facilitator among the members of the group in conflict. The teacher helps the children define the problem (highlighting multiple points of view), brainstorm possible solutions, use negotiation skills, and choose solutions that meet the needs of all involved. From this perspective, the teacher is in charge of scaffolding the resolution process by highlighting the multiple perspectives inherent in interpersonal conflict and encouraging children to generate their own solutions (Levin, 1994). With teachers taking this facilitative role, it becomes the children's responsibility to generate solutions satisfactory to all. The elements of compromise and dialogue present in such a negotiation reflect a more mature form of conflict management than is generally recognized in preschool children, as opposed to more simple forms such as disengagement or turning away from conflict (Iskandar, 1995).

The High/Scope model of peer problem solving is currently being implemented at a constructivist preschool in southeastern Massachusetts. Using this model, teachers follow a six-step process to facilitate children in resolving conflicts. These steps include calmly approaching the children and stopping harmful behavior, acknowledging each child's feelings, gathering information from each child, restating the problem using the children's words, asking children for their solutions and choosing one together, and offering follow-up support (Brickman, 2001; Evans, 2002). In a previous study, teacher-researcher Arcaro-McPhee (1997) documented several conflict resolution strategies employed by the children at this preschool. Coding of the children's responses to conflict during free
play revealed four strategies used by the preschoolers at this constructivist site: power assertion, disengagement, and two types of negotiation—simple negotiation and sophisticated negotiation. Power assertion was defined as an aggressive act that ends the conflict situation without resolution. Disengagement was defined as turning away or distraction from the conflict situation. Negotiation was broken down into two parts: simple negotiation—when one child states his or her needs and the other child agrees; and sophisticated negotiation—when there is evidence that the child can take on the view of another and there is dialogue between children. The purpose of this study was to document one preschool child’s (Stephen) development of conflict resolution skills when a peer problem-solving model is used in a classroom. The following questions were explored: When a constructivist atmosphere is created, will a preschool-age child be able to resolve conflicts by using negotiation? Also, will a preschool child learn to develop conflict resolution strategies ranging from the simple forms of power assertion or disengagement to the more sophisticated forms of negotiation?

Method

Participant
Stephen was a male student from an upper middle-class family in a class of 29 (17 males) Caucasian American children. He attended the afternoon class at a college laboratory preschool in an upper middle-class community in southeastern Massachusetts. Stephen was 4 years, 11 months old at the start of this nine-month-long study.

Procedure
After obtaining parental consent for participation in this study, problem-solving conflicts involving Stephen during free play were examined through videotapes, audiotapes, and journal entries collected throughout the year. Data were examined and analyzed to identify the gender dyads/groups evident in each conflict as well as the type of resolution strategy employed by each child. Data revealed that Stephen was involved in 20 conflicts over the school year. Each conflict situation was coded to identify which strategies Stephen used in conflict resolution: power assertion, disengagement, simple negotiation, or sophisticated negotiation. The data also were coded to see if teacher intervention occurred during the conflict and whether a change occurred in the type of resolution strategies used by Stephen throughout the school year.

Results and Discussion
Findings indicate that Stephen progressed from using power assertion as his primary strategy to learning how to use sophisticated negotiation. His initial attempts at negotiation were made with both female and male friends; later, he used negotiation with other peers. At the beginning of the study, when Stephen was beginning to become familiar with the problem-solving model, the teacher needed to help him through interventions and guidance. After some months of practice, Stephen began to rely on the teacher for support, but he initiated his own resolutions. As Stephen became comfortable with this method of problem solving, his strategies, as well as his skill level, improved.

The following three vignettes demonstrate Stephen’s progression from using power assertion strategies to using a more sophisticated form of negotiation. The dialogue below is representative of one of Stephen’s responses at the beginning of this study. Notice Stephen’s behavior as he enters into a conflict situation, which revolves around the possession of a water wheel at the sensory table.

Month One:
During free-play time, Stephen chooses to play at the sensory table. The sensory material in the table is bird seed, with various items set out for pouring, filling, measuring, etc. There also is a water wheel being used by Matt, which Stephen grabs from him.
Matt: “Hey! That was mine!”
Stephen: “Well, I’m using it now!”
Matt: “I need that!”
Stephen: “Hey! I need that!”
Matt: “I wanted to play with it. Can we share that?”
Stephen: (turns and walks away)

The teacher intervenes by asking Stephen if he would like to talk to Matt. He looks at her, then shakes his head, “No.”

