



The Effects of Peer Conflict Resolution Skills Training on Children's Psychosocial Development

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Author's contribution

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ABSTRACT

This research work was aimed at investigating the effects of peer conflict resolution skills training on the psychosocial development of children. Specifically, the author sought to provide answer to one research question which was: What is the role of play as a peer conflict resolution tool? The theoretical underpinning of this study was Morton Deutsch's theory of cooperation and competition. The study was also informed by Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories on play. A pretest posttest quasi-experimental design was adopted whereby 36 male and female children between 6 to 10 years old were randomly selected for the study. These children were all in class five of secondary school. Eighteen of the selected samples were randomly assigned to the experimental group and the other eighteen to the control group. The children in the experimental group were trained on peer conflict resolution skills for a month (8 sessions in total, 2 days a week, approximately 30 minutes a day) while the children in the control group did not benefit from any such training. A five point Likert scale questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection. An observation check list was also employed to measure children's post training conflict resolution skills. Data were analyzed using the t-test where the mean scores of both the experimental and control groups were compared, as well as a comparison of the mean scores for the pre and post-tests scores. Results indicate that children who took part in the training learnt how to use play to negotiate their differences. They also learnt how to use humor to manage anger. Recommendations were made to parents and

teachers to use instances of children's disagreements as opportunity to teach them of appropriate peer conflict resolution skills rather than just dispelling such emerging differences/disagreements as bad.

Keywords: Peer conflict resolution; skills training; psychosocial development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence in our schools today has been on a steady rise. Aggression and bullying are predominant issues in our schools today and these issues have received a colossal of attention from the media world. In such a context, conflict prevention and management amongst peers is primordial given that poor conflict management can have devastating effects, as it can escalate and interfere with the learning process and playground harmony [1]. According to [2] violence caused by anger are of utmost concern for youth at risk. This situation has placed both educators and mental health professionals in a difficult position as they are increasingly being confronted with the arduous challenge of managing behavioural and other aggressive problems.

It is in the light of this that conflict management takes center stage in our schools today as it is becoming increasingly necessary to train youth and school children on how to better manage playground conflicts. This thus brings to the limelight the effective role of conflict in children's social and psychological development. Research has proven that when children's conflicts are well managed in a cooperative way it prevents destructive cohabitation and creates positive relationship [3]. Such conflicts can be managed through integrative negotiation and peer mediation. Unfortunately, the benefits of conflicts are seldom promoted in children's interactions. For many people, the debate as to whether conflict is good or bad is irrelevant because according to them, conflict is a purely negative phenomenon that should be avoided [4,5]. Irrespective of these radical and nightmarish views of conflict, others still view conflict as a phenomenon that bestows a lot of positive advantages especially as concerns children's social and psychological development with respect to cognition, social cognition, emotions, and social relations.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED WORKS

Johnson [6] maintains that conflict resolution skills include, but not limited to skills such as

coping with difficulties and apologizing. These skills also include internal peace of the people where the conflict mostly occurs. In this light, improving peer conflict resolution skills should be a sine qua none for people who are charged with the duty of bringing up and seeing into the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of children. One way of improving these skills is through direct training whereby behavioural approaches for improving children's communication, decision making, problem solving, self-control and self-management are incorporated into training programs [7].

Amongst many skills at children's disposals for resolving peer conflicts, play is one of the most important ones. According to [8], *Play fosters belonging and encourages cooperation. However, cognizance must be taken of the fact that play bestows a lot more than just cooperation, as it fosters other necessary skills for children especially with regard to peer conflict resolution and management.* Play thus provides children with an important platform to network socially with other kids, and by so doing important social skills are learned.

Kids have many opportunities to move in and out of group play while on playgrounds. Solitary play helps kids socially, as it promotes creativity and alleviates boredom when children devise their own entertainment. While playing alone, kids can also learn social cues by observing group interactions without being a part of them [9]. When playing in groups, kids learn social roles and cultural rules, develop appropriate cooperation skills and learn a shared system of symbols, including verbal and body language. When children develop and test relationships, they learn self-control, compromise and negotiation skills. Kids also learn survival skills, independence and acceptable group activities to build on as they grow up.

