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Why Won't They Pay Attention? Improving engagement and classroom climate through teaching a conflict resolution program

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By

Leeat Medina

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This action research project, written under the direction of the candidate's master's project advisory committee and approved by members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership degree.

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Abstract

"Why Won't They Pay Attention?": Improving Student Engagement Through Teaching Conflict
Resolution Skills
By
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Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership
Saint Mary's College of California, 2022
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Research demonstrates that during children's adolescence, peers have a strong influence on

behavior choices, mental health and academic achievement. Conflicts that occur, as a natural part

of any relationship, can often cause disruptions both inside and outside of the classroom.

Teaching students how to constructively navigate conflicts that are often more complex in

adolescence, is essential if we want them to have healthy relationships and feel connected to

school. The goal of this action research project (ARP) was to investigate the effects of teaching a

conflict resolution unit on classroom engagement. This conflict resolution skills and strategies

unit helped improve students' engagement, reduce conflicts and taught students about effective

communication as well as factors within their control that affect their engagement.

Dedication

This action research project is dedicated to my family and friends who believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. Without their support and encouragement, I couldn't have gotten through this. To my daughters, who inspire me every day. I hope that seeing me do this at age 45, reminds them that it is never too late to pursue your dreams. To my amazing husband who helped pick up the slack when I was in class or deeply entrenched in homework. To my wonderful colleagues and professors at St. Mary's College MATL, who were an absolute pleasure to work with throughout the entire year. It was truly an honor to work with all of you! Thank you!

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I would also like to acknowledge the faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education at Saint Mary's College of California for their support and guidance throughout the course of the program. You were able to maintain a wonderful Master's program, despite a global pandemic, which required our classes to be conducted remotely. We were able to still feel connected to the people in our cohort as well as to the Saint Mary's community.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Middle school is a time when children's peer relationships become increasingly more important in their daily lives. While parents are still an important influence, peers tend to influence their choices more heavily. U.S. middle school students are also looking for more independence and control over their lives. Although these changes are a normal part of development, many students do not learn effective coping skills to help deal with the new demands of the middle school environment where they often encounter more challenging situations (Coleman, Deutsch, Marcus, & Morgan, 2014). Social media and texting have created its own set of challenges for middle school students because they have access to a medium of communication, often unsupervised by parents, that can often bring out behaviors that would not have been presented with person-to-person contact. Middle schools are seeing conflicts that begin on social media end up erupting on campus and conversely conflicts that may have started on campus continue and become larger conflicts on social media, often involving an even larger audience of their peers who join in and take sides.

Conflicts are a normal part of any relationship and of the human experience. The challenge that arises is learning to resolve these more complex conflicts, that occur as children enter adolescence, in a healthy way. Strategies students may have used in elementary school to solve conflicts are no longer effective when applied to situations that arise in middle school. Students need to learn new approaches to resolving conflicts in their evolving social dynamics. "Successful coping requires acquisition of new approaches to challenging situations when outmoded responses stop working." (Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Miller, & Landry, 2000, p. 2). As such, it is critical that middle-school-age students are explicitly taught new strategies for

resolving conflicts in their evolving peer relationships. Given students' need for independence and control over their lives, schools are looking to alternative ways to address conflicts and disruptions that tap into those developmental desires. "Students who learn to resolve their conflicts verbally and constructively may learn to avoid the destructive escalation that ends in physical harm." (Smith, Miller, & Robinson, 2002). Equipping adolescents with the necessary tools to constructively navigate their interpersonal relationships can help all students, but most importantly, those who are more at risk for violent or aggressive behavior.

Classroom teachers, administrators and counselors are struggling to effectively deal with the volume of conflicts and mental health needs of their students. Disruptions, often caused by interpersonal conflicts, can create a toxic environment and lead to a loss in instructional time. Punitive measures such as detention, suspension and expulsion, are proving ineffective in reducing the number of conflicts and disruptive and/or aggressive incidents, because they do not get to the root cause of the behaviors. Punitive measures do not teach students how to change their approach to the conflicts they encounter, and often make students feel alienated from the school as a whole, leading to negative effects on the overall climate of the school. As a result, schools need to find new approaches that target the root causes of these conflicts and help students react in a constructive way.

Many schools have turned to programs that teach students specific strategies for resolving conflicts productively and create positive interpersonal relationships. These types of conflict resolution programs have been shown to improve problem behaviors (Kahlberg, Lane, & Lambert, 2012), and in some cases academic achievement as well. A crucial element of this discussion is how social injustice in the school setting plays a causal role in some of the negative interpersonal behaviors that occur. Bettman and Moore (1994) contend that before implementing

a conflict resolution program schools must address whether it has created "a climate of powerlessness for students and adults who believe they are not valued in their communities." In order for a conflict resolution program to be effective, school staff need to be willing to engage in these difficult and uncomfortable discussions around bias and privilege before they implement it with students.

Statement of the Problem

Schools all over the country are addressing the issue of school safety as an urgent priority. In addition to fire and earthquake drills, students are also trained on how to respond to an active shooter on campus. While the more recent school shootings have created an uneasiness for students, parents and educators, the physical conflicts that occur between students more frequently, that do not usually do not involve weapons and may not result in serious physical injuries, can often have lasting negative emotional and psychological effects for the victims (KIllam, 2013). School administrators and staff are looking for ways to prevent violent incidents and reduce aggressive behavior among students. What has become increasingly clear to educators and administrators is that punitive measures such as detentions or suspensions are not effective in preventing conflicts, both verbal and physical, from occurring. Rather, these forms of discipline often lead to chronic behavior problems and increased aggression because they do not address the root cause of these acts.

Moreover, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students are disproportionately represented when examining suspensions and expulsions, which brings up the question of whether there are systemic injustices within the school systems that are causing some of these negative and/or aggressive behaviors . "School attrition rates, broken down by race and ethnic background, indicate that schools are failing African American and Hispanic students at a

disproportionately higher rate than they are failing White students" (Bettman & Moore, 1994, p. 13). Furthermore, there are many institutional practices, such as culturally biased standardized testing, monocultural curricula and teaching staff, an inhospitable school climate, and a pedagogical approach to teaching that most resembles the teaching staff, that contribute to inequities in educational opportunities (Bettman & Moore, 1994). Educators are turning to programs that teach students the skills to resolve their conflicts and assume responsibility for their behavior with the hopes of improving engagement and school climate. "Teaching students to resolve their conflicts constructively can have positive effects on the school environment, particularly because students' chronic behavior problems demand considerable time and attention from teachers and administrative staff" (Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson, 2002, p.143).

I am a sixth grade core, language arts/reading/history, teacher in a middle/working-class suburban school. We are the smallest middle school in the district, averaging 600-700 students total. One of the reasons I chose to teach at my current school is because it is one of the most demographically balanced schools in the district. I have been teaching at my current school for 12 years and have seen a change in the motivation, engagement and socialization of my students over the course of my time there. I have seen an increase in the number of conflicts between students which often result in disruptions in and out of the classroom. During the 2019-2020 school year, I had one of the most challenging groups of students of my career. They clearly had unresolved conflicts from elementary school, which played out in the classroom in various disruptive ways, such as name calling, negative comments, refusal to work in groups with others, to name a few. These negative interactions created a difficult learning environment and caused

anxiety among many of the students in addition to causing verbal and sometimes physical altercations outside of class time.

There was a lack of engagement and motivation in general. Normally I train students on our daily routines in the first quarter such as how they walk in the classroom, our warm-up procedures, how they sharpen pencils and get drinks of water, and by the second quarter, they do this without any prompting or reminding. Students also have clear learning goals for each day and are given the necessary instruction and tools to complete those daily goals. Normally my students learn these routines so well that I can move easily around the room helping students and groups individually without fear that other students would get off task or disrupt the class. This did not happen with last year's group. They took any opportunity to make comments or find some way to communicate with others in class about conflicts, rumors, or gossip. I was constantly on high alert, looking out for any potential issues between certain students. I had to be very careful about planning any activity that involved movement around the room, as many would see it as an opportunity to touch base with someone, usually about the current drama that had occurred, only making the situation worse. There was also a tremendous amount of negativity towards one another and this would often erupt in the classroom. One student would make a negative comment towards another and that was all it took to get the ball rolling. I was unable to trust them to be autonomous learners in the classroom because many of them were so preoccupied with social issues.

Community circles have been a regular part of my classroom for most of my teaching career and I have attended professional development training/workshops to learn how to conduct restorative circles. I used many different techniques prior to this inquiry, including restorative and community circles, counseling services, one on one counseling, and reward systems, to help

give students tools to resolve some of these issues and create a more positive atmosphere for learning in the classroom. Although they seemed to enjoy community circles, liked our school counselor, and wanted the rewards, all of it was unsuccessful in resolving the problems inside and outside the classroom. I also had a few, especially behaviorally challenging students, who contributed to the toxic social environment and were at the center of many of these unresolved conflicts. Although my school does have a positive behavior reward system (PBIS: Positive Behavior Intervention System), we do not have a clear, comprehensive conflict resolution program. We can refer students to our counselor for mediation, but we (teachers) are not a part of this process and often are not informed as to the outcomes. It is also unrealistic to expect one counselor to be able to address the volume of conflicts that arise in a middle school. Teachers, administrators and staff need to be involved in this process if we are to improve the overall climate of our school.

As such, I was interested in investigating how the implementation of a more comprehensive conflict resolution program, which directly involves the students, would affect the level of engagement, reduce disruptions, and improve the overall emotional wellness of my students.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to investigate if teaching a conflict resolution unit might help reduce the number of conflicts, disruptions to the classroom, and anxiety, as well as help improve students' overall engagement and sense of safety at school. Students were taught lessons, two to three times a week. These lessons included confidence building, creating healthy habits, goal setting, identifying types of conflicts and how the relationship of the people involved in the conflict is important to understanding it. Lessons also taught how to constructively resolve

conflicts. Through teaching conflict resolution, students can learn important interpersonal skills that will help them in relationships both personal and professional.

Many conflict resolution and peer mediation programs are based on theories presented by Morton Duetsch (1973) who laid out the fundamental knowledge needed to resolve conflicts successfully. Duetsch explored many aspects of conflicts such as the types of conflicts as well as causes. Duetsch also analyzed conflict that arises from an imbalance of power. This point is extremely important in addressing conflicts in schools with BIPOC students, who have historically been the oppressed group. The impact of this research could lead to implementation of a school wide conflict resolution/peer mediation program, and have a stronger impact on the overall school climate.

Adolescence is a time when students are experiencing emotional turmoil, anxiety about their appearance and sexuality, and at the same time are also craving more independence (DeJulius & McLean, 2019). According to the World Health Organization (2021), one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder. In addition, among adolescents, depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability. Given all of these factors, there is a greater need, now more than ever, for schools to help give children tools for dealing with some of these issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the need to address children's mental health even greater. Social injustices such as police brutality and discrimination also contribute to the feeling of anxiety, anger and confusion that young middle school students already often feel (DeJulius & McLean, 2019). Many of the issues they are dealing with have a causal relationship to interpersonal conflicts because of how highly valued peer relationships among adolescents. These peer conflicts lead to disruptions in the classroom and affect the overall school climate (Daunic et al., 2000). School counselors can be a vital,

trained, resource in assisting with conflict mediation but they are often stretched thin, dealing with an increase in mental health concerns, and lack of support from administrators (Holowiak-Urquhart & Taylor, 2005). As a result, teachers are often left to handle peer conflicts on their own, often during instructional time.

My school has been struggling to deal with the number of conflicts that arise on a daily basis. We have one full time counselor, who is completely overwhelmed with the mental health needs of our student population. While it is important to be able to refer students to our counselor, it is also important that teachers have the tools to deal with issues like peer conflicts that create disruptions in the classroom. Teachers need to maintain control in their classrooms and sending students out of class can often be seen as giving up power, and may affect the relationship between the student and teacher.

Action Research Question

The question guiding this action research project was: *How will the development and implementation of a conflict resolution unit affect middle school students' classroom engagement?* Specifically, I am interested in reducing the frequency of disruptions, increasing engagement, and improving students' overall emotional wellness. I believe that teaching a conflict resolution unit will lead to less disruptions, improved engagement, and better overall classroom climate.

