

COLLABORATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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How can an awareness of conflict management styles impact small group collaboration in sixth grade students taking Global Thinking?



AREA OF STUDY

I began teaching at St. Christopher's in September, 2015 and soon discovered that the transition to sixth grade could be very stressful for many boys. Those who struggle with social skills seemed to be particularly edgy during this transition. Group work was obviously a challenge for many students; I had also witnessed these struggles in a public school setting. When working collaboratively, some boys allowed their stress to create tension and conflict within their groups. If I were to teach some conflict management skills, helping the boys become more aware of their own personalities and conflict styles, perhaps they would become more adept at resolving their own conflicts or avoiding them altogether. This concept is used in the corporate and education world for teamwork and leadership training. Why not try it in the classroom?

WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

It was clear to me from the beginning that it would be necessary to find activities that would keep the boys engaged and active. I was hoping to help the boys realize that with conflict management skills in their toolkit, working in groups would not only become less stressful, but more fun as well. “A common response from classroom teachers has been that even the most complacent students have become ‘engaged’ in the interactive activities” (Grave, Frabutt, & Vigliano, 2007).

I also wanted the boys to draw on their empathy and hoped that by learning about each other’s conflict management styles and personalities, they would be able to see things through each other’s eyes. According to Wied, Branje, and Meeus, “...adopting the perspective of the other person in a conflict situation may lead to a better understanding of the other’s position, preventing destructive acts and facilitating constructive ones” (2006).

Implementing this action research project in the beginning of the year would allow me to set the tone for collaborative activities early. I could then return to these points throughout the year when I wanted the boys working in collaborative groups. “Teaching conflict-resolution skills through prevention programs has been shown to be one way of preventing more entrenched behaviour problems from emerging” (Taylor, Gillies, & Ashman, 2009). If we could avoid conflict

issues and learn to cope with the stressors of being a 6th grader early, perhaps we could avoid major breakdowns and withdrawal from classroom activities as the year progressed. In order to do this, it would be important to focus on the positive aspects of peer-to-peer interactions. “Negative emotions associated with conflict include anger, hope, fear, hurt, and guilt. Positive emotions associated with conflict include hope and energy” (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2013).

Ultimately, it comes down to how we, as teachers approach boys. There needs to be compassion, understanding, and a concerted effort to allow boys to be in touch with their emotions and how to deal with them when they turn negative. That

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was what I was hoping this action research project would help me accomplish. “As a society, we encourage boys...to be physically tough, independent, self-sufficient, and stoic. Good studies suggest that we may have it wrong...Researchers who look at the emotional lives of boys suggest that young males are every bit as wired for relationships — with each other... — as their female counterparts” (Tyre, 2008).

METHOD

Before beginning our Cultural Literacy group projects, I incorporated some preparatory activities into the curriculum. I began with a brief survey to assess student attitudes towards group work. Then, the boys participated in two inventory style assessments. The first assessment revealed student conflict management styles (accommodating, avoiding, compromising, collaborating, or competing) and the second assessment revealed their Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality type. I chose this personality test because I felt it lent itself well to explaining the personality in a way that would allow the boys to see how they interact with each other in group settings. They could discover whether they were an introvert, or extrovert, sensing or intuitive, feeling or thinking, and thinking or judging. After each test, we discussed the results as a class, and the boys wrote a

personal reflection in our class blog. They even learned which celebrities or famous people from from history matched their personality. We talked about how they could use this information to inform their group work.

We also practiced conflict resolution techniques such as active listening and establishing group norms. The boys first created group norms individually, based on what they thought were appropriate guidelines for group work. After receiving their group assignments, the team negotiated group norms together. I rewarded the boys with a sticker if their norms were on display during class, hoping this would encourage them to refer to them regularly.

The boys worked to complete a fairly comprehensive and strenuous group project, one that was challenging and required teams to set their own deadlines. I assigned the groups based on personality types and conflict management styles (teacher-assigned groups) attempting to get as much variety into the groups as possible. The boys shared these collaborative projects with the wider school community during a Culture Fair program in the fall.

In the second project, the boys got to choose their own group members. Students worked collaboratively to remove bias from news reports and produce an unbiased news cast video. I was curious to see if students would prefer working in groups provided by the teacher or the ones they chose for themselves. The boys also crafted new group norms and were encouraged to keep them on display during their collaborative activities.

FINDINGS

My data analysis left many questions. The project groups were comprised of collaborators and compromisers across the board. I wondered if this group dynamic was unique to St. Christopher's School or to the 6th grade or just to this group of 6th graders. Also, there was a disproportionate amount of students who identified as ESTJ (Myers-Brigg: Extroverted/Sensing/Thinking/Judging). Again, is there something about the culture here at St. Christopher's that



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propels students towards the responses that generate these results? Would they test differently in a different environment? Another question deals with the introverts: with so many extroverts, is there the potential for feelings of alienation or isolation in the introverts?

Another somewhat surprising result was that while the majority of boys prefer to choose their own group, many boys recognized the value of having the teacher choose their group for them.

Most of the boys either saw the benefit or recognized there may be some benefit in establishing group norms when collaborating on a project, and they felt that knowing their conflict management style and personality type was helpful to the success of their projects. The majority of the boys believed that their ability to collaborate on future projects was enhanced by this experience.

When I shared the boys' testing results with colleagues, I received a lot of positive feedback. Many were curious about what we could do in the classroom to help the introverts be more successful socially and academically. In the class in which I conducted my research, the introverted boys were very successful in both of these areas; however, that was not always the case in my other classes.

It was great to see my colleagues recognize the benefit of this utilizing this approach in the classroom. In fact, one teacher used our results to partner boys for a writing project in his classroom. Our collaboration helped reinforce the spirit of cooperation in the boys.

PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

I would like to improve our approach to the introverted boys in the classroom. In some preliminary research on this topic, I discovered there are some relevant resources, but there is a definite need for more work in this area. In my opinion, the modern classroom is often geared to the success of the extrovert. I believe that St. Christopher's has a real opportunity to conduct research into how to structure the learning environment for the success of both introverted and extroverted boys.

I'm also curious as to whether these results are unique to St. Christopher's. One obvious method to test whether these results were an anomaly to this group is to conduct the same research project with next year's 6th graders. It is also possible that the tests I used were too simplistic and not comprehensive enough to allow for more of a variety in the results. In earnest, it was difficult to find tests of this nature that had the appropriate vocabulary for 6th grade boys. Perhaps I could work on simplifying the vocabulary of a more comprehensive test.

All in all, I felt this action research project was very beneficial to not only myself, but also to my colleagues.

ENDNOTES

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