The development of social skills plays an important role in a child's maturation process. The valuable lessons they learn on the playground will provide a foundation to grow into socially-adjusted, well-adapted adults. According to [10], pretend play gives young children the

unique opportunity to be in control. They can do what they're interested in. They can make choices about what they're going to do and who's going to be what and what's going to be what and how the story's going to unfold. As their play becomes more advanced - where they take on different personas - they begin to see things from the perspective of others, to understand that other people have thoughts and feelings and emotions that drive their behaviors. When they begin pretending with peers, they learn how to communicate effectively and develop problem solving and negotiation skills.

The theoretical underpinning of this study was informed by [1] Theory of Cooperation and Competition. This theory helps us situate how conflicts develop and how best to resolve them. Deutsch opines that parties' goals play a big role in conflict resolution and goes on to say that the type of conflict and relationship between parties' goals determine the outcome of the conflict. He begins from the idea that conflicts come with a blend of cooperative and competitive motives, and positive or negative goals. Negative goals such as my success are your failure results in competitive relationships. Positive goals such as my success are your success easily paves the way for cooperative relationships.

Piaget's and Vygotsky's Theories on play also provided further insight into this study. In one of his celebrated works: *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, [11] posits that play helps children to be able to assimilate and accommodate their environment. In this light children come to understand the rules of the game and incorporate in their mental structure concepts of fair play which helps them in resolving conflict because fair play symbolically implies that one should not hurt the other. In Piaget's view, play mirrors the requisite for an unbiased grasping of reality.

Vygotsky [12] offers another theoretical perspective of this study as he increasingly sees play as a social symbolic activity, whereby the themes, stories, roles enacted by play episodes mirrors/reflects children's grasp and appropriation of the sociocultural materials in their environment. Vygotsky posits that although children are embedded with necessary physiological and psychological basis to function as humans, their capabilities and abilities are largely shaped by the sociocultural environment in which they find themselves. In the context of this study then, for children to get to their zone of

proximal development whereby they move from solving/managing peer related conflicts on their own through play, to being guided by a parent, peers, adult or significant figure in their lives, mediation and scaffolding is a sine qua none. Vygotsky maintains that through social interaction, as children play, there is transmission of cultural knowledge from more knowledgeable peers to less knowledgeable ones. Within the context of play, it is evident that more knowledgeable peers teach less knowledgeable ones on the rules of the game which more often than not incorporate concepts of peer conflict resolution skills. In this process, language and social communication is vital. Vygotsky stresses two key elements in play: Imaginary situation and rules. Such games with rules thus help children to understand fair play which translates into them applying these rules in conflict related situations. Vygotsky stresses that the implicit rules in children's play become apparent if we consider societal/parental restrictions placed on children's behaviour by virtue of the roles they adopt.

Lynch and Simpson [13] posit that social skills such as help giving and receiving, empathy, negotiation, problem solving, participation in group activities, do promote group harmony and individual's relationship with his/her environment. [13] go further to say that such skills are goal oriented paths through which children explore and fulfill social needs, especially when we take cognizance of the fact that social skills, including peer conflict resolution skills do inspire good relations between people [14].

As a matter of fact, children use play as a form of social communication, problem solving, reduction of anxiety, creativity and defense mechanism [9]. Children generally understand a greater part of their world through play especially as they seek to assimilate, accommodate and adapt to their environmental condition. In this regard children gain more experience through play as their thought process and other aspects of growth develop [9]. [15] hold the view that conflict resolution and other social skills which are usually learned during early childhood give children the latitude to adapt to their environment, create and maintain social relations.

As far as social skills and peer conflict resolution skills are concerned, a number of empirical studies have been undertaken by a number of authors. In the first of these studies, [16] conducted an experiment to examine the impact

of Philosophic Education Program for Children on social skills at the age of six as pluckiness, cooperation and self-control. 10 sessions of 40 minutes for 8 weeks were enough for the training. The author made use of activities like drama and story-telling which were applicable to the experimental group while the control group witnessed no training. Results indicated that those in the experimental group demonstrated more social skills with regard to pluckiness, cooperation and self-control. The similarity of this study with the current research lies in the fact that the present research also made use of drama, story-telling and humor as one of the activities used in training the children on conflict resolution skills.

In a related study, [17] conducted a study to enhance children's ability to appreciate and understand others' feelings, behaviours and opinions using a training program of illustrated book reading. The authors experimented with children between the ages of 3 to 5 years. Sessions of 15 minutes, three times in two weeks were used to read illustrated books to the experimental group. The results of this study was that children's skills as far as understanding emotions, opinions and behaviours can be improved/developed by the training program of illustrated book reading.