Limitations

There are several limitations that may have affected the outcome of this research project. These include time constraints, fear of retribution, and undisclosed data. As a requirement of the graduate program I was enrolled in, this project was conducted over an eight-week period. This relatively short period of time may have impacted the results of the study. Having a longer

period of time to teach more of the lessons that focused on application of the strategies taught may have impacted the participants more significantly. Students who were selected to participate in peer mediation training may not have had adequate time to put their training into action. Additionally, I was acting as both the researcher and the teacher who taught the lessons and trained the peer mediators, which could have affected the genuineness of the participation in the process. Students may have feared retribution in some way if they did not participate in the unit. Furthermore, some conflicts that occur outside of school on social media or texting may not have been disclosed by students even though they affected them at school.

Positionality of the Researcher

I am a white cisgender woman who researched conflict resolution and peer mediation involving a racially and socio-economically diverse group of sixth graders. Being an experienced middle school educator, who has taught at a Title I school, I understand the strong influence peers have on the choices students make in their day to day lives and that this shift can often lead to conflicting feelings and emotional distress. I also understand the importance of establishing a relationship with my students so that they trust in the process of learning how to resolve their own conflicts. I must be mindful of my position of power and influence during this process and reflect on how this could affect the students participating.

Based on my previous experiences with resolving conflicts involving my students, without using any established program or training, I am approaching this research project with several assumptions. First, I believe that sixth grade students want to avoid conflicts when possible. Second, I assumed that students want to be accepted by their peers and therefore have an interest in making sure any conflicts or potential conflicts are resolved peacefully. Lastly, I

assumed that sixth grade students are heavily influenced by their peers which would make peer mediators an effective tool in resolving conflicts.

To mitigate these biases I will be using multiple forms of data both prior to starting a conflict resolution and peer mediation program, during and after. I will collect and analyze observational and statistical data from colleagues, administrators and our counselor around conflicts and overall sense of climate in the classroom and common areas.

Definition of Terms

BIPOC

An acronym that stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color. This term is often used in the context of systemic racial injustices that directly impact those groups. This term has replaced POC (People of Color) in academic and mainstream writing, but there is still disagreement among writers and academics about the generality of the word, the context of how it is used and the race of the writer using it (Williams, 2020).

Conflict Resolution

A way for two or more parties to find a peaceful solution to a disagreement among them. Conflict resolution programs have been developed by researchers in the field of conflict resolution to help students learn negotiation strategies to constructively resolve conflicts (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Mitchell, & Fredrickson, 1997).

Community Circles

In the classroom a community circle, also referred to as a responsive circle is a safe discussion space in which students and the teacher sit in a round formation so that all members' faces are visible to one another. The goal of a community circle and responsive circle is to discuss topics that help build a sense of community, while a responsive circle is a tool for

addressing a moderately serious incident that occurred in the classroom or school community

(Wang & Lee, 2019).

Engagement

In education, student engagement refers to how involved or interested students appear to

be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other

(Axelson, Flick, & Arend, 2010).

Interpersonal conflict

Any type of conflict involving two or more people. (Duetsch, 1973).

Peer Mediation

In the context of being part of a conflict resolution program, peer mediation is when

students are trained in problem solving and negotiation techniques to mediate conflicts without

bias. Mediation provides a structured forum for the resolution of disputes on school grounds

(Lane & Jeffries, 1992).

PBIS

Positive Behavior Intervention Support is an evidenced-based three-tiered framework to

improve and integrate all of the data, systems, and practices affecting student outcomes every

day. (Center on PBIS, https://www.pbis.org/) At my school site, students receive electronic

points, which they can track, for demonstrating our core values; *positive, respectful, inclusive,*

determined and engaged.

Punitive

Something that involves punishment. In schools, punitive measures, such as detention or

suspensions, are used, by administrators, in response to behaviors that are deemed unacceptable,

inappropriate, disrespectful, or aggressive (Daunic et al., 2000).

School Climate

Refers to the quality of school life. School climate is often measured by students' sense of safety, participation in school activities, and the experiences of the staff (Smith et al., 2002).

Social Justice

In a school setting, social justice ensures that all students have equal access to educational opportunities, that academic principles are applied equally to all students, and that academic and behavioral expectations are structured to both acknowledge individual differences and be applied equitably (Bettman & Moore, 1994).

Implications

Extant research clearly supports the notion that, when implemented effectively, conflict resolution programs are effective in reducing conflicts, improving peer relationships, and overall school climate, as well as raising academic performance. Across the United States, interpersonal conflicts in the middle school setting, which often result in physical violence, contribute to an unsafe atmosphere and disruptive learning environment (Powell, Muir-McClain, & Lakshmi, 1995). Often, students who are not taught ways to manage their anger, control aggression, understand conflict, and avoid and diffuse potentially violent confrontations, end up lost in our juvenile detention facilities (Powell, Muir-McClain, & Lakshmi, 1995). In addition, interpersonal conflicts, that do not have the potential to escalate to physical violence, are also a source of anxiety for many. Bullying, teasing and other types of negative interactions among students, in my observations, are often the result of a lack of empathy and confidence in their status among their peers. The intention of my research was to provide my students the tools they needed to peacefully and successfully negotiate conflicts that arise among both friends and classmates. My hope was that through learning negotiation skills that require empathy,

compassion, and pursuit of a common goal, they would gain confidence and a feeling of independence from the need for adult intervention.

Additionally, I wanted students who learned these new skills to be role-models outside our classroom, in the larger school community. The intention was they could potentially be peer mediators and help train other students in conflict resolution techniques. As a school, I hoped that a conflict resolution program could be taught as an elective class or possibly to all students in one of their core academic classes.

The larger societal issue that I had hoped to address is the divisiveness that exists because of a breakdown in interpersonal communication. The lack of constructive dialogue and ability to approach a conversation, where each side has a differing view, poses a serious problem to our democracy as a whole. In order to find solutions to the problems our world is facing, both now and in the future, people need to be able to work together cooperatively.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The purpose of this research was to investigate if teaching a conflict resolution unit might help reduce the number of conflicts, disruptions to the classroom, and anxiety, as well as help improve students' overall engagement in the classroom. The need for teaching a conflict resolution program was an evolution that developed over many years. While mediating conflicts between students has always been a normal part of my experience as a teacher, it never seemed, in my view, to be a problem that interfered with classroom engagement and learning. During the 2019-2020 school year I experienced a group of students that made me look at conflict and interpersonal relationships, as it relates to classroom learning and engagement, between them differently. I realized that it wasn't that conflicts were not an issue prior, it was just not as apparent with previous groups as with this group. They came to my classroom with unresolved conflicts that dated back several grades, and these disputes played out regularly in the classroom, with name-calling, sarcastic comments, and put-downs. During the intervention, students were taught lessons, two times a week and participated in community circle discussions once a week. These lessons included confidence building, goal setting, helping students learn to identify types of conflicts, and strategies for resolving them constructively. Through teaching conflict resolution students can learn important interpersonal skills that will help them in relationships both personal and professional.

Research suggests that students developing social competence, during adolescence, can have a strong effect on academic achievement, and classroom behavior. Strong social emotional and conflict resolution skills are also predictors of future success as adults (Coleman, Deutsch, Marcus, & Morgan, 2014). Given the strong connection between becoming competent socially

and academic success, it is imperative that adolescent students be explicitly taught tools for working through conflicts that inevitably arise in their peer relationships.

The question guiding this action research project was: *How will the development and implementation of a conflict resolution unit affect middle school students' classroom engagement?* Specifically, I am interested in reducing the frequency of disruptions and improving students' overall engagement and behavior. I believe that teaching a conflict resolution unit will lead to less disruptions and better overall classroom climate.

Overview of the Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of foundational literature that informs this study. First, the literature review will cover the theoretical framework that informed this study. The theories used to support this study are Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of basic human needs, and Duetsch's (1973) theories on the resolution of conflict both constructive and destructive. Secondly, the research review includes a discussion of how adolescent peer influence, conflict and achievement are important factors in building identity, self-esteem, and can also affect academic performance, and as such, there is a need to explicitly teach students skills for constructively dealing with peer relationships.

The articles reviewed in this literature review were included because they review relevant research that connects to my research study's themes of adolescent interpersonal relationships, disruptive behaviors inside and outside of the classroom, and student's feelings of connectedness and belonging at school. All research studies were retrieved from databases including ERIC, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar. The key search terms *conflict resolution, adolescent peer relationships, peer mediation, adolescent conflict, community circles,* and *restorative practices* were used in this study.

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Theoretical Rationale

The three theories that were used to frame this action research project were Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Morton Deutsch's theories on the constructive and destructive processes of conflict resolution. All of these theories connect to the research study's goal of improving engagement and interpersonal relationships among middle school students.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

One theory that supported this inquiry was American psychologist Abraham Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of human needs. Maslow contends that there is a hierarchy of basic human needs that need to be met, so humans can reach the ultimate and last need on the hierarchy, which is self-actualization, or reaching one's full potential (Coleman et al., 2014). Although all of the needs in Maslow's hierarchy are essential, two of them are especially relevant to this action research project; *belongingness and love needs, and esteem needs*, both self and social.

According to Maslow during early childhood belongingness and love, which is the need to be a part of a group and feel cared for, are needs that are primarily fulfilled by a parent or guardian. When children enter middle childhood the need to belong extends to their peers. (Coleman et al., 2014). During adolescence the need for peer acceptance gets even stronger. This shift leads to situations that force children to have to manage conflicts on their own, that had been previously mediated by a parent or adult (Coleman et al., 2014). Maslow theorizes that children who have their basic needs met are more well equipped to handle these new conflicts that arise.

Another type of need Maslow identified was *Esteem needs*, both self-esteem and social esteem. Self-esteem refers to self-confidence, mastery, worth, and strength, while social esteem refers to respect, dignity, and appreciation (Coleman et al., 2014). These are critical needs that are often tied to school, both academic and social.

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Deutsch's Theory of Resolution of Conflict

The research question of this thesis was also heavily informed by Deutsch's theories on the factors that contribute to conflicts, both constructive and destructive. Deutsch discusses how self-esteem in middle childhood has a major influence on how students deal with conflict and their attitudes toward school in general. Children with high self-esteem, and positive friendships tend to have a more positive attitude towards school and are able to deal with conflicts constructively. Deutsch proposed that social relationships have different dimensions and that the relationship dynamic needs to be examined in order to constructively resolve conflict.

Deutsch's five basic dimensions of interpersonal relations: *cooperation-competition, power distribution (equal versus unequal), task orientated, formal versus informal and intensity and importance.*

Deutsch explains that the character of the interpersonal relationship can be defined by finding where the relationship lies within each dimension. He also indicates that there are psychological orientations that are applied in all relationships: *cognitive, motivational and moral orientation*.

In a friend-friend relationship there is a psychological orientation that promotes benevolence, trust, affection and respect. He contrasts that with a police-officer-thief relationship which produces hostility, aggression, defensiveness and suspicion. During adolescence, children are changing rapidly both physically and psychosocially. Children are building their identity while developing friendships, which often creates stressful situations. Their need for social approval influences their behavior strongly and positive feedback from friends often determines which behaviors children will continue to exhibit repeatedly (Coleman et al., 2014).

Deutsch also brings in Erick Erickson's psychosocial stages in development when discussing the change that occurs when children enter the adolescent phase. Due to the dramatic and rapid change both physical and social, adolescents are faced with the stressful task of adapting their approach to peer relationships that they had learned in middle childhood (Coleman et al., 2014). Erickson indicates that adolescents revert back to the attachment phase of infancy as they search for friends they can trust and admire (Coleman et al., 2014). There is also a shift in the structure of classroom activities from adult-centered to peer-centered. Deutsch discusses how this shift requires the child to apply the communication style and identity they have within their family to these new relationships and dynamics. Oftentimes conflicts arise when children are faced with a discrepancy between what they feel are trustworthy or admirable qualities and the behavior their friends may be exhibiting.

Educators have an obligation to support children during all phases of their development, by giving them the tools to navigate the challenges that arise at each phase. Adolescence is a critical phase, where peer-to-peer relationships are developing and changing. The conflicts that inevitably arise during this time of development often affect a child's ability to succeed academically and emotionally. It therefore makes sense that schools should be the setting for explicitly teaching children techniques for dealing with their conflicts.

This theoretical framework provided a foundation to understand how conflict can play a significant role in adolescent development. The conflicts that arise during this time can cause disruptions both inside and outside the classroom. If adolescents are not provided with the necessary tools to successfully deal with their conflicts it can affect both their academic and social development. Middle school educators need to evaluate how they are addressing the social development of the children they are teaching.

Review of Related Research

The review of related literature was arranged into three segments: Adolescent peer influence, adolescent conflict and achievement, and benefits of learning conflict resolution skills. Each of the above three sections included a summary of relevant literature and a discussion of the connections between extant research and the present study.

