Conflict Resolution Ecosystem in Schools: Strategies and Needs

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts are organic in nature. They are an integral part of our lives and there are no individuals who can claim that they have not face conflict situations in their daily lives. Conflicts are essentially differences in how opinions are expressed, differences in perspectives and understanding of different points, differences in ways of working, etc. With differences, human interactions aim to incorporate conflicts. So, when a teacher tries to put forth some concepts in classrooms, there are differences in the meaning grasped by the students. These differing thought processes may lead to situations wherein conflicts arise. The conflicts may sometimes result in better comprehension or at other times, may lead to rifts. In this backdrop, it would be critical to look at the need to look at conflict resolution ecosystems in school settings. This paper tries to understand the strategies and needs for a constructive conflict resolution ecosystem in schools through the literature available. It also tries to delve on the framework of conflict resolution that needs to be developed in schools so that conflict competencies of students can be enhanced.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, classroom management practices, peer mediation, restorative practices, negotiation, school conflicts

Conflicts and their nature

Now, there are many, many people in the world, but relatively few with whom we interact, and even fewer who cause us problems. So, when you come across such a chance for practicing patience and tolerance, you should treat it with gratitude. It is rare. Just as having unexpectedly found a treasure in your own house, you should be happy and grateful to your enemy for providing that precious opportunity.

— **The Dalai Lama**

Conflicts are natural, be it of interest or of response to situations. These occur on a daily basis, and are unavoidable situations faced by everyone. Conflicts not only take place among the individuals but also within oneself. Conflicts are the differences in expression of opinions, viewpoints, ways of working and understanding, striving to achieve the same goals in different ways, etc. Any kind of human interaction incorporates conflicts. Here it may be emphasized that conflicts are not always destructive, if channelized properly they may turn into opportunities of growth. Ghaffar (2019) insists that conflicts are needed to raise and address problems, energize work to be on the most appropriate issues, help people 'be real', help people learn how to recognize and benefit from their differences.

Conflicts in schools

Schools are foundational to human lives. They are learning grounds for appropriate behaviour. Since conflicts are unavoidable, their management and resolution should necessarily begin during schooling days. Conflicts in schools may be intrapersonal conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, intra-group conflicts, inter-group conflicts, conflicts between students and teachers, and conflicts between parents and authorities. These may arise out of attitudes and behaviours of students like ego, show-off, introversion, extroversion, etc. Children acting out their emotions may tease, gossip, show physical aggression which escalates into conflicts. Conflicts may arise anywhere in the school premises - be it classroom, library, school bus, playground, while standing in line, canteens and any place where kids gather. If left unchecked, these same behavioural and attitudinal patterns continue into the teenage years, where stiffer competition exists among peer groups. And later on, these, manifest themselves in adult behaviour as well. Therefore, it is important to understand nature of conflicts and resolution strategies.

This review paper was written to bring down knowledge gap of teachers and school administrators in developing robust class conflict resolving mechanism, relevant attitude and required skills.

METHOD

Literature review was undertaken over a period between 1971 and 2022. Key words given above were employed to identify research articles from prominent journals in peace and conflict studies, educational management, organizational behaviour and general management. Six paper were found. Eleven books on conflict management, educational management, organisational behaviour, general management and mediation were looked into for relevant literature besides two reports and one course material for lack of research articles. As there are not many publications in this area between 2000 to 2022, researchers had to go back till 1971 for the purpose of having sufficient sources for review.

The review was done broadly on six aspects: deeper issues behind conflict, conflict resolving competency, types of scenario, conflict management strategy, mediation, and learning from school conflicts. These six aspects, in sequence present a systematic perspective for resolving conflict management in school. Concluding section will present the model arising out of perspective for purpose of future confirmatory studies and application in schools.

FINDINGS

(A) Deeper Issues behind Conflict

For developing critical understanding of conflicts and their resolution, Kundu and Sharma (2022) made a broad point wise summary of these deeper elements from observation and other studies which can help in developing greater understanding of conflicts and their reasons:

1. As we all know that no two human beings are the same nor are their thought process or their perspectives, we have to remember that even though we may have some common characteristics, we are essentially different. Much of the disputes arise due to differences in our perception. Also, we must keep in mind that same techniques of conflict resolution will not work for all alike due to these differences.

2. We also need to keep in mind that our own outlook, thoughts and perspectives keep on changing from time to time and in different situations. This has an impact on the way to see conflicts and how we try to handle these.

3. When we look at the entire gamut of human interactions and human relationships, we would realize that these interactions and relationships are very complex in nature. These are multi-layered and multi-dimensional. These interactions are also unpredictable as these involve two different individuals who are through a process of constant change themselves. In such a situation, it is difficult to have any single fixed framework for resolution of conflict.