A study by [18] to examine the impact of Play-Based Social Skill Training Program on children's social harmony and social skills made use of 48 children (6 years of age) in the experimental condition and another 48 in the control condition. The author incorporated play activities with family and other important activities to enhance social skills for 8 weeks, three times a week. It was concluded that social skills and social harmony levels of children in the experimental group was higher. This study just reviewed here is similar to the present research in that the current research also made use of play activities in teaching children conflict resolution skills.

2.1 Statement of the Problem

Children engage in conflict on a daily basis and traditionally, most people fall short of taking positives from such conflicts. The first reaction of most parents, teachers and other members of our society to children's conflict is to intervene and put an immediate end to it. Parents will often scold their children (in the name of discipline) for quarreling, or fighting without giving them room to dialogue. They often see conflict as a negative

phenomenon. Most of these adults whose duty it is to socialize and groom children, believe that they are the experts, the peacemakers, the ones with the best ideas and the ones who can define and interpret conflict better.

Unfortunately, most children in our society are left to themselves, to use whatever means at their disposal in resolving conflicts, irrespective of whether it is the correct approach or not. As a result of this, children grow up lacking the necessary skills to help them resolve disputes with their peers. Some of them find it very difficult to join peer play groups, often resort to the use of force or violence whenever there is a disagreement. Moreover, most of these children have difficulties making and maintaining friends, empathizing with others, giving and receiving complements, taking turns in an activity, asking for a favor, respecting others' views or taking another child's perspective into cognizance during an argument. Hence, the powers that be, seldom, if never ever, really incorporate the notion of training children on skills necessary to resolve, if not manage conflicts in our schools.

From this research problem, this study thus seeks to provide answer to one research question: what is the role of play as a peer conflict resolution tool?

3. METHODOLOGY

For the quantitative data, quasi experimental pre-test, post-test, follow-up control group design was deemed appropriate for this study. A total of 36 pupils (both males and females) between the ages of six and twelve were randomly selected for this study. These pupils were selected from three primary schools within the Buea Municipality. These schools were: Government Nursery and Primary school Molyko Town (GNPS), Cradle Bilingual Nursery and Primary School Check Point (CBNPS) and Catholic Nursery and Primary School Molyko Buea (CNPS). 18 of the selected samples were randomly assigned to the experimental group and the other 18 to the control group. A five point Likert scale questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection with pupils expected to circle one of five options (Never/Rarely/ Sometimes/Often/Always). Qualitative data was measured using an observation checklist.

An observation guide was constructed by the researcher with the intention of observing

children after they had been administered treatment. The guide was mostly open ended to give the researcher the latitude to record children's interactions and the various ways they employed in resolving conflicts in their natural environment. The guide had indicators tied to the various techniques of resolving conflicts that the children had been taught, such as joining an ongoing play group appropriately, being able to ask for and give help to someone, being able to say I am sorry when at fault, being able to play with others even if you do not agree with them.

A training manual was constructed to guide the researcher in training the children on conflict resolution skills. The manual was designed in a tabular form with each column having, a sub skill, short term objectives, teaching activities, learning activities, materials needed, work assigned, evaluation and result. The sub-skills and short term objective sections were designed to impart children with perspective taking skills like being able to offer help to others, being able to say sorry to others when at fault, being able to distinguish thoughts from feelings, and much more. The column of materials needed were trainer designed questions, chalk, chalk board, pencil and paper, brooms, card board papers, football, locally made ball etc. On the column for teaching and learning activities, they were activities designed to be carried out via role play, modeling or direct instructions.

As far as validity is concerned, randomization of the sample in a quasi-experimental study like this helped eliminate about nine threats to validity. As for the instruments, the researcher further presented the training plan of activities, questionnaire items and observation guide to friends, experts on conflict resolution, as well as faculty staff in the Department of Educational Psychology of the University of Buea for critical examination. Some of the items were rejected for their ambiguity and incomprehensible nature and replaced with less ambiguous ones. Moreover, items that were not deemed to be indicators of the variables under question were replaced with more appropriate ones. In addition, some of the materials introduced to be used for play activities were rejected by the teachers of these children on ground that they did not represent contextual realities (that is, these were not materials used by the children in their everyday lives and every day play). They suggested locally made materials that represent the real life interactions of these children. For example, instead of using a computer game to teach these children, the

teachers suggested local games like "dodging" (a game made out of locally made ball intended to shoot a target, being one of at least three players) which these children play all the time.