Adolescent Peer Influence

One of the most dramatic changes that occurs during adolescence, besides the physical changes, are the importance and influence peer relationships have in their daily lives (Opotow, 1991). The dynamics of their interpersonal relationships become more complex and with less adult supervision, adolescents are faced with navigating these complexities (Opotow, 1991). Although it is clear that peers have a strong influence on how adolescents navigate daily life at school, at home, and on social media, there are still many questions around what factors determine the level of influence and how to make sure that adolescents use it constructively (Zingora, Stark, & Flache, 2019). This research on adolescent peer influence served to inform the development of this ARP, as I investigated the question, *"In what ways and to what extent do adolescents influence each other?"* Reviewing research on how adolescent intergroup and outgroup dynamics work and how peer influence plays a role, can offer insight on ways to design more targeted supports to improve those relationships.

Adolescent influence indicators. One study by Zingora, Stark, and Flache, 2019, examined the dynamics of adolescent friendship networks and indicators that influence their intergroup and outgroup attitudes. The context of the study focused on how social influence contributed to the widespread negative attitudes towards a Muslim ethnic minority in the Netherlands. Because children also reported negative attitudes toward Muslims, researchers

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hypothesized that studying "the processes underlying social influence of adolescents' attitudes toward Turkish and Moroccan ethnic minority members in the Netherlands may thus compare to other contexts with similarly stigmatized ethnic groups" (Zingora et al., 2019, p. 689). Furthermore, the results may help schools understand how these negative attitudes form in order to implement interventions that help encourage tolerance and positive social interactions.

Thirty-one classrooms, totaling approximately 847 students, aged 12-13, participated in the study. Researchers tested seven hypotheses that focused on three different areas of influence that affect adolescents' attitudes towards friendships. Those three areas of focus were: "*The Influence of Friends on Intergroup Attitudes*, *Identifying Most Influential Adolescents by Popularity*, and *Social Influence and Ingroup Members*." Within each area of examination, researchers tested two hypotheses.

In the first area of focus, *The Influence of Friends on Intergroup Attitudes*, researchers tested the first two hypotheses, *Adolescents' intergroup attitudes become more similar to their friends' intergroup attitudes over time (social influence)*, and *Adolescents are more likely to form friendships with peers who have more similar outgroup attitudes*. Researchers looked at the effects the increase in importance social relationships had on adolescents. As a result, Zingora, Stark and Flache, hypothesized that, in an effort to maintain these social relationships, adolescents will conform to the prevailing attitudes within the ingroup. In addition, they examined how adolescents have a tendency to form friendships with peers that have similar interests. These interests can be related to music preference, religious affiliation or lack-there-of, ethnicity, race, and lifestyles in general. Peers that share one or more of these similarities make up their intergroup friends.

In the second area of focus, *Identifying Most Influential Adolescents by Popularity,* researchers examined the different notions of popularity and hypothesized that the more friendship nominations adolescents' friends receive in a classroom, the more likely they are to adopt the attitude of their intergroup. In exploring this concept, researchers used Social Identity Theory (Reid & Hogg, 2005), as a theoretical framework. This theory proposes that an adolescents' ability to influence their peer social group, depends on their ability to determine socially appropriate behavior. Researchers further explain that adolescents who are considered popular may have the ability to establish group norms because they possess leadership qualities and other social skills that peers want to emulate.

Researchers looked at two different types of popularity; *sociometric popularity*, which means that an adolescent has a large friend group, and *prestige popularity*, which refers to peers who may be perceived to be popular often as a result of high-profile acts, like fights or other aggressive behavior, and are not necessarily well liked. In addition, they also examined two other factors that affect an adolescent's influence within their friendship group; *clique leaders*, and *time spent together*.

Within a friendship group there are clique leaders, which is defined by having many connections to their peers and as a result are more likely to get attention. Clique leaders are also more likely to be selected as a friend by members of their smaller, more densely connected, friendship group (Zingora et al., 2019). Researchers noted that because cliques tend to be smaller and therefore offer more opportunities for connection, membership in a clique is more highly valued than being part of a larger group. Consequently, clique leaders, who by definition are very well connected to all members, have a tremendous amount of influence on how members of the clique behave and on their overall attitudes.

Researchers also examined how the amount of time adolescents spend with friends can determine their level of influence. Because it may be difficult for clique leaders and sociometrically popular adolescents to spend significant amounts of time with all members of their group, they may not be able to build quality relationships that allow them to exert more influence. This is in contrast to prestige popularity which "is not based on the number of friends a person has and may as such be unrelated to the amount of time prestige popular adolescents spend with each friend (Zingora et al., 2019)." The conclusions drawn from this are that the amount of time spent with friends represents a type of popularity that can exert a significant amount of influence.

The last area researchers examined was *social influence and ingroup members*. Researchers, using Social Identity Theory as a basis, examined how adolescents' attitudes are differently influenced by ingroup and outgroup friends." Social Identity Theory proposes that people are more likely to adopt attitudes from persons that are considered ingroup members than from outgroup members (Zingora et al., 2019)." They also found that ethnic identity was a factor in the formation of social groups. Therefore, they wanted to test whether shared ethnic identity resulted in a stronger social influence among adolescents.

The results of the study showed that sociometric popularity, or having a lot of friends, yielded the strongest influence on shaping adolescents' intergroup attitudes. Researchers also found that the influence of sociometric popular adolescents was stronger when there were negative intergroup attitudes held. These results suggest that there is a need to implement intervention programs that improve how adolescents interact with each other. Intervention programs that focus on training more influential peers have been successful in changing intergroup attitudes and existing norms in schools (Zingora et al., 2019).

Impact of Adolescent Peer Influence on Attitude and Behavior

One of the areas of research I examined was how adolescent peer influence affected attitudes toward school and the choices adolescents make. This section explores six research studies that examine different dimensions of peer influence and how they relate to behavior, academic achievement, and aggression.

There is an abundance of research around the developmental changes, physical and social-emotional, that occur during the adolescent phase. One important shift that occurs during adolescence is the importance and influence of peers, specifically around the behavior choices they make and their attitudes towards their social environment (Norwalk, Milojevich, Dawes, Hamm, & Farmer, 2019).

One study investigated the relationship between peer influence and adolescent aggression, problem behaviors and prosocial behavior. Researchers Farrell, Thompson and Mehari, investigated five domains of peer influence: *1) peers' deviant behavior, 2) peer support for aggressive behavior, 3) peer pressure, 4) peers' prosocial behavior, and 5) support for prosocial behavior.* Their study examined "the extent to which there is support of distinct dimensions of peer influence and whether these dimensions are independently associated with adolescent problem behavior" (Farrell et al., 2017). The goals were to determine the structure of peer influence, assess the extent to which different peer domains were uniquely related to behavior, and finally to explore gender differences in peer influences (Farrell et al., 2017).

Seven cohorts of students from three urban public middle schools in the southeastern United States participated in this study. Researchers randomly selected a total of 210 students from sixth, seventh and eighth grade. The study was conducted over a four-year period, and each year of the study, a random sample of the new sixth grade class was selected.

One of the most significant findings of this study was in areas that showed the need for further and broader examination of adolescent peer influences. Researchers found that although peer pressure was the most consistent factor that contributed to physical aggression and problem behaviors, peer influence was not stronger overall on delinquent behavior. In fact, researchers found that adolescents who had friends that engaged in behaviors that were considered prosocial, such as acts of kindness, compassion, and helping others, were less likely to end up using alcohol and drugs. Their findings suggest that prosocial influence can be protective against at-risk behaviors and can help adolescents feel the sense of belonging that they so strongly crave.

Another significant finding of this study was that there appears to be a stronger negative peer influence among seventh and eighth graders then in sixth graders. Researchers concluded that although their findings show that sixth graders are influenced by peer pressure, it is within the context of the school-wide climate. Furthermore, changes in friends' behaviors occur over the course of the middle school years, which explains the increase in negative peer influences in seventh and eighth grade. Researchers conclude that these findings show the need to implement interventions upon entry into middle school that help adolescents navigate the negative peer pressure influences.

Another study done in 2019 by a group of researchers from Harvard, Radboud and the US Army Natick Soldier Research Development and Engineering Center, examined peer influence in adolescents, specifically around risky decision making. The study was conducted in the greater Boston area, with 61 female and 57 male participants, ranging in age from 13-25, drawn from both suburban and urban environments. The demographics of the participants was representative of the area they were drawn from. In order to evaluate if decision making was influenced by peers, researchers designed a risky choice task in three different peer

configurations. One configuration had one participant in the testing room while the other participant sat in the next room. A second configuration had both participants sitting back to back, so they could not see the other's computer screen where the test was completed. The last configuration had one participant completing the test while the other sat in a chair next to them. Their results indicated that young adolescents showed higher levels of risk taking when peers were present and when the risk could impact their social position or status within their peer group (Somerville, Haddara, Sasse, Skwara, Moran, & Figner, 2019). The overall findings of the study showed that peer influence on risky behavior was more complex than just the mere presence of peers, but rather involved social and decisional factors. The implications are that if we are able to better understand these factors, we can create ways to mitigate negative peer influences that cause risky behaviors.

A third study, done by a group of researchers from Arizona State University, examined peer influences specifically around the effects of homophobic name calling on gender identity. Two-hundred and ninety-nine sixth grade students, representing different ethnic backgrounds, from the Southeastern United States, participated in the study. The findings of this study showed that homophobic name calling among sixth grade adolescents can cause a child to change or "readjust their self-views" about their gender identity (DeLay, Martin, Cook, & Hanish, 2018, p. 645). This supports the "looking glass self" hypothesis which proposes that "peer feedback is incorporated into the self-concept" (DeLay et al, 2018, p. 645). In Maslow's theory of human motivation, this assimilation of peer feedback is further reinforced by adolescents' need to feel a sense of belonging among their peers. Researchers further concluded that fulfilling these needs could also lead to a heightened risk for mental health risks, like depression or anxiety. The findings of this study help us understand the degree to which peers influence how they see

themselves, specifically around gender identity. Knowing this can help educators create interventions that target behaviors which can negatively impact adolescents' development.

Another study, done by a group of researchers from the University of Florida, looked at the effectiveness of a school-wide conflict resolution and peer mediation program, in addressing disruptive and aggressive behavior. Three middle schools, in the southeast United States, participated in this school-wide study. Unlike the previous studies reviewed which only used a selected group of students from a school, the conflict resolution and peer mediation program examined in this study was implemented school-wide. This required a much more complex system for implementation because there were not only more students involved but more adults. One of the vital components for the success of the program was having the support of an administrator at each school that was committed to implementation of the program. In addition, each school had an implementation team which were charged with supervising the program at each grade level, choosing the curriculum and designing how the program would be implemented and monitored (Daunic et al., 2000).

The findings of the study showed that when a CR/PM program was implemented with fidelity by a committed team of staff and strong administrative leadership, it could change the way students respond to conflicts in a more constructive way (Daunic et al., 2000).

Teaching Conflict Resolution Skills to Affect Classroom Behavior and School Climate

Middle schools all over the country are struggling to effectively deal with student aggression and disruptive behavior that often is a result of negative peer influence and interactions that result (Smith et al., 2002; Daunic et al., 2000). Peer relationships are more highly valued at this stage of development and as a result the dynamics of maintaining these relationships become more complex as peer influence and acceptance becomes stronger (Smith

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et al., 2002; Daunic et al., 2000). Naturally, as part of any relationship, conflicts arise that often require new approaches to resolve, which many adolescents are not equipped with. This often causes conflicts that escalate to physical or verbal conflicts (Johnson et al., 1997).

In order to address the conflicts that arise during adolescence, schools all over the country are turning to conflict resolution programs that are aimed at teaching adolescents to manage their conflicts constructively, and prevent them from escalating. The aim of implementing these types of programs is to teach students strategies for managing their social relationships constructively and will lead to less disruptions both in the classroom and in the larger school community, improving overall school climate. The following literature investigates how effective conflict resolution and peer mediation programs are in reducing classroom and school wide disruptions caused by peer conflicts, as well as increasing constructive student interpersonal interaction.

One study, by Daunic et al. (2000), examined the effectiveness of school-based conflict resolution and peer mediation programs at three middle schools in the southeast United States. Most conflict resolution programs have a peer mediation component, where certain students are nominated, using teacher and student feedback, to be trained in conflict mediation and negotiation. Researchers set out to share the design of school-wide conflict resolution and peer mediation programs and the results of its effectiveness in middle school. The study, which took place over two years, involved 20-35 students across all three grade levels, and four to six teachers and/or counselors.

