

DE-ESCALATION OF TENSION AND CONFLICT IN SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM AN APPLICATION OF SOME SUGGESTED STEPS IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

¹Ekiugbo, Emoefe U. K. (Ph.D), ²Dada, S. O. (Ph.D), & ³Adegboye, A. A. (Ph.D)

^{1,2,3}School of Social Science Education, College of Education,
Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti.

E-mail: ekiugbo.uche@bouesti.edu.ng

Orcid no: <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-4811-7731>

Abstract

Conflict is normal and inevitable in human society, schools inclusive. Handling conflict inclusively and non-violently is a hallmark of democracy. Conflict means to perceive and experience incompatible differences within the individual or between two or more individuals which may lead to some form of opposition. Conflict is a natural tension that arises from differences. Conflict occurs daily in everyone's life. Teaching about de-escalation of tension and conflict can help to make schools and community more peaceful and thus prepare students for the challenges of democratic citizenship. This article describes a curriculum unit used with a group of students in junior secondary schools in Nigeria, built around the key idea of not only understanding conflict but also steps that can be deployed to de-escalate tension and conflict in social studies classroom. It is not a primarily a conflict resolution training program per se, rather it is an integrated social studies, language and drama unit that presented that presented controversial scenes that are national in outlook in an accessible way in Nigerian Schools. The understanding of de-escalation of conflict thus developed was later applied to complex interpersonal conflicts such as bullying in the classroom setting.

Keywords: De-escalation, Interpersonal Conflict, Conflict, Administration of Justice, Secondary Schools.

Introduction

The first step in concept development is often to identify several examples of the phenomenon and to distinguish these from non-examples. The teacher and the class began the unit by brain storming and describing many different instances of conflict. The children examples included a disagreement between a parent and a child about what should be eaten for breakfast, competition between Delta state indigenes and Edo State indigenes in the recently concluded Sport fiesta in Abuja and a state dispute declared by teachers in a neighbouring state as contained in the news, eg. Imo state in the South Eastern Part of the country in Nigeria. One student pointed out a mild conflict in their own classroom at that moment about the scarcity of chairs and tables. She believed that a few students usually boys, often got there first and grabbed them. The teacher affirmed that that each of these was an example of conflict and asked students to describe the disagreements, but did not attempt to explain or mediate any particular conflict at that moment.

At first, many of the students' examples were not necessarily instances of conflict. As the class talked about why each was or (wasn't) an instance of conflict and what the various examples had in common, more students caught on and volunteered correct examples. To reinforce the concept of different views point at both social and interpersonal levels, a homework assignments directed the class to investigate various people's opinions regarding a series of protest strikes by public sector workers that were taking place in Imo state of Nigeria (one of the state in south eastern part of the country). As students brought in new articles and stories from home, the class discussed who was involved, and how each conflict participant or student observer viewed each problem. The class compared the rare occasions when big disturbances or violence broke out with other occasions when disagreement were handled peacefully or violently, mentioning the endsars violence that rocked the nation to a stand still some years ago and how local news coverage emphasized them.

Later, the class use the term "conflict" and "viewpoints" to analyze conflict in children's literature and news photos and stories regarding a major conflict occurring at the time between the Ijaws and the Urhobos war in warri (an oil city in Delta state of Nigeria). other ethnics and communal clashes in Ogoni land in Bayelsa and Plateau state all in Nigeria. The teacher presented, illustrated and discussed with the class the notion that conflict tends to escalate (get worse) if unresolved. To make the material more accessible for the diverse students in the classroom, the teacher supplemented reading, writing and discussion by having students observe and draw pictures and act out roles in relation to various examples of conflict. The teacher injects in the concept of de-escalation.

The teacher explained the concept of de-escalation of tension and conflict to the students in the next class (ie) the next period. De-escalation is a human behavior that is intended to prevent escalation of conflicts. People may become committed to behavior that tends to escalate conflict. So specific measures must be taken to avoid escalation. De-escalation is avoiding or preventing an escalation of undeserved behavior. Sometimes called conflict resolution, verbal de-escalation or crisis intervention. It is an essential skill for teachers who must also display patience, empathy, compassion and a genuine desire to help students resolve crisis which are inevitable in the classroom.