4. In situations of conflict, there is an atmosphere of negativity -full of negative energy,

negative perception, negative behavior and dysfunctional communication ecosystem. Also, there is involvement of intense emotions, issues of intentions of the conflicting parties, attitudes which are inconsistent and problems of stereotypes. The system becomes dysfunctional and there is chaos and turmoil.

5. In conflicts there is intersection of emotional issues, intentionality, interests, self-aggrandizement, identity, the history and form of the relationship between the conflicting parties; we must realize that in most occasions the actual reason of the conflict is beneath the surface. It is possible that the conflicting parties may be fighting over trivia or superficial issues and they are unable to unearth the real reasons of the conflict or are not conscious of these underlying concerns. It is critical to discern on the actual meaning of the conflict, what it means to each of the conflicting parties, the reasons of why and how they got into the conflict situation.

6. Many times when a conflict has taken chronic proportion or it has developed into a situation which has become difficult, thinking starts to sink in that it could be an uphill task to resolve it. In order to resolve such issues, it would need greater effort to change and transform. It is also here we could find that there could be considerable resistance for any perceptible change which could contribute towards the resolution of the conflict.

7. We must realize that there are issues and sub-issues in conflicts. It is important to keep in mind that each of these issues and sub-issues are important even though some of them would seem to be insignificant. So, any change in any of these issues or sub-issues could help in transformation of the scenario either in a small way or even towards finding a major solution to the conflict.

8. In most of the situations, we should realize that conflicting parties want resolution of their disputes. No one wants a conflict situation to linger on as it is stressful and leads to more complex problems. When conflicting parties find a safe space to dialogue and reconcile their

differences, it is likely they would be more flexible, open, will be attuned to managing their emotions, feelings, intentions and attitudes.

(B) Conflict Resolving Competency

Robbins (1974) lists eight resolution techniques as follows: (1) problem solving; (2) superordinate goals; (3) smoothing; (4) avoidance; (5) compromise; (6) command; (7) altering the human variable; (8) altering structural variables.

Michael (2006) suggests that conflict resolution requires listening to the needs of the parties and providing opportunities to meet those needs. Peaceful methods of conflict resolution if properly utilized can come in handy to amicably resolve the arguments, skirmishes, fights, misunderstandings and any other differences between the students.

Kundu and Sharma (2022) argue that honing one's conflict competencies was the best way to handle a conflict situation. They underline the need to develop different techniques and capacities so as to enable individuals to respond to a particular conflict situation. Competencies need to be developed for deciphering underlying reasons of conflict and probe beneath the superficial issues of the conflict.

(C) Types of Scenario

Kundu and Sharma (2022) wrote about three scenarios which are as follows: We should realize that in situations of conflicts, there could be different pathways in which these could be resolved. It is upon the conflicting parties on how they would act, their attitudes, behavior and approaches. There could be a scenario when even if the conflicting parties get into the negotiation table, due to some reason or the other, go back to a situation of impasse and more hostility. In the second scenario, the conflicting parties through the process of dialogue move towards resolution, they collaborate together to find solution to their dispute. In yet another scenario, the conflicting parties goes through a process of self-realization, they start looking at the conflict as an opportunity to learn and transformation. Hence, we must realize

that every conflict gives an opportunity to people to express and act on how they would like the situation to evolve-whether there would resolution and transformation or continuation of the impasse.

(D) Conflict Management Strategy

Student advisories, confrontation sessions, sensitivity training, involvement in the process, volunteerism, educational pluralism, acceptance of failure, cooperative studies are some other strategies of conflict management in schools according to Thomas (1971).

According to Johnson and Johnson (1996), conflict resolution and peer mediation programs are often promoted as a way to reduce violence in schools. Rahim and Bonoma (2002), using the dimensions of self-concern and other's concern, came up with five conflict management strategies which are:

(a) Avoiding: Low level of concern for both self and other.

(b) Dominating: An aggressive strategy where self-concern is a priority.

(c) Obliging: More concern for the other less for self.

(d) Integrating: Equal concern for self and other.

(e) Compromising: Where both parties forgo some of their concerns to reach a solution.

Isabu (2017) suggests five-step mediator driven action for resolving conflict:

⊙ Step 1 is to analyze and understand the nature and type of conflict through questions.

⊙ Step 2 involves selection of the most appropriate response to the conflict. According to Griffin and Moorhead (2007), these five responses can be: Accommodation, avoidance, competition, collaboration, and compromise.

⊙ The 3rd step is pre-negotiation stage for initiation into conversation. This stage requires some groundwork to be done to start negotiation such as establishing meeting logistics.

⊙ Step 4 is Negotiation where the disputing parties express themselves freely and also try to understand each other's point of view in presence of a teacher or head.

⊙ Post negotiation stage is the last or 5th step when the decisions made are implemented.