The conclusions of the research were that Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation (CR/PM) programs can be effective in reducing the number of office referrals caused by disruptive or aggressive behavior, and reported conflicts, if implemented with fidelity, but there

was no evidence of schoolwide change in teacher or student views of school climate. It is unclear what the demographic make-up was of the schools who participated, so it is difficult to know if the success of the program would be the same in any middle school in the country. Despite the limitations of the study, participants in the peer mediation program did report using the skills they learned with friends and family.

A second study, conducted at a suburban middle school during the 1993-1994 school year, focused on examining if students who were taught specific techniques for resolving conflicts would use them more than those who were not trained (Johnson et al., 1997). One-hundred seventy-six students in grades 5-9, participated in a control group experimental design. The experimental group which had 116 students participated in a conflict resolution training program 3 days per week. The control group, which consisted of 60 students, received no training (Johnson et al., 1997).

The findings of the study suggest that students who were taught effective negotiation techniques for resolving conflicts are more apt to use them than those who were not. This suggests that students who are trained in conflict resolution and peer mediation, tend to use the strategies they learned, resulting in a decrease in escalation of conflicts, better interpersonal skills, and an improvement in overall school climate (Johnson et al., 1997).

A third study, done in 1991 by Opotow of Columbia University, examined how schools can use peer conflicts as an opportunity to help in their social development. Opotow interviewed 40 inner-city seventh graders, the majority of whom were Hispanic (53%) and Black (43%), and organized the information gathered from these interviews into three topics for discussion: adolescents' view of conflicts and conflict skills, the relationship between adolescents and school

staff in the context of students' conflicts, and approaches that can improve conflict management in schools (Opotow, 1991).

In examining how adolescents view conflicts Opotow (1991) looked at destructive conflict outcomes and constructive outcomes of conflicts. The destructive outcomes stemmed from adolescents' fear of social isolation, humiliation and loss of status. Participants interviewed expressed that there is pressure to not only engage in a physical conflict, but to be perceived as the winner of the confrontation. One young man interviewed about this topic said "When you lose everybody puts their backs to you" (Opotow, 1991, p. 419). This fear of being ostracized overrides any fear of being hurt in the physical altercation. This fear is compounded by the fact that most of the conflicts that occurred were between close friends or classmates and this caused lasting negative effects. Stress, anxiety, attendance, and lowered academic achievement, were all lasting effects of physical altercations (Opotow, 1991). In addition, most of these conflicts remained unresolved due to an absence of opportunity for the disputants to explain their feelings, and this left participants with lingering feelings of self-doubt. Without understanding what caused the conflict and being able to have closure, adolescents are left with feelings of confusion, anger, helplessness and depression (Opotow, 1991). These findings underscore the need to create a forum for students to be able to resolve these conflicts constructively.

From the adolescent perspective, there are constructive outcomes of conflicts, specifically physical conflicts, according to the results of Opotow's interviews with participants. Adolescents felt that conflicts can act as protection, meaning that when peers see another peer in a fight it can act as a deterrent for others to bully, harass, or get into a physical conflict with them. Another constructive outcome that adolescents reported was that it helped maintain social norms. One young man interviewed explains this idea: "Most kids who get jumped they deserve it though.

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They go around talking about mothers and messing with kids' girlfriends" (Opotow, 1991, p. 420). This addresses the problem that schools face in transforming these types of accepted norms among adolescents' social culture.

One last constructive outcome of conflicts is the drama that is generated as a result. Opotow (1991) discusses how adolescents are fascinated watching, starting and hearing about fights. The buzz and oral discourse that is created by this shared fascination can be seen by adolescents as an opportunity to advance themselves socially or feel a sense of belonging to the larger school culture. For adolescents improving their standing among their peers can take precedence over any negative consequences that may result for those involved in the fight.

Adolescents' responses to conflict are often impulsive, emotional and based on what they have either previously experienced firsthand, or observed as a bystander. Opotow categorized their responses to conflicts as "conflict seekers" and "conflict avoiders". Those who are at the extreme of either category have increased risks for conflicts, either because they are looking for conflicts (seekers), or become easy targets for bullies (avoiders). While Opotow (1991) acknowledges that with maturity, adolescents will develop the ability to better assess the risks and consequences before engaging in a fight, it is not inevitable that effective conflict resolution skills will develop unless explicitly taught. The conclusion Opotow derives from this information is that adolescents need help in navigating their conflicts and learning from these experiences in order to improve their interpersonal relationships and their own self-esteem.

In the next section of the article, Opotow (1991) presented the findings from interviews with school staff and students around how the approach school adults take towards adolescents' conflicts, as well as the discipline protocols adopted by the school, can often cause them to escalate and may also cultivate a feeling of distrust. Opotow found that schools are often taking

too much of an impersonal, overly structured response, to conflicts, where the adults are in complete command. There is little or no opportunity for disputants to participate in the process and the outcomes of these hearings are not often seen as fair. Opotow advocates for a more collaborative approach: "In contrast, when disputants are involved in problem solving and decision making, they are more likely to perceive conflict outcomes as fair." (Opotow, 1991, p. 426) Furthermore if schools treated conflicts as a natural part of any relationship, and afford students the opportunity to have a discourse to help uncover the underlying issues, they can create an atmosphere of tolerance.

Opotow's data showed that most students did not discuss their conflicts with adults for several reasons. First students reported feeling that adults will automatically tell students to walk away from fights, which they felt fails to acknowledge the complexities involved in these conflicts. Secondly, students fear the consequences and lack of control that may result if they reveal a conflict to a school staff member. Third, there is a fear of being publicly humiliated, if they get an adult, either family or school staff, involved. Fourth, there are some types of conflicts that students felt was better for them to handle on their own, even if it breaks school rules, in order to reduce having more problems in the long term. Lastly, students feel that adults over-simplify their conflicts and fail to try and understand the complexities involved from their perspective. There is often a history involved in adolescents' conflicts that go back to their elementary school years and the disputants may hold information about each other that is embarrassing or personal. Opotow (1991) explains, "Refusing to divulge the basis of the conflict to adults demanding information permits adolescents to preserve their dignity in the secondary conflict with the adult that emerges from the peer conflict." As a result, educators need to find a way to address conflicts without creating new problems as a consequence.

Opotow proposes that in order to effectively deal with adolescents' conflicts adults need to value all that they bring to the table. School adults need to create a forum where students feel that their views are heard and respected, and where they can feel free to challenge or criticize school policies or actions. Opotow emphasizes that conflicts offer a gateway to better and more open communication between students and adults.

Opotow (1991) presents three approaches to conflict management that have been demonstrated effective in previous studies. First is the *academically oriented approach,* which focuses on teaching constructive conflict resolution techniques and skills, like collaboration, perspective taking, and disagreeing without attacking others' ideas. Opotow noted that this approach can only be effective if teachers are properly trained in these techniques and if the school as a whole is committed to implementing it for a longer period of time.

A second approach to conflict management Opotow (1991) presents is a *skills-oriented approach*. While there is an academically oriented component to this approach in that students are taught constructive conflict management skills, the main focus is training students to mediate conflicts among their peers. Opotow notes that this type of approach is often successful and gets student buy-in, it is not a comprehensive approach to all types of conflicts. Peers who are trained to be mediators are limited in what kinds of conflicts they are helping to resolve, which are mainly peer to peer conflicts. Although these are often the most frequent types of conflicts, Opotow points out that there needs to be an approach that addresses conflicts that involve other people in the school community.

The last approach to conflict management Opotow (1991) presents is *structural change*. This approach focuses on changing the structure of the traditional hierarchical style of managing a school. Creating a framework that allows a diverse group of stakeholders to collaborate, plan,

make decisions, and challenge ideas, can lead to a more cooperative and tolerant atmosphere. One program that Opotow suggests as a way to effectively change the hierarchical structure is to create smaller school units. Opotow presents research that shows how smaller schools are better able to address students' needs, create more intimate relationships, and have more options for students to engage with adults. This approach has the potential to be more effective because of the community atmosphere that is created.

Opotow concludes by discussing that no matter what type of approach to conflict management a school chooses, it must be based in an environment that respects adolescents' experiences and perspectives and invites them to be collaborative partners in the process.

The research reviewed in this section demonstrated the potential for creating more positive social interactions among adolescents when they are taught how to constructively manage peer conflicts. These three studies demonstrate how training teachers to equip students with conflict management tools can improve interpersonal relationships. The research presented also emphasized the need to create structural changes within schools to create more of a collaborative environment, where adolescents' feel respected and their voices heard.

Summary

Theoretical research by Maslow (1943) and Deutsch (1973) provided the foundation for this study. Maslow theorizes that adolescents who have their basic emotional and physical needs met, are better equipped to navigate the complexities of interpersonal relationships. Deutsch discussed the importance of understanding the dynamics of a relationship in order to resolve conflicts constructively. In addition, Deutsch emphasized the influence a child's self-esteem has on how they deal with conflict and their attitudes towards school in general.

Reviewed research explored adolescent peer influence, how peer influence affects behavior, and the effectiveness of conflict management programs on classroom behavior and school climate. The major findings were how staff and students benefit from understanding how peer influence plays an important role in the way adolescents approach conflicts. Examining the dynamics of friendship networks and why certain children within a group may have a stronger influence than others, can assist educators in improving peer relationships. Researchers found that when intervention programs focus on training influential peers in conflict negotiation, it has been successful in positively changing intergroup attitudes.

The next chapter describes the methodology used to implement the study. Researcher field notes, exit tickets, and observational data were used to evaluate the impact of teaching conflict resolution strategies.

Chapter III

Methods

Many schools across the country are struggling to deal with disruptions and discipline issues that are often a result of peer conflicts. Punitive consequences such as detention and suspension have not been shown to be effective in reducing negative behavior, and often create a more hostile school climate (Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Miller & Landry, 2000). As a result many students feel disconnected from the school community and are not invested in helping contribute to creating a positive school climate. Students who may not feel connected to the adults at school, will look to other ways to feel connected and gain acceptance.

During adolescence, children are starting to form their own identities, separate from their families, and those identities are heavily influenced by social relationships and the larger school environment (DeLay, Martin, Cook & Hanish, 2018). Research exploring the effects of adolescent peer influence points to a variety of results, both positive and negative. Conflicts that arise among adolescents, as part of any normal relationship, are often complex and require different strategies to successfully navigate. These conflicts, when unresolved, often cause disruptions in the classroom and in the larger school community. In addition, conflicts can cause stress, anxiety, depression and aggression (DeJulius & Mclean, 2019). With the proper guidance, conflicts can have considerable constructive potential (Deutsch, 1973). The tensions that are often a consequence of a conflict can provide an opportunity for creative problem solving, personal growth, and deepening interpersonal relationships (Schmuck & Runkel, 1985).

In order to address the problems that result from unresolved conflicts, schools are turning to programs that incorporate teaching conflict resolution skills, often training students as mediators (Daunic et al., 2000). At the school site of this current study there were no clear

programs for dealing with disruptive and aggressive behavior often resulting from peer conflicts. Students at this school site come from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds which offers many challenges as well as opportunities. Adding the social-emotional toll the pandemic and socio-political climate has inflicted, the challenge of creating a more inclusive, cooperative, and tolerant atmosphere is even greater.

The purpose of this study is to investigate if teaching conflict resolution strategies might help reduce the number of disputes, disruptions to the classroom, and anxiety, as well as help improve students' overall sense of safety at school. Therefore, the action research question was: *How will the development and implementation of a conflict resolution unit affect middle school students' classroom engagement?*

Setting

The middle school in which this study takes place was located in a suburban city in Northern California. School enrollment at the time of the study indicated roughly 600 6ᵗʰ-8ᵗʰ grade students. Three hundred-eleven (52%) students identified as boys and 268 (45%) students identified as girls The demographic make-up of the population within the school is varied by race, ethnicity and socio-economic status, which allows for social interaction between students from a variety of backgrounds. The racial and ethnic makeup of the school was as follows: 33.79% Hispanic or Latino, 28.97% White (Non-Hispanic), 7.41% Asian, 0.34% Pacific Islander, 4.83% Filipino, 3.97% Black or African American, 12.07% Multi-Ethnic, 8.62% Unknown. School enrollment also indicated that 10% of the students were classified as English language learners (ELLs), while 15% were reported to have learning disabilities. At the time of this study 42.9% of the student population was socio-economically disadvantaged.