Teachers explained to students a major benefits of the de-escalation of tension and conflict in the classroom such as bringing down tension before getting worst or potentially violent or reaching a boiling point. Learning to de-escalate situations considered as injurious to peace in the classroom may not be easy for teachers. It requires patience. De-escalation may not prevent all challenging behaviors from happening but these steps treated in this article can help diffuse a situation before it gets worst. Therefore the goal here is to allow the student calm down, think clearly, so that teachers and students can get to the roots of the problem and move through the challenges together. These might be a logical consequences such as cleaning the messs created neatly in a democratic way that leaves both parties filing fulfilled and satisfied.

What is conflict?

A series of lessons guided students to describe a variety of basic human needs to distinguish needs from wants, how to analyze the ways unmet needs might be sources of conflict. Students developed and acted out scripts portraying conflict over unmet needs. The then ongoing conflict in Imo State in Nigeria provided the class with interesting examples of human needs or wants is a source of conflict. The one scenario the students acted out was the Governor of the State refusing to honor arrangement reached with Labor leaders over the payment of workers' salaries. This attracted the attention of the Nigeria labor congress executives at the National level. The Leaders gathered at the state secretariat for a day peaceful demonstration in solidarity with the workers who have been denied their wages for months. The peaceful demonstration turned violent and sour as it was alleged that most miscreants hired by the state government came out violently attacking the workers and their leaders who are gathering for a peaceful protest, this brought conflict, which paralyzed the Nigeria economy for days. Another scenario acted out by the students was when the classroom was arranged in two equal lines facing one another, a couple of feet apart. One line played the role of the Ijaws who had moved into a vacant homes a few months earlier. The other line played the role of the Urhobos who were displaced by flood that had occurred the previous year. They now returned to their ancestral homes to find out that their owns had been taken over by the Ijaws. Each students identified a partner across from him or her in the other line. The teacher encouraged them to act the same time to minimize shyness and invent their own responses. It was noted the students acted in different ways. As the Urhobos demanded for a release of their homes and properties taken over by the Ijaws while they were away, some Urhobos acted in different ways such as threatened violence, others laughed with embarrassment, some with dignified diplomacy, while others sued for help from neighbors to attack the Ijaws. Some others negotiated for Peace through a mutually acceptable temporary arrangement.

Another scenario acted by the students illustrated conflict over beautiful damsels in the class. The class had 10 male students and only five female students. The 10 male students wanted a damsel each, who will be left out among the male students without a damsel? The same with unmet needs in a refuge camp using a photo of five hungry children after food relief supplies had run out at a refugee encampment. With only a plate of food to satisfy only one of them, who gets the plate of food? especially when the five of them are extremely hungry? Who in the first place were the perpetrators of violence, what caused the children in the first place to flee from their homes and why the conflict? The essence of this according to the teacher was for the class to examine the same conflict could provoke many different feelings and the way the students (if they had similar feelings) could choose to act in different ways in response to a particular problem. After role playing, the students were asked to describe by the teacher how they felt, imagined, playing different roles. The teacher affirmed the many different possible feelings and responses to the same conflict.

After the class had become comfortable examining distant conflicts, the teacher addressed the problems of bullying and exclusion that had been occurring on the same play ground. He used literature, artwork and drama to illustrate, and analyse the problem. For example "Name

calling" by Okoro Daniel was used to illustrate the way bullying problem get worsen when other children joined in targeting a schoolmate and to show how the underlying conflict sometimes arises from a misunderstanding. He adjourned till the next lesson, next day
Another day, students, each draws their own pictures of bullying situations. And were asked to discuss as a class what made some people bullies (their characteristics) and the reasons they believed people bullied others. Students quickly articulated several reasons for bullying behaviour, such as social difference, status, individual desires for security or acceptance, retaliation and perceptions that they had been treated unfairly.

