Conflict resolution: the R-D2 basic procedure

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Abstract.

Are our students, future primary and kindergarten teachers, prepared to face the everyday conflicts of a classroom? We only can answer this question from our personal experiences as tutors of the Practicum. Reading the reflective diaries they have to present after this period, we discovered that the most extended strategy to solve conflict was: "say you are sorry". Following the stages of an action-research methodology, we decided to test a proposal to solve this problem. As teachers of the subject "Educational Guidance and Tutorial Action" we decided to introduce a specific unit about "living together" (convivencia) and conflict resolution. We elaborate a basic strategy or procedure that the students had to apply in a practical activity (unfortunately, the students of this subject don't have any placement at school). We also tested if they remembered this basic procedure at their final exam. The results were that, they started the procedure, but very occasionally arrived to a real solution, and … only one of the students remembered the procedure. This is why we decided to create a new proposal to solve these two problems. We called this proposal R-DEDOS or RD2. You will have to read the full paper to know more.

Keywords: classroom management, aggressive and violent behaviour, communicative skills and strategies, emotional intelligence

1.   Introduction

We are teachers at the Faculty of Education, at Complutense University of Madrid, and one of our academic duties is tutoring the students during their placement at schools (we call this period Practicum). At the end of this period, they present a reflective diary. As part of their reflection, last year, we encourage them to focus on some special subjects (as they usually focus on how the love being with children). One of these subjects was: "Convivencia", (coexistence): are there any problems in your classroom and how do you solve them?

When pushed to reflect about this subject, we discovered that most of our students were not prepared to afford this task, though this is a really common situation they will have to deal with and counts with a large theoretical background. This was the starting point of our action-research reflective spiral or cycle. Our next research question was: why they are not prepared and what can we do to solve this situation?

The results of our diagnostic lead us to design an intervention plan. After a literature review about this topic, we proceed to add/review a unit within the academic program of the subject "Educational guidance and tutorial action" to introduce the concepts of conflict and give the students a basic strategy or procedure to face its resolution. We also designed a practical activity in order to evaluate if our plan was effective.

We will explain more in depth all the steps followed in the next chapter (methodology), and we will present you our reviewed plan of intervention, consisting on an improved basic procedure that we named R-D2 (r-dedos) in the discussion section. Finally, we are going to present you our "crowd testing" proposal, whose aim is to evaluate the efficacy of this new procedure.

2.   Methodology

The way the events took place, starting from our personal professional experience as teachers at the Faculty of Education, responsible of future teachers training, and our reflective attitude has lead us to decide that the best way to answer our initial question - are our student prepared to afford conflict resolution - is the action - research methodology.

As Zuber-Skerritt (1996: 83) suggests 'the aims of any action research project or programme are to bring about practical improvement, innovation, change or development of social practice, and the practitioners' better understanding of their practices' [1]. Thought the reference is not recent, but a classic, and therefore, timeless. (Let us express our disappointment about the obsession with the date of the reference more than the quality of it, like is the case). These words can be perfectly applied to our research.

Action - research procedure, as Carr and Kemmis proposed in 1988 [2]- another classic-, consists of four basic steps, that can be repeated over and over in a reflective spiral. The steps are: 1. Reflect about your professional practice in order to diagnose possible problems and

needs; 2. Make an intervention proposal (action plan) as a possible solution to our problem; 3.Implement the plan (action); 4 Observation (data collection) in order to test the adequacy of our proposal…. and, a new reflection will result in a new phase of reflection. (See Figure 1).

Let's proceed to explain, step by step, the procedure followed in our research.