Although the middle school in this study has a library, due to district wide budget cuts there is no full-time librarian. Parent volunteers did organize and staff the library at lunch. There was one full time and one part time counselor and one part time school psychologist. All 28 classroom teachers were fully credentialed. There were 20 female teachers and 8 male teachers on staff at the time of the study. The racial and ethnic makeup of the teachers was as follows: 78% White or Caucasian, 10% Hispanic of Latino, 7% Filipino, 4% Two or More Races. These data show that the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the teaching staff were substantially different from the population of students at the school.

Demographics of the Classroom

The participants were drawn from my two core classes, which I had for English and World History, during the 2021-2022 school year. All 59 students enrolled in the class were invited to participate and their parents/families were notified. Twenty-two participants were girl-identified and 37 were boy-identified students. Nine participants (15%) had identified learning disabilities and received services from the Special Education Department (SPED). These students received academic support in the form of a separate period titled Academic Success as well as a push-in Special Education teacher during their English and Math periods. The participants' ages ranged from eleven to twelve at the time of the study. Nine participants are identified as having limited English proficiency and take an extra class to support their English language development. The implications of having such a diverse learning community are that students had varying learning needs and brought different communication styles to the classroom.

Data Collection Strategies

In order to determine the effect of the conflict management skills taught, I used a variety of data collection strategies throughout this study. Data was analyzed qualitatively and

quantitatively to ensure the reliability of the results. Journal responses, exit tickets, field notes, and community circle activities offered a variety of qualitative data. Quantitative data was collected on the number of reported conflicts, and weekly engagement rating from their exit tickets and weekly participation points.

Student Journal Response Data

As part of our normal daily warm-up routine, students answered journal prompts that reflected and analyzed their own experiences and thoughts about conflict. I collected their journals weekly and analyzed their responses to specific prompts that asked about experiences with conflict and classroom engagement. For example, one journal prompt they were asked to respond to was: *Conflict is a part of life. We all experience having disagreements with people in our lives. Think of a recent experience where you were in a conflict or disagreement with someone in your life. Describe the conflict and explain how or if it was resolved. What did you learn from the conflict? Are you satisfied with how you handled it? Why or why not?* Once or twice a month I collected their journals and randomly chose six from each core. Additionally, journals were collected weekly to more closely analyze and record specific data from their responses around conflict dynamics. I was specifically interested in analyzing the following categories: *who was the conflict with? (Peer, adult, family, friend?), strategies used to resolve conflict, satisfaction with outcome and lasting effects.* These notes were also recorded on a google doc on my school laptop.

The information gathered from their journal responses was extremely helpful in understanding if students were applying any of the strategies they were learning in our intervention to everyday situations. Because they knew that only I would be reading them, their

responses may have been more candid, as opposed to when they shared thoughts, or responses to the whole class.

Exit Tickets

Weekly exit tickets were administered to measure students' perceptions about their classroom engagement, factors that affected their engagement, conflicts with friends or classmates and if and how, when applicable, these conflicts were resolved. The questions asked were: *Rate your overall engagement on a scale of 1-5 (5=almost always engaged and 1=rarely engaged), What do you think affected your engagement?Did you have any conflicts this week with friends or classmates?If you did have a conflict, was it resolved and if so what strategies did you use?Is there anything I can do to support you and help improve your overall engagement?* The data derived from the exit ticket allowed me to determine if students felt that their engagement was improving and also if they were using strategies to help resolve conflicts in their interpersonal relationships. In addition, I was able to compare if students' perception of their engagement was comparable to the data from the disruption charts and my field notes.

Field Notes

Two to three times a week I taught lessons from the Overcoming Obstacles program (1992), focusing on confidence building and conflict resolution skills. Furthermore, students shared their experiences with conflict during our regular, weekly, community circle. While students were sharing their conflict experiences, I captured pertinent details, in a composition notebook, related to how they handled the conflict, interpersonal relationships, and how these affected them, as I did with their journal responses. I then transcribed this data, with added context, observations, direct quotes and details, onto a google doc which was kept on my password protected school laptop. This data helped me to assess students' perceptions of whether

their experiences with handling conflicts was affected by the lessons and activities conducted in the classroom.

Community Circle Activities

Once a week we conducted a community circle as a way to check in with students and build a stronger classroom rapport among the participants. Each circle started with an icebreaker activity and then a check in question. Examples of check in questions were: *Think of one word or phrase that describes how you are feeling today? Rose, bud, thorn (Rose=Something positive, Bud=Something you are looking forward to, Thorn=Something that was difficult/challenging/negative).* After the check in question, I presented a question for discussion that was either related to current issues in the classroom or larger school community, social issues, academic issues, or a debrief of a lesson from the Overcoming Obstacles program.

Procedures

The study took place over ten school weeks between January to late March. The study consisted of three phases: the pre-intervention phase (one week), the intervention phase (eight weeks), and the post-intervention phase (one week).

The intervention consisted of teaching lessons, from the Overcoming Obstacles program, that focused on foundational skills such as confidence building, communication, decision making, goal setting and problem solving before finally getting to conflict resolution skills. These foundational lessons were essential for students to be able to successfully implement the conflict resolution strategies. In many cases the lessons taught were directly related to navigating interpersonal relationships. At the end of the study students completed an exit ticket, similar to the weekly ones, they had been completed during the entire intervention, but with added questions that examined how they felt overall about the program.

Pre-intervention

All 59 students in my two sixth grade core classes were invited to participate in this study. Each student received a parent information letter to take home. Once letters were sent home students participated in community building activities that focused on getting to know their peers. This phase was important for establishing a level of comfort and familiarity with their classmates. For instance, one activity was called "The Name Game", and this helped students to make sure they knew each classmates' names. Another activity involved having students record answers to questions about themselves and then had students share their answers out. Some of the questions asked were: *If you were a book, what book or type of book would you be? If you were a character in a story or movie, who would you be? If you were an animal, what would you be?* As students shared their responses to the class, I observed reactions from the rest of the class and made notes about any reactions that expressed judgment or negativity. These notes were used to help establish guidelines for future community building activities.

Students continued participating in weekly community building activities throughout the intervention and post-intervention phases.

Intervention

During the intervention phase students participated in 2-3 lessons per week from the *Overcoming Obstacles program*. The program began with an introduction to what it means to overcome obstacles in daily life. Students participated in a "Thread the Needle" activity where several volunteers tried to thread a needle, while the rest of the class observed and thought about how to successfully thread the needle. After, students were asked to reflect on their observations with guided questions such as: What seemed difficult about threading the needles? How could

some of these difficulties be overcome? Why is it easier for some volunteers to thread the needles than others?

Next students were asked to first identify the traits and skills necessary for success with more guiding questions: Were all the volunteers successful? Why or why not? What did the volunteers need to do to succeed at this task? Was finishing first a characteristic of success here? Was being smart, getting good grades, reading fast, or having a good memory important to being successful here? Lastly participants were asked to reflect on the traits and skills that were necessary for success by explaining to them that researchers have found that although intelligence, memory and being a good reader are helpful skills, they are not the key reason people succeed in life.

Another important part of this first phase of the program was establishing classroom guidelines. Students brainstormed ideas in small groups about rules that they felt were essential for promoting a positive, judgment free environment, where students would feel safe to share ideas. I made a list of the guidelines each group shared and then had a class discussion in order to narrow the list and eliminate and or combine ideas that were too similar. Finally, the class agreed upon the top five guidelines and I printed them on poster sized paper and posted it in the classroom.

In the next phase of the program students explored the importance of having dreams for their future and completed a project called "Cloud Nine" where they made a visual representation of their personal dreams and goals for the future. We discussed the importance of having dreams in order to stay motivated, especially during times of stress. In addition I shared stories of successful people who persevered through failures and hardships to pursue their dreams. This helped to reinforce for the students the concept that when you have dreams for

yourself in the future and you don't lose sight of them, you can overcome any obstacle that presents itself.

For the remaining weeks of the intervention participants explored concepts of respect, confidence building, communication, problem solving and finally, resolving conflicts. Each unit consisted of 3-4 lessons with interactive activities. All non-digital work students created as part of the activities in the lessons was kept in a folder in the classroom.

Post-intervention

During the last week of the study students participated in a culminating community circle to discuss what they learned from the intervention, and they completed the normal weekly exit ticket with added questions to evaluate their overall feelings about the program.

Plan for Data Analysis

Each data source was collected to address the research question: *How will the development and implementation of a conflict resolution unit affect middle school students' classroom engagement?* Participants kept a journal with reflections about the strategies they learned, and if they found them useful in their relationships. Additionally, I kept a log of researcher field notes and observations. Participants' data from their exit tickets were analyzed and compared with the data collected from their journal responses and researcher field notes, to assess whether their overall engagement improved. In addition, their journal responses and my field notes were analyzed to assess any improvements in their interpersonal relationships.

Quantitative analysis was used for the results from the weekly exit ticket engagement ratings and disruption charts. For baseline data, the initial exit ticket was analyzed to see how each participant rated their overall engagement. The exit ticket numerical values had been assigned to the response as follows: "rarely engaged" (1), "sometimes engaged" (2), "engaged

about half the time" (3), "usually engaged" (4), "almost always engaged" (5). Student responses were coded accordingly. These weekly scores were then analyzed for central tendency, and compared to previous weeks.

Qualitative analysis was conducted on the data that emerged from their journal prompt responses, researcher field notes, and exit ticket responses. When reviewing the researcher field notes, I looked for data that showed how participants felt about their engagement in their learning as well as their interpersonal relationships. I searched for instances where participants reported feeling more engaged in school overall and where they may have used strategies taught during the intervention, in their interactions with peers and coded them by themes that emerged.

Summary

The aim of this action research study was to investigate the effects of teaching a conflict resolution unit on the overall engagement of suburban sixth graders. I had noticed that unresolved conflicts, often dating back to mid-elementary school, created a toxic environment both in the classroom and out. Students, unable to overcome the damage inflicted as a result of past conflicts, had difficulty working cooperatively with others and would openly express negative feelings towards others in the classroom. These conflicts and negative interpersonal skills affected their overall classroom engagement and interrupted learning for the classroom as a whole. I hoped to find an intervention to help repair and improve these relationships in order to create a more peaceful, tolerant and, most importantly, engaging environment.

The conflict resolution unit took place over eight weeks and was split into three phases. In the first phase, which lasted three weeks, participants spent time learning about their classmates and understanding perspective taking. During the second phase, which lasted five weeks, participants learned about goal setting, respect, problem solving and conflict resolution

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strategies. During each phase participants reflected on the strategies and techniques they learned, through journal responses, community circles, and weekly exit tickets.

This chapter introduced the setting of my action research, the participants' triangulation of data from instruments used to collect and measure participants' responses, the procedures used to implement the intervention, and the methods used to collect and analyze data. The next chapter presents the findings from the data that was collected in this study.

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this research was to investigate if teaching a conflict resolution unit might help reduce the number of conflicts, disruptions to the classroom, and anxiety, as well as help improve students' overall sense of safety at school. The question guiding this action research project was: *How will the development and implementation of a conflict resolution unit affect middle school students' classroom engagement?* In my eighteen years of teaching experience, I have noticed an increasing lack of engagement as well as disruptions to instruction and learning. In addition, there seems to be a lack of connectedness to the school community, and to each other. I believed that teaching a conflict resolution unit would not only result in less disruptions, and improved engagement but would help build my students' confidence and teach interpersonal skills that could improve their relationships with peers.

A review of the literature suggests that when students develop social competence, during adolescence, it can have a strong effect on academic achievement, and classroom behavior (Sandy, Boardman, & Deutsch, 2014). Strong social emotional and conflict resolution skills are also predictors of future success as adults (Sandy, Boardman, & Deutsch 2014). Given the strong connection between becoming competent socially and academic success, it is imperative that adolescent students be explicitly taught tools for working through conflicts that inevitably arise in their peer relationships. The skills learned through a conflict resolution program help empower students by equipping them with the ability to resolve their own conflicts, manage their anger, communicate effectively, and learn to see another's perspective (Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Miller, & Landry, 2000).

Overview of Methods and Data Collection

Data was collected over a ten-week period for this action research project. The study consisted of a pre-intervention phase (one week), an intervention phase (eight weeks), and a post-intervention phase (one week). During the pre-intervention phase, students established a set of commitments, which were rules that they all agreed upon for interaction and behavior in the classroom. Students began participating in community building activities to help establish a level of comfort and familiarity with their peers. Lastly, students wrote the first of a series of journal responses that focused on peer relationships, conflicts, and identifying strengths and weaknesses within themselves and others.

