

Conflict in the Classroom

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Conflicts are inevitable in human relationships, and the teacher-student relationship is no exception. It is common for teachers to encounter situations when their messages, despite all their best intentions, are ineffective in modifying unacceptable behaviour. When this happens, there is conflict in the classroom. Most teachers are quite familiar with situations of conflict and often spend a lot of valuable teaching/learning time trying to resolve them, usually without much lasting success.

The Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary defines "conflict" as deriving from "Latin, *conflictus* act of striking together, from *confligere* to strike together, from *com-* + *fligere* to strike." Other words that convey the same message are collision, war, and battle. In human relationships, conflict means disagreements and battles occurring between two or more persons when their behaviours prevent the other/others from satisfying their needs, or when their values do not match.

Like taxes and death, conflicts between the needs of teachers and the needs of students are bound to happen, and they can happen quite frequently. Many teachers believe that the occurrence of conflicts in their classroom is a suggestion that they are somewhat inept professionally. Such teachers usually blame themselves because they are convinced that there should be no conflicts in classrooms where there are "good" teachers and "good" students.

The teacher or the students do not solely own conflicts. Conflicts involve the needs, views, and emotions of both parties; so that, really, both own the problem. Whether a conflict is a minor disagreement or a major battle, the cause is always the same: one or both parties are saying, "What you're doing (or not doing) is making it difficult for me to live my life, the way I would like, to meet my needs." Almost without exception, teachers think of resolving classroom conflicts in terms of winning and losing. The win-lose orientation shows up in the way they talk about the students: "I'll be damned if I'll let these students walk all over me;" "Students today don't respect the authority of the teacher," or "I'll show those students who's really in charge."

The win-lose orientation seems to be at the heart of the knotty issue of discipline/indiscipline in schools. Many teachers feel that they have only two approaches to choose from; they can be strict or lenient, tough or soft, authoritarian or permissive. They see the teacher-student relationship as a power struggle, a contest, and/or a fight. Therefore, it is not surprising that students, in turn, see their teachers as natural enemies—dictators to be resisted by whatever means in one case or, contrastingly, as softies they can ignore, take advantage of, and even disrespect.

And so when conflict in the classroom arises, most teachers try to solve them so that they can win, or at least not lose. The problem with adopting this approach is that the classroom experience degenerates from one of teaching/learning to one of asserting authority and power. While maintaining some degree of control is important for the

smooth and effective “running of the class,” winning by this method for the teacher obviously means that the students end up losing, or at least not winning.

The fact is that when win-lose methods are used to resolve conflicts in the classroom, while the “losers” may feel the brunt of “defeat,” the “winner/s” also pay a price. In a society that places a high value on power, the corruptive effect on those who wield power over others creates its own oppositions and may even foster destruction. In many classrooms, teacher power generates resistance and rebellion, which must be dealt with. This leads to teachers asserting even more power, leading to further resistance from students. The result is less and less teaching/learning time in the classroom. Whether teachers realise it or not, it is a fact that using power diminishes teachers’ influence. Teacher power does not genuinely influence students; it simply forces them to behave in prescribed ways. It does not persuade, convince, educate, or motivate students to behave in particular ways. It is for this reason that students generally return to their former behaviour once the authority and power are removed from the classroom—many teachers can attest to this. And, finally, when teachers rely on power they suffer still—they are deprived of warm, pleasant, friendly relationships with students. In fact, teachers who exert high levels of power control in their classrooms are often met with hostile, unpleasant responses from students. In contrast, those who extend care and compassion to their students experience reciprocity.

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