Note Stephen’s attempt to gain control of the water wheel by pulling it from Matt, demonstrating a power assertion strategy. Stephen’s words and behavior suggest his lack of awareness of Matt’s feelings and needs. Matt’s behavior suggests an attempt at simple negotiation by offering to share the water wheel. However, Stephen does not verbally respond to this suggestion; rather, he turns and walks away from the conflict situation. When the teacher intervenes and asks Stephen if he would like to speak to Matt, he shakes his head and declines to do so. The teacher respects his wishes while remaining available for support and intervention in the next months.

By the fourth month of the study, Stephen moved from power assertion to disengagement. The following scenario represents Stephen’s growth in his use of resolution strategies. Note Stephen’s apparent shift from a more physically aggressive strategy, as seen in the previous example, to verbal expression of his own needs.

Month Four:
Billy is in the small block room building a structure with another child. Stephen comes over to the teacher and says: “I want to play with Billy.” (The teacher facilitates this action by bringing Stephen over to Billy.)
Stephen: (to Billy) “I want to play with you.”
Billy: “Well, I’m playing with Adam. I played with him yesterday at my house. When you’re not here I play with Adam. And when Adam is not here I play alone.”
Stephen: (Looks at Billy as Billy speaks, and then walks away.)

Notice that Stephen uses language instead of pulling or grabbing, as he had done earlier in the year. Stephen walks away from the conflict situation, demonstrating a disengagement style of resolution. Although he progressed from physical to verbal expression, he failed to take the perspective of another or to use language for negotiation. Also, note that the teacher facilitated the conflict by supporting Stephen when she brought him over to speak to his friend. Rather than imposing an adult’s solution and directing the resolution, such as making the children play together to be “fair,” the teacher respected both children’s approaches and allowed them to create their own resolution.

Toward the end of this study, Stephen was engaging in negotiation strategies to resolve conflict. Note his move from walking away to staying in the relationship and engaging in a dialogue with the other child.

Month Nine:
Outdoor in the play yard, Stephen and Joey are playing gas station with tricycles. Stephen is riding the tricycle and Joey is playing gas attendant, pretending to fill up the gas tank of Stephen’s “car.” The play is quite harmonious and the boys switch roles, with Joe on the tricycle and Stephen at the gas tank. Joey rides up and fills his tank up with fuel. Then, Joe rides around the driveway and comes back again.

Stephen: “The gas station is closed. We’ll be open on Friday. Come back. Oil gas station is open!”
Joey: (comes over and grabs the gas pump away from Stephen). “Let me be it!”
Stephen: “No, I just got here!”
Joey: (very insistent) “I want to be it!”
Stephen: “You can have a turn when I am done.”
Joey: "Want a turn on my bike?"
Stephen: "Okay, but it won't be fun."
(Gets on bike and rides around. He comes back to Joey) "I need gas."
Joey: "Give me money."
Stephen: "Okay." (Gives Joey money and rides away.)

The teacher asks Stephen if he was okay with the outcome of the situation. Stephen nods his head and says, "Yeah."

Toward the end of the school year, Stephen was consistently using sophisticated negotiation as his resolution strategy. Sophisticated negotiation involves perspective taking and dialogue. Note that in this instance, Stephen's behavior suggests perspective taking with the other child as well as an ability to verbally communicate his own needs. Despite Stephen's statement that taking turns "won't be fun," his behavior also suggested an understanding of Joey's needs and an ability to incorporate them into their play. This conflict was resolved by the two young children without adult intervention, although the teacher gave follow-up support by asking Stephen about his feelings.