After the classroom commitments were established, the intervention phase began and students participated in lessons from the *Overcoming Obstacles* program. Two to three times a week students experienced interactive activities that were designed to build confidence, develop community, set goals, and finally learn strategies and tools for approaching conflicts constructively. Lessons ranged in length from 20-40 minutes.

Data collection during the intervention phase consisted of data from student journal responses to prompts related to the intervention, a weekly exit ticket, and finally a log of researcher field notes. Students completed journal responses at least twice a week, as part of our classroom warm-up routine. Exit tickets were completed every Friday and consisted of students scoring their overall engagement for the week, indicating factors that affected engagement, and finally sharing if they were involved in a conflict. Field notes recorded observations regarding student engagement, behavior, interactions, notable quotes, and any other important events that occurred. Field notes were recorded two times per week for 15-20 minutes.

Demographics of Participants

The participants for this action research project were drawn from my two core classes, English and World History, during the 2021-2022 school year. All 59 students enrolled in the class participated and their parents/families were notified. Twenty-two (37%) participants were girl-identified and 37 (63%) were boy-identified students. Nine participants (15%) had identified learning disabilities and received services from the Special Education Department (SPED). These students received academic support in the form of a separate period titled Academic Success as well as a push-in Special Education teacher during their English and Math periods. The resource specialist would often be present for the intervention lessons, and journal writing time. Nine participants are identified as having limited English proficiency and take an extra class to support their English language development. The participants' ages ranged from eleven to twelve at the time of the study.

Analysis of Journal Response Data

Throughout the intervention students responded to prompts in their English journals, once or twice a week. Students completed their journal responses in a composition notebook. This was a normal part of our classroom routine, since the start of the school year. During the intervention period the journal prompts focused on concepts related to the Overcoming Obstacles lessons. When reading their responses, I looked for data related to their perceptions of conflict, personal strengths and weaknesses, and attitudes towards their peers.

One lesson focused on the importance of values. The lesson helped students identify what their values are and how having strong values helps them make decisions more confidently, especially when peer pressure is a factor. It also coincided with our study of Martin Luther King Jr. and his legacy. The journal prompt they responded to was: *The definition of values is a person's principles or standards of behavior; ones' judgment of what is important in life. What*

values do you think Martin Luther King Jr. stood for? What values do you stand for? Most

students' responses were related to the importance of family and specifically their parents. One

male identified student wrote: "Many did not quite grasp the idea of values being a quality, like

honesty and integrity, but did reference that their families taught them about ideas of the right

way to behave". For example, one student wrote: "My family is the most important thing that

helps me and makes me feel good. They teach me what I should and shouldn't do". This

illustrates that the student identified where they learned what type of behaviors are considered

right and wrong.

Later in the intervention another journal prompt focused on skills and traits that are

necessary for success: *What traits/skills do you think are necessary for success in achieving your*

goals? Describe. This prompt was presented after one of the intervention lessons where students

had to identify what skills were necessary for success on the "Thread the Needle" activity.

Students observed three of their peers try to thread a needle. Some students were successful,

while others were not able to thread the needle. After the activity students engaged in a

discussion about what skills were necessary for success in this activity and why some students

might have been successful while others were not. Students identified that while there may have

been other factors that could have contributed to success, such as previous experience threading

needles, and patience, they all were able to identify that perseverance was one the main

components of success.

Furthermore, students were asked to reflect on how skills that are necessary for success in

life are often not connected to intelligence, and academic achievements. Their journal responses

reflected these ideas. Many students responded to the prompt about traits/skills necessary for

success, with qualities such as persistence and patience as qualities for success. One student

explained why persistence was an important trait for success: *"I think that another trait/skill that you would need to succeed would be persistence because you wont reach your goal on the first try, so you need to keep trying and trying until you achieve your goal."* Another student's response also demonstrated understanding of the goal of the lesson: *"Having a good, calm mindset will help you achieve your goals."*

During the third week of the intervention students experienced lessons that focused on developing healthy relationships. The first lesson focused on the concept of mutual respect. As a class we developed a definition for respect that everyone could agree on. Next students were asked to explore how to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and that of others. Students examined how each individual brings their own strengths and weaknesses to different situations and the importance of looking for the strengths in others to help build confidence and work cooperatively. Students responded to two journal prompts over the next two weeks that were related to this lesson. The first was: *What is your greatest strength? Describe how this strength has helped you in life?* Many students had difficulty with this at first. I noticed a reluctance from some students and others felt that they didn't have any strengths. As a class we brainstormed what qualities they felt could be strengths and created a list. Some of the qualities on that list were: organized, patient, good sense of humor, artistic, kind, and athletic.

The second prompt was focused on identifying strengths in others by identifying qualities they think are important in a friend: *What qualities do you think are important in a friend? Explain.* As a class we brainstormed a list of qualities that they felt were important in a friend. The list consisted of the following qualities: listening, understanding, honest, kind, caring, good sense of humor, thoughtful, and trustworthy. Students were asked to explain why that quality was important and give specific examples of when a friend has shown that quality. One student

wrote: "Being understanding is a really important quality to have in a good friend. Having a friend that will listen and put themselves in your shoes. For example, if there is a conflict and your friend doesn't agree with you, they should still listen to your side and try to understand." This response demonstrates that the student recognized that conflict is a normal part of a relationship and that there is a way to disagree respectfully and even work to find a common ground.

During the sixth week of the intervention participants responded to a prompt that focused on thinking about past experiences with conflicts that may have been caused or made worse by their actions. The prompt was: *Write about a time when you acted, or said something without thinking and then regretted it later. If you could go back and re-do that moment, what would you do differently? How can you avoid doing it again?* This prompt was a follow up to a lesson about the importance of thinking before you speak or respond to what someone else has said or done. The discussion consisted of being aware of when you start feeling emotions like anger or hurt, and not responding, either verbally or over text, when you are in an emotional state. Students shared experiences where they responded or acted out of jealousy, anger, frustration, annoyance, or hurt. It was interesting that many students picked moments that were from their early elementary years. One student shared: "One time when I was very young, probably 5, it was Halloween. My friend got a cool stretchy toy, and I was very jealous. Later that night she had spilled her whole bucket on the ground. I was so jealous that I took the toy." Another student shared about a time he called his brother a hurtful name out of frustration. In both examples students expressed regret for their actions and that they had learned from these experiences how to better manage their emotions.

The data from students' journal responses does indicate that students are aware of how conflicts have affected their lives. Students were able to identify strategies, taught in the intervention lessons, that they could have used in past situations that could have either prevented a conflict from occurring or helped resolve it. Overall, two major themes emerged from their journal prompts: *Students identify the need to be aware of body language and other nonverbal communication,* and S*tudents identify qualities that are essential for success both socially and academically.* Participants were clearly able to articulate how their body language and other nonverbal forms of communication, like eye contact and hand gestures, can send unintended signals that can sometimes give someone the wrong impression. Additionally, students' identified qualities that were important for themselves as well as friends to possess in a healthy relationship. Overall, three qualities in particular were mentioned the most times in students' responses: kindness, honesty, and understanding.

Analysis of Exit Ticket Responses

At the end of each week students completed an exit ticket in which they rated their overall classroom engagement on a scale of 1-5 (1= not engaged and 5=very engaged), identified what factors affected their engagement, indicated if they had any conflicts, and if so, how the conflict was resolved. Figure 1 shows the overall mean of responses for their engagement rating each week. This figure shows that their overall engagement did increase slightly but not significantly during the course of the study.

Figure 1

Weekly Engagement Rating
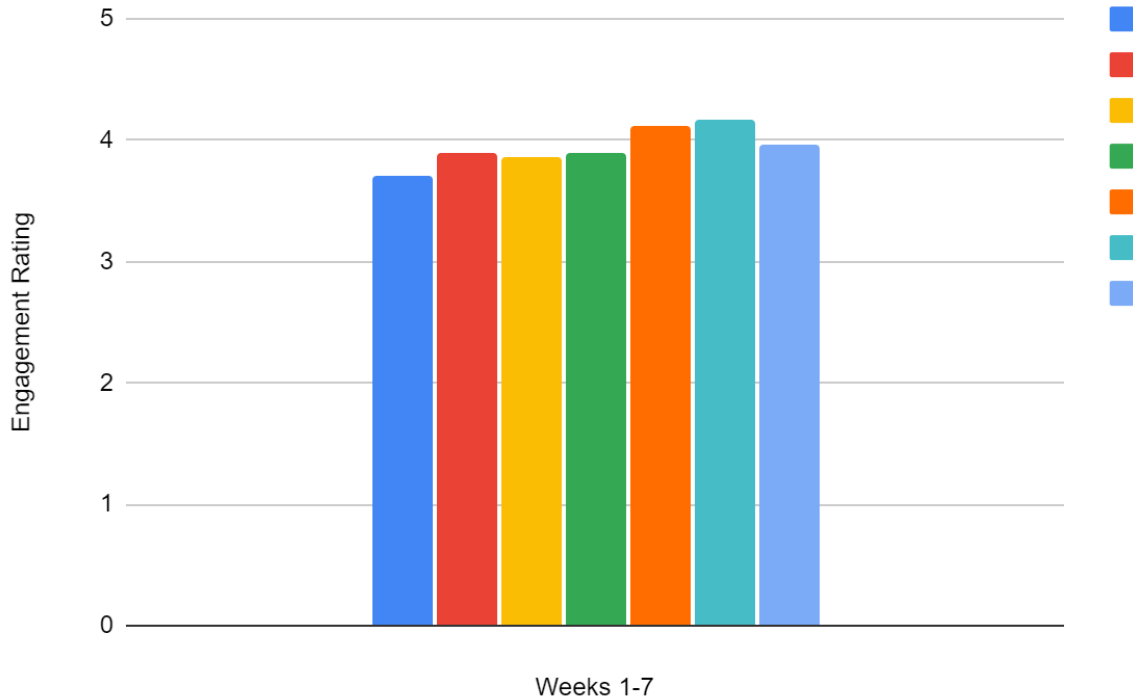
Note: Students rated themselves on a scale of 1-5. 1=not engaged and 5=very engaged. N=59

Figure 1 reveals that students felt that their overall engagement did increase consistently throughout the intervention. Their engagement rating increased by 7%. While the overall engagement ratings did not increase significantly, it also did not decrease. It stayed relatively constant throughout the intervention. The lowest overall engagement rating occurred during the first week of the intervention and the highest overall engagement rating occurred during week 6 of the intervention.

Figure 2

Total Number of Students Reported Being Involved in a Conflict
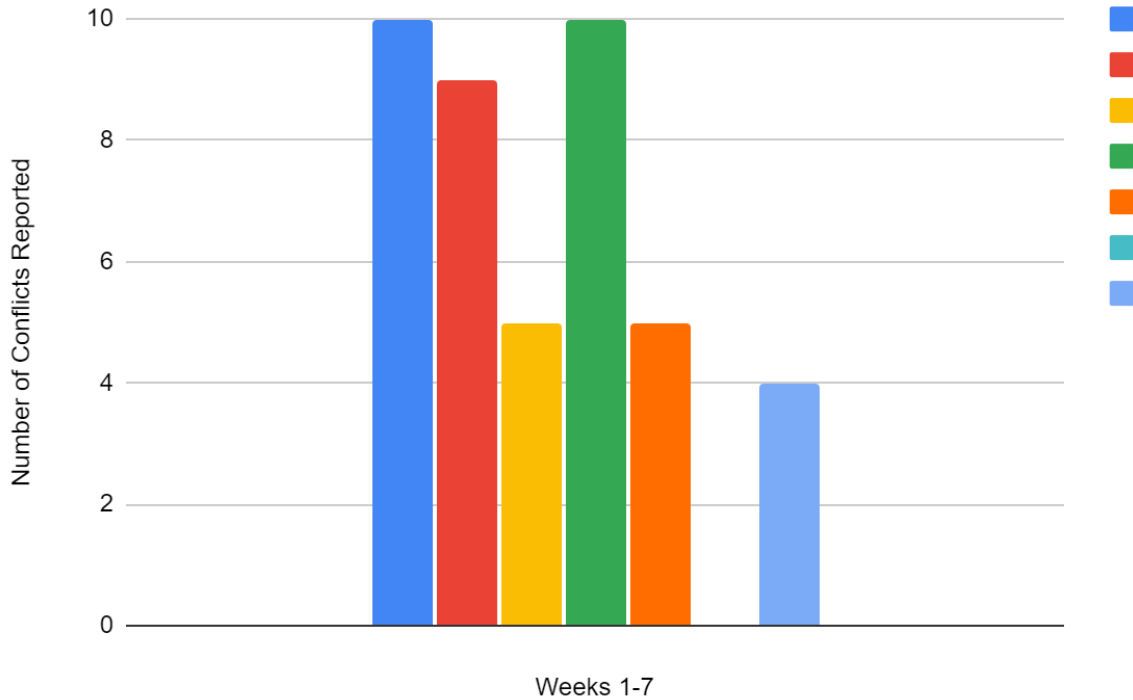
Note: Students reported with a yes or no each week if they had a conflict. They did not report the number of conflicts they had individually.