- **Step 1: Reflection**

As we previously mentioned, one of our academical duties is to tutorise and correct the reflective diary of our students after the *prácticum* period. Most of them are not used to make reflection, and they trend to indicate how they enjoyed during this period or how they love children. To avoid this generic opinions, last year we encourage them to include a reflection about classroom management, encouraging them to observe how teacher used to solve conflicts among students, or even, explain how they manage to solve them by themselves. Most of the students (five out of seven) arrived to the following solution: "Say you are sorry", "shake hands/ give a kiss", "promise you will never do it again". As we already explain, we are not following a quantitative approach, so the significance of our data doesn't rely on the representativeness of the data but on its power to generate reflection, as it the case. Reflection about these data made us realize that "conflict resolution" was not clearly included in their academic curriculum. As teachers of the subject "Educational Guidance and tutorial action", we had the opportunity to make some improvements.

Figure 1: Carr and Kemmis's   Action - Research process. (1986)
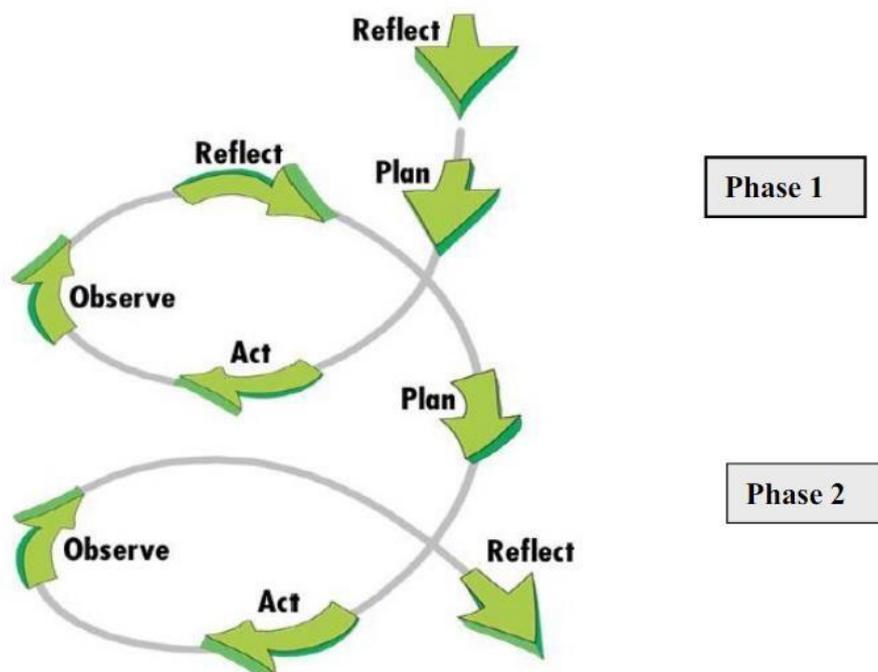
Source: (of the Image) Action Research Model by Kemmis & Mactaggart (1988) { 3]

- **Step 2: Literacy review and Intervention plan -**

Our intervention plan was to include or review (as one of us has already include a unit related to "coexistence / living together" (convivencia) a new unit devoted to conflict resolution. Before planning this unit, we made a literacy review. The first idea was to make a clear definition of conflict. As (Jares, X.R, 2006) explains, conflicts are part of the fact of living together, belonging to a group, as its nature is to have different points of view (values, knowledge, opinions) about a certain issue, and this is part of our cultural organization [4]. We can say that a conflict occurs whenever two person have different points of view.

A second key point is the way these conflicts can be solved. The three basic strategies referred by the different authors consulted - Serrat (2002) [5], Alzate (2004) [6] - are: negotiation, mediation and arbitration. They differ in the level of autonomy of the subjects implicated in the conflict. A negotiation strategy means that contenders are able to solve the conflict by their own, and at the same time, they have authority enough or power to decide (Alzate, R, 2004). This is why this is not a good proposal for kindergarten and primary.

Mediation and arbitration require the intervention of a third person. In the case of arbitration, this third person has to offer a solution to the conflict, but in the mediator procedure, mediation is only a facilitator. This means that, in order of autonomy requirements, the strategies can be arranged as follows: arbitration, mediation, negotiation.