3.1 Procedure

This study was composed of three phases. The first phase was the selection and assignment of participants to the experiment and control conditions, followed by a pre-test as mentioned above.

The second phase was conducting a conflict resolution-training program to the experimental group. The researcher himself conducted the training program. The training program lasted for a month and consisted of eight sessions that were held two times a week. Each session was applied in the classroom setting and lasted for half an hour (30 minutes). In the control condition pupils did not receive any treatment. The training program was aimed at equipping children with constructive conflict resolution strategies. The specific goals of the conflict resolution strategies included teaching pupils: (a) to be able to distinguish thoughts from feelings (b) to be able to understand how others feel (c) to be able to say I am sorry when they are at fault (d) to be able to apply good listening and speaking skills like using "I messages" (e) to be able to play with people who make them angry (f) to be able to use humor in the appropriate way to reduce tension or anger (g) to be able to approach and join an ongoing play group with caution, not coercion.

The third phase of the study entailed administering post-test measures (the same rating scale that was administered to them before the training was once more administered after the training). A few days after the treatment procedure ended the posttest measures were administered to pupils in the experimental and control groups. Thereafter, observation of the experimental group was carried out for two weeks. This was aimed at observing whether the training had the desired effects on the experimental group.

3.2 Ethical Consideration & Consent

In conducting this study, the researcher took cognizance of major ethical concerns. In this regard, the informed consent of the participants was sought from their parents and teachers. Moreover, the researcher made sure that in the

course of the training, participants were not subjected to any form of physical or psychological harm of any nature. Moreover, the researcher made it known to the participants the essence of the research and how it would benefit them and the society at large. Finally, after the research, the researcher had to go back and provide a similar training he gave participants of the experimental group to those of the control group. This was to prevent issues of bias and to make sure that everyone benefit from the training.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the t-test where the mean scores of both the experimental and control groups were compared, as well as a comparison of the mean scores for the pre and post-tests scores. After calculation, it was tested against the t- table. The t-calculated value was compared against the t-table.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

HO1: Play will not be an effective technique in resolving peer conflict.

When the pre- and post-training mean scores for the experimental group were compared, it is glaring that the post-training mean score was higher than the pre-training mean score (that is, pre-training mean was 3.32 on 5.00 with a

standard deviation of 1.38, while the post-training mean was 4.45 on 5.00 with standard deviation of 1.16). On the other hand, the mean score for the control group dropped from 3.34 with 1.35 standard deviation for the pre-test, to 3.33 with 1.28 standard deviation for the post-test. Comparing the post-training mean score for the experimental and control groups, it is glaring that those who took part in the training (the experimental group) outperformed those who did not take part in the training (the control group).

Thus, from the results obtained, it is evident that the participants of the experimental group that received training on techniques to use play in resolving disagreements and other peer conflict resolutions skills were able to use these skills in conflict situations while the control group showed little knowledge/mastery of these skills.

4.3 Qualitative Data

The qualitative data is based on the researcher's observation of pupils' activities carried out in the areas that had to do with conflict, conflict resolution and appropriate behavior. The data was derived from the frequencies and percentages of the indicators or items on conflict resolution skills. Themes were used to describe behaviours that occur frequently especially with regard to peer conflict resolution skills. Three main themes identified were listening and speaking skills, perspective taking, as well as joining play groups.

Table 1. Comparing the pre- and post-training mean of both the experimental and control groups

Hypotheses	Mean (Standard deviation)				Decision	
	Experimental		Control		Experimental H0: Pre = Post H1: Post > Pre	Control H0: Pre = Post H1: Post > Pre
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST		
Ho1: Teaching children techniques in using play when in disagreement does not significantly affect their ability to negotiate with their peers	3.32 (1.38)	4.45 (1.16)	3.34 (1.3)	3.33 (1.28)	t = 6.5243 Significant at 1%.Reject Ho. This means that post training performs better than pre-training.	t = 0.0516 insignificant at 10% It means that the difference between pre and post training for the control group is insignificant.