The teacher then led students to complexity their understanding of bullying, first by inviting them to compare their own with others(classmate and literature) experiences. Second and probably most important, he asked them to place themselves "in the shoes" of bullies, that is, to described how many times they themselves had picked on somebody or wanted to do so, how they felt before. during and after the episode. In many cases, the children said they felt at least temporarily powerful and important while acting as bullies. Referring to the concept of escalation, the class discussed the ways some children joined or followed along with bullying episodes, because of the way it made them feel or to avoid being targeted themselves.

Speaking earlier from the point of view of victims, the children had tended to stereo type, to blame bullies (perhaps telling the adults what they believed they wanted to hear). However, after sharing their experiences as bullies(ringleaders or followers), as well as target (victims of bullying),most students develop an understanding of bullying as a response to complex conflicts involving in group and out of group relationships and various sources of power and self respect. Beginning with a focus on tangible human needs (such as food and shelter) as causes of (some) conflicts helped the class-perhaps especially those with limited English proficiency to see to concept of conflict. Moving on to examine a range of inter-personal and inter-group conflict examples from literature and direct experience helped to deepen students' understanding of conflicts, causes, the associated view points and feeling, and their own roles as participants in the life conflicts. By first applying the concept of conflict to matters in the news, and later making the concept personal through the study of bulling in their own school yard, the students developed working definitions of conflicts (as disagreements over different viewpoints, wants or need) and an understanding of how conflict may escalate or be redirected in social interactions.

How can we handle Conflict as teaches: De-escalation of tension and conflict?

One particularly helpful activity was to have students write about conflict "in role" that is, from the point of view of one party to the problem, describing from that perspective how they felt, how they thought the conflict should be handled, and the consequences, they predicted. This is the de-escalation of tension and conflict.

De-escalation may not prevent all challenging behaviors from happening but these steps suggested can help diffuse situation before it gets worst, as this will help children calm down and think clearly, as it is assumed from experience that anger beclouds the sense of clear thinking in man. The goal is to help the child calm down, think clearly, and make good choices and moving forward.

The suggested steps to the teachers in the social studies classroom are thus:

1. Listen to what the controversial issue from the students, taking notes of those involved and their disposition generally. Students may become committed to behavior that tends to escalate conflict, so specific measures be taken to avoid escalation. The teacher should display skills of patience, empathy, compassion and a genuine desire to help students resolve the crisis. The teacher should ask questions on any grey area, giving full attention and avoid changing the subject or interrupting when one of the party is giving his or her own account.
2. Create, maintain and respect personal space: Student involved in the conflict should be arranged a couple of feet apart. Students should be made to maintain that personal space created and avoid body contact throughout the period. The technique could be giving seats to the students involved with the teacher seated in the middle.
3. Acting calm: The teacher should be calm throughout. Seeing the calmness of the teacher can help reduce aggression on the part of the students. Teachers would wait until the persons have released their frustration and explained how they are feeling.
4. Empathize: Present genuine concern and a willingness to understand without judging. Teachers should ponder a little to look at the common issue characterizing this dispute between the students. In furtherance of this inextricable link between these students involved, the teacher may succeed in patching it before the problem grows out of size as he should not sweep this under the carpet. A genuine skill of empathy and patience is an asset to the teacher here.
5. Tone of the teacher: the tone of the teacher should be calm to demonstrate empathy. Learning to de-escalate situation may not be easy and this requires skill of crisis intervention and the tone of the teacher speaks volume as an agent of peace. Peace from his tone should be seen as a concept associated with absence of hostility and violence, and rooted in friendship, love and harmony.
6. Teacher to give choice: This can help learners feel more in control of their actions. The teacher could choose anyone of the students to question and answers, helping to slowly bring the temperature down before it reaches a boiling point. This should not look as if it is the court session. Such questions and answers session should not be seen as a way to humiliate one of the parties involved but to get to the root of the problem, if not, the teacher will face resentment and backlash of anger from the students.
7. Give space and wait time: Teachers should make both parties involved in the feud to know that he is there for them in a compassionate way. Teacher to make students understand that conflict is a part of life and should be expressed, not repressed and thus offer opportunity to learn and improve one relationship with the other. Compassionately, the teacher should see violence as the midwife for any society, any system that is pregnant in change, and therefore should out of compassion seek understanding and cooperation and working together for a common goal.
8. Teacher listens and repeats what was said: Teachers bearing in mind that conflict is nothing but divergent views about an issue of interest and the purpose for the conflict is always for a change of attitude, either positive or negative depending on the standard of the people concerned, the teacher having listened to the parties involved with rapt

