

Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

Conflict is generally understood as something that has to be coped with and solved. From a developmental point of view, however, we expect that conflict helps us “to solve ourselves” instead. This means that conflict is considered a chance for personal development.

Children aged 10 and 11 years old already have the ability for hypothetical reasoning. According to Piaget (1972) this ability allows their interest to expand beyond what they have immediately experienced and consider many other social possibilities.

Exploring interpersonal conflicts with experiential activities as the ones suggested above gives a chance to take psychosocial elements into account which will promote children’s development.

The activities are based on the process of “social perspective taking” developed by Selman (1980). According to Selman (1980) “perspective taking” is the ability to assume the perspective of another person in order to understand their thoughts and feelings. This ability evolves from the age of three till 15 through four different stages. Children of 10 and 11 are situated between stages 2 and 3. Stage 2 is called “Reflexive Perspective Taking”. It implies that the child understands that any individual knows the perspective of others and this influences the point of view that one has about the others. To take another’s perspective is one way of evaluating other’s intentions, purposes and behaviour. The child can create a sequence of perspectives but at this stage he cannot coordinate and integrate all sequences as a whole. It is at stage 3 “Reciprocal Perspective Taking” when the teenager understands that individuals can perceive themselves as a whole. This implies going beyond oneself and the other in order to perceive the relationship from the point of view of a third person (Kegan, 1994). The fourth and last stage means going beyond the relationship to include social conventions or rules and the general context where the interaction is taking place. The teenager at this stage understands that a reciprocal perspective taking does not provide a complete understanding of a situation if there is a lack of this social context where social interaction gets its full meaning.

In order to understand oneself one must first understand the others. Then the individual must determine how he or she is both similar and different from others. As Markstrom (1992, p. 183) states *“social perspective taking establishes such a process by allowing the individual to reflect upon the self from the perspectives of other individuals, other groups and society as a whole.”* An overemphasis on the perspective of others is said to lead to rigidity, while too much emphasis on the self’s perspective may lead to egocentrism.

Activity number 3 above has been designed to provide an opportunity to take four different perspectives in relation to a particular interpersonal conflict lived by the children as a relevant experience for them. Its purpose is to establish different perspectives or points of view towards the same experience, a typical stage 2 of Selman’s model: the possibility of taking another’s perspective. After reflecting on this in step number 4 from a more external and general perspective created by the community (represented by the class and the teacher), we present activity 5. This activity is based in the “Meta Mirror Format” formulated by Dilts (1990). The key assumption is that dealing effectively with challenging relationships and interactions requires the ability to perceive and integrate a number of different perspectives or “perceptual positions”. The Meta Mirror procedure helps people develop the ability to define and coordinate multiple perspectives, especially in situations involving emotional struggle and conflict. In terms of Selman’s model this would imply achieving a third stage of “reciprocal perspective taking”. The rationale of this procedure is based on the assumption that the place where you find the most difficult for communicating with another person is a mirror image of how you are relating to yourself in that situation. It creates a context in which you can keep shifting the

perspective from the most subjective (first position) towards the most objective (second, third and fourth positions) until you get a more integrative and comprehensive understanding of that social situation. Again in activity 6, all students take the perspective more typical of stage fourth of Selman's model, that of a community or social convention in order to share and discuss the lived experiences.

The sequence of seven steps provides a developmental challenge to this group of children due to the fact that most of them would be situated in a stage 2 of Selman's Social Perspective Taking model. This means that they would find it more difficult to finish activity 5 which implies not only experience a sequence of different perspectives for the same social event but the coordinated integration of all these perspectives. This difficulty is not only normal but desirable in terms of the concept of Zone of Proximal Development, "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). From a developmental point of view we would not only be training a social skill but trying to promote socio-emotional development through the use of concrete conflict experiences.

Methodologically speaking we are going beyond typical cognitive-behavioural practices generally working with artificial role playing techniques (Iborra, 2004). The purpose of this is double. First we think that experiential methodologies oriented towards the exploration of key processes (Iborra, 2007; Kolb, 1984) can facilitate the transfer of these new abilities to different contexts out of the training scenario. Second according to the intervention recommendations stated by Zacarés and Iborra (2006, p.38) any developmental intervention "*should be consistent with a theoretical background making sure all procedures are relevant and have personal meaning for the participants so that the intervention can really influence their life course*".

According to this we have proposed a sequence of activities based on developmental theories taking into account the own and relevant experiences of the participants to the seminar. The sequence of activities is also based on a general outline of experiential learning focused on processes which stress the following steps (Ingarfield, 2007):

- The trainer or facilitator introduces a topic. It is open enough to provide a general understanding for the participants that will explore it.
- Participants do (explore).
- Participants check what they have found in their exploration.
- Participants share their experiences and meanings.
- The trainer demonstrates or introduces a formal model.
- Participants check this formal model with their own and previous experience.
- All discuss the variations of results and the limits of the model.

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