Building an ecosystem conducive to positive dissolution of conflicts calls for adoption of non-coercive techniques of conflict resolution. Mansoori (2019) lists different conflict resolution strategies that can be integrated in school ecosystems:

(a) Directly teach students the skills they need to work in partners or groups, including the importance of communicating needs, setting goals, and what to do if something goes wrong

(b) Encourage students to role-play situations that require empathy, communication, and problem-solving

(c) Help students see how their actions impact others, both positively and negatively, by including these observations in everyday conversation. Phrases such as, I feel confused when you…, I feel happy when we..., or we work best together when…, help students make this connection.

(d) Teach students your process for resolving classroom conflicts before issues come up. This way, students are prepared to take an active role in resolving their own problems.

(e) Remember that conflicts often arise from a combination of fear, anxiety, or frustration. Help students learn to recognize emotional triggers and manage them in healthy ways, such as with mindful activities, movement, or reflection.

Kundu and Sharma (2022) It would be pertinent to point out here that the conflict management strategy chosen depends on the level of conflict and the circumstances. Different strategies will work in different situations. Strategies here imply specific behaviour pattern adopted to deal with a conflict situation.

(E) Mediation

Since school is an entity composed of people from generational ages, Bodin and Crawford (1999) find

negotiation and mediation as the best strategies for eliminating conflicts. Mediation, particularly peer mediation can effectively diffuse conflicts at school level.

Kgomo (2006) suggested that the institutional head must engage in the conflict resolution process. For this he/she may have to multitask into different roles such as communication agent, negotiator, leader, mediator, problem solver, researcher and a decision-maker.

Maccoby and Studder (2011) have identified five steps to handle conflicts through mediation:

1. Anticipate – potential conflicts that might take place.
2. Prevent – By developing strategies to nip the conflict before it stems out.
3. Identify – The nature of conflict.
4. Manage – The emotional aspects of it.
5. Resolve – Respond, do not react.

Karen (2020) in his handbook on peer mediation highlights the significance of conflict resolution through mediation in schools for happier and healthier children. If the school makes conflict resolution strategies an integral part of their ecosystem, it can help in reduction in conflicts and use of retributive practices.

According to the Lescher (2021), developing a class inventory and self-assessment by the students can help a lot in dealing with conflicts. This inventory must include those specific aspects of the class which are likely to be the sources of conflict. For example, teaching sensitive material may challenge some student's strongly held beliefs, these calls for carefully teaching methods. To avoid conflicts a teacher must conduct a classroom discussion on the very first day, discussing the policies regarding the attendance and grading, syllabus and in-class behaviour. Apart from this building strong bond with the students, good communication skills, empathy, respect and concern can also help in avoiding as well facing a confrontational situation.

Kundu and Sharma (2022) suggest the need for schools to develop a framework of peer mediation programmein which parties come together in presence of a peer mediator to reflect and act upon the conflict so that it can be resolved.

(F) Learning from School Conflict

Kundu and Sharma (2022) observed: If we go back to the last conflict situation in which we were involved, we would realize how conflicts can give us the opportunity and space to hone our skills and awareness on how to respond to our opponents and difficult scenario. As conflicts are bound to come in our life, we must try to ensure on how each of these conflict situations becomes a significant source of learning, enhancement of wisdom and of course further improvement. Here we want to point out that conflicts should offer opportunities to learn not just for individuals but also for systems and institutions. It will help in responding to such conflicts more constructively in the future. In the context of school environment, they argue that students enhance their socio-emotional learning when they are exposed to conflict situations and strategies of conflict resolution.

CONCLUSION

There goes this famous saying by William Wordsworth that- 'The child is father of the man'. Whatever foundations are laid in children they reflect rigidly in their adult behaviour. They shape one's identity. Both positive and negative traits acquired in childhood demonstrate in adulthood. Since conflicts are an unavoidable part of human existence, children need to acquire management skills to come out of them constructively. An individual who cannot deal with conflicts positively whether internal or external, undergoes a lot of mental pain and disturbance. Traumatic experiences can ruin a child's personality completely. Conflict resolution mechanisms should therefore be a significant part of educational curriculum. Peer mediation, negotiation, parent teacher meetings and get-togethers can play a crucial role in nurturing relationships, trust and empathy in children.

In the backdrop of the expansive literature review undertaken by the authors it would be apt to

suggest a framework of conflict resolution practices which schools could introduce in their endeavor to enhance conflict competencies amongst students. As underlined above, enhancing one's conflict competencies is a life skill which should be introduced right from a young age so that students can negotiation different types of conflict situation they may face in their lives. Also it can help in promoting their socio-emotionally learning.

The framework the authors propose is to introduce a set of simulation exercises which helps to enhance conflict competencies and skills to resolve conflicts. Schools could introduce other innovative programmes like role plays, analysis of conflict situations, and promotion of mediation mindsets amongst students through real life examples. Using audio-visual tools and introduction of exploratory and experiential methods can also strengthen the skills to resolve conflicts and enhance conflict competencies. The framework should consider identifying students who have mediation mindset and potential to handle conflicts constructively. Overall, this can help students to understand the values of resolving conflicts constructively.

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