attention, taking down notes may repeat to the parties involved all the complaint and views made, making sure he does not miss out any of the vital points, and views making sure that he does not miss any of the vital points that one of the parties may see as a strength in his or her argument, thus been seen as bias.

9. Teachers could defer this matter to a later date by offering the suggestion: "let us talk about this later to the parties involved" thus closing the matter temporarily. The goal here is to help the parties involved calm down with time, think clearly and make good choices while moving forward. This means that everyone agrees to a cease fire temporarily. Sometimes, strong emotions or the power imbalances that can be present in relationships are difficult to resolve and can only be addressed properly with a temporary cease fire.
10. Invite the parties involved to join a calming activity. The teacher emphasizes the essence of agreement to crisis, the cause of divide in the classroom, consistent exhibition of intolerance and lack of compromising attitude could lead to fracas in the classroom. The teacher maintains that conflict in the classroom could be drastically reduced if student thoughtfully and honestly work together and see how they can reach an equilibrium with those inevitable areas they may necessarily come across. Teachers passes his verdict in a healthy atmosphere as this will breed a healthy, happy classroom reunion and interaction.

Concluding the unit: de-escalation of inter personal conflict and administration of justice in social studies classroom.

At the beginning of the study of conflict by the students, the problems the problems the students chose to dramatize (and that teacher picked up on and extended with the different examples in Nigeria) were generally physical needs that are negotiated on a social, economic, and political level, such as scarcity of damsel, clean drinking water, homelessness, poverty, and medical care. These examples involved tangible needs and problems and thus seemed in many ways less challenging, than those associated with the students; own interpersonal conflict (in part because they took place far away and thus were viewed in their broad outlines)

By applying the concept of conflict (developed earlier in relation to complex but distant problems) to the personal problem of bullying in their own school yards, students began to see both interpersonal and global conflict as problems to be solved. Instead of just being a victim, an aggressor, or spectator, students began to see other choices that were available to them, and to respond to the viewpoints, feeling and needs that underline aggressive behaviour. Virtually every student's increased her/his capacity to understand responses to conflict as choices that could be evaluated, rather than as inevitable outcomes of others actions.

As a conclusion and performance assessment regarding the de-escalation of "conflict theme" the teacher asked group of students to create skits that illustrated any kind of conflict. After watching each performance, their classmates worked together to analyse the conflict's cause (what was the problem?), the various viewpoints (who was involved and what did they want?), The skit of bullying in the classroom, and of chairs and tables of enough for all students in the classroom were outstanding.

The approach to managing the conflict (what happened and why?) and the consequences (was the ending win-win, win-lose, or lose-lose), and did this solve the problem on ground? The students also worked on skits involving siblings rivalry, to the struggle for land in adjacent communities of Ijaws, Isekeri and Urhobos. Some groups acted out win-lose scenarios (such as hitting an annoying younger sibling with one of them getting blame by parents, or attacking an Ijaws or Urhobo settlement in a land rights dispute, or bullying to extort lunch money).

Other group created out win-win scenarios. Such as getting parents to revise their younger-sibling care responsibilities in exchange for a special activity together, or renegotiation boundaries in a land for a peace deal, or persuading a bully that his classmates would include him in their playtime if he didn't push them around.

In debriefing the skits, several children remarked on the way aggressive (win-lose) approaches tended to provoke escalation or retaliation, thus eventually creating lose-lose consequences. They did not pretend win-win alternatives were easy or common, but showed creativity in inventing some of such settlements and showed awareness that those solutions might last longer and cause fewer people to get hurt. The students' analytical comments showed that virtually all of them could connect their personal concerns and experiences to the social and political world.