A recent strategy has been incorporated to this trio: conciliation (Sanchez, A & Villajos, L, 2018) [7], which is somehow in between mediation and arbitration, as the conciliator can suggest solution, and the mediator, no.

Finally, we wanted to focus the attention of our students towards the differences between and aggressive and a violent behaviour, as this are possible ways to solve a conflict, thought not adequate, especially in the case of an violent behaviour. As Fernández (2004) indicates, and aggressive behaviour is defensive, but a violent one is deliberate, so highly unwelcomed and avoidable [7].

We must also take into account that a preventive approach (Vega, 2015[8] is also a procedure to promote, in fact, the best one, but this includes training not only the teachers, but the students within the classroom. In our proposal we are not going to focus in this procedure.

The final result of this review was this academic unit (Figure 2):

Figure 2: Unit 8 in the Virtual Campus.

Source: Personal picture.

 In this unit, we include all the topics previously mentioned: (1) Conflict and coexistence; (2) Conflict resolution; (3) Conflict, aggressiveness and violence. (4) Rules and discipline; (5) Teacher skills and strategies.
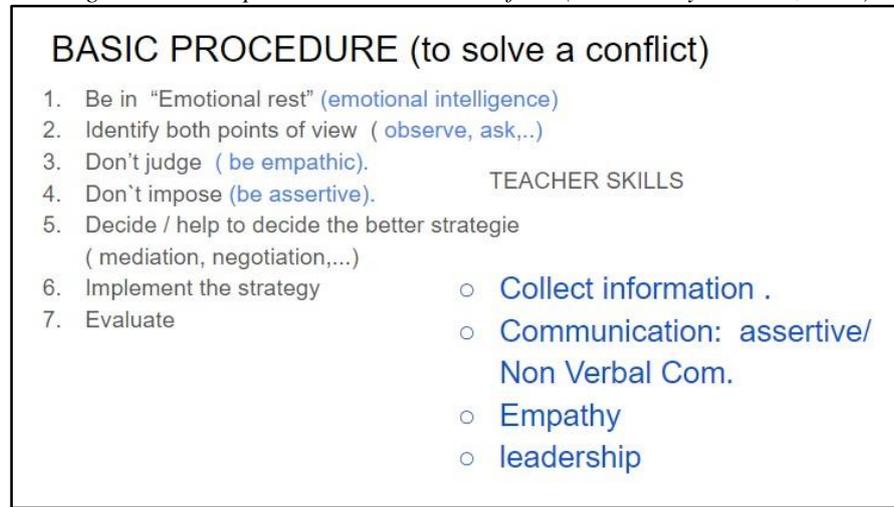
● **Step 3: Plan implementation**

We implement this unit in a primary group and in a kindergarten one. In this paper we will focus our reflection in the kindergarten one, as the data that gave birth to this research belonged to kindergarten students.

Beside the theory presented, we prepare a practical activity. In this activity a basic procedure was given to the students, and they were asked to follow this procedure to solve a conflict retrieved from their personal memories.

The basic procedure provided to the students, and designed according to our previous literacy reflection is represented on figure 3.

Figure 2: Basic procedure to solve a conflict. (Caballero y Escobar, 2018)

BASIC PROCEDURE (to solve a conflict)

1. Be in "Emotional rest" (emotional intelligence)
2. Identify both points of view (observe, ask,..)
3. Don't judge (be empathic).
4. Don't impose (be assertive).
5. Decide / help to decide the better strategie (mediation, negotiation,...)
6. Implement the strategy
7. Evaluate

TEACHER SKILLS

- Collect information .
- Communication: assertive/ Non Verbal Com.
- Empathy
- leadership

Source: Personal image.

We will describe next step (observation/ data collection) in the next section.

3.   Results (3rd step)

We selected two sources of information:

- The results of the activity
- A final exam

Al the examples provided by the students (17 group activities corrected) applied the first steps properly, but only 6 of the 17 were able to arrive to a real solution of the conflict.