Figure 2 illustrates the number of students who reported being involved in a conflict each week. The first and fourth week of the intervention had the highest number of conflicts reported (10), while the sixth week had the lowest number (0). There was an overall decline in the number of conflicts reported over the course of the intervention.

Additionally, students indicated whether they were involved in a conflict each week. The number of conflicts reported decreased 63% over the course of the intervention. The highest number of conflicts reported, which was during the first week of the intervention, was ten, and the lowest number was zero, reported during week 6.

As part of their engagement exit ticket, students also indicated what factors they felt contributed to their engagement rating. Table 1 lists the reasons students specified most often as contributing to their engagement both negatively and positively.

Table 1

Contributing factors affecting engagement

Factors negatively affecting engagement   1. Not enough sleep   2. Too busy   3. Daydreaming   4. Distractions   5. Tired from PE or other physical activities   6. Not eating right   *Factors positively affecting engagement*   1. Sufficient sleep   2. Positive attitude   3. Better focus

Note: Items were listed in order of most frequent responses to least frequent responses.

Lack of sleep was overwhelmingly the top reason students indicated as negatively affecting their engagement and conversely students who rated themselves high on engagement said that they attributed their positive engagement to getting enough sleep. In addition, it is interesting to note that the most frequent responses were related to factors that occur outside of school. It is also notable that students did not indicate peer conflicts as a source that affected engagement, even though students had shared both during community circle and in journal entries that they had experienced stress and sadness due to disagreements with friends.

Analysis of Researcher Field Notes

The researcher field notes were recorded in a Google Document file (Appendix C) after the Overcoming Obstacles lessons which were conducted two-to-three times a week, as well as, after community circle activities, which were conducted once a week. I recorded notes regarding participant engagement, quotes shared by participants, off task behavior, group dynamics. There were 12 recorded entries in all, ranging in length from one to two paragraphs. The entries were coded so that qualitative data could be utilized to investigate the action research question, and a variety of themes emerged. Notable themes included: *positive interactions with peers*, *recognizing how their words and actions affect others*, *learning better communication skills*, *misunderstandings causing conflicts*, *school related stress*, *social issues*, *organization*, and *time management*.

After examining field notes that were recorded after intervention lessons, activities and community circles, one of the most common themes that emerged was engagement that improved relationships with peers. On at least 15 occasions I recorded instances where students were showing kindness in the way they were speaking and interacting with peers. Engagement affecting how their words and actions affect others was another common theme, as demonstrated by 12 recorded events infield notes. Finally, a third theme emerged from researcher field notes was misunderstandings causing conflicts. On at least 10 occasions I recorded instances where students were able to identify misunderstandings and how they may have led to conflicts.

Table 2 illustrates three prominent themes that occurred the most frequently throughout the intervention: *engagement that encourages positive interactions with peers*, *engagement that brings awareness to how their words and actions affect others*, and *misunderstandings causing conflicts in interpersonal relationships*. The examples provided demonstrate how the

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intervention strategy, learning interpersonal relationship skills, helped strengthen their sensitivity towards others and encouraged them to be more thoughtful about their words and actions.

Table 2

Summary of Common Themes from the Researcher's Field Notes

Theme	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3	Example 4
Engagement #1: Positive interactions with peers.	"I noticed that students were trying to help each other and giving silent clues, using body language. They were rooting for each other to be successful and were extremely positive." -1/20/22	"When a classmate was especially successful at the activity, they cheered for them" -1/24/22	"Many of their definitions of how to show respect involve showing kindness." -1/27/22	"I noticed students were actively advocating for their classmates and pointing out things that they had done well." -2/24/22
Engagement #2: Recognizing how their words and actions affect others	"This has been an excellent start to the program. Students were really engaged with the opening activity for the lesson, called "Thread the Needle". " -1/27/22	"I was so happy to see that one particular student who has always had difficulty staying still during our "Mindful Mondays", was very still and controlled during our mindful moment. " -2/11/22	"Today students reflected on how their body language and nonverbal cues can unknowingly send negative or disrespectful messages. I saw students increase their awareness of their eye contact and how they were sitting in their seats." -3/15/22	"I was really impressed by the way students felt safe to share times when someone has stereotyped them or made a judgment about them before knowing them." -4/13/22
Engagement #3: Interpersonal relationships: Misunderstandings causing conflicts	"It was really encouraging to hear students sharing ideas of what may cause a misunderstanding" -2/18/22	"While inside the classroom students seem to make an effort to understand each other, conflicts outside the classroom continue to cause disruptions." -2/25/22	"Great discussion today about how to prevent misunderstandings from occurring. Students shared great ideas learned from our lesson on communication." -3/4/22	"Overall I am impressed with how students have been communicating with each other. I have observed very few conflicts in the classroom during the course of the intervention." -3/25/22

The examples provided from the themes highlighted in Table 2, which come from the researcher's field notes, demonstrate how students' awareness of the effects of their words and actions was strengthened or heightened throughout the action research study.

Summary

The purpose of the action research project was to determine the effect of learning conflict resolution skills and strategies on overall classroom engagement. An intervention consisting of lessons on conflict resolution skills and strategies was implemented for eight weeks. Three data gathering strategies were used to examine the effects of the intervention on the participants overall engagement: journal responses, a weekly exit ticket, and researcher field notes.

Quantitative data was collected by means of the weekly engagement rating on the check-in form and qualitative data was collected through journal responses, weekly engagement check-in form, and researcher field notes.

Journal response data illustrated that students were relating concepts taught in the intervention lessons to their lives and understood how some of the skills and strategies they learned could help improve their interpersonal relationships. Additionally, students' journal responses demonstrated that students were reflecting on how their words and actions affected their communication with their peers.

The data from the weekly exit tickets showed a small 7% increase in students' self-reported engagement. Lack of sleep was the most common reason reported as a factor that negatively affected engagement and conversely, sufficient sleep was the most common factor reported that positively affected engagement. Stress and busy schedules were the two other reasons reported that negatively affected engagement. In addition to rating their engagement and indicating factors that affected it, students also reported if they were involved in any conflicts

that week. The data showed that the number of conflicts reported went down significantly over the course of the intervention, with the highest number (10) reported during week 1 of the intervention and the lowest number (0) reported during week 6.

The data from the researcher field notes showed an increase in positive interactions between students, an increased awareness of how their actions affect others and finally a recognition of causes of conflicts. Participants were recorded making encouraging comments and taking action when they recognized a classmate needing help. Instances where students changed behaviors that were negatively affecting a classmate, were also recorded. Finally participants were recorded sharing examples of how conflicts can occur as well as strategies that could have prevented some of them.

In the next chapter I discuss the results of this study. Results are compared and contrasted to studies discussed in the literature review and I explore the implications of this action research study. Chapter V will conclude with plans for my future work as a transformative teacher leader as a result of implementing this project.

Chapter V

Conclusions

Adolescence is a time of great change physically, cognitively and socially (Opotow, 1991). Peers and friends become a stronger influence on the decisions adolescents make in their daily lives (Farrell, Thompson, & Mehari, 2016). Supporting students with this dramatic transition is vital for helping them develop positive relationships with their peers. According to Maslow's hierarchy of basic human needs, fulfilling the need to belong is an essential step in the process of reaching one's fullest potential. Feeling accepted by one's peers and having meaningful friendships is an important step in fulfilling this need to belong during adolescence. While conflict is a normal part of any relationship, learning to resolve them constructively does not come naturally to most adolescents as well as many adults. Researchers have found that helping adolescents develop healthy relationships can improve school engagement, especially among at-risk youth (Moses & Villodas, 2016).

In a sixth-grade suburban classroom, where this action research project was conducted, I noticed a lack of engagement in students' own learning. Students often seemed disinterested and unmotivated to complete their assignments or engage in partner or group activities. There was a lack of engagement during instruction which was demonstrated by a lack of eye contact when direct instruction was being delivered and inattentive body language (not facing the speaker, putting their head down on the table). In addition, conversations I would overhear during group work time, were often off task, and more specifically, focused on social drama that had transpired during brunch, lunch, or on social media. These observations demonstrated that many of my students were both not engaged in their learning and were preoccupied by peer conflicts. Because these issues were also present with my students during the 2019-2020 school year, and

to a large degree much more extreme, I was inspired to pursue a solution that might improve the classroom conditions. This is what led me to begin this action research project.

Teaching a conflict resolution unit was chosen as the intervention strategy to be investigated due to a variety of factors. Most notably, research has shown that students who learn conflict resolution skills and strategies, specifically effective communication and anger management, are less likely to engage in aggressive or destructive behavior (Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Miller, & Landry, 2000). Moreover, research has also shown that conflict resolution programs have helped students by providing them with a framework for resolving conflicts, helped them take responsibility for their behavior, improved the climate of the classroom by reducing the number of conflicts teachers have to mediate, increased learning, and finally helped students see how cultural diversity affects the way we communicate and relate to one another (Daunic et al., 2000). This research, combined with my past experiences with a classroom environment riddled with conflicts, propelled me to believe that teaching conflict resolution skills and strategies would help improve overall engagement and peer relationships. Therefore, I investigated the following question: *How will the development and implementation of a conflict resolution unit affect middle school students' classroom engagement?*

This chapter is organized into the following five sections: summary of findings, interpretation of findings, limitations, summary, and plan for future action. The first section, summary of findings, focuses on data from the three measured sources: journal response data, weekly engagement rating, and researcher field notes. The next section provides an interpretation of the findings. The third section will explain possible limitations to this action research study, while the fourth section gives a succinct summary of the entire action research project. The fifth

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and final section discusses the possible future actions I will pursue in response to this action research project.

Summary of Findings

A mixed-methods approach was used to examine the effects of teaching a conflict resolution unit on the engagement of the suburban sixth grade participants. Three instruments were used to measure participants' classroom engagement. The instruments were students' journal responses, weekly engagement exit tickets, and researcher field notes. All students in both of my English/World History core classes participated and a parent letter was sent home informing families about the study.

Chapter IV presented the findings from the triangulation of data collected during the action research study. These data show that students' self-rating of their own engagement increased by 7%. There was a small, but measurable improvement. The evidence from students' journal responses and researcher field notes further demonstrates that students gained skills and knowledge about interpersonal relationships, and that there was an overall decline in the number of conflicts reported over the course of the intervention.

The conflict resolution skills and strategies intervention program titled Overcoming Obstacles was implemented over eight weeks. Two to three times a week, students participated in lessons that focused on different skills related to interpersonal relationships, values, communication, and negotiation techniques. Each lesson allowed participants the opportunity to examine a particular skill through interactive and engaging activities. After each lesson students responded to journal prompts and completed weekly exit tickets while I recorded my reflections and observations in a Google Drive document to create the researcher field notes.

Journal Response Data

Analysis of the data gathered from journal responses demonstrated that participants as a whole did strengthen their social awareness and learned skills and strategies that will help them in their interpersonal relationships. For example, in one student's response to the prompt about what qualities they thought a friend should have, one student responded: "I would like to see honesty in a friend because if you lie, how can you build trust with that person?" This illustrates that students understand that there are certain characteristics that are essential for healthy relationships. Another student wrote: "I think that caring is an important quality to have in a friend because sometimes you might be hurting (either physically or mentally) and a really caring friend would make sure that you're okay." This student has also identified how friends can act as part of a support system and shows that being aware of how a friend is feeling is an important part of maintaining a good relationship. Overall, data from students' journal responses showed an understanding of how certain qualities are important in a healthy relationship.