Importance of de-escalation of tension and conflict to peace curriculum in Nigeria schools' social studies classroom

De-escalation of tension and conflict is the process of diffusing conflict as they begin to prevent them from getting worse or eventually violence. It is helping to slowly bring the temperature down before it reaches a boiling point. This is an important idea for all educators and parents because children and young children feel overwhelm with anger and pride sometimes. Learning to de-escalate situations may not always be easy as it requires practice but the impact is felt not only in the school, in the community where such students are located, but the nation at large. The goal is to help the child calm down, think clearly, make the right decisions in the atmosphere of peace.

Conflict is a struggle between ideas actions or between individuals. It is an interaction between two or more people who are competing over perceived or actual goals or values with the aim of beating the opponent or having a joint solution (Bukmore 1999). De-escalation is reducing tension, anger from reaching boiling point. Conflict and tension is part of life and thus conflict should be expressed not repressed (Carfruthers 1996). Conflict offers opportunities to leaders to improve relationship with others. According to (Ekiugbo 2015) to express conflict means to begin to think of how to resolve it. Conflict makes a society more responsive to the population and its attended problems (Bickmore 2002). Deutsch, 1993 opined that conflict prevents society from stagnation. Violence is the only midwife for any society that is pregnant with change. Habo 1996 maintained that when conflict arises in the classroom it is a base for stabilization or friendship among students, it is a window for change. Conflicts can be stressful and damaging to relationships, but de-escalation is a plus not only

to the school community but to the nation as a whole. Two strong independent personalities will not flow together without causing turbulence and hence conflict is inevitable. Houses 1966 opined that conflict are not necessarily bad, the determining factor is how the teacher handles them in the class. If the teacher uses conflict constructively in the classroom, it can strengthen and solidify relationship among students and this, usher in peace, that all requires. Peace is ingredient for development, not only in schools, but the society at large.

Peace is a concept associated with the absence of hostility and violence, rooted in friendship and harmony. It is lack of conflict and freedom from violence. Peace as a concept is two sided. There are negative peace, which is absence of personal violence and positive peace which is absence of structural violence or social justice. There are five levels of peace, which are all interrelated and independent. These are personal, social, political, institutional and ecological.

Social studies has a potential to promote national and International development and is very vital for Peace education. The matter of conflict and harmony has been on for ages. Peace is when an individuals are capable to resolve their world of differences, deprived of violence, Ekiugbo 2023; while education is an instrument to transform attitude of learners towards peace. It is a social change agent through which modification and reformation of mind of the individual can be made, to make them be able to live in peace and harmony. Peace model therefore provides the means of obtaining beliefs and information expertise, to live in coordination with one's self and with others within a normal situation.

Social studies is vital for Peace education as well as, promote national and International development. The focus of social studies is man and his environment. The ultimate aim is to equip the individual with knowledge and understanding for peaceful relationship. Through the subject, learners are expected to acquire required skills, and values to meet the challenges of peaceful Nigerian environment.

The concept of peace span religion and culture. incorporating such values like harmony, justice and human dignity. According to Osemene 2012, peace means a political condition that creates or ensures justice and social ability through formal and informal institutional practitioners norms. Ekiugbo and Isanbor, 2014 see peace as concord, harmony and tranquility, opposed of antagonistic conflicts or violence. We have personal or mental peace, intentional peace, capitalistic peace and perpetual peace. Peace could be brought in through coercive powers, power of law, power of God and also through conflict resolution strategies among which is de-escalation of tension and conflict outlined in this write up.

The essence of Peace education as listed by Ekiugbo (2023) among others are:

1. To appreciate the richness of peace
2. Address feud
3. To provide information about security system
4. To understand violent behavior
5. Develop intercultural understanding
6. Provide for future understanding

7. To teach peace as a process
8. To promote a concept of peace accompanied by social justice
9. To stimulate a respectful type
10. To end violence

These and other intercultural experiences can go a long way in promoting peace in our schools. The school climate whether physical or social and the relationship among those students is a factor to be considered when the issue of peace is mentioned.