Fig. 1. children being trained on how to use play in negotiation

4.4 Listening and Speaking

One of the themes that emerged during the observation was pupils' ability to listen to their mates when they were talking to them. The researcher observed that participants spent their free time more frequently in the company of friends, discussing with one another. On more than three occasions, the researcher observed one or two participants asking a friend to explain something to him or her. On one particular occasion, one of the pupils was observed asking his friend to explain something he drew on a piece of paper to him. On another occasion, one participant was arguing with a classmate. Later on, they were seen chatting together. They were comparing drawings. Another participant was observed weaving a bag out of thread with her friend. She complained that her friend didn't do it well. What was amazing is that she didn't yell at her friend, but spoke to her politely. These were her words "I hope you have not spoilt that bag". She later on explained to her how it was supposed to be done.

4.5 Perspective Taking (Say Sorry to Others and Being Assertive)

Participants were able to say sorry to their mates very often when they were at fault. On one particular occasion, one of the participants, after pulling his friend's shirt backed off after his friend

expressed displeasure. He told his friend in his own words "I thought you would like it. But sorry." Thereafter, that same day, he asked his friend to explain something to him. His friend did. This showed their ability to make amends. Another participant was observed telling his classmate who took her ruler that she didn't like what he did. Her mate apologized to her. She was observed later on the same day asking a classmate to leave her bench. She assertively told the classmate that the bench wasn't his, that he should go to his own bench. Another participant was observed confronting his classmate that he marked his book incorrectly. They had done the corrections in class and he knew the correct answer. He asked the mate to mark it correctly. This showed the children's ability not to shy away from what they think is right.

4.6 Joining Play Groups

Observation results showed that almost all participants observed showed their ability in joining play groups all the time, whenever the occasion presented itself. One of the participants was observed on more than three occasions playing with kids. She would hold their hands, form a circle with them, be in the middle, as a cheer leader and start jumping with them. The kids loved playing with her. Whenever she met the junior kids playing, they were always happy

to welcome her. Another participant was observed as she watched her friends play a local game called “dodging” with hopes of joining. As she watched, she was not just passive. She cheered by the side and made noise praising the players. This was indeed a good tactics because she was eventually allowed to join them when she asked if she could join. Another participant was observed on a separate occasion watching his friends play football. He stood by the side and played the role of a radio journalist, commentating on the match. At one point, he told his friends he wanted to play. He joined in without any problems. On another occasion, two participants were observed comparing drawings. It was like a drawing game between the two. One tried to explain the rules to the other. Another accused her friend of cheating. They started arguing as they accused each other of cheating. They eventually resumed playing after chatting out their differences.

From all these observations, it is very glaring that the participants in the experimental group had learned appropriate skills in avoiding or dealing with conflict. Although some of the skills they employed in dealing with conflicts were never directly taught during the training, it is a given that the training as a whole taught them that they were acceptable and unacceptable ways of dealing with conflict and they often imbibed the acceptable ways in dealing with conflict.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study are in synergy with [18] who examined the impact of Play-Based Social Skill Training Program on 6 years old children's social harmony and social skills and found out that social skills and social harmony levels of children in the experimental group was higher than that of the control group. The results of the present study also concur with studies undertaken by [17,16]. [16] conducted an experiment to examine the impact of Philosophic Education Program for Children on social skills at the age of six as pluckiness, cooperation and self-control. 10 sessions of 40 minutes for 8 weeks were enough for the training. The author made use of activities like drama and story-telling which were applicable to the experimental group while the control group witnessed no training. Results indicated that those in the experimental group demonstrated more social skills with regard to pluckiness, cooperation and self-control. [17] on their part conducted a study to enhance children's ability to appreciate and

understand others' feelings, behaviours and opinions using a training program of illustrated book reading. They concluded that children's skills as far as understanding emotions, opinions and behaviours can be improved/developed by the training program of illustrated book reading.

6. CONCLUSION

From the data collected and analysis made, it was evident that conflict is ever present in children's every day interaction. Findings revealed that when children are taught techniques in managing conflicts especially using play and humor, they learn these techniques and put them into appropriate use when the need arises. From every indication, children who took part in the training learnt how to use play to negotiate their differences; they learnt how to use humor to manage anger.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers should make sure to use every opportunity that arises in the class room to teach children skills necessary for resolving conflict especially during play and other activities of interest to children.

Peer conflict resolution skills and other social skills training should be incorporated in the curriculum of nursery and primary schools. This will give them a holistic perspective of life whereby they will blend academic knowledge with other necessary social skills that will permit them cope with relationships and other problems that come as a result of interaction with their environment.

Children should be given the opportunity to engage in play activities as these activities give them the opportunity to understand relationships, rules of the game, social roles and to be able to take then perspective of other.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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