And the results of the exam show that only one student, from a total amount of 63 was able to remember the whole procedure.

4.   Discussion: reflection and a new plan

According to these results, a review of the general process is needed. This review will focus in two aspects: the need of arriving to a real solution and the idea of a more synthetic/ sort procedure that could be easily remembered. This is not a banal question, as if the students don't remember the procedure, they will not apply it.

We are aware that conflict resolution is a complex procedure, but if we have clear the basic steps, we will be able to incorporate the necessary skills and strategies involved in its resolution.

The basic procedure will be named as an acronym: R-DEDOS or R-D2(read *dedos* is Spanish). This name will be easy to remember as the word *dedos* means fingers. And we can also associate the image of a finger.

This basic procedure is designed for scholar use (students from 3 to 12 years). The procedure assume that the teacher has a professional responsibility of his/ her students, so his intervention is compulsory, and also that due to the age of the students they are at the beginning of their developmental process, so their autonomy level cannot be compared to the one of an adult, and a more directive procedure is required.

The steps of this basic procedure are:

- R- *Respira y relájate* (breath and relax); as nothing can be done since an excited approach.

- D - *Deten y separa* (stop and separate). Usually conflicts are taking place, and an aggressive or violent answer has started, so the first teacher responsibility is to stop this kind of answers.

- E - *Escucha* (active listening). Teacher must listen and identify the two points of view, without any previous judgment.

- D - *Diagnostica y Decide* the best strategy (Diagnose and decide). After listening the two versions, the teacher can obtain enough information to diagnose and decide about the best way to solve this conflict; but as we previously mentioned, conflict resolution is a complex process in which personal and social information must be taken into account (Serrat, 2002) [5], so this process may require more data collection before arriving to a proper decision.

  The teacher must clearly decide the best strategy, taking into account the autonomy level of the contenders. So, as we previously explain, his selection will start with arbitrage (low autonomy) - conciliation - mediation - negotiation (high autonomy).

  We also recommend an interesting variation of arbitrage: the classroom assembly. In this case, the referee is not a person, but a group of persons. This option is of great benefit as we are promoting autonomy and a really recommended way of rules establishing, by active participation.

- O - *Ofrece/ obliga a adoptar una estrategia de resolución* (Offers the students an strategy to solve the conflict. As we previously mentioned, from a counselling point of view, offer an strategy is more effective than imposing one, but teacher must take into account that if the circumstances require so, her/his duty is to solve the conflict, so she or he will have to impose the best strategy.

- S - *Solucion* (Solution). This is a key point. Teacher and students must have clear that a specific solution is required. Something "touchable", that is, we need to arrive to the bottom of the conflict. We suggest to arrive to two kinds of specific solutions:
    - ○ Rules: deciding if these rules will affect the whole community from this point to the future.
    - ○ Aphorism: a specific statement expressed in a concise and witty manner that contains a moral principle.

5.   Conclusion

This second basic procedure is the starting point of a second phase of reflection. We don't have any data about the efficacy of this procedure, as it's a "new born", but our expectations are positive. We also know that to develop this procedure, teachers will require an special training including different skills and strategies (empathy, communicative skills, emotional skills, diagnostic skills). In the program of our subject (Educational Guidance and tutorial Action), some of this skills have been developed, so our students have a basic training in this field, but if this is not the case, a training program on this kind of strategies will be required. We must also remind that, besides this remedial procedure, we must insist on a preventive approach.

Finally, we want to propose a collaborative way to continue with this second stage of reflection. We have called this procedure "crowd testing". We share with you this R-D2 proposal (may be you will require to adapt the acronym to your mother tongue), and we invite you to implement it in a real context. After that, you are also invited to share the results in this blog: R2-dedos.blogspot.com

With those shared results we will have more data to reflect about and to decide about the validity of this procedure. You are also invited to participate in this project just as a user or as an active researcher in a new shared project.

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