Peace curriculum with its emphasis on de-escalation of conflict and tension in the classrooms can run through primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria for better results. The following could be part of the curriculum following the recommendation of Salmon (2009) for better results: empathy, anger management, social skills and character education. These four component of the school curriculum can be taught in our schools, in addition to the curriculum of all the subjects. The schools and the related educational institutions have the responsibilities of passing on the ever changing knowledge stride from One generation to the succeeding generation. Education as viewed by Beekner (1974) is a process by which the individual learner is provided with skills to organize his knowledge and to increasingly become more functionally efficient in all his or her intellectual and service delivery efforts. This is where peace curriculum is an important tool for the acquisition of necessary skill by the individual to live peaceably in the their society and to use non violence strategies to seek, obtain and maintain justice This is the message de-escalation of tension conflict in this write up.

Conclusion

It is not secret that the matter of conflict and harmony has been discussed in schools for ages. Peace is when students are able to resolve their clashes, deprived of violence. Social studies education is noted for peace as students are expected to acquire requisite skills, values to meet the challenges of peaceful Nigeria environment. The teacher, apart from resolving crisis in the classroom, can teach his students how to address feud, acquire information about peace as a process, by promoting the concept of peace, accompanied by social justice.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion so far, the following recommendations are made.

1. Since education is problem solving, teachers should equip learners with the necessary skills of de-escalation of tension and conflict in the classrooms.
2. All schools should include a workable and non-violent curriculum that will integrate the study of intergroup conflicts, development of critical thinking and problems solving rather than using violence to match violence in the classrooms.
3. Peace must be actively pursued both by this teachers and students in all parts of the educational system.
4. Peace must be an inter-disciplinary topic in order to become a part of students attitudes and behaviors.
5. Peace songs, games, arts projects, cultural diversity. where students learn something about different culture represented in the schools, use of materials to show corporation,

studies such as good roles, models and common human bounding should be integrated into the peace curriculum designed and implemented for Nigerian schools.

6. The federal government of Nigeria can with adequate funds and through the curriculum development bodies of Nigeria and with the corporation of parents, professionals bodies, and teachers achieve these laudable ventures.

References

- Bickmore, K (1999) Teaching conflict and conflict Resolution in School: (Extra)- curricular considerations in children's and Adolescents understanding of war, conflicts and peace. San Francisco.
- Bickmore, K (2002) Integrated Elementary Curriculum about conflict Resolution: Can children Handle Global Politics. *Thony and Research in Social Education* 27, No. 1 (writer): 45-69.
- Carfruthers, W et al (1996) Conflict Resolution as Curriculum: A Definition, and Process for Integration a Core Curricula" *The School Counsellor* 43, (5):345-373.
- Deutsch. M. (1993) Educating for a peaceful World. *American Psychologist* 48 (5) 510-517.
- Hahn, C. (1996) Empirical Research on Issues (Concentrated Social Studies) in Handbook on Issues-Centred Social Studies *NCSS Bulletin* 93.
- Houser, N. (1996) "Negotiating Dissonance and safety for the common Good: Social Education in the Elementary Classroom. *Theory and research in Social Education* 44, No. 3:294-312..
- Salmon I (2013) The peace curriculum Supplemental Aggresina Replacement Training. Erie colorado: center for safe Schools and Communities. Inc.
- Beekner, W. (1974) *The secondary school curriculum content- structure*;: London: intext Educational publishers.
- Ekiugbo, U. K. & Isanbor, P. O. (2014), Sociology of religion as advancement of the culture of peace. *Journal of sociology, psychology and Antropology*. 4, (6).
- Ekiugbo, U. K. E. (2023) Using demonstration method to teach domestic violence in Nigerian Social Studies classroom. *International journal of inter disciplinary research method*. 10(2) 64-75. United Kingdom.