In addition, students' journal responses illustrated an awareness of how peer relationships have an effect on their overall well-being. When students described qualities that they deemed essential in a friend, they elaborated on why those qualities were important. Students explained specific situations where possessing certain characteristics can affect their disposition. In the previous example a student explained that caring was an important quality in a friend because they can act as support in times of need. Students enumerated that friends have a significant effect on the way they feel, which can affect a students' focus in class. If a student is in a healthy peer relationship, where they feel supported by peers, they are better able to stay engaged in academic work in the classroom. One student explained: "If one of my friends made sure that I was okay, when I was feeling down, they would instantly make me feel better."

Data from journal responses illustrated two key findings. First, that students are clearly able to articulate qualities that are essential in healthy peer relationships. Students described the ways certain characteristics, like honesty and kindness, help to create a friendship dynamic that is supportive and constructive. Secondly, journal response data demonstrated the influence that peers have on each other. Students discussed specific situations where a friend showing kindness helped change their mood almost instantly. In addition, students also described situations where a conflict with friends caused feelings of stress and anxiety, which made it difficult to focus on academics.

Exit Ticket Data

Analysis of the data gathered from the weekly engagement exit ticket did show an increase in their engagement rating. The highest mean average score was 4.16 and the lowest mean average was 3.7. It is notable that the mean average score did increase each week, until the last week of the intervention. The small drop in student self-reported engagement rating during the last week could be attributed to the fact that we had recently returned from a one-week spring break and, in my experience, students often have a difficult time re-engaging in school after a long break. It could also be due to it getting closer to the end of the school year and students are often already anticipating summer break. Otherwise, there were no significant changes in the classroom or school environment in general.

While students' self-reported engagement rating did not demonstrate a significant effect of the intervention on their engagement, there was significant data gathered from participants' responses about what they felt affected their engagement. The exit ticket data also indicates that students are aware of how certain lifestyle choices, like the amount of sleep they get, has effects on their ability to focus in class. Sleep was the most common factor students reported as

affecting their engagement either positively or negatively. Students who indicated that they got adequate or a good amount of sleep, tended to rate their engagement higher than those who indicated they did not get enough sleep. This confirms what many studies on sleep have concluded, which is that when adolescent children do not get enough sleep they are at higher risk for low academic performance, and depression (Widome, Berger, Lenk, Erickson, Laska, Iber, Kilian, & Wahlstrom, 2019).

The number of conflicts reported on the weekly exit tickets declined over the course of the intervention. There was a 63% drop in the number of conflicts reported from the first week of the intervention to the last. This decline could be attributed to some of the skills learned during the intervention that helped promote more positive and respectful communication. While the decline in conflicts is a positive result, what was also interesting to note is the strategies those who were involved in conflicts reported using to resolve their conflicts and how the amount of strategies changed from the first week to the last week. During the first week there were 10 conflicts reported, which was the highest number indicated during the intervention. The following were the ways that students indicated their conflicts were resolved: Four students reported forgetting about it and moving on without a resolution, two reported apologies by one or both parties, one resolved it with the help of a teacher, one reported switching friend groups, and two reported talking it out. During the last week of the intervention when only 4 conflicts were reported, students reported using talking it out as the method for resolving their conflicts. While talking it out was not a specific strategy that was taught during the intervention, we did conduct lessons on effective communication and students experienced a role-play activity that centered around being aware of what you say and how you say it. Students during the role-play had to reenact the scenario and change the responses of the characters that would create a more positive

outcome. This exercise taught students to understand the importance of being thoughtful about how they respond to their peers as well as taking responsibility when their words or actions negatively impact someone else. This may have influenced the way students resolved conflicts.

Researcher Field Notes Data

Three major themes emerged from the researcher field notes. These were: *engagement improving relationships with peers, engagement affecting how their words and actions affect others, and misunderstandings causing conflicts.*

After examining field notes that were recorded after intervention lessons, activities and community circles, one of the most common themes that emerged was engagement that improved relationships with peers. Throughout the intervention students experienced lessons and activities that required them to work together collaboratively and learn about each other. During community circles we always closed with compliments or appreciations, which allowed students the opportunity to think about and appreciate what their classmates bring to the classroom community. These experiences undoubtedly improved their individual relationships but also brought the whole class together as a whole.

Engagement affecting how their words and actions affect others was another common theme, as demonstrated by 12 recorded events in field notes. During week 5 of the intervention students engaged in lessons that focused on what your words and actions say about yourself, how they affect others, and learning how to use language that is appropriate for the situation. I recorded instances where students were being mindful of the language they were using when sharing out to the class making sure they were phrasing feedback in a way that was positive and constructive. I observed moments in which students showed awareness of how their actions affect others, by changing distracting behaviors they had previously done. One example I

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recorded was during our weekly mindful moment, where I guide my students through a three to five minute meditation. Students had been taught mindful posture, which is the position they should be sitting in during our meditation. I had a few students who found it challenging to stay completely still during our meditation and their movements were distracting to those around them. After students experienced the lessons around how actions affect others, I observed one of the students who normally had difficulty staying in mindful posture, making an observable effort to remain still during meditation. This demonstrated an awareness of appropriate behavior in a particular situation.

Finally, a third theme that emerged from researcher field notes was misunderstandings causing conflicts. On at least 10 occasions I recorded instances where students were able to identify misunderstandings and how they may have led to conflicts. During week 4 of the intervention students participated in lessons around communication, both verbal and nonverbal. They acted out a scenario that demonstrated how important it is to take the time to understand all the facts of a situation before making a judgment or coming to a conclusion. During a community circle activity, students were asked to identify what they felt caused some of the conflicts they have experienced, either personally, or as an observer. Misunderstandings and rumors, which are a form of misunderstandings, were the most common responses. I noted that we had a "Great discussion today about how to prevent misunderstandings from occurring. Students shared great ideas learned from our lesson on communication." This demonstrated how students were becoming more aware of how they may be able to prevent some conflicts from occurring or escalating that may be rooted in a misunderstanding.

Interpretation of Findings

Based on a thorough analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the strategies used during this action research project, I was able to draw the following conclusion: teaching students conflict resolution skills and strategies improves their relationship with peers and overall engagement. In addition, teaching effective communication skills can prevent conflicts. Results from their exit tickets, journal responses and researcher field notes all corroborate this statement.

Improved Relationship With Peers

The data from students' journal responses clearly shows that peer relationships are an important part of students' daily lives. What was most significant was how well students articulated the qualities that are important to possess in a healthy friendship. The Overcoming Obstacles lessons helped teach students an awareness of constructive communication strategies and their journal responses demonstrated they truly reflected on how they could apply those skills to peer relationships.

Additionally, exit ticket data indicated that students had less conflicts over the course of the intervention. Of the students who had indicated they experienced a conflict, a majority of them applied strategies to resolve them constructively. While some of the strategies students utilized, such as "talking it out", were not explicitly taught during the intervention, they participated in role-play activities and lessons that illustrated how a lack of mindfulness around their words and actions can lead to conflicts. Learning to be aware and reflect on how students may have contributed to a conflict with a peer is the first step in being able to resolve it constructively.

These findings connect to reviewed literature by Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Miller, and Landry (2000) and Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Mitchell, and Fredrickson (1997). Researchers

found that teaching students conflict resolution strategies and skills decreased the number of conflicts, the escalation of conflicts that occurred, and improved interpersonal skills. Students who were explicitly taught specific techniques for resolving conflicts were more likely to use them than those who were not trained. By equipping adolescents with the tools needed to navigate the social changes that occur during the middle school years, educators are reducing the amount of time spent on dealing with conflicts and giving children the autonomy they so crave.

Improved Classroom Engagement

One of the findings of a study done by Opotow (1991) was that when students learn to resolve conflicts constructively it can improve communication, attendance, reduce anxiety, and improve academic achievement. When students are not preoccupied with conflicts between close friends or classmates, they are better able to fully engage in their academics. Participants in this action research project improved their classroom engagement over the course of the intervention. The lessons and activities from the Overcoming Obstacles program were engaging, interactive, and relevant. In addition, the lessons from the program allowed students to explore what they value about themselves and their peers. Students looked forward to the days the Overcoming Obstacles lessons were conducted and because we often had other work that needed to be completed prior, students were more productive and focused because they wanted to ensure we had time for the activities. Learning strategies that allowed students to feel more in control of their interpersonal relationships improved their confidence. Additionally, examining how their body language and other nonverbal communication can send unintended messages helped participants become more mindful of how they conducted themselves in the classroom. When students have an increased awareness of how their actions, whether intentional or not, can affect others, it helps them stay more present, focused and engaged.

Effective Communication Can Prevent Conflicts

Throughout the intervention students experienced lessons and activities that involved communication. One lesson focused on stereotyping, specifically around making judgements about someone or a particular situation, either before getting to know them or without knowing all the facts. Students were able to identify how this can lead to conflicts because you have not taken the time to get the facts about someone before making a judgment about them. Participants understood that this was a failure in communication. It was impactful for students to listen to their classmate's shared experiences where they had been misjudged.

The goal of this action research project was to examine if teaching a conflict resolution unit would improve engagement in the classroom, which the data demonstrates was achieved. Engagement ratings increased and the number of reported conflicts decreased. In addition, the data revealed that sleep was reported by students as a significant factor affecting their engagement. Although the data does not support that conflicts were a factor in students' engagement, it does illustrate a heightened awareness of variables students can control to affect their engagement and social relationships.

Limitations

This action research study took place over an eight-week period, making the limitation of time a constraint, since there were many lessons we were unable to get to in the program. A longitudinal study tracking students' engagement and conflicts over multiple years as they continue to participate in the Overcoming Obstacles program is recommended and would provide more conclusive results.

Another limitation may have been the influence the power dynamic may have had on their responses on the exit ticket. Knowing that I was going to see their engagement rating may

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have influenced their responses to be higher than if they thought I would not see it. Even though I told them that they should be totally honest and there would not be any negative repercussions for lower engagement ratings, there still may have been a worry that they would offend me.

Summary

Over the past three years I had been noticing a decline in the overall classroom engagement of my suburban sixth grade students. In addition, I observed conflicts that would erupt both inside and outside the classroom that interrupted the learning environment and contributed to a negative classroom climate. Research has shown that middle schools all over the country are struggling to deal with student disruptive behavior that often is a result of negative peer influence and interactions (Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson, 2002; Daunic, et. al., 2000). In addition, researchers have also concluded that adolescents' peer conflicts have a significant influence on their social development and future well-being (Opotow, 1991).

When synthesizing the data gathered from journal response, exit tickets, and researcher field notes, I determined that the suburban sixth grade participants did benefit from the conflict resolution unit intervention in that they became more aware of how their words and actions affected their peer relationships. The data regarding their weekly engagement rating did not change significantly, therefore it cannot be determined that participants' high engagement ratings was a result of the intervention.

Plan for Future Action

Collectively, the results from this action research project demonstrated teaching a unit on conflict resolution skills and strategies has an overall positive effect on students' classroom engagement and peer relationships. I plan on presenting my findings to fellow staff members during our staff development prior to school starting, as well as at our grade level and staff

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meetings. Two of my colleagues have already taught several of the lessons from the Overcoming Obstacles program used in this research study. As a grade level team, we plan to use this program from the start of the year, so that we can teach the entire Overcoming Obstacles program, which includes a unit on effective study habits, adapting to changes, and service learning. In addition, I would like to explore implementing peer mediation, along with the conflict resolution program, which trains students to help mediate conflicts between students.

I am encouraged by the results of this action research project and how the Overcoming Obstacles program was received by my students. I am optimistic that sharing the results of this study will encourage my colleagues to implement this or some other type of program that teaches students' skills and strategies needed to have healthy social relationships. My hope is that a school-wide conflict resolution program will also help improve student connectedness to school and reduce the number of verbal and physical conflicts that occur.

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Appendices

A.   Weekly Engagement Exit Ticket
B.   Researcher Field Notes

Appendix A

Weekly Engagement Exit Ticket

Exit Ticket
Before you leave class today, answer the following questions.
Name*
Email
How would you rate your classroom engagement this week?*
rarely engaged   1   2   3   4   5   engaged almost all of the time
What do you think affected your engagement either in a positive or negative way? (positive engagement example: good nights sleep. Negative engagement example: did not sleep enough)*
Did you have any conflicts this week with friends or classmates?*

yes
No

If your answer to the previous question was yes, was this conflict resolved?

yes
No

If your conflict was resolved, what strategies did you use to resolve it? (example: I apologized, we talked it out, etc.)

As your teacher, is there anything more I could do to help support you and improve your engagement?

Appendix B

Researcher Field Notes

Date	Activities	Events/Quotes/Student Engagement/Behavior/Interactions
		•
		•
		•
		•
		•
		•
		•
		•