General Discussion
While only suggestive as a case study, these findings support the hypothesis that when a constructivist, sociomoral environment is created, young children will progress from the less-developed strategies of power assertion and disengagement to the more complex and developed forms of negotiation and power sharing. By implementing a High/Scope and peer problem-solving approach to conflict resolution, children are able to practice their social skills in a safe, encouraging atmosphere (Evans, 2002; Gartrell, 2002). In support of past research (Killen, 1995), these findings reflect that the use of explanations and rationales from peers enhances socially positive forms of interactions. Furthermore, interactions with parents, siblings, teachers, and peers provide different sources of experiences for children to develop constructive ways of resolving conflicts with each other. In the constructivist classroom observed by the authors, the teacher fosters such interactions, as evidenced in the vignette depicting conflict between Stephen and Billy. By bringing Stephen together with Billy and supporting them in dialogue about the conflict, the opportunity for self-expression and exposure to the perspectives of others was enhanced. Furthermore, the teacher's acceptance of the children's solution demonstrated the mutual respect characteristic of the constructivist approach.

This research supports Piaget's contentions that when children are able to experiment with different conflict resolution strategies, they can and do resolve their own conflicts through negotiation. By introducing young children to conflict resolution skills in ways they can understand and enjoy, children may be more likely to develop more sophisticated social skills. In a classroom that fosters mutual respect between children and teachers, it is likely that children will learn how to grapple creatively with conflict and to provide solutions that are agreeable for everyone involved.

While this study demonstrates that a peer problem-solving model is effective in fostering children's sociomoral development, there is much regarding the constructivist based classroom that has yet to be explored. The maturing nature of a child's social skills (as in Stephen's situation) is supported by Hoffman (1994), who proposes that empathy, with its strong maturational basis, may motivate a child to refrain from acting aggressively towards others. Future studies that examine the development of empathy in a constructivist environment may provide valuable information in understanding children's development of resolution strategies. In light of past research, equivocal findings regarding gender differences in empathy and use of resolution strategies also should be further explored (Gilligan & Wiggins, 1987). Other areas of interest include the role of the adult in a child's sociomoral development. Crockenberg (1992) has suggested that the likelihood of
children negotiating with peers is enhanced when family relationships offer a model of conflict resolution characterized by direct self-expression and attentiveness to others’ needs, as well as verbal and nonverbal compromises that allow the dyad or group to achieve their goals. Further studies should address how varying resolution styles of parents, as well as those of student teachers, teachers, and directors in constructivist environments, relate to a child’s development of resolution strategies.

Research also is needed to validate the use of the constructivist model of conflict resolution in the preschool classroom. Of particular importance is promoting awareness for the value of research and interventions in violence and conflict resolution targeting preschool classrooms. Many adults believe preschool children are not capable of sophisticated forms of negotiation. As a result, research and interventions are being addressed to children who are in grade school or older. By then, however, we are already beginning to see violence erupt; children as young as 1st grade are bringing guns to school, and middle school children are being shot on school grounds. If, as this study suggests, young children are capable of negotiation, further studies are needed to explore how creating a sociomoral atmosphere in preschool may set the stage for more peaceful classrooms in later years. Furthermore, attention must be given to parsing out the contributions of both the developmental capabilities of young children and the environmental characteristics of a constructivist atmosphere to peaceful resolutions. Young children can develop the tools for promoting peace in their classrooms if given the credit that they are capable of using negotiation. This may be a first step in addressing the devastating violence we are currently witnessing in much of society.

A comparison of constructivist to more traditional approaches to resolution is warranted as well, to demonstrate the efficacy of the constructivist classroom and approach to education. If the constructivist approach to teaching demonstrates such growth in children, why is it not being used as a protocol across the United States? Bayer et al. (1995) suggest that teachers may be more concerned with maintaining peace by stopping the conflict rather than helping children learn how to maintain the peace themselves by promoting their acquisition of certain necessary skills. This traditional model is suggestive of an authoritarian approach, in which obedience to authority is valued over children’s acquisition of autonomy and interpersonal skills.

In direct contrast, constructivism favors the teacher stepping out of the direct teaching role, so that power and control are transferred to the child. Is this concept too unfamiliar in American education? Why, in a purportedly democratic society, is democracy not being carried out in the classroom?

In conclusion, this case study suggests that preschool children can—and do—resolve their own conflicts using sophisticated negotiation when given the opportunity and the environment to experiment. Providing situations and teachable moments for children to try out different strategies may ultimately lead to more highly developed prosocial behavior in the classroom and, eventually, in society at large.

References


